

Crane operators in South Korea strike following string of industrial accidents

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Crane operators in South Korea announced on Tuesday that they would strike following a string of worksite accidents in recent weeks. The workers, who overwhelmingly approved industrial action with 83.1 percent voting in favor, are demanding the government improve safety measures before they return to the job.

The crane operators join a growing wave of struggles internationally, as workers fight back against attacks on wages and working conditions.

The impetus for the latest walk-out was an accident that took place on June 5 in the city of Incheon, when a crane dropped construction materials, injuring a worker. Another worker was similarly injured on May 8, when a crane's line snapped, dropping materials and hitting another laborer. Approximately 3,300 workers belonging to the Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU), affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), then voted to approve strike action.

Accidents involving small-cranes have become widespread. On May 16, a worker was killed in the city of Donghae when a crane collapsed on top of him at a cement factory. On April 24, a worker in Incheon fell from a crane and died. The KCWU stated that, "Since April 24, there have been at least 8 small-tower crane accidents nationally that have led to the death of one worker while three others have been injured."

Many of these accidents have been caused by equipment that had previously been deregistered by the government due to safety concerns. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT) had deregistered a total of 369 cranes, citing equipment problems, ostensibly preventing them from being used. Last year, MOLIT inspected around 10 percent of registered cranes, or 590 units, and found 4,000 defects in the equipment.

This has not stopped construction companies from using the faulty equipment in order to cut costs at the expense of safety. Crane operator Hyeon Byeong-seok told South Korea's MBC News that "The equipment was concerning to operate because it had been deregistered, but the site manager didn't care and told us to use it anyways."

Striking workers are demanding the proper supervision of all small-tower cranes beginning July 1, an immediate halt to the use of all equipment that has been deregistered and direct engagement in negotiations with the head of MOLIT, No Hyeong-uk.

The dangers facing workers are not new but have been ongoing for a number of years. Crane operators also struck in 2019 citing safety concerns and demanding higher wages. Since then, deadly accidents have continued to occur, including at least three workers who were killed in crane accidents in January of last year.

Construction workers are therefore understandably in fear for their lives. However, it is a situation that is being repeated around the world, particularly under the COVID-19 pandemic. The ruling class in every country has done everything possible to keep workers on the job generating profits for big business. This is also true in South Korea, where outbreaks of the deadly virus did nothing to halt operations in workplaces like distribution centers and auto factories.

The fight for safety on construction sites must be seen in this broader political context. The same big business profit interests dictating the use of dangerous equipment to cut costs also underlie the homicidal drive to force workers back on the job as the virus is circulating widely.

The South Korean construction workers are therefore posed with the need for a struggle, not only against

dishonest business owners, but the entire capitalist system. Their allies are not politicians and union bureaucrats who make vague pledges to improve safety, but the entire international working class.

The KCTU and KCWU are attempting to convince workers that their safety concerns can be addressed by the government, and therefore under capitalism. Jeon Jae-hui, an official with the KCWU, appealed to the Moon Jae-in administration, not other workers, saying, “They say these are small cranes, but there are a lot of accidents involving them. There are many accidents across the country, so it’s a dangerous piece of equipment. We have continually requested to MOLIT to provide supervision over this.”

Moon campaigned in the 2017 presidential election pledging to halve workplace fatalities to approximately 500 annually. In other words, Moon came to office, backed by the KCTU, announcing that 500 workers’ deaths a year were acceptable.

A new law passed in January will supposedly reduce workplace fatalities according to the Moon administration and its ruling Democratic Party (DP). The law, which only takes effect next year, supposedly will subject business owners or senior officials at a company to one year in jail or a fine of up to one billion won (\$US897,000) in the event they are found liable for a worker’s death. Small and medium sized businesses have been given a two-year grace period, despite the fact that most accidents occur at these companies.

DP lawmaker Gang Byeong-won stated on May 31, “We are aware of concerns that the industrial accident law will not be effective on small- and medium-sized industrial sites, accounting for 80 percent of all related deaths.”

The paltry promises of “reform” have changed little. According to the Ministry of Employment and Labor, 882 workers died last year while on the job, or more than two per day. This was an increase of 27 from 2019. In the first quarter of this year, 238 employees have died at work, putting the total number of deaths on pace for 952 this year.

In addition, ninety-four of the workers killed last year were non-Koreans, largely migrant workers employed in construction and factories. Despite this, the KCTU and its affiliated unions regularly whip up anti-foreign sentiment.

In May, the KCWU in the city of Gwangju launched a series of protests demanding companies only hire local Korean workers while denouncing illegally hired foreign workers. In other words, while Korean and foreign workers face the same, exploitative and dangerous conditions, the unions are attempting to divide them and shift blame on to foreign laborers.

There is no reason to believe the new labor law will have a significant impact on protecting workers. Similar laws have done little to reduce widespread industrial accidents in South Korea and are filled with loopholes to protect businesses and their profit margins. Workers must turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout the country and internationally to wage a genuine struggle for workplace safety and against capitalism.



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