

India: A massive explosion in Gujarat chemical plant kills 10 workers

By Arun Kumar
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Early this month a massive blast in a storage tank and resulting fire at the Yashashvi Rasayan Private chemical plant in Dahej Industrial Estate in the Indian state of Gujarat killed 10 workers. Six workers were killed on the spot and another four later succumbed to burn injuries after they were hospitalised. Some 77 other injured workers were sent to nearby hospitals.

The enormous June 3 blaze at the plant, which is located in Bharuch district, took 11 fire units about six hours to bring under control. Thousands of people had to be evacuated from nearby villages, including 3,000 from Lakhi and 1,800 from Luvara.

The tragic loss of life and terrible injuries are a direct result of the callous indifference towards mandatory work safety measures by company management and the Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which holds power in Gujarat and leads the central government.

The Yashashvi Rasayan Private plant, which manufactures over a dozen industrial chemical products, is owned by the Patel Group and supplies to a global network of clients, including in Europe, the UK, South Africa and Scandinavia. The company has announced a pittance in compensation of 500,000 rupees (\$US6,600) to the victims' families.

The *Indian Express* reported that a preliminary investigation compiled by Vijaysinh Parmar, a sub-divisional magistrate, said the fire followed a storage tank blast and "there was no responsible person present in the factory" at the time.

Bharuch district collector, Dr M.D. Modia, who told the media that senior officials were investigating the incident, said: "There were Methanol and Xylene chemical tanks near the storage tank that exploded. Both these chemicals are highly poisonous and flammable."

The Gujarat state government quickly shut down the plant under Section 4(2) of the Factories Act with Vipul Mittra, an additional chief secretary for labour and employment, announcing an official investigation.

"To ensure the safety of workers, the unit will not be allowed to resume operations until adequate safety measures are in place," he told the media. He also "promised" increased safety audit inspections of all factories in the Dahej Industrial Estate.

Mittra's assurances are worthless and designed to cover up the criminal negligence of government authorities towards basic workplace safety.

Indian central and state governments systematically turn a blind eye to company violations of industrial safety norms, ensuring that profits take precedence over worker's lives.

The real attitude of Prime Minister Narendra Modi towards the health and safety of workers is revealed in its determination to reopen all industries, even as the coronavirus pandemic continues to rapidly spread throughout the country.

No arrests have been made over the Yashashvi Rasayan chemical blast and fire. Justifying its failure to arrest anyone responsible for the disaster, a police report into the incident declared that company owners have "not yet come before the police; we are trying to contact them."

Rohit Prajapati, a spokesperson for the Prayavaran Suraksha Samiti (PSS) environmental group, told the *Week* that the chemical blast is probably related to the lack of proper monitoring of the plant during COVID-19 lockdown and its reopening.

Chemical plant facilities are not like normal industries, he said, and questioned if the necessary monitoring had been carried out before and after the lockdown. The PSS has warned that other industrial

disasters are waiting to happen if these industries are not properly maintained, and especially during reopening periods.

In fact, there have been increasing numbers of industrial accidents reported since the Modi government's premature and reckless return-to-work was initiated.

Last month, 11 people died and around 800 were hospitalised by a poisonous gas leak at an LG Polymers India plant in the port city of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. Four workers were also killed by a large explosion at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC)-owned thermal power plant in Tamil Nadu.

On June 11, just eight days after the Yashashvi Rasayan blast, one worker was killed and five others injured in explosion at the Hemani Industries agrichemical facility. The Hemani plant is also located in Gujarat state's Bharuch district.

A few hours before last month's Visakhapatnam poisonous gas accident a similar toxic leak occurred at a Chhattisgarh paper mill. Up to seven workers at the mill were hospitalised after being exposed to gases while they were cleaning the paper pulp tank in preparation for a resumption of operations at the facility.

Ahmed Patel, senior Congress party leader from Gujarat and a member of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian national parliament), issued a tweet denouncing the BJP-led state government over the Yashashvi Rasayan disaster and calling for all factories to face work safety audits.

"The buck stops only with the state government ensuring safe working conditions [and] that factories have completed safety audits. We are concerned that recent changes in labour laws will incentivise unsafe working conditions," he declared.

Patel's concerns are bogus. The Congress party, which has systematically imposed socially-disastrous economic reforms in order to transform India into a cheap labour heaven for global investors, is equally responsible for allowing these companies to violate basic safety measures.

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