

Structural collapse at power plant in Indian Special Economic Zone kills 9 construction workers

Naveen Dewage
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Nine migrant workers from the northeastern Indian state of Assam were killed and one worker injured September 30, when an arch structure collapsed at the construction site of a thermal power plant inside the Ennore Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Minjur, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

The victims fell along with a large steel framework that crashed down upon them from a height of nearly 45 metres. Most were crushed to death instantly. The only surviving worker had managed to clutch on to a steel structure.

The deceased workers were Munna Khemprai, Sorbojit Thausen, Phaibit Fanglu, Bidayum Porbosa, Paban Sorong, Prayanto Sorong, Suman Kharikap, Dipak Raijung, and Dimaraj Thausen.

None of the workers killed in the accident were permanent employees. They were hired on piece-rate contracts, denied provident fund and insurance coverage, and lived in overcrowded dormitories near the site.

These migrant workers, who were subjected to slave-labor exploitation and deprived of even minimum rights, have been sacrificed on the altar of corporate profits, as is the case of thousands of such workers annually in India, South Asia and globally. On October 14, a fire at the Anwar Fashion garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killed at least 16 workers, mostly teenagers. On October 10, a massive explosion at the Accurate Energetic Systems (AES) munitions factory in Tennessee in the US, also killed 16 workers. Those are just two recent examples of how human lives are destroyed in the drive for corporate profit.

The Minjur thermal power plant is a project of the Tamil Nadu state government-owned Tamil Nadu Power Generation Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO). Its construction was contracted to Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), India's state-owned power plant manufacturer. BHEL in turn subcontracted the construction to the Bangalore-based firm Metal Karma which employed about 40 workers, most of them from Assam.

In her First Information Report (FIR) to the Tamil Nadu Police, TANGEDCO's superintending engineer at the Minjur site accused Metal Karma of not following proper safety procedures. This is more than likely true. But as it was TANGEDCO and BHEL that were ultimately responsible for the project, it was clearly their responsibility to ensure those working on it were working in a safe environment. Both TANGEDCO and BHEL are, it need be added, publicly owned companies with vast resources.

Efforts are clearly underway to scapegoat the lowest-level subcontractor in the contracting chain so as to let the responsible

corporate and government officials off the hook. This is aimed not just at avoiding legal responsibility and the potential financial and other costs associated with it. It serves to protect the entire subcontracting/privatization framework through which both public and private companies reduce costs and swell profits by resorting to subcontractors and poorly trained, low-paid contract workers.

Due to popular outrage over the industrial slaughter at Minjur, the authorities have been compelled to take some limited face-saving measures. In addition to arresting three contractors, the Ministry of Heavy Industries (MHI), has, according to an October 13 *Times of India* report, pressed for the resignation of several director-level officers at BHEL, with further disciplinary action, including suspensions, likely.

TANGEDCO has been plagued by a rising number of industrial accidents, caused by the increasing pace of work, the poor training of personnel, and staff vacancies and shortages. Whether TANGEDCO officials willfully ignored the unsafe practices of the subcontractor ultimately tasked with building the power plant or were simply ignorant, they and their political masters bear ultimate responsibility for the workers' deaths, as it is they who have been spearheading the drive to maximize profits through cost-cutting.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has cynically announced a token compensation of 200,000 Indian rupees (\$US2,400) for the family of each of the deceased workers and 50,000 rupees for the lone survivor. Not to be outdone, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin offered 1 million rupees (\$12,000) to each of the dead workers' families.

These gestures, repeated after every such preventable disaster, are a cruel substitute for genuine safety measures, which are seen as an obstacle to attracting investors because they will add additional costs thereby reducing profits.

The introduction of the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (OSHWC) in 2020 gutted older labour protections by allowing enterprises to self-certify safety compliance in lieu of inspections by independent state authorities.

The Tamil Nadu government has aggressively implemented these "ease of doing business" measures to attract investors even as fatal accidents multiply across construction sites, factories, and power projects. The state government, like its counterparts across India and the central government led by Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), place the profit interests of local and foreign investors before human lives.

The accident is a direct product of decades of deregulation,

privatisation and cost-cutting pursued by successive central and state governments, whether led by the BJP, the Congress Party, or in Tamil Nadu the Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

The Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, are close allies of the DMK, a big business Tamil ethno-nationalist party, and routinely tout its claims to be a promoter of “social justice.”

The CPM and CPI and their trade union fronts—respectively, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) — have issued perfunctory social media statements on the Minjur accident that reek of hypocrisy, given that the Stalinists have supported successive governments at both central and state levels that have maintained such deadly unsafe working conditions.

An October 1, a CPI social media post called the tragedy “a reminder that the lives and safety of workers must be treated with utmost priority,” and pledged vaguely to take steps to “ensure accountability.”

The CPM Tamil Nadu secretary, P. Shanmugam, in a similarly hollow statement, blamed TANGEDCO and contractor BHEL for negligence while urging the state to end the use of low-paid “guest workers.” He appealed for 2.5 million rupees in compensation from BHEL, beyond the paltry 1 million rupees and 200,000 rupees offered by the state and central governments respectively.

These parties and their unions, which have for decades collaborated in implementing “pro-investor” policies and suppressing worker struggles, shed crocodile tears while shielding the capitalist system responsible for the deaths of the Ennore workers.

The Stalinist trade unions function as shock absorbers for the Indian ruling class, diverting, suppressing and fragmenting the social might of the working class. They have systematically blocked the development of an independent working class counteroffensive, while maintaining their positions on labour-management committees and collective bargaining councils that rubber stamp layoffs and the spread of contract labour.

They have proclaimed their willingness to maintain “industrial peace” in the states where they have formed the government, and currently in Tamil Nadu provide “progressive” cover to the anti-worker DMK government.

Adding to this reactionary environment, Tamil nationalist formations such as the Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK, We Tamils Party) cynically exploit widespread unemployment to promote vicious anti-migrant chauvinism to pit workers in Tamil Nadu against migrant workers from elsewhere in India. NTK leader Seeman has repeatedly demanded “permits” for North Indian workers in Tamil Nadu, alleging they are responsible for crime and the loss of job opportunities. Such poisonous rhetoric divides the working class along ethnic lines and diverts social anger away from the corporate and state elites responsible for the miserable conditions confronting all workers.

In reality, the influx of migrant workers is not the cause but the consequence of capitalist exploitation and uneven regional development—conditions sustained by the very same pro-investor governments that these parties all support.

Tens of thousands of young men and women from Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh are drawn to Chennai, Tamil Nadu’s capital, and other industrial zones in southern India each year. They flee agrarian distress, crushing debt and the collapse of small-scale farming in their home states—direct consequences of decades of pro-market policies implemented by

successive central and state governments.

Increasingly, workers from Assam have joined this internal migration stream, driven by the same miserable conditions created by the ruling class. The tea plantation economy that once absorbed much of Assam’s rural labour has been gutted by privatization, stagnant wages, and chronic neglect, forcing the workers to leave for precarious construction and factory jobs in southern India and other industrially developed areas. There they face linguistic isolation, discrimination, and the absence of any social protection. Their migration is not voluntary in any meaningful sense; it is a desperate search for survival in a system that offers them no alternative.

The Ennore deaths are not an isolated tragedy but part of a global pattern of industrial homicide driven by the subordination of human life to corporate profit. No confidence can be placed in the capitalist parties, the state apparatus, or the Stalinist trade unions to end these types of industrial deaths. The defence of the lives, jobs and working and living conditions of workers—migrant and local alike—requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees at every workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves.

The corporate media pays attention on occasion to one or another industrial accident due to the sheer number of worker fatalities, the prominence of the accident site, or its association with a major fire or explosion. But factories, construction sites, mines, and special economic zones are plagued on a daily basis with fatal and life-changing accidents in Tamil Nadu and across India. Most of the time this news is suppressed at the level of the workplace, with management and government officials placing the blame on workers themselves for supposed carelessness and the disregard of safety measures—no matter that in pursuit of profit employers fail to provide proper training and safety equipment and constantly press workers to cut corners to increase output.

The WSWs and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) urge workers to provide us with reports of all such accidents and the unsafe working conditions that lead to them. Such exposures are critical to the fight for safe working conditions and for developing an independent industrial and political movement of the working class to establish workers’ control over production and the workplace. Such a movement must be developed as an integral part of the fight for workers’ political power and the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life so as to ensure workers’ lives and livelihoods are no longer at the mercy of corporate profit.



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