

Violent protests in Indian capital over factory closures

By Terry Cook
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Thousands of industrial workers, workshop owners and their supporters took to the streets of the Indian capital of New Delhi this week to protest against moves to close down thousands of small factories in accordance with a Supreme Court anti-pollution order.

Demonstrators angry at the sudden loss of jobs blocked traffic and in some cases burnt government buildings and vehicles. Clashes with riot police armed with batons and tear gas broke out in different areas of the city. Hundreds of protestors were injured and at least one young worker was killed on Monday when police fired on protestors in the Chajjupur area in the north east of the city.

The protests erupted on Monday after city council authorities, under orders from the Supreme Court, sent in teams to begin to seal off “polluting” industrial premises operating in residential areas across the city. Over 97,600 small factory units employing more than a million workers are scheduled for closure or relocation.

The demonstrations continued on Tuesday and Wednesday, although on a smaller scale. Areas of the capital have been turned into a virtual police camp after the Delhi government deployed hundreds of police, including 40 companies of the Delhi Armed Police, four companies of the Rapid Action Units and at least two other armed police units.

The protests immediately threw both the Delhi and national governments into a panic. An editorial in the *Indian Express* on Wednesday commented: “Monday saw scenes that the capital hasn't witnessed for almost a decade... with buses being burnt, mobs going on the rampage and police resorting to firing. Meanwhile everybody, but everybody, who had anything to do with the current imbroglio in Delhi was busy passing the buck—from the chief minister of Delhi to the minister of urban development to the chief secretary of the state.”

The Delhi Legislative Assembly was adjourned within minutes of convening on Tuesday when members from

both the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) engaged in such bitter recriminations and slinging matches that the proceedings became inoperative. On the same day, the municipal council broke down in half an hour in similar circumstances.

The issue is not new. A private case was brought in the Supreme Court case 15 years ago over high levels of industrial pollution in the capital. Successive authorities in Delhi have done nothing to prevent the haphazard growth of industry in the capital or to ensure the control of air and water pollution and the observance of basic safety standards.

In 1996 the Supreme Court issued an injunction ordering the closure of large sections of small industry in Delhi's residential areas. It directed the Delhi municipal council to ensure that no licenses were issued for the establishment of new industries in residential areas. The court also ruled that thousands of polluting factories lacking necessary permission stop production from January 1997 or agree to be relocated.

Despite the court's directive, both city and state government authorities, fearful of an electoral backlash, have continually delayed fully implementing the order. So far about 39,000 units have been closed, leaving the vast bulk untouched. At the same time 15,000 new licenses have been issued.

Under the “Delhi Master Plan,” the government was supposed to set up new areas for the relocation of closed industries. But factory owners complain that the areas set aside lack any infrastructure, including water and electricity, and would accommodate less than one-tenth of the affected firms. No government compensation or assistance has been provided to the thousands of displaced workers.

On Tuesday, in the midst of the unrest, the Supreme Court rejected a request by the Delhi government to permit it to “go slow” on the industry closures because

the “situation in the city was likely to escalate”. The three-judge bench arrogantly declared: “Court orders cannot be withdrawn simply because hooligans have taken to the streets.”

The city council had, however, already decided that it would not continue sealing premises and had begun to remove seals from the 650 units closed down on Monday.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee intervened, after being prevailed upon by a delegation of parliamentarians from the BJP—the major partner in the ruling national coalition. He held an urgent meeting with Urban Affairs Minister Jagmohan who agreed to make another approach to the Supreme Court to ask for more time for relocating industry.

Jagmohan, who heads the agency set up to supervise the industry closures, said he would amend the Delhi Master Plan to allow “non-polluting industries” to remain in residential areas. The proposed changes alter the definitions of “small household industry” and “non-polluting” so as to allow virtually all industrial units to remain in residential areas of the city. The number of offending industries is now estimated to be as low as 4,000 to 5,000.

The problems in New Delhi are a graphic example of the failure of the profit system. Successive government authorities at all levels, municipal, state and national, are responsible for the chaotic, unplanned industrial development created by bribery, corruption and the vagaries of the market. As a result industrial workers are compelled to labour for a pittance in dirty, unhealthy and often dangerous conditions while the health and lives of local residents—often the same workers and their families—are also put at risk.

To suit their new plans for Delhi, sections of the ruling elite have decided that something has to be done about the mess. But the measures are being carried out with callous indifference to the impact on the lives of workers, many of whom, without a job or any access to welfare, will be reduced to destitution. Under the anarchic operation of the market, the conflict between the needs of workers for jobs and the appalling conditions created by the industries that employ them is irresolvable.

For the time being, it appears that the factories, along with their uncontrolled fumes and toxic substances, will remain in residential areas of New Delhi. According to the Minister for Environment and Forests, of the 96,600 factories located in residential areas in Delhi only 683 have effluent treatment plants of any description. Media reports describe the Yamuna River that runs through the

city as a “glorified open sewer” because tonnes of untreated effluents and toxic waste are dumped into it.

According to an editorial in the *Hindustan Times* on Wednesday, nearly 50 people have died over the last year because unsafe factories operate close to their homes. Seeking to justify the stand of the Supreme Court, the writer painted the following picture of the hazards:

“Not only do many of the factories pollute their immediate environment, several are potential infernos. Their godowns [warehouses] are stacked with chemicals like petroleum ethers, including highly inflammable methyl ethyl ketone and mek peroxide used in the paint and chemicals industry... Equally dangerous are the thinners, used to dilute paint, which vaporise at room temperature and can ignite if not sealed properly...”

“Many of these godowns are in the basements of buildings housing several families. The Lal Kuan tragedy, which killed 40 persons, started off with a fire in a basement godown. Just above the godown is a huge residential locality housing around 500 people. ‘It was sheer luck the godown door was open, else the impact would have been towards the inner wall, which would have blown up the entire complex,’” says a crime branch official...

“Delhi's factories are typically clustered together in fetid ghettos whose congested bylanes are practically inaccessible. Last year, when a fire broke out at the Saria Rohilla chemical factory surrounded by residential buildings, fire-fighters had to join hosepipes from several engines together to access it. Result: the water pressure was severely reduced, and it took hours to control the fire. Recalls a Delhi Fire Service officer: ‘It was impossible to move about. Forget about industries, the area is not even fit to house people.’”

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