

# Asian Workers Organising

The newsletter of Australia Asia Worker Links

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## work kills more than wars

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According to the ILO there is one work-related death every fifteen seconds.

Six thousand workers are killed by work every day.

This means that work kills 2.2 million workers every year.

Work injures and mutilates workers also. Almost 270 million accidents are formally recorded each year, of which 350,000 are recorded as causing fatalities. Illnesses also come from dangerous work

Dangerous work leads to injuries, illnesses and deaths, which could be prevented. Most disasters and everyday hazardous practices at work are preventable. Industrialised countries are exporting their hazards to developing countries.

Where workers are fully unionised the serious accident rate is half of workplaces where workers are not organised.

Union Health and Safety Representatives are key to workers organising to prevent injuries and illness. Workers elect Health and Safety Representatives to represent them. They must not be appointed by management. They must have legal rights (entitlements) to contribute to workers'

health and safety. These rights include:

- \*The right to access all information on OH&S;

- \*The right to be consulted on all issues related to health and safety;

- \*The right to inspect workplaces immediately in the event of accident/injury or after giving reasonable notice;

- \*The right to participate in identification of hazards, assessment of risk and decisions about controls;

- \*The right to perform all of the HSR activities on paid time;

- \*The right to represent co-workers on all matters relevant to health and safety;

- \*The right to attend H&S training on paid time with the employer covering costs;

- \*The right to seek assistance from any person - such as their Union, Community Workers' Health Organisations or Government;

- \*The legal rights to issue Notices to force the employer control the risks; and

- \*The right to stop the process, if workers are placed in immediate danger.

Trade union freedom is a vital factor in workplace safety, all too often it is still flouted. In fact, trade unionism is a high-risk occupation, just take countries like Columbia and The Philippines.

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# Fight for the Living Mourn for the Dead



April 28 is the International Workers' Memorial Day.

It is intended to remember all those killed at or by work, and to strengthen our resolve to reduce risks and protect people from injury in the workplace.

There are also many National Days of Mourning for those killed by work.

In Bangladesh it is April 11, the anniversary of the Spectrum-Shahriyar factory collapse in Bangladesh. On that date, hundreds of night-shift workers found themselves buried under the debris of an industrial unit. Eventually 64 persons died and 74 were injured.

In Thailand it is May 10, the anniversary of a fire in the Kadar toy factory where 188 workers were killed in 1993 when they faced locked doors and no fire protection.

28 April was initiated by Unions in Canada, chosen for International Workers Memorial Day as it is the anniversary of the Occupational Health and Safety Act in the USA and also commemorates the day that 28 people were killed in a construction incident in Connecticut.

Since 1989 trade unions in the USA, UK, Asia, Europe and Africa have organised events on and around 28 April.

The canary, pictured on the workers' badge, has been sent down mines with the miners for centuries to show if the air was turning bad. The canary died first - hopefully giving enough time for workers to escape.

## Join Australia Asia Worker Links

AAWL is an international solidarity organisation that works to build solidarity links between workers as the best means to develop and strengthen workers' rights in the Asia Pacific region.

AAWL organises its work into projects. For example, we have projects to free jailed trade unionists and projects to build support for striking workers in Australia and overseas. Projects can last from months to years.

Join AAWL, call us on 9663 7277  
or visit our website at [www.aawl.org.au](http://www.aawl.org.au)

Take a moment to think about those who have lost their lives through their work and remember that we can organise on the job to fight for the living.

## Tune in To Community Radio 3CR

Asia Pacific Currents is the radio program of AAWL. Tune in every Saturday morning from 9:00am on Community Radio 3CR, 855 am.



## Bangladesh Garment Industry

In Bangladesh's notorious garment industry, foreign companies stand to make billions of dollars in profits, primarily from cheap labour. The industry is estimated to generate \$US 5.51 billion a year, and accounts for 76% of the country's economy. The garment industry is dominated by US and European companies who have shifted their factories to Bangladesh in order to save money on labour. For example, in the US, a garment worker makes approximately \$US 10.20 an hour, compared to \$US 0.30 in Bangladesh.

Across Bangladesh, the garment industry employs about 3 million workers, 90% of whom are women. Apart from the cheapness of the labour there, Bangladesh's factories have little, if any, standards for health and safety.

Hundreds of workers have been killed, just in the first three months of this year. On 23 February 2006, 54 workers were killed and more than 100 were injured when a fire destroyed the four storey KTS Textile Industries building in the Kalurghat Industrial area of Chittagong.



According to reports, 1100 people were working the night shift when an electrical short circuit caused flames to spread throughout the factory building. With the main entrance to the building locked, workers were forced to jump from second and third storey windows to escape the flames. Even still, there were up to 1000 workers still trapped inside the building. It took fire fighters almost ten hours to put out the building.

The factory reportedly produced for US companies Uni Hosiery, Mermaid International, ATT Enterprise and VICA Enterprise Corp. Bangladesh authorities then sealed off three other factories connected to this facility citing unplanned construction and inadequate safety measures. The other factories were Vintex Fashion, Cardinal Fashion and Arena Fashion, which together employed 6,000 workers.

Just two days later, on the morning of the 25 February 2006, 19 people were killed and 50 injured when the Phoenix Building, a five storey building in the Tejgoan district of Dhaka, collapsed following unauthorised renovations to convert its upper stories from a factory and offices to a 500-bed private hospital. 150 construction workers were inside at the time of the collapse, along with an unknown number of garment workers.

Later that day a further 57 workers were injured, 4 seriously, when a transformer exploded at the Imam Group of Indus-

tries, which housed Moon Fashion Limited, Imam Fashion, Moon Textile, Leading Fashion and Bimon Inda garment factories. Fearing fire, the workers attempted to leave through a narrow exit, resulting in a stampede.

On 6 March 2006, a fire at Sayem Fashions in Gasipur killed 3 and injured 50. Following these catastrophes in the last few months, on 8 March, the Bangladesh government assembled ten inspection teams to visit garment factories across the country, checking that gates and exits are properly set up for enabling workers to exit in the event of emergency. New laws were enacted in order to fine company owners who do not comply with these emergency evacuation standards. The teams, however, did not inspect on-the-job health and safety standards in order to prevent disasters, nor were any recommendations made about working conditions, wage increases and holiday entitlements.

Unions and workers are skeptical of these moves, prompting industrial action and protests across the country on 18 March and 11 April, the anniversary of the Spectrum factory collapse.

These events are just the latest in a long line of incidents related to poor health and safety standards in the Bangladesh garment industry. Since 1990, 350 workers have been killed and 2500 injured in garment factory fires. In January 2005, 22 Bangladeshi workers were killed in a factory fire, which was thought to have been caused by electrical short-circuiting. On April 11 of the same year, at 64 workers were killed and 74 injured in the collapse of the nine-storey Spectrum Sweater factory building in Savar. This industrial accident was in fact commemorated this year through protests and actions across Bangladesh.



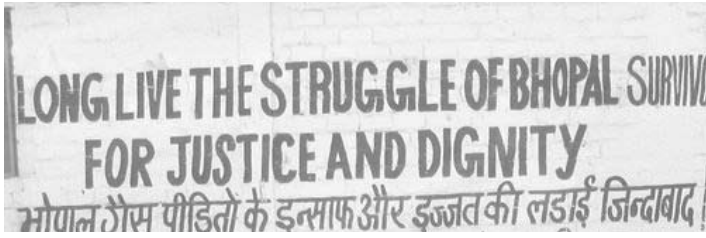
*Garment workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, protesting on 18 March 2006. This photo is courtesy of "The People's Weekly World"; [www.pww.org](http://www.pww.org)*

In addition to this atrocious record of industrial murders, garment workers in Bangladesh experience illness and disease. Some common ailments include headache, anaemia, fever, chest, stomach eye and ear pain, cough and cold, diarrhoea, dysentery, urinary tract infection and reproductive health problems. Some of these are caused by the extraordinary hours workers are forced to do, the lack of recreational leave and sick leave.

More information: [www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org)

Jiselle Hanna  
Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance  
Asia Pacific Currents Coordinator

# Union Carbide tragedy still felt in Bhopal 21 years on



Progress, economic growth, increased opportunity. That is what the multinational companies promise when they establish their factories in the low-wage countries of Asia.

Actually the companies are searching the world looking for super profits. These are to be found in places that have been colonised or re-colonised and survive under the rule of local administrations and the WTO.

Today India is called one of the great tiger economies. Many companies are relocating there. The promised progress, economic growth and increased opportunity are not yet apparent for the 500 million or so Indian people who are homeless or living in slums with incomes below US \$2 per day, but the super profits for the capitalists are in the bank already.

In 1976 the big capitalist companies were just starting to relocate some of their big factories in Asia.

Union Carbide set up a factory in Bhopal to manufacture pesticides. Progress, economic growth and increased opportunity were the promise for the inhabitants of the large city in central India, located on two lakes on the side of some very pretty mountains. Union Carbide produced very dangerous chemicals, including methyl isocyanate (MIC), an extremely toxic substance that has to be kept cool and can explode in contact with water.

The factory was built with the latest technology, except that Union Carbide saw no need to maintain costly safety systems that can often slow down production. There was also no thought about the safety of the population of Bhopal, living just metres outside the factory gates, as the plant was conveniently located well inside the urban area. The factory brought employment to the people of Bhopal. The company felt no other duty to them and just took the super profits home.

By 1982 the workers at Union Carbide had become unionised and often complained about the poor working conditions and poor safety systems. In September 1982 a safety audit showed major safety problems that could cause a disaster. Local publications publicise the dangers, but the company took no action to possible industrial disasters.

By 1984 however Union Carbide was facing serious competition in the pesticide industry, and began a process of downsizing and cost cutting. In October 1984 they reduced production and sacked staff (including safety monitors). They reduced training, and they turned off the cooling system for the MIC tank. Turning off the cooling system saved Union Carbide and their shareholders almost \$50 per day. It also let the MIC overheat.

On 3 December 1984, a night-time cleaning operation by an understaffed, under-trained and under-equipped maintenance crew went wrong. More than 27 tonnes of MIC escaped into the night air and flowed into Bhopal.

Three days and nights of panic followed and 8,000 people, mostly industrial workers and their families, died of lung failure. This is the world's worst industrial accident, and the worst corporate murder ever committed.

The Union Carbide managers ran to the United States, where they remain unpunished. Twenty-two

years after the poisoning of Bhopal the death toll is shocking: More than 20,000 are dead from the effects of the gas. At least 150,000 inhabitants of Bhopal are living and dying from the chronic diseases caused by MIC. Many children are born with defects caused by their parents' exposure to the gas. It is thought that more than 500,000 people were exposed to the gas and may develop or pass on diseases because of it.

Union Carbide refused to issue doctors with the exact chemical composition of the gases to protect its 'trade secrets', and declared bankruptcy in India. Union Carbide fought all compensation cases, eventually being forced to pay US \$470 Million. This money has mainly been used by a department set up by the Indian gov-



compensation housing offered to the people of bhopal  
photo taken in January 2006

ernment to deal with health issues and rehabilitation including the establishment of five hospitals, at which most of the victims cannot get treatment. The relatives of the people who were killed directly by the gas received only a maximum of US \$500 after some years of court cases. Today the factory sits empty and contaminated, polluting the water table of the population living in the area around the factory, who are too poor to afford bottled water.

Union Carbide merged with Dow Chemicals in 2001. Dow is a company with extensive knowledge of chemicals including their uses and misuses. They were the manufacturers of Agent Orange that was used by US forces during the Vietnam war. Dow has refused to recognise any claims against Union Carbide by the survivors in Bhopal.

In February 2006, the Bhopalis' padyatra, or long march for justice, began. A group of survivors from the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal marched to Delhi to demand recognition, compensation and legal action against the Union Carbide managers.

Their demands were:

- Set up a National Commission on Bhopal;
- Provide Safe Drinking Water;
- Prosecute Union Carbide and Anderson;
- Make Dow Clean Up and Pay;
- Blacklist Dow and Union Carbide; and
- Remember Bhopal

Then, in early April, survivor-groups stepped up the campaign to win compensation and commenced a hunger-strike that would end in victory on 17 April 2006.

Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, promised to clean up the disused chemical factory, provide fresh drinking water for the local people and build a £13 million memorial to the dead.

He fell short, however, of pledging to prosecute Dow Chemicals or Union Carbide's former chief executive, Warren Anderson, in order to preserve India's business prospects.

More information:

[www.bhopal.org](http://www.bhopal.org) or [www.bhopal.net](http://www.bhopal.net)

Manrico Moro  
National Tertiary Education Union  
AAWL Information Convenor

## Occupational and Environmental Health Network India

A network on Occupational and Environmental Health has been established by grassroots organisations working on the issue in India. The decision was taken at a meeting held at New Delhi on 30-31 January 2006, jointly organised by the Asian Network for the Right of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV), Asian Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and the People's Training and Research Centre, India.

Thirty activists from sixteen organisations attended the "National Consultation on OHS". Groups from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Delhi attended the meeting. There were individual activists from Kolkata, Delhi and other places who also attended the meeting. Representatives of International organisations like the AMRC and FOCUS also attended the meeting.

During the two days, representatives presented their work on specific issues, narrated the difficulties, prepared resource maps and discussed strategies to help each other to achieve better results. Groups from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh decided to work together to get justice for the silicosis sufferers of stone crushing units of Godhra.

Strategies to promote victims groups and making social security schemes more pro-people were also discussed. Numbers of groups expressed a strong need to have a network. As a result, it was resolved to form a network named "Occupational and Environmental Health Network India" (OEHNI).

Jagdish Patel  
People's Training and Research Centre  
Gujarat, India

## china health and safety: still a big worry

By now most readers will be aware of the role of big brands in developing countries such as China sub-contracting to small factories, which, because of price-cutting pressures, push their workers into long hours of work, forced overtime, inadequate ventilation and poor training leading to a horrendous accident and injury rate.

Thankfully, many of China's newspapers and some active Asia region NGOs have brought some of the most dramatic scandals to light, most notably mining disasters. This has led to some positive action by the Chinese government.

In 2002 a couple of landmark laws on health and safety were passed. These laws laid out the right of workers to refuse to participate in unsafe production. Article 19 of the Work Safety Law sets out that firms with more than 300 workers must set up work safety management structures.

A miner in China is 40 times more likely to die underground than an Australian miner so it was heartening to see Xinhua news-agency report on 14 March 2006 that the Chinese government had shut down more than 70 per cent of 5,000 collieries that had been declared unsafe.

Big State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) can relatively easily put full time health and safety officers in place and pay for training in proper handling of chemicals or dangerous dust. SOEs, however, are no longer the leaders of industry. The three private types of management: Privately Invested Enterprise (PIE), Foreign or Jointly Owned Enterprises (FIE) and Town or Village Enterprises (TVE) now make up two thirds of the non-agricultural economy. Most of them are small scale, with little awareness of or interest in preventing workplace injury to their workers. Often local government officials are part owners of the business. This means that even the best of the central government's laws are often simply ignored.

A report publicised by China Labor Watch showed that untrained workers who have been forced to work 12 hour days are much more likely to fall victim to exhaustion (which is then labelled 'carelessness'), leading to injuries to their hands, eyes or lungs. In the toy making industry, during peak periods, such 12-hour days - combined with 6 day weeks - can last for a month or two. This is utterly illegal, but is not policed properly.

Anita Chan argues in China's Workers Under Assault that management from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Korea is especially likely to be involved in the worst cases of occupational injury and abuse. This is why it was great to see Feng Xingzhong,

a victim of silicosis, win his three year legal battle - to the tune of 460,000 yuan. His employer Gaoya Jewellery tried to dodge paying him by changing its operations under a new name, Gaoyi Gems. Gaoya, or Gaoyi, was owned by Ko Ngar Gems, a Hong Kong company. Mobilisations by NGOs outside of China helped Feng in his battle. China Labour Bulletin, while proud of this victory, warns that many hundreds more silicosis victims have not succeeded in receiving proper compensation.

Millions of poor, under-educated villagers have flooded to the coastal cities of China where the high growth economy is happening. Their youth, inexperience and lack of education make it more likely for them to fall victim to accidents and less likely to be aware of their legal entitlements. The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) has spoken about organising these internal migrant workers, but has had only limited success. The small scale of many of the private enterprises, plus the fact that the migrant workers don't speak the local dialect, makes it easy for unscrupulous employers to demand 'down-payments' for the workers to be granted work, then keep their residence papers, then

charge them fines and penalties - such as deducting half an hour's wages for arriving five minutes late for work.

Once they are injured, few are covered by health insurance. The Economic Information Daily, on 17 February 2006, estimated that more than 85 per cent of people living in cities and towns do not have basic medical insurance. When a worker is taken to hospital, the factory usually pays the bills (but then fights not to pay further compensation). This means the hospitals draw their income from those factories, so some bargaining takes place by factory management to get hospitals to keep their fees as low as possible. This leads to inadequate treatment for the worker.

Direct worker participation in monitoring health and safety would lead to a better situation. In the 1980s, especially in the big

SOEs, union organisation in the big factories, including twice yearly meetings of the Staff and Worker Congresses, gave workers some direct input into monitoring their firms' safety. In recent years, however, the numbers of representatives and the amount of resources committed to occupational health and safety in such SOEs has dwindled. Meei-Shia Chen in the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (December 2003) cites one worker representative as saying "If the boat is shaking, then people on the boat will become sea sick". Injured workers are being told not to expect to be cared for if their firm isn't making 'enough' money. ACFTU representatives often do not challenge this new ideology because they believe they are accountable to management and the government rather than to workers.

In the private sector, where not only small firms, but also fac-



*This photo is from Anita Chan's article A "Race to the Bottom": Globalisation and China's labour standards. It shows lots of internal migrants. You'll notice that they are young and many are female.*



# asbestos kills

In early March, six workers fitting out an entertainment venue in Glen Waverly suburban Melbourne, spent a week cutting up and installing internal wall panelling, recently imported from China.

The manufacturer's website clearly states that the product is 100% asbestos free, so it was imported in good faith. But concerns were raised that the panels might contain asbestos. Two panels were subsequently sent for testing and the results showed they contained Chrysotile (white asbestos).

Work stopped immediately on the job and the CFMEU issued a nationwide alert over the alarming discovery.

WorkSafe Victoria and the Australian Customs Services have been informed, also the Department of Human Services Victoria.

Six families now have reason to be concerned about their future health.

The wall panels are currently being removed and disposed as contaminated waste by a Class A Asbestos Removalist at significant expense to the developer. For 20 years building workers have been eradicating asbestos from our buildings under strict safety guidelines and specifications.

For two years we've had a complete prohibition on imports of asbestos products to Australia.

All this is for good reason. Exposure to asbestos fibres is known to cause fatal Mesothelioma and lung cancer, as well as being associated with cancer of the colon, vocal chords, rectum and kidneys. It is a death sentence and Australia has the highest per capita rate of Mesothelioma in the world.

According to workers compensation statistics for 2002-2003, Asbestosis was the most common condition leading to a fatality for the Construction Industry.

For years, we've struggled with the shameful effects of exposure to this deadly fibre, but from this incident, it's clear we have to exercise even more diligence to ensure that imported products are genuinely asbestos free.

After some research, it was discovered that the manufacturer is a Canadian and Chinese Joint Venture.

Pat Preston  
Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union  
Manager, Occupational Health and Safety Unit

*Australian Trade Unions have led the call for a ban on asbestos, and this has been taken up at the International level. This May Day, get behind the International call for a ban on asbestos*

## **There is only one useful thing you can do with Asbestos. Ban It!**

Asbestos is the world's biggest ever industrial killer. International Labour Organisation figures suggest asbestos diseases could eventually claim the lives of as many as 10 million people worldwide. At least 100,000 die each year — one person every five minutes.

According to the ICFTU, global Unions kicked off a world campaign to ban the use of asbestos on 8 June 2005 in Geneva. Some 4,000 worker, employer and government representatives from around the world gathered for the annual conference of the UN's 178-member International Labour Organization (ILO).

**Join the global call for a ban on asbestos.  
For more information, go to: [icftu.org.au](http://icftu.org.au), or  
[www.btinternet.com/~ibas/](http://www.btinternet.com/~ibas/)**