

DEATH TRAP: ON LABOUR REFORMS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Thousands of workers in Tamil Nadu's famed fireworks industry remain trapped in unsafe conditions despite an unending series of accidents that keeps drawing attention to their plight. In the latest accident at a fireworks unit in Virudhunagar, at last count, 20 lives have perished, while 28 workers are in hospital. Such tragedies, caused predominantly by gross violation of norms governing the hazardous industry and human error in handling explosive substances, have occurred with some regularity now. In 11 months, 25 lives were lost in major blazes in three other fireworks factories in Virudhunagar (9), Cuddalore (9), and Madurai (7). Most victims were women. While the dead end up in statistical records, on the ground there is only short-term action: registration of cases, arrests, identification of causes, token inspections, issuance of warnings and safety advisories. The causes are well documented. Unlicensed units that have mushroomed in and outside Sivakasi mostly escape scrutiny till explosions occur. A greater concern is the illegal sub-leasing of contracts for manufacturing crackers by licensed units. Preliminary investigation into the current tragedy has also revealed sub-leasing of works to several persons. The very nature of work in a hazardous industry makes sub-leasing a byword for safety compromise. It leads to conversion of every shed in a manufacturing unit into a 'factory' in itself with inflammable chemicals stored all over. Consequently, the limit on workers to be deployed is violated resulting in crowding in each shed. Supervision of the quantum of chemicals to be mixed or stored — a key task to avoid friction — becomes a casualty.

Untrained workers and the piece-rate system, which induces people to race to produce more units per day, have also caused accidents. Eyewitness accounts suggest that in the latest accident, a worker, possibly fatigued, had hurriedly emptied semi-finished crackers triggering an explosion. While the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation offers training for workers, shortage of labour has prompted the industry to hire new recruits with limited skills. The industry continues to be labour-intensive, although a decade ago Parliament was informed that automation of the hazardous manufacturing process would be undertaken. Periodic inspections at factories, sustained crackdown and stringent penal action against violators are non-negotiable. For this, Central and State governments must provide the needed manpower for enforcement agencies as the industry has grown manifold. A sustained political push for labour reforms and technological innovations within the industry is also essential. After all, there can be no joy during any celebrations using fireworks if those making it lead a life of dangerous uncertainty.

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