

Two South Korean railway workers killed

Ben McGrath
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Two South Korean railway workers were killed Tuesday morning, and four more seriously injured, after being struck by a passenger train. Another worker received reportedly light injuries. The authorities have stated they are investigating the exact cause. However, the railway industry in South Korea is notorious for its dangerous working conditions and regular accidents.

The accident occurred in Cheongdo county, North Gyeongsang Province. The seven workers were inspecting retaining walls near the tracks along the Gyeongbu line following recent heavy rains, when they were struck by a Mugunghwa passenger train traveling at 100 kilometers per hour.

The state-run Korea Railroad Corporation (Korail) operates trains on the line and employed one of the workers involved in the accident, while subcontractors specializing in safety employed the other six, including the two killed. The Korail employee was supervising the group's work. No injuries were reported among the 89 passengers on the train.

Subcontractors are a particularly vulnerable section of the South Korean working class. Many lack job protections, receive lower pay and are often forced into dangerous positions to keep their jobs. Investigators have stated they are looking into whether the six subcontractors were rushed or otherwise forced to do work outside their contracts.

The workers had reportedly entered the area only seven minutes before the accident, after getting approval to enter the area. Initial evidence regarding the cause points to a lack of safety measures. The workers were unable to see the approaching train as they were just 120 meters from a curve in the track.

In addition, a fire official stated at a press briefing Tuesday, "The train in question was electric and made less noise than a regular train. I suspect that the workers did not notice the train approaching because the vehicle was so quiet."

Four workers carried a phone with a train monitoring app that would supposedly send a warning when a train was approaching. The app reportedly did not work properly. The workers also had walkie-talkies, though they apparently did not receive a warning by radio.

Workers are also supposedly instructed to walk along embankments, but those struck on Tuesday were walking along the tracks. Korail, which does not shut down train lines for this kind of work, has attempted to blame the workers themselves for the accident. A spokesman said they "likely walked on the gravel path beside the rails instead of the designated path."

However, the workers were forced to go too close to the tracks due to the narrow area and the thick vegetation that had been allowed to grow, indicating that the track was not properly maintained. One of the injured workers stated, "Because of the slope, it was impossible to move outside the track, so we had no choice but to step onto it."

The deaths on Tuesday are the first at a state-owned company since President Lee Jae-myung took office in June. Lee, a Democrat, and his administration have falsely postured as friends of workers.

Minister of Employment and Labor Kim Yeong-hun stated, "a regressive accident that should not have happened has occurred again. If various violations of industrial safety obligations are revealed, we will forcefully hold them [Korail] accountable."

This is a farce. Korail is well-known for industrial accidents, which have frequently occurred under both right-wing and "liberal" administrations. Whatever the findings of the current investigation, the result will at most result in a slap on the wrist so as to placate angry workers and their families while nothing is done to improve safety.

In August 2024, two workers were killed and one injured at Guro Station in Seoul. Between 2020 and 2023, at least 10 rail workers were killed on the job.

The latest incident also recalls an accident at Miryang, South Gyeongsang Province in October 2019, in which one worker was killed and two seriously injured after they failed to detect a signal regarding an oncoming train.

In March 2023, the government fined Korail a “record high” fine of 1.92 billion won (\$US1.4 million) for safety violations, which included failing to follow safety procedures before maintenance work.

Labor Minister Kim is well acquainted with Korail. He is a former leading official in the Korean Railway Workers’ Union (KRWU) and the so-called “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). He was head of the KRWU from 2004 to 2007 and then led the KCTU from 2010 to 2012.

Both union bodies have a long history of acting on behalf of government and big business in suppressing industrial action. Railway workers regularly go on strike to try to address the unsafe working conditions.

The KRWU called a previously planned strike on December 5 last year, shortly after then-President Yoon Suk-yeol’s failed coup attempt. But the union called off the strike a week later with none of the workers’ demands being met. Lee Jae-myung, then head of the Democratic Party, personally stepped in and held with the union to shut down the strike and prevent a broader working-class movement emerging against the political establishment.

Lee came to office in June conscious of the widespread discontent throughout the working class, which has, in addition to Yoon’s coup attempt, faced the deadly COVID-19 pandemic that was allowed to run rampant, as well as stagnant and falling real wages.

Earlier this month, the Lee administration launched a campaign to reduce workplace deaths over five years to the average for Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The number of deaths in South Korea each year is frequently downplayed, with media reports often covering only cases in which families of the dead are approved for compensation benefits.

According to the Labor Ministry’s statistics, 2,016 workers were killed in 2023, or 0.98 per 10,000. Between 2019 and 2022, the death toll has topped 2,000 each year. Total deaths from industrial accidents last year reached 2,100, the *Kyunghyang Sinmun* reported this month.

Under Lee’s plan, hundreds of workers would continue to die each year, even if companies implemented stronger safety regulations. Former Democratic President Moon Jae-in, in office from 2017 to 2022, also pledged to reduce workers’ deaths by half, which did not occur. As Tuesday’s accident demonstrates, even at state-owned companies, Lee’s campaign is entirely inadequate.



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