Deadly building collapse in South Korea highlights unsafe conditions in construction industry

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14 June 2021

A five-storey building in the city of Gwangju, in southwestern South Korea, collapsed on June 9, toppling onto a nearby road and crushing a bus filled with passengers. Nine people were killed and eight more were seriously injured.

The building was being demolished at the time, but the company carrying out the work, and the local government, ignored basic safety precautions, all too common in such man-made disasters.

While the accident is still under formal investigation, South Korea's Yonhap News agency reported that the Hyundai Development Company (HDC) and its subcontractor Hansol Corporation, ignored legal and safety procedures in the demolition process, by removing lower floors first, rather than starting at the top floor. The work was also done without regard to the strength of structural supports.

The day after the collapse, President Moon Jae-in called for a "thorough" probe into the accident, to give the appearance that the government would address safety concerns. In reality, nothing will be done to fundamentally change how business is done. Construction companies will continue to be allowed to sacrifice safety in order to cut costs, enforce speedups, and place profits before the lives of workers and the general population.

The local government in Gwangju itself failed to take the necessary safety measures, required by law, which include designating a safety zone around the building scheduled for demolition, as well as ensuring a safety supervisor is on scene to oversee the work. The supervisor was reportedly not at the job site when the building collapsed.

All the victims were passengers on the bus, which had stopped at a bus station next to the demolition. Gwangju mayor, Lee Yong-seop, attempted to place blame solely on HDC, saying: "The company did not request our cooperation regarding the relocation of the bus stop."

The authorities are also trying to shift blame onto the workers. "Our investigation will focus on whether the construction workers had been abiding by safety rules when demolishing the building, and whether the demolition was being carried out in accordance with due procedures," a police officer told the media.

Local residents, however, criticised the mayor and his government for the safety failures. In an attempt to deflect public anger, Lee declared there would be a two-week safety inspection throughout the city. These inspections are designed to do little more than paper over the root causes of fatal accidents: the drive for corporate profit, backed by the local and central governments.

Hansol Corporation, which had the subcontract from HDC, illegally subcontracted the work to another firm, Baeksol Construction. The use of subcontract workers is common in South Korea, where companies use highly-exploited labourers, in order to drive down wages and enforce the sort of speedups that led to the June 9 disaster. Workers may not receive appropriate training, and face being sacked if they raise safety concerns.

At least seven people have been charged with professional negligence resulting in death, in relation to the accident. This includes an HDC official and three site supervisors. They have been banned from leaving the country, but not detained. Even if found guilty, they will be scapegoats, while the unsafe practices will

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continue.

Similar accidents have occurred in recent years, including in 2019, when a building being demolished in Seoul's Seocho District collapsed onto a street, killing one and injuring three others. In December 2017, a crane being used to demolish a building in Seoul's Gangseo District, fell and crushed a bus waiting at a traffic light. One person was killed and another 15 were injured.

The June 9 disaster highlights the dangerous conditions that workers and the public are exposed to on a daily basis. It occurred during a three-day strike by crane operators, who walked off the job after a string of deadly accidents in recent weeks. According to the Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU), which called the strike: "Since April 24, there have been at least eight small-tower crane accidents nationally, that have led to the death of one worker, while three others have been injured."

The KCWU, which is affiliated with the "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, called off the strike on June 11, claiming it had concluded negotiations with the government. However, the ongoing accidents show that very little will change.

The agreement between the KCWU and the government included a promise that a union-backed expert would participate in inspections of small cranes. However, the union and the government know there are unsafe cranes. Last year, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport inspected around 10 percent of registered cranes, or 590 units, and found 4,000 defects. In other words, workers have been sent back to work on the same faulty equipment that drove them to strike in the first place.

As this record makes clear, the union called a token strike to allow workers to let off steam, before sending them back to work in unsafe environments. As a result, more workers will die, unless workers begin to take matters into their own hands.

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