

# **“Industrial homicide”: How the Deaths of 75 Workers at a Chinese Factory Could Have Been ‘Easily Prevented’**

Sunday 10 August 2014, by [CHEN Michelle](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2014).

After the swirl of poison dust settled, the factory grounds resembled a battlefield, strewn with charred bodies and rubble. The explosion, which left about seventy-five workers dead and 185 injured, wasn't the scene of an attack, really—just another one of the countless industrial accidents that befall China's factories each year. But in light of the manufacturing sector's record of killing, maiming and sickening its workers, some have deemed the blast a form of industrial homicide.

The massive explosion at Zhongrong Metal Products in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province—a subcontracted auto-parts supplier for General Motors and other multinationals—was sparked by a build-up of combustible dust, a byproduct of the metal polishing process used to produce impeccably shiny hubcaps. According to the journal *Caixin*, the disaster was preceded by a slew of safety lapses. Although the plant was equipped with dust-removal gear, “workers who escaped the blast said the production lines were always enveloped in metallic dust so thick that visibility was severely impaired.” In addition to shoddy facilities, workers reportedly lacked appropriate safety training and had inadequate gear—just “goggles and a cotton face mask, which could not prevent exposure to dust particles.”

One worker quoted on *China.com*, Liu Fu Wen, recalled, “Before work every day, no one provided training on safety issues, no one said that dust might explode.” Not only were workers not aware that they were stuck in a virtual powder keg, as *Caixin* reports, the physical labor was brutally strenuous, with workdays of up to twelve hours.

Though a thorough investigation has been promised, activists see another shameful failure in both government regulation and workplace safety culture. Labor scholar Wang Jiansong commented on social media (via *China Labour Bulletin*) that the disaster “exposes a huge black hole in work safety,” and “the safety inspectors were idle on the job and the local trade unions likewise turned a deaf ear.”

Kunshan's indirect ties to global auto giants underscores how China's neoliberal explosion allows luxurious consumer products to be sourced from primitive working conditions.

Garrett Brown, a California-based occupational health specialist, tells *The Nation* via e-mail that from an industrial safety perspective, “aluminum dust is very explosive and any major manufacturer—such as GM—knows this well and knows the control measures to take (ventilation, enclosures, training).” Based on the facts reported so far, he adds, “I would say that these 75 deaths and 185 injuries should never have happened, that the employer(s) involved, from GM down the line, knew better and could have easily prevented this incident. This incident is nothing less than industrial homicide and all the employers involved bear the responsibility.”

The government has launched a major investigation, President Xi Jinping has vowed to crack down on the culprits, and a few company representatives have been detained. But these efforts may yield

few results in the end, as both regulatory authorities and corporate officialdom are rife with corruption and opacity.

General Motors says via e-mail it will seek another supplier to replace Zhongrong while the investigation is pending. It has not announced plans to reform its safety practices—in contrast to the contrition the company has shown in its product recalls for unsafe cars.

Labor rights advocates see oppressive labor conditions and occupational hazards as twin scourges undermining workers' security.

Noting the irony that GM recently won praise as a leading "Fortune 500 company in the area of corporate social responsibility," US-based watchdog China Labor Watch stated that the company "has a duty to ensure safe production in its supply chain, and it shares responsibility for this deadly explosion."

The Hong Kong-based advocacy group SACOM has called on all companies involved (including GM contractor CITIC Dicastal, BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Honda) to provide for victims' compensation and healthcare, noting that in the "complicated web of [a] globalised supply chain," responsibility for safety issues is "outsourced to developing countries." As multinationals like GM are "holding the biggest power in the supply chain, while locating themselves the [farthest] from their suppliers," SACOM activist Pui Kwan Liang says via email that they have an obligation to "take concrete action to provide adequate resources to support their downstream suppliers," to maintain the best safety protections and standards.

Factories are churning out new crises on a daily basis. In recent days, chemical-related disasters have erupted at a Gansu petrochemical plant and at another Jiangsu chemicals factory that caught fire. Back in 2011, Apple was scandalized by two aluminum dust explosions at factories in Chengdu and Shanghai run by the Taiwanese-owned supplier Foxconn (also known for its pattern of worker suicides), which killed several workers. Still, Apple's consumer reputation, polished by its heavy campaigning around its self-regulating factory audit program, was barely dented.

Even when workers are not getting blown up, day-to-day contact with toxins at manufacturing plants take a slower, but equally lethal toll on workers' bodies. The Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin points out that Kunshan's dust-laden factory air also exposed workers to the lung disease pneumoconiosis. The disease has become a nationwide epidemic affecting millions of workers, but employers and officials responsible for providing healthcare have yet to effectively address its causes.

The Zhongrong incident is rooted in systematic regulatory failures, and the responsible corporations may never truly be held to account for the tragedy. But the explosion has cleared new space in the social media sphere, for a civil society dialogue on worker protection amid China's capitalist transformation. Shortly after the Kunshan disaster, a coalition of leading labor scholars and activists penned an open letter calling for a paradigm shift on labor practices—through the empowerment of workers as their own safety advocates. Poor working conditions, the group argued, reflected "the lack of workers' right to organize and the absence of trade unions. There are no smooth channels for workers to express their interests or speak in a collective voice for labor.... They are alienated as a part of the production line."

To address occupational safety issues in the long term, they argued, Chinese manufacturing industries need not just tighter regulation, but the direct engagement of employees in workplace oversight. In other words, a more democratic workplace is a safer one.

Yet activists often dismiss China's labor unions for being self-servingly aligned with management or with government interests. In a 2013 analysis on occupational safety in Chinese manufacturing, Yiu Por Chen and Anita Chan acknowledge that state-run unions often provide little meaningful protection for workers. The scholars did however point to a historical example that could potentially inform workers' response to the next tragedy: the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911, the deadly industrial disaster that galvanized the American labor movement and spurred critical reforms.

The carnage at Zhongrong evokes the Triangle Fire in some ways. But China's workers must confront broader, more global economic forces when they challenge corporate impunity today. Nonetheless, by agitating locally, on the shop floor, for their right to work without having to risk their lives, they might just wield the most powerful protective gear of all: their collective voice.

**Michelle Chen**

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\* The Nation. August 6, 2014 - 11:55 AM ET:

[http://www.thenation.com/blog/180892/how-deaths-75-workers-chinese-factory-could-have-been-easily-prevented?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=email\\_nation&utm\\_campaign=Email%20Nation%20-%2020140807&newsletter=email\\_nation#](http://www.thenation.com/blog/180892/how-deaths-75-workers-chinese-factory-could-have-been-easily-prevented?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=email_nation&utm_campaign=Email%20Nation%20-%2020140807&newsletter=email_nation#)

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