

South Korean prime minister resigns over ferry disaster

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Nearly two weeks after the sinking of the Sewol ferry, the South Korean government is facing increased pressure from the public over lax safety regulations and the slow official response to the disaster. As of Sunday night, 188 people were confirmed dead, with another 114 still missing. Most of those on board were students from Danwon High School in the working-class city of Ansan. Another 174 people were rescued on April 16, the day of the sinking.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Chung Hong-won resigned. “Watching the pain of the families who lost their loved ones and grief and anger of the people, I felt that the prime minister should take responsibility,” he stated. Chung has been the face of the government’s response to the disaster. While speaking to the victims’ families, Chung has had water bottles thrown at him and his car blocked. He has been prevented from leaving meetings, and faced angry parents and relatives demanding answers over the tragedy.

Chung’s resignation is designed to deflect attention from President Park Geun-hye’s administration, by providing a convenient political fall guy for the catastrophe. Chung stated: “There have been so many varieties of irregularities that have continued in every corner of our society and practices that have gone wrong. I hope these deep-rooted evils get corrected this time and this kind of accident never happens again.”

Chung’s reference to “irregularities” is a distraction from the fact that this tragedy is bound up with the capitalist system itself, which puts corporate profit ahead of the lives and safety of working people.

The Sewol’s crew members have also been made scapegoats. On Saturday, four more were arrested, bringing the total to fifteen. All are being blamed for leaving the vessel on coastguard rescue boats, rather than assisting passenger evacuations.

The crew members may have contributed to the disaster,

but the primary responsibility for this tragedy lies with the government and the company that owned the ferry, Chonghaejin Marine.

Twelve crew members were temporary workers, including the captain himself, who was working on a one-year contract. These workers had virtually no safety training and were paid just 70 percent of their counterparts in the industry. Also, two captains are often used on long trips, so that one can always be on the bridge, yet this was not the case on the Sewol. It sank while an inexperienced third mate navigated through rough waters.

This ferry sinking, while certainly the largest in South Korea’s recent history, was not an anomaly. Three weeks earlier, another of Chonghaejin’s ships was involved in an accident in the Yellow Sea. In recent years, there have also been several incidents involving engine failure on Chonghaejin Marine ships.

Chonghaejin Marine, owned by Yu Byeong-eon and his two sons, is the successor company of Semo Marine, a part of the Semo Group. Semo declared bankruptcy in 1997, leading to the breakup of the group. Yu reportedly hid Semo funds that were later used to create Chonghaejin. Over the years, he has apparently utilized close relationships with government officials, including former military dictator Chun Doo-hwan and ex-Seoul mayor Oh Se-hoon, to dodge regulations while securing loans and business deals.

Yu is now under investigation for dereliction of duty, embezzlement, tax evasion and bribery. Yu allegedly bribed officials in the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries and the Korean Coast Guard to turn a blind eye to violations being committed by his companies.

The company cut costs wherever it could. The Sewol had a major fault in its steering system, of which the company was aware. The ship’s captain unsuccessfully requested repairs. The Sewol was also redesigned after it

was purchased from a Japanese company in 2012. Extra decks were added to allow the ship to carry more cargo and passengers that may have contributed to its instability in the water. According to opposition lawmaker Kim Yeong-rok, the ferry was carrying 3,608 tons of cargo, or three times the recommended amount.

These actions are not simply the result of one bad owner or company. Corruption is rife throughout South Korean companies, regardless of industry. This unrestrained capitalism cannot be changed by a few new laws or replacement of officials.

Two months before the sinking, a building collapse killed ten university students and injured 128 people in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province during a welcome party for freshman students from Busan University of Foreign Studies. The building had been improperly built using inferior materials.

Disregard for workers' lives is also rampant. At Samsung, 146 workers have contracted various forms of cancers while working in semiconductor factories over more than a decade, according to Banolim, an advocacy group for semiconductor workers. Due to unsafe conditions, workers were exposed to dangerous chemicals that resulted in cancers, from which 57 workers have died.

To cover up the underlying causes within the profit system, the media, both internationally and in South Korea, have in many cases attempted to portray the accident as a result of Korean cultural disregard for safety. Corporate and official disregard for safety, however, is far from a Korean phenomenon. Just last week, the US Chemical Safety Board announced that last year's fertilizer factory explosion in West, Texas that killed 15 and injured 236 more was completely preventable. The board blamed the company that owned the fertilizer plant, government regulators and other authorities for the incident.

Regardless of any cosmetic safety measures that are adopted by companies or President Park's government, tragedies like the Sewol sinking will continue to occur so long as private profit, and not safety and human need, is the priority.



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