

# Two firefighters killed in Osaka inferno: A warning of deepening social crisis in Japan

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On Monday, August 18, a devastating fire broke out in the bustling Dotonbori district of Osaka, claiming the lives of two firefighters and injuring four others. The blaze, which began at around 9:50 a.m. in a ground-floor shop, quickly spread into two adjoining multi-story structures—one seven stories and the other five—before being brought under control after nine hours of grueling efforts.

The victims, 55-year-old veteran firefighter Takashi Mori and 22-year-old recruit Mitsunari Nagatomo, were members of the Naniwa Fire Station. Both were found trapped on the sixth floor of the seven-story building. They were carried out only to be declared dead in hospital. Their deaths mark the first line-of-duty firefighter fatalities in Japan since 2023. Four other firefighters and a woman in her twenties sustained minor injuries.

The tragedy unfolded in one of Japan's most vibrant districts. Dotonbori, located in the Minami area of Osaka, is famed for its neon lights, packed arcades, restaurants and bars, drawing millions of visitors annually. Beneath the veneer of glamour and energy, however, it is a densely packed web of aging structures, makeshift renovations and narrow corridors—a tinderbox in which a spark can quickly become an inferno.

## Unresolved violations

Although the cause of the fire is still under investigation, officials confirmed that the two Osaka buildings destroyed in the August 18 blaze had a history of uncorrected fire code violations. A June 2023 inspection found six breaches, including missing emergency exit signage.

Authorities ordered improvements, but four violations remained unresolved. Some areas lacked automatic fire alarms, and mandatory evacuation drills—required to be held at least twice annually—had never been carried out.

This negligence set the stage for disaster. During the firefight, part of the structure collapsed between the fifth and sixth floors, trapping firefighters Mori and Nagatomo. Their deaths were not an accident, but the outcome of allowing unsafe buildings to

operate in one of Japan's busiest districts.

The fire itself consumed just 110 square meters—small in scope—yet spread quickly through narrow passageways and vertical shafts. Of three men who entered, only one escaped, highlighting communication failures, poor situational awareness or a breakdown of safety protocols. Such a loss of life in a relatively contained fire points to a systemic failure.

While Japan's fire service is internationally regarded for its rigor and rare fatalities, this case exposes dangerous cracks. Dotonbori's aging buildings are infamous for noncompliance with modern fire codes, where fireproofing, smoke control and evacuation routes are routinely sacrificed for profit. Unauthorized renovations and unsafe wiring proliferate with little oversight, tolerated by local authorities who protect lucrative businesses.

The tragedy echoes earlier disasters, including Tokyo's 2001 Kabukicho fire that killed 44 people, where locked exits and illegal modifications were found. The deaths of Mori and Nagatomo reveal the persistence of a deadly pattern: profit and lax regulation prioritized over human life.

Osaka Mayor Hideyuki Yokoyama offered condolences and promised an investigation, while the fire department pledged a review panel. Such rituals, repeated after every disaster, mask systemic negligence. Once public outrage fades, profit takes precedence and conditions remain unchanged.

The deaths of Mori and Nagatomo were not accidents but the direct outcome of a system that subordinates safety to commercial greed, tolerates hazardous buildings, and sends workers and emergency responders into preventable death traps.

## A broader decline in workplace safety

The Osaka fire is part of a wider pattern of deteriorating safety across Japanese society. Official statistics show a steady increase in workplace injuries and deaths, particularly among the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

Last year, over 6,000 foreign workers were killed or injured

on the job, the 13th consecutive annual increase. Technical intern trainees and specified skilled workers are especially at risk, often forced into dangerous jobs without adequate training or protective measures, and hampered by language barriers. The ruling elite deliberately stokes xenophobia to distract from the extreme exploitation of immigrant workers and to mask the deepening political crisis facing society.

The manufacturing and construction industries are rife with violations. Workers are compelled to labor in unsafe conditions while management and government regulators turn a blind eye. The culture of overwork compounds the danger. Nearly one in ten workers logs more than 80 hours of overtime a month, increasing risks of fatal accidents, strokes and suicides. The notorious phenomenon of *karoshi*—death by overwork—remains widespread despite decades of official promises to address it.

### **Safety sacrificed in a deepening crisis**

Japan’s vaunted “safety culture” is being exposed as a myth, eroded by deepening economic crisis and growing global tensions. Trump’s tariffs have intensified an already fragile situation: the economy shrank 0.2 percent year-on-year in early 2025, with the Bank of Japan forecasting only 0.5 percent growth for the year. Growth has stagnated for years, while real wages continue to decline—falling 1.8 percent in April alone.

Under these pressures, building owners routinely cut safety corners to preserve profit margins, aided by regulators constrained by austerity and beholden to business interests. The Osaka fire is the tragic outcome of this dynamic.

Meanwhile, the government pours resources into militarism, raising defense spending from ¥3.9 trillion in 1989 to ¥7.7 trillion in 2024, with a target of 2 percent of GDP by 2027. This relentless expansion comes at the direct expense of social services, leaving workers increasingly vulnerable in unsafe workplaces and communities.

### **Profit over safety**

Disasters like the Osaka fire recur because of the dynamics of Japanese capitalism. Entertainment districts such as Dotonbori are vital profit centers, driving businesses to cut corners with illegal wiring, locked exits and unsafe modifications.

Regulators, prioritizing the profits of politically connected landlords, routinely ignore violations. The state thus functions not to ensure public safety but to defend business interests, leaving firefighters, workers and the public to bear the consequences.

The nine hours it took to extinguish the blaze, despite its limited spread, suggests absent or ineffective suppression systems and failed compartmentalization. That such a small fire proved deadly exposes the hollowness of Japan’s regulatory “safety net,” which in practice provided no real protection against a preventable tragedy.

### **A warning to the working class**

The death of two firefighters in Osaka is a warning. It exposes how fragile the protections for working people truly are, even in a country that prides itself on its safety culture. Every pledge by politicians to “investigate” or “prevent recurrence” is contradicted by the ongoing deterioration of conditions on the ground.

Just as foreign workers are sacrificed in dangerous factories, and as overworked employees collapse at their desks, firefighters—who are themselves workers—are treated as expendable instruments, to be thrown into unsafe structures while the root causes remain untouched.

What unites these phenomena is the subordination of human life to profit and the refusal of the capitalist state to challenge the interests of the wealthy.

The Osaka fire demonstrates that workers cannot rely on government investigations, regulatory agencies or politicians like Yokoyama, who defend the profit system responsible for such tragedies. Real safety requires a political struggle against capitalism, led by rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions and the state. These committees must assert control over workplace safety, conduct inspections, demand compliance with fireproofing and evacuation standards, and refuse unsafe work.

The rank-and-file investigation into the death of Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. in Michigan earlier this year exemplifies the critical role of such initiatives, exposing unsafe conditions and corporate negligence concealed by management and unions. The same determination is needed in Japan and worldwide.

Above all, the fight for safety must be linked to the struggle for socialism, reorganizing society on the basis of human need rather than profit. The Osaka tragedy proves that even in an advanced economy workers are unsafe. The fallen firefighters’ deaths must serve as a rallying point for an international struggle against the capitalist system itself.



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