

South Korean government under pressure after arrest of Hyundai workers in US

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The seizure on September 4 of more than 300 South Korean workers at the Hyundai Motors Metaplant complex in the United States has resulted in widespread shock in South Korea. Facing pressure from various sectors, the administration of President Lee Jae-myung is attempting to balance between protecting the interests of big business and expressing phony concerns for the workers.

Foreign Minister Cho Hyun was dispatched to Washington to orchestrate the workers' release and no doubt appease Trump, who denounced them for being in the US "illegally." The workers will return to South Korea "voluntarily" rather than face deportation, according to South Korea's foreign ministry. Seoul has charted a flight that is expected to leave from Atlanta with the workers on board late Wednesday at the earliest.

The Trump regime's attack on these workers has placed its fascistic policies on full display for the population in South Korea. In a recent survey, six in ten South Koreans expressed anger over the treatment of the workers, particularly after video was released showing them marched to a prison bus in chains.

Protests, though relatively small at the moment, have taken place in Seoul near the US Embassy. Demonstrators have denounced US immigration policy and held signs, for example, declaring "No person is illegal."

This threatens to cut across Seoul's cooperation with Washington, both economically and militarily. Less than two weeks prior to the raid, Lee met with Trump in Washington where the South Korean leader obsequiously praised Trump as a "peacemaker" and pledged to back the US war drive against China.

A total of 475 workers were seized in the raid at the construction site of an electric vehicle battery plant in

Ellabell, Georgia jointly operated by Hyundai Motors and LG Energy Solution (LGES). The raid was conducted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal agencies, who took the workers to a detention facility in Folkston, Georgia.

As well as South Koreans, other workers detained came from Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, Ecuador, Chile and Venezuela. Those present described a military-style raid with drones and helicopters overhead, "hunting" workers in the plant.

Hyundai and LGES stated they were unable to obtain the correct short-term visas for their employees. The workers detained in Georgia, who were carrying out highly specialized tasks, entered the US under the short-term visa waiver program or had B1 business visas, neither of which allows the holder to work.

Most of the workers were not directly employed by either Hyundai or LGES, which have washed their hands of responsibility. Instead, they are subcontractors, a tier of workers that lacks job protections. This leads to employers demanding that workers engage in dangerous work or activities beyond those stipulated in contracts under the threat of dismissal. The subcontracting system is prevalent around the world, creating a highly exploited layer of the working class.

South Korean businesses commonly employ subcontractors to cut costs, with this section of workers making up approximately 38 percent of the labor force. Seo Sang-pyo, South Korea's former consul general in Atlanta, stated it was common for subcontractors in the area to not have the correct visas for their work.

The workers at the Hyundai-LGES facility are victims of not only the US state, but the companies that placed them in that position in the first place, forced to risk abuse, arrest and deportation. This fact is not lost

on workers in similarly precarious positions in South Korea, who in recent years have staged protests demanding an end to the subcontracting system.

Workers reportedly expressed misgivings about being sent to work in the US on incorrect visas. One worker in South Korea, who had previously worked with six of those detained in Georgia, told Reuters anonymously, “I begged them not to go to the United States again.”

Workers from the Korean community in Georgia also expressed anger towards the companies online, accusing them of ignoring laws and relevant dangers in order to cut costs. One wrote of their employment experience at a South Korean-operated factory: “[M]any Korean staff were dispatched from [South] Korea, and safety protocols were not followed. One died on site. All the company did was shut down for a day and pay a penalty. I honestly don’t want to work at a Korean-run factory again.”

Hyundai in particular has a track record of ignoring safety. In the last two and a half years, three workers have been killed at the Hyundai Metaplant complex where the raid occurred.

Seoul is now scrambling to suppress the growth of popular anger. South Korean consular officials in the US who had met with the detainees claimed, “We gather that there has been no unfair treatment of the detained people or any potential violations of human rights.” This ignores the obvious fact that the seizure of the workers itself was a massive violation of their basic democratic rights.

Phony “progressive” parties and organizations, including the so-called “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), have also stepped in to contain and block the emergence of larger protests. While the KCTU has made radical-sounding denunciations of US policy, it speaks for sections of big business angered over disruption to their operations, not the seizure of immigrant workers.

KCTU chairman Yang Gyeong-su is staging a “one-person protest” outside the US embassy this week, demanding Trump apologize and that South Korean businesses halt investment in the US. “The Trump administration is not only forcing investment in the US, but also forcibly detaining Korean workers and meddling in our internal affairs,” he declared.

Yang continued: “The KCTU absolutely cannot tolerate this. We demand the Lee Jae-myung

administration halt investment in the US and pursue [South] Korean-US diplomacy based on an equal relationship.” In other words, Yang defends the South Korean big business investments and the “right” of the South Korean ruling class to decide how best to exploit labor.

At no point has the KCTU suggested a united struggle with workers from other countries or called for strikes and large-scale protests in South Korea. The KCTU’s cheap stunts are meant to deflect anger away from the Lee administration and big business and defend the South Korea-US alliance by claiming it can be made more “equal.”

Among sections of big business, the seizure of workers has also generated anger, amid fears that their investments in the US are now being threatened. This could potentially cut across joint South Korean-US business activity, which is being increasingly directed towards US war preparations against China.

According to the *Korea Economic Daily*, work at the Hyundai-LGES plant and 22 other South Korean-operated sites involved in automotive, shipbuilding, steel and electrical equipment around the US had halted or nearly all halted after the raid.

Echoing the big business orientation of the KCTU, a company executive in Seoul told the *KED*: “Korean workers are being treated like criminals for building factories that Washington itself lobbied for. If this continues, investment in the US could be reconsidered.”



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