

Devastating fire in South Korea kills at least 38 workers

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A fire at a construction site in South Korea last Wednesday afternoon killed at least 38 workers and injured another 10, eight of whom are in serious condition. Investigators were still searching for victims' remains on Sunday. These types of deadly fires are a common occurrence in South Korea, where safety measures are often ignored to boost profits. Last week's is one of the deadliest fires in the country in more than a decade.

The blaze took place in the second underground level of a warehouse under construction in the city of Icheon, Gyeonggi Province, 80 kilometres southeast of the capital, Seoul. A total of 78 workers were in the building when the blaze started. It began when a flammable material called urethane, used for installing insulation, ignited and exploded. The flames quickly spread due to "rapid combustion," according to authorities, and lasted for more than five hours. The building did not have sprinklers or other obligatory safety measures.

As oil mist accumulates when urethane is used, construction companies are required to install ventilation systems to remove the mist and other gases. They are also supposed to strictly regulate the use of the other equipment in the area of the flammable material, such as welding tools. It is believed that workers were told to continue welding while the urethane was being used to speed up construction time. A worker at a construction site next to the warehouse stated, "The danger was obvious, but the company failed to properly provide safety equipment compared to [at] other sites."

Seo Seung-hyeon, head of the Icheon fire department, described the terrible results, "There was no clothing left on the workers at all. We presume that an ignition of oil mist caused an explosion and the sudden

combustion gave the workers no chance to escape." Many of those who died in other parts of the building succumbed to toxic gases.

Authorities launched an investigation on Thursday to determine the exact cause of the fire and to determine what safety regulations were violated. Some 28 people had been questioned by the end of Thursday and another 15 people at the construction company Kunwoo, which was building the warehouse, have been barred from leaving the country.

Yi Sang-seop, the CEO of Kunwoo, spoke to grieving families for five minutes to offer an apology, before reportedly fleeing the scene as mourners demanded to know what measures the company would take to prevent future accidents. Yi gave no answers.

Icheon was also the location of a deadly fire in 2008 that killed 40 workers in a refrigerated warehouse. Another 46 people died in a 2018 fire at a hospital in Miryang that lacked sprinkler systems. A month before that, in December 2017, 29 people were killed at a sports centre in Jecheon, which also had no sprinklers.

Families expressed anger towards the government and the construction company following Wednesday's deadly blaze. "I got so angry listening to the mayor (of Icheon, Eom Tae-jun) apologize...The words were the same as 12 years ago, only the speaker had changed. If they promised that nothing like this would happen again, then it shouldn't happen," a worker, giving only his family name Gim, told the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*. Gim, who has worked in construction for 20 years, lost a nephew in Wednesday's fire.

Gim continued: "The companies squeeze the workers of subcontractors and just tell them to do everything 'quickly' to shorten the construction time. If the workers ask for change, the only answer they get is 'if you don't like it, then don't come to work

tomorrow’.”

The workers killed were all irregular or subcontract workers, meaning that they lacked basic job protections, making it easier for the company to fire them. They included two workers from Kazakhstan and one from China. Irregular workers are paid significantly less than their regular counterparts and are often forced to do more dangerous jobs while also lacking benefits.

Conscious of the common occurrence of fires as well as public anger towards the government’s indifference to safety, Prime Minister Jeong Se-gyun said during a meeting of government ministers on Thursday, “We need to find a more practical solution in order to prevent the recurrence of fires at construction sites.”

Presidential spokesman Gang Min-seok stated President Moon Jae-in had said during a Wednesday emergency meeting that despite supposed new safety measures announced after the 2017/2018 fires, “It is regrettable that a similar accident reoccurred. It means we’ve not learned the lesson from previous accidents.”

The new “safety measures,” enacted in February 2018, were little more than a cosmetic response to the dangerous conditions that persist around the country. It involved an eight-week campaign of additional fire safety checks, minor additional preventative steps, and a public awareness drive. This amounted to pro forma inspections, with little done to address actual safety violations, let alone to demand the installation of protective equipment and ensure companies follow safety regulations.

On Labor Day, Moon offered empty platitudes to the grieving families while stating his government was improving working conditions around the country. “Due to the efforts of workers, the minimum wage hike, transitioning irregular positions to regular ones and the 52-hour work week have been implemented. Through these measures, our society is overcoming polarization,” the president claimed.

There is no truth in these words, as the disaster on Wednesday shows. Cosmetic measures have been taken during the course of Moon’s administration that do nothing to change the actual situations workers face.

Whatever steps are taken after this latest fire will not address the status of irregular workers or impose any demands on big business. The government’s empty words of condolence will be packed away and forgotten until the next disaster when they will be trotted out

again only to mollify public anger and cover up the entrenched indifference under capitalism to the lives of workers.



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