

South Korean public sector workers strike over irregular employment status

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Tens of thousands irregular public sector workers struck in South Korea yesterday, demanding an increase in pay, an end to wage discrimination, and conversion to regular worker status. Those participating included school cafeteria and administrative staff, custodians at local government offices, and highway toll collectors. The strike will continue on Thursday and Friday, with rallies in regional locations taking place throughout the country. In total, more than 100,000 workers are preparing to walk off the job.

Yesterday, 22,000 school staff from the Korean Federation of Service Workers Union made up the largest number of strikers. An additional 4,000 workers came from the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union and the Korean General League of Unions. All three unions are affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

They rallied in Gwanghwamun, Seoul alongside supporters, with the KCTU reporting that more than 50,000 participated to denounce government policies towards public sector workers. The authorities estimated 32,000 took part.

Workers expressed hostility to the administration of President Moon Jae-in, which had previously pledged to eliminate irregular public sector positions. "The government and education offices justified employment discrimination during the negotiations but [pretended they are] open to compromise to the press," said Park Geum-ja, a representative of the school workers' union. "Today's general strike is the result of lies, irresponsibility and the hypocrisy shown by the [government]."

The school workers are demanding a 6.24 percent pay raise. Even if the government agrees, the increase would only lift wages to 80 percent of those of the lowest paid tier of regular public service workers.

However, the education ministry has proposed a meager 1.8 percent increase, claiming there is no money. Irregular school workers currently earn 24.3 million won (\$US21,000) annually.

In addition to wage discrimination, irregular workers can also face dangerous conditions, often lacking proper training or safety measures at job sites. Last December, Kim Yong-gyun, a 24-year-old irregular worker, was killed at the Taean Thermal Power Plant in South Chungcheon Province when he became trapped on a conveyor belt transporting coal. To cut costs, Kim was working alone during the night shift at the plant operated by the stated-owned Korea Western Power.

Between 2012 and 2016, 337 of 346 accidents at the five major power plant companies have involved irregular workers. From 2008 to 2016, 37 out of 40 workers killed at the plants were irregular workers.

Irregular workers are those hired by subcontractors or work in hourly or temporary positions. They earn around 60 percent of their regular counterparts despite doing the same jobs. In addition, most lack benefits like employment insurance and can be fired at any time. The growth of this highly exploited layer of the working class began under the Democrat Kim Dae-jung during the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis. It rapidly expanded under the so-called progressive government of Noh Moo-hyun.

President Moon served as a close aide to Noh during the latter's administration when the number of irregular workers as a proportion of the total workforce grew to 55.8 percent.

The current number of irregular workers stands at 33 percent, according to Statistics Korea. However, like unemployment rates, the real number is underreported. A 2013 study found that the number of irregular workers stood at 46 percent, significantly higher than

the then official figure of 32 percent. Regular and irregular status are not defined in legal terms, but describe the conditions under which people work. Those with long-term guaranteed contracts with benefits are considered regular. Otherwise, they are irregular.

Irregular workers have accused Moon's government of using this imprecise definition to change their status to regular only in name. The administration distributed guidelines to public companies on changing workers' status, including by setting up subsidiaries and hiring workers through those new entities. This would enable the companies to avoid directly hiring workers or paying them the same wages as workers in the parent company.

At the Incheon International Airport, for instance, 70 percent of the 10,000 workers are to be hired by new subsidiaries by 2020. In other cases, as with some 40,000 irregular teachers, who are denied pensions, the government issued exceptions so as to maintain their irregular status.

Other public sector workers are also planning to strike in the coming days. Workers at Korea Post will strike next Tuesday to protest harsh conditions that have led to the death of mail carriers through overwork. The union states that 175 delivery workers have died since 2010. Some 25,247 workers out of a total union membership of 28,802 voted to go on strike, which will be the first in Korea Post's 135-year history.

"We can no longer sit by and watch delivery workers dying," the union said a statement. "We will go on a strike on July 9 for the first time in the history of the nation's postal services unless Korea Post and the government present proper countermeasures." The workers are demanding the government hire additional mail carriers and implement a five-day work week.

With widespread working-class discontent in South Korea, the KCTU is not leading a fight for better working conditions. It is isolating workers and preventing a broader struggle against the government and capitalist exploitation. Irregular workers must break with the unions, form their own rank-and-file committees and reach out to postal workers, auto workers, shipbuilding workers, and the rest of the working class in the country and internationally to wage a genuine struggle for their rights to well-paying jobs and safe working conditions.

The KCTU is desperate to keep workers tied to the Democratic Party despite its years of betrayals. It promotes the illusion that the Moon administration can be pushed to adopt pro-working class policies. During the protests against former President Park Geun-hye in 2016–2017, the KCTU promoted Moon and the Democrats and worked to ensure that the demonstrations did not turn against the ruling class as a whole. After Moon came to office in 2017, the KCTU declared that the "social meaning of Moon's election is profound."

The reality for the working class, however, is that the conditions of exploitation continue under capitalism, regardless of which political party holds power.



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