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Pakistan:

Bosses' greed kills more than 325 workers

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On September 11, 2012, two particularly deadly fires struck company buildings in Pakistan. Some 300 employees in the garment export factory Ali Enterprises died in Karachi, making it one of the biggest disasters attributable to inhumane conditions imposed on workers. There were a thousand workers, many of them young women, in this four storey building, which only had one accessible exit. Many died of suffocation, trapped in basements. Others were seriously injured after jumping to escape the flames. On the same day, 25 employees were killed during another fire at a shoe factory in Lahore, in the centre of the country. The identification of the victims is difficult, many of them being contractually undeclared workers hired by subcontractors. It should be added that the company itself had no legal existence. [1]

As is often the case, no safety measures had been respected by the bosses for whom only profit counts: windows barred, emergency exits locked, few or no or no fire extinguishers, doors and stairs blocked by goods, highly flammable products in all corners, packing in of staff and so on. Fires are common in these factories, but no authority cared... until the tragedy.

For Nasir Mansoor, Secretary-General of Pakistan's National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), in Pakistan "workers are treated more like slaves than human beings" [2]. During a street demonstration on September 12, the NTUF demanded a strict inspection of plants in coordination with organizations representing the employees, the registration of all industrial establishments under the Factories Act, the effective implementation of laws on health and safety, the abolition of the contract system, the issuing of a letter of hire to everyone at the time of their hiring and their inclusion in social protection systems [3].

What does the life of a worker matter to the wealthy? As Farooq Tariq, of the Labour Party (LPP) bitterly noted, if members of the elite had died in such a manner, the government would have declared a day of national mourning. Asif Zardari, president of Pakistan and co-chair of the ruling PPP, made a very brief visit to the Lahore hospital where victims of the fire at the shoe company had been taken, to the plant and to the families. He went after having promised compensation, and had, according to the press, given flowers to five hospitalized workers.

The tragedy has become an excuse for a polemical dispute between the two competing parties of the elite, each accusing the other of negligence: the People's Party (PPP) which governs the province of Punjab (where the shoe factory was located) and the Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif (PLM - N) in Sindh (where the clothing company was located). In truth, in neither province was the inspection of enterprises authorized. Such inspections had been banned under the Musharaff dictatorship and this prohibition has only been formally lifted in Punjab (not in Sindh) after the death of 27 employees on January 4, 2012, at a pharmaceutical company in Lahore. However, the lifting of the ban did not mean authorization [4].

Charged (how could it be avoided?), the criminal bosses were immediately released on bail. They have sought refuge in Larkana bench, the hometown of the Bhutto family, which heads the PPP and, today, the country. The class injustice is obvious when we know that, for defending the rights of loom workers, trade union leaders in Faisalabad were each sentenced to 99 years in prison under anti-terrorism laws. "Not a single person", notes Farooq Tariq, "has accepted any responsibility of this great tragedy and no minister or adviser or any state bureaucrat has resigned. It shows a complete collapse of morality of the ruling class in Pakistan" [5].

In Pakistan, popular anger is great. Various trade union federations, notably, called for a "black day" on September 15, as well as political parties: the Awami Party of Pakistan (APP), Workers Party (WPP) Pakistan, Pakistan Peoples

Party (Shaheed Bhutto PPP). At Lahore, this appeal was launched at a press conference held on September 13 at the Press Club.

On September 15, in the great textile centre of Faisalabad, most businesses were closed due to strikes. United events, bringing together trade unions and left parties, took place, notably in Islamabad, Lahore, Hyderabad and Karachi.

On the international level the IndustriALL Global Union (IGU) federation and LabourStart immediately organized a protest campaign [6]. They joined Pakistani trade unions demanding wage compensation from the government of five million rupees for the families of the workers who were killed, and two million rupees for injured workers and the maintenance of the wages of the workers. The unions also asked the Government to arrest employers and charge them with murder. They are demanding sanctions against the Ministry of Labour and government authorities who have failed to ensure the safety and health of these workers. A petition is open online to support these demands. [7]

In a letter to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Jyrki Raina, general secretary of the IGU, wrote: "The 2010 Pakistan Labour policy has among its objectives the following: Just and humane conditions of work be guaranteed to all workers. We very much would like to see this be finally applied to the garment and shoe-making workers in Pakistan who constitutes 30 per cent of the workers in the country and who have some of the most inhumane working conditions" [8].

The labour movement and left-wing parties are bringing together their forces so that the guilty employers do not escape justice and safety measures are finally imposed on industrialists. Thus in Karachi - where the most deadly fire took place - a new movement was formed: the Workers Right Movement (WRM). To this end, on September 22 more than 70 representatives of trade union federations, enterprise union sections, territorial agencies operating in the industrial areas, left parties, youth, student, and women's organizations, social workers, and human rights activists, as well as individuals, gathered [9]. A rally was announced for September 29.

It is, obviously, not just in Pakistan that such tragedies occur. On May 10, 1993, Thailand experienced one of its worst industrial fires. It destroyed the Kader toy factory, leaving 188 dead and more than 500 injured, some remaining victims with disabilities for life (some paralyzed) after having jumped out of the second, third and fourth floors of the building. Asian Food Worker, the newsletter of the IUF [10] Asia Pacific, described the working conditions in this company, which recall those of Pakistan: "minimum wages were the norm, overtime was compulsory, work often extended late into the evening and amenities were lacking" [11].

According to this article published on the 18th of July 2007 by the Asia Pacific secretariat of the IUF [12], through a rather complicated business and family links network, the Group Charoen Pokphand (CP) - a major transnational - owned 80% of the Kader toy factory. After intense mobilization, it had to pay compensation to the victims of the fire and their families. The Thai Government for its part had to undertake to strengthen health and safety regulation. Ten years later, however, nothing has changed. Which did not prevent CP from participating in 2003 at a conference in Sweden entitled "Human rights and economic relations". [13]

These tragedies reveal the extreme contempt with which the ruling classes deal with ordinary people in these countries; but this was also the case in Europe before the struggles for social protection and a modification of cultures. This is a question on which the international labour movement must act with even more force.

[1] ["Pakistan: Employers' terror against Karachi weaving loom workers"](#).

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[2] ["Factories in Pakistan more like death trap than the work places, workers are treated more like slave than human beings".](#)

[3] ["Horror in Pakistan after 300 workers die".](#)

[4] ["Pakistan: Political gimmicks over the death of 300 workers".](#)

[5] ["Pakistan: Political gimmicks over the death of 300 workers".](#)

[6] The Pakistani trade union federations affiliated to the IndustriALL Global Union are the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), Pakistan Metalworkers' Federation (MFP), The Pakistan Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (CDR) and the Federation of Textile, Garments and Leather Workers

[7] [Pakistan: Make textile factories safe.](#)

[8] ["Horror in Pakistan after 300 workers die".](#)

[9] ["Pakistan: "Workers Right Movement" formed to launch movement against culprits of factory fire, protest Rally on 29Sep in Karachi".](#)

[10] The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations.

[11] ["10 Years After the Kader Toy Factory Fire: Thailand's CP Group and Corporate Responsibility".](#)

[12] This what the IUF secretariat wrote: "CP was the co-owner of the Kader Toy Factory. Through a complicated series of holding companies in Thailand and Hong Kong, with ownership held in the names of key CP Group executives, their spouses and other family members, CP effectively controlled 80% of the company that owned the factory where the fire broke out.

Immediately following the fire there was extensive debate within Thailand as to who would be held responsible and what actions should be taken. After initial foot-dragging and intense campaigning by surviving Kader workers and their allies, CP agreed to a one-off payment to family members of 200,000 baht (US\$8,000) for each worker killed and set aside monies for the education costs of children orphaned by the fire. The government of the time promised increased regulation of health and safety standards.

Yet, 10 years later there has been virtually no change in health and safety standards in Thailand (in some measures they have worsened since 1993), no one from the CP Group or management of the Kader factory has been found responsible for anything other than building code violations (warranting a US\$12,000 fine, imposed 10 years after the fire) and the workers who survived the fire today lack adequate social protection or the means to recover their lives.

Given these circumstances it is necessary to ask : what exactly is CP's commitment to human rights, especially if a high-profile representative such as Sarasin Viraphol is chosen to speak on the company's behalf at an international forum ?"

[13] The CP group, in an email sent after the publication of this article in English, states that "The Charoen Pokphand Group does not have ownership in anyway of the Kader toy factory," and that to state the contrary would be "a defamatory statement".