

Unchahar Blast

Perilous working conditions

In yet another gory “accident”, 32 workers died and 100 workers injured in Unchahar thermal power plant at Raibareli, UP, run by National thermal Power Corporation (NTPC). The political leaders expressed shock and grief. The state government offered compensation. An enquiry committee was appointed. And the matter lost its news value and fade away. This is what happens in every case of work place accidents.

The accident occurred due to blast in the high pressure boiler of unit-6 of the plant. Without shutting down the boiler completely the workers was ordered to clear the ash collected due the malfunction. As the pressure mounted in the boiler blast occurred. About 300 workers are in and around the boiler at the time of blast. This is an easily avoidable blast if all the safety norms were observed. It only exposes the callous disregard for the worker’s safety and lives.

There is no excuse as the NTPC is a public sector unit and supposed to observe all the safety norms. It runs 48 thermal plants all over India. It should have well defined safety procedures. In fact, it had. But they were wantonly kept aside for the sake of production.

Majority of the affected workers are migrant contract workers engaged by the NTPC through a contractor. This is a ploy used by many industries including the PSUs to escape from the responsibility of providing secure and safe employment to their workers. As workers are employed by the contractor, they argue, the industry at which they are working will not have any responsibility. This is a wide spread practice despite the Supreme Court ruling that the government is responsible for contract workers as the principal employer. The so-called labour laws and even the rulings of Supreme Court are being openly floated without any fear of criminal action by the very government and its bodies that are supposed to be guardian of law.

Why such callous impunity being shown towards the safety of workers? Since the advent of New economic policies, there was all round clamour for dismantling of labour laws and put in their place ‘hire and fire’ policy. The successive government incessantly talked about labour reforms, which is nothing but doing away with labour laws.

The present BJP government proposed amendments to the Contract Labour (regularisation and Abolition) Act, 1970 to facilitate use of contract labour in hazardous jobs. It also proposed amendments to the Factories Act, 1938 to reduce the number of inspections to be made each year. Even before the amendment is incorporated in the Act, it introduced *shram suvidha* portal that accepts “self-certification” of compliance to labour laws. The boiler Regulations 1950 were amended to allow self-certification by the employers.

It is in this context that the work place accidents are growing phenomenally. The rights and lives of the workers are being placed at the altar of “ease of doing business”. Unchahar blast is one of hundreds of industrial accidents that occur every year. And thousands of workers are losing their lives. It is the working class through its class struggles that can change this perilous situation they were forced to exits.
