

Fire at workers' apartment in South Korea leaves seven dead

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A fire Friday morning at a low-rent apartment building for workers in Seoul, South Korea, has left seven people dead and another eleven injured. The tragedy highlights the lack of safe housing for many in the working class.

The fire occurred at approximately 5 am in Seoul's Jongno district in the north of the city. It reportedly began in a room near the stairwell on the third floor of the three-storey building, with the occupant, who survived, stating that his electric heater had caught fire and he was unable to put out the flames. The escape route for many on that level was therefore cut off. All of the casualties were people who lived on the third floor.

The style of the building where the fire occurred is known in Korean as a *gosiwon*, which rent inexpensive, cubicle-like rooms typically to single workers and students. Rent at the *gosiwon* where the fire broke out ranged from 270,000 won (\$239) to 380,000 won (\$336) per month, with more charged for rooms with windows and extra space. The residents were primarily day labourers, with most of the victims in their forties, fifties, and sixties. One of those who died was a Japanese national.

With the fire blocking the main stairwell, those who survived did so by climbing out windows or using an emergency descending line to get to the ground. Lee Chun-san, a resident on the third floor, stated, "I lived in a room with a window that cost 320,000 won a month. I climbed out the window and down the air conditioning pipes. The rooms without windows cost about 280,000 won. If you had a window, you lived and if you didn't you died."

According to Gwon Hyeok-min, the Jongno Fire Station Chief, the 35-year-old building where the *gosiwon* was located had deteriorated over the years

and had no sprinkler system. The building, which has a restaurant on the first floor, was registered as a residence in 2007 and was apparently exempt from a revision of a law on multi-use public buildings that require all such establishments beginning in 2009 to install sprinklers.

Survivors also told the media that while the building was equipped with fire alarms and smoke detectors, they did not go off. A survivor surnamed Sim told the *Joongang Ilbo*, "I woke up to smoke a cigarette at around 4:45 am. On my way to the rooftop, I saw smoke coming from Room 301. The person in Room 301 was trying to put out a fire. I yelled that there was fire and went downstairs to hit the emergency alarm. But the alarm didn't work."

While accidents will occur, the consequences of this fire and that of disasters generally are compounded by a lack of concern for safety from building owners and the government. Over the last six years, there have been 310 *gosiwon* fires. In 2018, the number of fires in *gosiwons* has been 9.5 percent higher than in other multi-use public buildings, a common trend.

According to 2014 statistics from the Seoul government, there are 1,080 *gosiwons* around the city without sprinkler systems, or more than one in seven in the South Korean capital. There are about 12,000 *gosiwons* around the country in total.

In Seoul alone, a government inspection found in 2015 that one out of five *gosiwons* was susceptible to disasters like fire. In part, this is due to the fact that rooms are often illegally modified to fit more living spaces in addition to other cost-cutting measures attacking safety.

The proliferation of this style of housing points to both the lack of decent accommodation for workers as well as attacks on wages. Youth are also particularly

affected by this housing crisis. A 2016 study conducted by Statistics Korea found that four in ten people under 35, in and around Seoul, were “house poor,” or that the cost of housing left them without enough money to afford other costs of living.

Owning a home in South Korea comes with serious barriers. On average, the cost of an apartment has soared to nearly 6 million won (\$5,310) per square meter. Options for renting are also restrictive, with two types of renting systems in place, exacerbating the problem. The first, known as *jeonse*, requires a renter to put down anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the value of the apartment as a deposit in lieu of monthly rent.

The second system, known as *wolse* requires monthly rent, but also comes with an upfront deposit that can cost thousands of dollars, prohibitive to a worker living from paycheck to paycheck. This leaves the unsafe gosiwons as the only option for many.

The lack of safety measures like sprinkler systems in public buildings is not limited to gosiwons however. A massive fire at the Sejong Hospital in Miryang in January killed 41 people came a month after a conflagration killed 29 people at a sports center in Jecheon. Both buildings lacked operating sprinkler systems. The two fires were the deadliest in South Korea in nearly a decade.

Since the April 2014 sinking of the Sewol ferry, leaving 304 people dead, mostly high school students on a class trip, public safety has been a major political issue in South Korea. It helped fuel mass anger towards not only ousted president Park Geun-hye, but the political establishment as a whole, which the working class rightly sees as being the source of the attacks on people’s living conditions.

President Moon Jae-in campaigned on promises to address these concerns. However, the fact that nothing has been done to improve safety for the working class in one of the world’s wealthier countries is indicative of the fact that the Democrats, no less than the conservatives, protect the interests of capitalism.



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