

It's no accident: the silent death of workers in India

Day workers need much better health, safety and social protection

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Every morning, groups of men squat on the pavement in the streets of Delhi and wait for a truck to pick them up and bring them to a construction site. They carry bags of tools. Their clothing is worn and their skin leathery, the expressions on their faces are weary and resigned. Workers in the Indian capital build buildings for about 500 rupees (US\$7) a day. If an employer has an extra space to fill for the day, they'll climb onto the truck. If not, they'll have to try their luck another day.

The ones who find work for the day face a grim reality: construction is the deadliest sector in India, with an average of 38 fatal accidents a day. Falls from great heights, electrocutions and falling walls and scaffolding cause one-in-four Indian construction workers to die at construction sites. According to a study by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), one of the country's most prestigious academic institutions, around [48,000 people die at work in India](#) every year.

News of workplace accidents appears every day in local media. Fifteen miners are buried inside an illegal coalmine after a flood. An explosion in a shop results in 13 deaths. A building under construction collapses and kills seven workers. Two [sewer cleaners](#) die of asphyxiation when the wall of the tunnel where they were working collapses. It's a steady stream so routine that it only attracts attention when the figures are catastrophic (like the [1984 Bhopal disaster](#), in which a gas leak resulted in the deaths of 25,000 people).

According to Apoorva Kaiwar, regional secretary of south Asia for the global union federation IndustriALL, the lack of official records makes it difficult to determine the actual death toll as "many accidents go unreported." Injuries, as she explains, are even less likely to be reported.

"If someone is injured and dies 15 days later in a hospital or at home, the connection between the accident and the death is very difficult to prove because the person was registered as 'injured'". The more time passes, the harder it is to establish responsibility. "If you die 20 years later because you inhaled toxic chemicals in an industrial plant, no one is held accountable," she says.

Professor Kumar Neeraj Jha, a civil engineer at IIT Delhi and author of the aforementioned study on workplace deaths in India, describes the pattern of evasion of responsibility that repeats itself every time an accident occurs. "When a fatal accident takes place, the employer gets off by paying a small compensation to the families and conspires with police and labour inspectors to make the whole thing go away." All of the sources consulted by *Equal Times* agree that it's common for Indian companies not to invest in occupational safety because it's cheaper for them to pay the costs of compensation for accidents than to modernise their facilities to make them safer.

Workers in the construction industry are also poorly trained because their employers know that they

are easily replaced. “These workers end up in construction as a last resort because the working conditions are very tough. Their contractors don’t give them adequate training because they know that they are only there on a temporary basis, so they are not interested in investing in their training and safety,” explains Professor Jha. A report by the [Delhi Institute of Human Development](#) shows that less than 30 per cent of workers have completed secondary education and that only one in ten have received training specific to their work.

The labour market of India – a country of 1.3 billion – primarily operates within the [informal sector](#) and is fraught with the most precarious of conditions.

Although strong labour laws exist, in practice workers are subject to daily verbal contracts, risky occupations with no minimum protection measures, dilapidated infrastructure and obsolete tools, low daily payments or unpaid wages which can’t be claimed, the result of a network of contractors evading their responsibility: a situation, in short, characterised by instability, insecurity and uncertainty.

“We need stronger labour administration, meaning more awareness of occupational safety, more training in machinery for employees, more inspections and more personnel to carry out these inspections,” says Kaiwar of IndustriALL. According to official data from the [British Safety Council](#), an organisation dedicated to workplace safety, India has only one inspector for every 500 factories.

Workers face precarious conditions so rampant that most choose to prioritise their employment, even at the risk of their safety. “If the equipment in a factory is not working properly, workers can inform the superintendent, but the superintendent is the one who decides whether the machine is repaired and if the worker continues working. Employees who decide not to work due to unsafe conditions can be fired, so they usually choose to keep quiet because they need the job and the salary,” explains Kaiwar.

Work based on the caste system

It should be remembered that while modern, caste-free occupations now exist in India, the country’s labour hierarchy has historically been a reflection of its [caste system](#), which continues to play a significant role in the division of labour. Individual members of a caste often inherit the trade that tradition has assigned to their group. Although officially prohibited, these discriminatory hierarchies remain commonplace.

“Looking at the labour hierarchy means looking at the caste hierarchy. You are just as unlikely to find any upper class Hindus performing manual labour as you are to find high-risk jobs not being performed by lower castes, dalits (intouchables) or [adivasis \(tribal populations\)](#),” says Gautam Mody, secretary general of the New Trade Union Initiative. Every day three workers die in the factories of India. A sewer and gutter cleaner dies every week. None of them are of high caste.

According to experts, workers at the bottom of the labour hierarchy have come to accept labour abuses and dangerous conditions, often unaware of the risks they face on a daily basis. In an environment where workers can lose their jobs for speaking out, most keep quiet to survive.

“Workers can unionise, it’s a right recognised by law, but it’s one of the most violated rights. Punishment for workers who unionise is being fired under some pretext or another, it’s very common,” says Kavita Krishnan, head of the Communist Party of India (PCI-ML), who argues that employers take advantage of citizens who are “desperate” for work.

In a country with a labour force of somewhere between [400](#) and [527](#) million people, where contracts

are usually verbal, sacking people is cheap. “Why is it so easy to fire workers? Because there are huge numbers of people looking for employment, so any worker can be replaced by ten workers who are even cheaper, who come from all over the country looking for any job,” says Mody.

Labour protests are nonetheless very common in India. Teachers in Punjab and Tamil Nadu recently took to the streets to demand wage increases. In Rajasthan, a campaign was recently launched to combat child labour in the production of handicrafts for tourists, an industry that employs 250,000 children under the age of 14. For the first time, producers of defence equipment (around 400,000) have joined together to protest privatisation of the industry.

India began 2019 with a [massive general strike](#) against the “anti-employment” policies of the governing BJP party, privatisation of the public sector, unemployment, job insecurity and the government’s plans to facilitate investment from multinationals at the cost of protection for Indian workers, and for a minimum wage of 18,000 rupees (about US\$253), decent pensions, real social security and compliance with labour laws.

Around 200 million workers took part in the demonstration organised by the country’s ten largest trade unions, which themselves face existential threats as the current government of Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi attempts to rollback [freedom of association](#). It was the third general strike Modi has faced since taking office. He is up for re-election this month.

The opposition’s secret weapon in the campaign is India’s growing unemployment and [agricultural crisis](#). Modi was first elected in 2014 on promises to solve both problems but has failed to do so in his first term. Instead, he has focused his attention on the supposed threat posed by neighbouring Pakistan as a means of stirring up the nationalist sentiments of his voters.

This article has been translated from Spanish.

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