

On eve of Carnival, costume factory fire exposes deadly working conditions in Brazil

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On February 12, a fire at a garment factory in the northern part of Rio de Janeiro exposed the true state of working conditions and infrastructure in Brazil.

Although the fire started in the early hours of the morning, the Maximus Apparel factory was full of workers working long, around-the-clock shifts or sleeping there. One of the workers told *Agência Brasil* that “We were sleeping [in the factory] because, as we’re making carnival costumes, we went to bed late.” The fire broke out in the middle of the night.

On the morning of the same day, the workers tried to escape through the factory windows as firefighters set up ladders and tried to extinguish the flames. Some gave interviews to television networks shortly after fleeing the building, and reported having escaped the flames by a matter of seconds.

One worker told *Globo* that she had been working in the factory for at least three consecutive days without returning home. She said: “We were all working inside the studio when someone started shouting ‘fire, fire’. When I opened the door, the fire came. We just had time to run, throw ourselves on the stairs and escape.”

The deputy in charge of the forensic investigation pointed to an irregular electrical system, with clandestine connections, which may have been overloaded, causing the fire. The deputy commander of the state fire department said: “It was a building that had a lot of high-combustion materials, such as plastics and paper.”

The building also was surrounded by narrow alleys making it impossible to approach it with trucks to fight the flames or rescue the workers. This slowed down the rescue, with firefighters rushing ladders to the factory windows. Among the 21 workers rescued, one died from smoke inhalation. Five others remain hospitalized.

The electrical overload and the presence of workers at the Rio plant in the middle of the night are related to the frantic preparations for Carnival, which has seen growing and lucrative private investment in recent years.

Outlining the opportunities for companies during this year’s Carnival, *Exame* wrote: “According to an estimate by the National Confederation of Trade in Goods, Services and Tourism (CNC), the figures should exceed R\$12 billion in revenues.” *O Globo* pointed out that “investments are up to 20 percent higher than in 2024, companies say.”

Agência Brasil interviewed a woman who lives near the factory and pointed out the extremely exploitative conditions of the workers:

“I see it from my window, 24 hours a day, midnight, 1 a.m., 3 a.m., 5 a.m., they’re there working,” Marilúcia Blackman, who had to leave her house in a hurry, told journalists.

The costumes incinerated in the fire were to be delivered to the elite group of samba schools, called the Gold Series, which will open the Carnival parades at the Marquês de Sapucaí sambadrome in Rio de Janeiro between February 28 and March 1.

Fearing that the disaster at the factory would tarnish the image of the Carnival festivities and interfere with corporate investments, the state of Rio de Janeiro’s pro-Bolsonaro governor, Claudio Castro, responded to the fire by immediately announcing an additional R\$16 million for the Gold Series while remaining silent on the causes of the fire.

In an interview with *TV Brasil*, veteran carnival designer Leandro Vieira pointed to the precarious conditions in the costume factories: “There is, especially in the access group [Gold Series], a precariousness of working environments. Maximus is probably still the best structured place.”

Carnival designer and commentator Milton Cunha told

Agência Brasil that, in general, the workplaces of samba schools in the lower divisions are even more dangerous. Citing one operating out of a shed on the Intendente Magalhães, he said, “The only way it doesn’t catch fire is by a miracle. And every now and then, the rain comes and takes everything away. It’s fire and water.”

The dangerous conditions and intense exploitation of workers is not limited to workshops producing for Carnival in Brazil.

According to the Instituto Sprinkler Brasil (ISB), in 2024, the number of fires in non-residential premises reached a new record of 2,453 fires, a 10.4 percent increase over 2023, and four times greater than in 2018. Hospitals recorded 104 fires in 2023, six times more than the 17 fires reported in 2018.

A survey carried out by the Ipsos Institute at the request of the ISB revealed that the use of sprinklers by companies is low. Only 36 of the 300 companies interviewed by Ipsos said they had this type of system on their premises. The survey also showed that only 14 percent of the companies interviewed said they had a sprinkler system in all their units, and 22 percent said they had a system in only a few operational units.

The increase in the number of fires is a reflection of the abandonment of investment in prevention and maintenance for decaying infrastructure. On February 8, just a few days before the fire at the costume factory, an oil manufacturing plant also in the northern zone of Rio, was hit by a fire, and the smoke could be seen from miles away. A disaster was averted because firefighters contained the blaze before it spread to the plant’s fuel tanks. And on February 18, a fire hit filming locations at the Globo studios on Rio’s west side.

The precarious conditions seen in Rio de Janeiro are repeated throughout the country. To cite just a few of the most recent cases, on January 22, a major fire destroyed a chocolate factory in the interior of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. On February 21, a large fire in the south of the city of São Paulo in a thermal insulation factory threatened to spread to neighboring houses.

The absence of any comment from Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party (PT) on the fire is an indictment of his government, which is facing an unprecedented crisis after a Datafolha opinion poll revealed a plummeting of his approval rating from 35 percent to 24 percent between December of last year and February of this year.

Workers’ families are currently facing an accelerating decline in social conditions with persistent inflation rates and double-digit percentage increases in the prices of basic food items. After being re-elected in 2022, Lula continued the social cuts of his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro, repudiating any promise to improve the living standards of the population and defending the fundamental interests of the ruling class in Brazil.

As with the response to COVID-19 and dengue fever, the Lula government has allowed years of criminal neglect of workers’ health and occupational safety to produce the tragedy in Rio. Data from the National Campaign for the Prevention of Occupational Accidents (Canpat) shows that the number of occupational accidents in the country rose from 612,500 in 2022, at the end of the Bolsonaro government, to 665,594 by November of last year under Lula. In 2023, there were a staggering 2,888 fatal workplace accidents reported.

According to a recent study by the Observatory on Workplace Health and Safety, on average, a worker is killed on the job somewhere in Brazil every three hours. The country ranks fourth highest in the rate of workplace accidents, trailing only China, India and Indonesia.

Brazil’s figures, however shocking, significantly underestimate the real toll in deaths and injuries, particularly in the vast informal sector, which accounts for 37 percent of the workforce. There are, for instance, 12,000 deaths annually of motorcyclists, the majority of whom are believed to be workers in the informal delivery sector.

The huge opposition to the grueling working hours and dangerous and frequently fatal conditions faced by workers was demonstrated in the PepsiCo workers’ strike at the end of November, which paralyzed production in more than one plant in São Paulo and made demands based on a petition for an end to the six-day workweek with another day off.



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