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Pakistan

Lahore factory blast: Lift Ban on Factory inspection, better health and safety measures for the workers

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16 bodies, ten of them women and three teenage boys, are recovered after 24 hours of an industrial incident when a three-storey factory building owned by a pharmaceutical company caved in after a huge blast in Lahore. The huge blast was apparently caused either by the boiler or by gas cylinders in the boiler section of the factory. The building collapsed trapping over 50 workers, most of them young women and child labor. The factory was located in a residential area and the blast also destroyed an adjacent house and partially damaged another.

Activists of Labour Party Pakistan and Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party held a demonstration in front of the factory few hours after the incident to demand the arrest of the owners, more effective relief work, a compensation of at least one million for those who lost their lives, five hundred thousand for all the injured, lifting of ban on labour inspection and to provide all the necessary safety measures to the workers. Hundreds of workers gathered to raise voices against the Punjab and central government and also against capitalism. Women Workers Help Line and National Trade Union Federation participated in the demonstration as well.

“In Punjab, it is the rule of the companies and not by the representatives of the people, The incident proves that bosses have been given free hand to violate all the labour laws, child labour is employed, workers are under paid, no job contract is given to the workers, women are sexually physically abused and no measures taken for the health and safety of the workers” said Farooq Tariq, spokesperson Labour Party Pakistan speaking on the occasion.

According to the details, the Orient Labs (Pvt) Ltd. which deals in veterinary injections had been sealed by government agencies at least twice in the past. It was illegally operating in the area and residents had filed a case in a civil court seeking closure of the factory because it was in the residential area. There are hundreds of such small factories operating in residential areas and violating all the labour laws.

The relatives of those were trapped inside the rubbles spoke at the demonstrations describing the horrendous working conditions at the factory. Salma, an elderly women who was aunt of one the women worker spoke at the demonstration and said that workers in this factory are paid Rupees 3000, to 5000. They are working over 12 hours and no facility of proper toilet is available at the factory.

Most of the private factories are paying less than the minimum wage of Rupees 7000 fixed by the government. The labour department is been paralyzed by the ban on labor inspection.

Azra Shad, chairperson Women Workers Help Line who had visited this factory earlier to organize the women workers told the gathering that women workers are the worst exploited here in this factory. They are paid a very little amount and most of them are under 16 years. “I was always discouraged by the bosses to enter this factory” she said. “This is because the factory owner never wanted any union in this factory, she said. “ We will not leave the workers alone, we demand an immediate arrest of the bosses and police must register a murder case against the owners she said.

Daily Dawn reported today that Khalid Habib, whose house was partially damaged, said the factory was sealed on the orders of a judge after residents had filed a case for removal of the factory from the residential area. But the owners broke the seal 15 days after the court’s decision. According to him, the owners had built more illegal structures and the authorities concerned did not respond to several pleas made by the residents. The DIG (Operations) Ghulam Mehmood Dogar said three brothers, Sheikh Zaheer, Sheikh Zafar and Sheikh Zubair, were running the factory and a few other outlets in different parts of the city. Hunjarwal police has registered a case under

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Section 302 of the PPC against the three owners of the company on behalf of the state.