

South Korea begins to deport migrant workers

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The South Korean government has launched a vicious campaign to deport 120,000 so-called illegal migrant workers—more than half the country's 230,000 foreign workers. Roundups by 50 specially-formed squads of immigration officials are to take place for 10 days each month up to June next year.

The National Assembly passed the Employment Permit System, the framework for the crackdown, in July. Under its provisions, undocumented foreign workers who have been in South Korea for less than three years had until October 31 to apply for a work permit. Those living in the country for more than three years and less than four had to leave by November 14 but could apply to return. All others faced automatic deportation with no prospect of returning.

According the Ministry of Law, the first 10-day roundup carried out last month resulted in the detention of 880 “illegal” workers of whom 414 were deported. Prior to November 14, the country's international airports were packed with migrant workers scrambling to make the deadline.

Many of the workers came from China, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in the late 1980s, during South Korea's economic expansion. They were employed in jobs normally shunned by Koreans—the so-called “three-D jobs”: dirty, dangerous and degrading. Most migrant employees were paid half the wage of a Korean worker and many received far less.

Thousands of guest workers were brought to South Korea via the notorious Industrial Technical Trainees Scheme introduced in 1991, which purported to offer training to recruits from so-called developing countries. Under the scheme, guest workers were given a six-month visa with a possible extension of six months.

In reality, the trainees were bonded to employers who

sponsored them—normally small or medium sized companies—and used as a cheap labour. Abused and badly treated, tens of thousands of trainees fled their bonded employment to seek better-paid alternative work. By leaving the trainee schemes, however, they automatically became undocumented and their “illegal” status often resulted in even greater exploitation.

Given the obvious benefits of a ready pool of cheap and compliant labour, it is little wonder that many employers have opposed the present wave of deportations. Some, however, are taking advantage of the situation by withholding wages owed to illegal workers. Reuters reported last month, for example, that over \$US2.6 million in wages owed to 1,460 workers were being withheld.

The deportations are devastating for the migrant workers, especially those with families in their home countries who depend on remittances. Many are weighed down with debt, having paid large sums of money to recruiting agents for jobs or temporary permits to enter South Korea. One Pakistani worker said he had sold everything to borrow \$US5,000 from a job broker to get a visa. He explained that the brokers in his town were not informing potential recruits of the new laws in South Korea.

Faced with deportation, a number of migrant workers committed suicide in November. Two hung themselves, one threw himself under a train and another jumped off a passenger boat while being deported. Seo Sun-Myong, a pastor working with migrants, angrily declared: “This is not suicide. They were killed by a government policy that was trying to force them to go back home.”

Thousands of illegal migrants have gone into hiding and exist in appalling living conditions. Hunted by squads of officials, they do not venture onto the streets

to buy food and other provisions for fear of being seized. Many are continuing to work at night in the factories where they were previously employed. Others have gone into hiding in the countryside.

According to one report, few migrant workers are now seen on the streets of Incheon's large Namdong Industrial Complex, where more than 10 percent of the 60,000-strong workforce comprised guest workers. Employers who harbour or fail to report illegal migrant workers face fines of 20 million won (\$US17,000) or two years jail.

The crackdown on illegal migrants was launched amid deepening economic and political problems besetting the government. President Roh Moo-hyun is currently embroiled in a corruption scandal following allegations that his chief financial backer Kan Keum-won, a textile businessman, was involved in embezzlement and tax evasion.

His administration confronts rising levels of unemployment and mounting labour unrest, which are expected to escalate as the economy slows further. According to an OECD report in November, South Korea's growth rate this year is predicted to be just 3 percent, down from 6.3 percent in 2002. Under these conditions, the government is seeking to make migrant workers the scapegoat for its own failure to alleviate the country's growing social crisis.

The overall unemployment rate currently stands at a two-year record high of 3.7 percent. But among 15- to 29-year-olds, the figure is 7 percent. According a recent government report, young people take 12.4 months on average to find jobs after graduation or after dropping out of school—an increase on last year's average of 11.7 months. Unemployed youth may now be forced to take the low-paid jobs previously filled by undocumented migrant workers.

Over the past 12 months, guest workers have been increasingly involved in campaigns for labour rights. Thousands have been involved in demonstrations alongside Korean workers to demand an end to repressive labour laws and the introduction of legislation to protect the rights of workers, including granting legal status to all immigrant workers. The provisions of the Employment Permit System, which allow some migrant workers to gain work permits, were designed at least in part to divide the mounting opposition.

The protests are continuing, however. More than 2,000 migrant workers and South Korean supporters have been staging sit-ins at the Myongdong Cathedral, the Seoul Anglican Cathedral and the Kyungnam Migrant Workers Counsel Office, demanding a halt to the deportations and the withdrawal of the new permit system.



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