

South Africa: Eleven die in factory fire

Barbara Slaughter
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Eleven workers were burnt to death last Friday night in a factory fire in South Africa. The blaze was at the ESS chemicals factory in Lenasia, a suburb of Johannesburg. The whole of the nightshift—ten women workers and one male supervisor—were trapped inside the building with no means of escape. Officials on the scene said some of the bodies had become stuck in melted plastic from large tanks holding chemicals. One woman appeared to have suffocated and others probably died under piles of brick and debris left by the explosion of gas bottles inside the factory.

The factory owner, Solly Lachporia, had locked all the doors and gates from the outside, which was confirmed by Billy Nomqca, who sells fruit at the factory entrance. He told the *Sunday Times*, "It was something-to-six when I saw the factory owner lock the side door before driving away," adding, "Since I started selling fruit here six months ago the workers have always been locked in".

The trapped workers could not even telephone for help because the phone was locked in a burglarproof office. When the blaze started they rushed to the back of the factory and tried to break open a padlocked door. A police spokesman said passers-by tried to rescue the workers, but could not reach them. "Witnesses are saying they came from a nightclub that is near here and that they could hear the people screaming, but they could not get in because the gates and the doors were locked," he said.

John Phongwayao, a security guard at the nightclub, watched helplessly as a woman trapped inside cried for assistance. He told the *Sunday Times*, "I saw one woman holding onto the mesh gate and she was crying. I saw other people falling into the fire. The lady was still crying when the factory exploded seconds later. Then there was just silence."

Margaret Washington, one of the workers at the factory, was due on shift on Friday, but stayed at home

because of pain from an old burn wound on her leg. On Saturday morning she stood outside the factory with stunned dayshift workers and relatives, watching police and fire officers remove charred bodies from the rubble.

Firemen entered the building through a hole blown in the wall—the main entrance was still padlocked. The roof caved in during the blaze and burnt chemicals and plastic containers had formed a molten mass around the bodies, making the work of removal almost impossible.

Margaret Washington said that allegations that the nightshift workers were routinely locked in were true. She said the owner was afraid workers would steal items from the factory. Lachporia's brother denied the workers had been locked in. He claimed the allegations were "totally fabricated".

It has been confirmed that chemicals—including highly inflammable white spirits—had been stored inside the building. Forensic experts said that according to the law, the chemicals should have been kept outside. Their preliminary conclusion is that the fire and subsequent explosion may have started when white spirits spilled onto the floor near a gas burner, used for heating chemicals in the production of floor polish.

A Soweto police spokesman said the factory owners could face charges of culpable homicide or murder. He said the owner had had a responsibility to provide a fire escape, but the expert evidence gathered so far indicated that this had not been done. "He has not yet been arrested, but if the forensic guys confirm what they are saying today he will be. Definitely."

South Africa's director-general of labour Rams Ramashia visited the site on Saturday. He claimed to be "outraged and dismayed" by what he saw and said he had ordered an investigation that would be followed by a formal inquiry.

However, the conditions that existed at this factory are not unique in South Africa. Millions of workers toil

under unhealthy and dangerous conditions for miserable wages. Margaret Washington told reporters that she earned \$23.30 a fortnight, or just over \$10 a week.

Employers blatantly ignore safety regulations and the ANC government is currently taking action to remove the labour laws brought in 1994, after the end of Apartheid, which afford workers a modicum of protection.



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