

Explosion at Indian thermal power plant kills four workers

By Arun Kumar
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A massive explosion at a Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC)-owned thermal power plant in southern India on May 7 has taken the lives of four workers. Two permanent workers—Sharfuddin, 54, and Pavadai—and two contract workers—Shanmugam, 26, and Balamurugan, 36—have succumbed to severe burns in hospital.

Four other contract workers—Anburaj, Jayshankar, Manikandan, Ranjitha Kumar—were injured by the blast. They were initially admitted to a NLC-run hospital in Neyveli, then later shifted to Kauveri private hospital in Trichi city due to the seriousness of their injuries.

The tragic deaths are a result of the management's hasty moves to resume work, in line with the Modi government's instructions to reopen the economy, despite the worsening COVID-19 pandemic.

The NLC management resumed operations at the plant on April 8 without carrying out mandatory maintenance procedures and ensuring safety measures. Its failure to renew outdated boilers led to the explosion.

This was an act of callous disregard for the basic safety of workers, in addition to pushing them back to work amid the rapid spread of the coronavirus in Tamil Nadu and across India, which also placed their lives in grave danger.

Tamil Nadu has become the second most pandemic-affected Indian state, after Maharashtra. As of Sunday, Tamil Nadu's recorded infection cases rose to 22,333, while the figure for the whole country reached 190,162.

Trade unions linked to almost all the main political parties operate at the NLC, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM. They are

complicit in this tragedy because they refused to demand mandatory safety measures at the plant.

The NLC is a highly profitable, central government-owned corporation, based in Neyveli, 200 kilometres southwest of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. The company mines lignite and generates electricity. It has four open cut mines with an annual capacity of about 30 million tonnes in Neyveli and one open cut mine at Barsingsar in the state of Rajasthan. It operates four thermal electric power stations in Neyveli and one at Barsingsar.

The workers' deaths triggered protests by their families and fellow workers. They demanded financial compensation of 10 million rupees and a permanent job for a member of each victim's family. The NLC rejected the demand and offered to pay only 1.5 million rupees.

After angry workers and family members refused to accept that offer, the management agreed only to increase the compensation to 2.5 million rupees per dead worker, with a permanent job for a member of each victim's family. The trade unions held several hours of talks with the management, and accepted the meagre compensation, one quarter of the workers' demand.

The NLC has a record of ignoring basic safety measures. A report published by downtoearth.org referred to two major accidents and a minor accident in the past five years that exposed serious issues in maintenance and safety systems in the old units running at the company's thermal power stations.

The efficient and safe operating life of a thermal power plant is considered to be around 25 years but there has been a protracted delay in commissioning new units at NLC. Its plants have been running with units that were scheduled to retire between 2011 and

2015. A large number of its units are 25-57 years old.

Over the years, the report added, the Delhi-based non-profit Centre for Science and Environment has pushed for the NLC to expedite the retirement of old units. But the management failed to do so, endangering workers' lives.

Despite the public sector company continuing to make huge profits, it has refused to install new units to ensure safety. This is a clear example of how workers' lives are sacrificed for profits under the capitalist system.

According to *Business Standard*: "On a consolidated basis, the company reported a 15.03 percent rise in net profit to Rs 398.75 crore [3,987.5 million rupees] ... in Q3 [3rd quarter] December 2019 over Q3 December 2018."

Contract workers make up at least half the Neyveli workforce. They are subject to arbitrary and brutal working conditions, and many are paid as little as 10 percent of the wages of regular workers.

The NLC management has long ignored their demands to be hired as permanent workers, even though many have worked for the company for decades. This is another example about how contract labour, once considered rare, is widely used in India, in both the private and public sectors, to extract lucrative profits.

Contract workers are denied even the meagre benefits, like medical insurance, pensions or provident funds, won by permanent workers through generations of struggle. The exploitation of contract employees is one of the main weapons used by the ruling elite to drive down the wages and conditions of all workers.

The NLC unions maintain a strict segregation between the contract and permanent workers inside their own organisations, thereby reinforcing the inferior status of the contract workers. The unions oppose any unified struggle with the contract workers, even when forced to call industrial action because of the growing opposition of permanent workers to the conditions they face.

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