

The Wang Fuk Court Fire in Hong Kong: A crime of global capitalism

Erik Long

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The official death toll in the catastrophic fire that engulfed seven high-rise residential buildings of Wang Fuk Court in Tai Po, Hong Kong rose to 151 on Monday.

Over 2,000 survivors have lost everything and are now homeless. Hundreds are housed in converted COVID isolation shelters on the runway of the old Kai Tak airport.

Fourteen people connected to the engineering company and the scaffolding subcontractor carrying out renovation work on the exterior walls at Wang Fuk Court have been arrested on charges of manslaughter in an ongoing investigation into the causes of the fire.

Investigators have determined that, among other violations, the contractors used illegal, highly flammable netting on the bamboo scaffolding that encased the buildings. The flames spread from the netting to styrofoam boards covering the windows, which acted as an accelerant spreading the fire throughout the building. The homes of thousands had been wrapped in tinder.

Over the weekend, an unmistakable but unremarked change swept Hong Kong. The green netting that surrounds every construction and renovation site was being quietly taken down; bales of the stuff lie on street corners. The skeletons of bamboo scaffolding stand stark throughout much of the city. It is a tacit admission of the ubiquity of the use of substandard and illegal materials, and indicates the degree of failure of government oversight and lax enforcement.

Wang Fuk Court was covered in approximately 2,300 non-compliant sheets of netting. Each illegal sheet cost about \$HK50 less than a mandatory flame-resistant one. The cost-cutting measures that ravaged the complex and killed over 150 people likely saved \$HK115,000, about \$US15,000—roughly a hundred US

dollars per incinerated human being.

The cindered remains of Wang Fuk Court stand in Tai Po in the New Territories. It was the last of the land carved out from China in the Pearl River Delta by British imperialism. Britain seized Hong Kong through multiple Opium Wars, demanding at gunpoint that China open its borders to the poison Britain grew in poppy fields in India, processed in Singapore, and marketed through Canton.

Britain handed Hong Kong back to Beijing in 1997, a city shot through with staggering levels of inequality, bearing the imprint of a century-and-a-half of colonial subjugation.

The broad democratic impulses that exist in Hong Kong are certainly not a product of British colonial rule, nor its re-integration by the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) in Beijing, which implemented modestly expanded direct legislative elections. Rather, they are the legacy of hard-fought battles by the working class which staged general strikes and mass protest actions in coordination with workers in Guangzhou in the first half of the 20th century.

Beijing presides over the reintegration of Hong Kong with the mainland under the mantra “one country, two systems.” Under this rubric it has preserved the Basic Law drawn up with Britain, maintaining a certain political autonomy for the Special Administrative Region. The fundamental concern for Beijing is that Hong Kong continue to serve as a connecting point for the free flow of international finance capital; all other considerations are subordinate to this.

What Beijing fears most of all is the social contamination of unrest spilling across the border. The Greater Bay Area of the Pearl River Delta from the Mainland of Shenzhen and Guangzhou to the islands of Macau and down the Kowloon peninsula to Hong Kong

is a single economic unit. The spark of working class resistance at any point could spread the conflagration of revolution throughout Southern China.

Amid widespread shock and anger over the fire, the Office for Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong has warned that anyone “attempting to use the victims’ grief to advance their political ambitions” would be arrested and punished by law. Chinese authorities are well aware that anger over the unnecessary loss of life in Hong Kong will resonate with working people in China who have suffered tragic loss of life in apartment, factory and hospital fires as a consequence of lax safety measures and the cost-cutting of developers and builders.

While the horrors of the Wang Fuk Court fire are cloaked in the particularities of bamboo scaffolding and green netting, it is not only a Hong Kong event. The inferno in Tai Po is a local eruption of a global crisis. Capitalism is producing catastrophe upon catastrophe for the working class.

The most obvious and striking parallel is the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the 2017 conflagration that incinerated 72 people. The green netting of Wang Fuk corresponds to the flammable cladding of the Grenfell-encased working class housing. Both exemplify the cramped homes of the expendable.

Engels, writing *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* in 1845, coined the phrase “social murder” for the process whereby capitalism placed hundreds and thousands of workers in conditions that led to their “too early and unnatural death.” It is precisely apt.

The catastrophes of Wang Fuk Court and Grenfell are spectacular eruptions of the miserable, and entirely preventable, world housing crisis. They are not mere excesses, not simply failures of regulation. They are an inescapable part of capitalism. For capitalism, what is an act of murder is at the same time a routine cost of doing business. A mass death toll is intrinsic to the functioning of the system.

Cost-cutting, assembly line speed ups, real estate swindles and mass evictions—capitalism is driven to these measures by its own inherent logic of competition and profit-making. The capitalist who will not employ these measures will be displaced by one who will, and the stock exchange will rise.

The social character of the capitalist class, bred bone-deep by this competition, bears the indifference and

rapacity of over two centuries of global exploitation.

Around the globe those that construct and tend the glittering excesses of finance—in Hong Kong, the bank towers of Central Hong Kong and the mansions of the Peak—these workers live in hovels, in cages. They gather for the family dinner in homes surrounded by flammable netting.

Capitalism has urbanized the world, but in a grotesquely unequal and irrational manner.

Around 300 human beings—fathers, grandmothers, infant children, migrant workers—were incinerated in their homes at Grenfell and Wang Fuk Court. How many millions more die of disease in the squalor of shantytowns and slums of the world? The threadbare possessions of evicted tenants are thrown into the streets in America under the watchful eye of the police.

Even in its centers of concentrated wealth, capitalism routinely cannot provide homes to the working class with potable water, or factory workplaces safe from maiming and death. The infrastructure for flood control in countries subject to the ravages of typhoons – the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam—is criminally undeveloped and ill-maintained, and thousands of working people die each year as floods engulf their homes.

All is subject to the profit motive. There is no other governing principle under capitalism. Human lives must not be measured by its metrics.

The social murder of Wang Fuk Court cries out for the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement throughout the world by socialism—a system that measures rational economy by human need and that shelters everyone in dignity, comfort and safety.



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