

South Korean workers detail inhumane conditions in ICE custody following raid at Georgia Hyundai plant

Patrick Smith**16 September 2025**

On September 12, roughly 300 workers from South Korea landed in Seoul, more than a week after they were kidnapped and imprisoned by the US immigration Gestapo while laboring at the joint Hyundai-LG Energy Solutions battery plant in Ellabell, Georgia. Following their release, workers have begun speaking out on the deplorable conditions they suffered at the hands of federal immigration agents while imprisoned in the privately run Folkston ICE Processing Center.

“They tied our hands behind our backs like criminals. We had to bend down to drink water from the floor,” said Kim Ji-hoon, a 38-year-old Korean electrician, describing his detention by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). “They took our phones, our wallets, everything,” said Park Min-seo, another detained worker, in an interview with *Donga News*, a South Korean publication. He added, “We were kept in a room with almost no light. The bathroom had no doors—just a sheet. We were treated like animals.”

Over 450 workers were shackled and imprisoned, in the largest ICE operation of Trump’s second term, with many reporting degrading treatment, physical restraints and psychological trauma during their detention. While some 300 have returned to South Korea, many of the non-Korean immigrants kidnapped in the September 4 raid remain imprisoned or unaccounted for.

It is believed that the many of the 175 workers, predominantly Latino, remain detained in Georgia’s Folkston ICE Processing Center, a facility with a history of inhumane conditions. A July 2022 report by the US Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General found “numerous violations that compromised the health, safety and rights of detainees.”

In unannounced surprise visits in November 2021, inspectors described “unsanitary and dilapidated” facilities, including “torn mattresses, water leaks and standing water, mold growth and water damage, rundown showers, mold and debris in the ventilation system, insect infestations, lack of access to hot showers, inoperable toilets, an inoperable thermometer display on a kitchen freezer, and an absence of hot meals.”

In justifying the raid earlier this month, the US government claimed that workers at the facility had violated the terms of their visa or were in the country illegally. As of this writing, the US government has brought zero charges against any of the workers or businesses operating at the Georgia plant.

It appears many of the Korean workers were allowed to be in the US under the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). ESTA is not a visa, but it allows workers to enter the US for short-term business or training—but not manual labor. Yet, according to worker testimonies, they were forced into hazardous construction work, violating their visa terms.

“They told us we were coming to train American workers,” said Lee Dong-woo, a 45-year-old welder. “But from the first day we were doing the hardest labor—welding, lifting, working 12-hour shifts. If we complained, they threatened to send us home,” Dong-woo recalled to *Chosun Ilbo*, a Korean newspaper.

The raid came after two preventable worker deaths at the plant this year. On March 24, 2025, Savannah local TV station WTOC reported that Sunbok You, a 67-year-old Korean worker, was dragged by a forklift and severed in half. On May 21, 2025, Allen Kowalski, 27, was crushed to death when a load fell on him,

according to local station WSAV.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote in July 2025 about reports that Federal investigators from OSHA found widespread safety violations at the plant, yet no significant changes were made before the raid.

“This was a disaster waiting to happen,” said James Stanley, a former OSHA official.

The raid has brought renewed scrutiny to Hyundai’s long record of labor abuses. In 2022, Reuters exposed child labor at Hyundai supplier plants in Alabama. In 2024, the Department of Labor sued Hyundai after a 13-year-old girl was found working 50-60 hours a week.

In August 2025, a federal judge allowed a lawsuit by Mexican engineers who alleged they were misclassified and underpaid under the TN (Trade NAFTA) visa program, which allows citizens of Canada and Mexico to temporarily work in the United States if they are part of an eligible profession, including engineers, scientists, accountants and university professors.

Hyundai has denied direct responsibility, blaming subcontractors, a tactic used by corporations the world over to evade accountability.

The shocking treatment of detained workers and the brutal conditions exposed by the raid have ignited global outrage, sparking international condemnation. Yet trade unions in the US and internationally have proposed no strike action to defend workers’ democratic rights.

Following the raid, Christi Hulme, president of the AFL-CIO’s Savannah Regional Central Labor Council, slandered workers kidnapped by ICE as “illegal immigrants” who were stealing “our labor.”

Yvonne Brooks, president of the Georgia AFL-CIO, issued a perfunctory statement following the raid lamenting that it would increase the “workload burden” of the remaining workers.

Brooks speaks for a union bureaucracy that has no orientation toward the workers she is supposed to defend. Her boss, AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler, who takes home \$319,741 in annual pay, offers hollow rhetoric about corporate greed but never takes any meaningful action.

With 175 Latino workers still detained, immigrant rights groups are mobilizing legal support and protesting outside the Folkston ICE facility.

Meanwhile, Hyundai faces growing pressure from workers to end its exploitative labor processes.

“We were just trying to work and survive,” said worker Kim Ji-hoon. “No one should be treated like this.”

There is only one option for workers at Hyundai and globally. Rank-and-file committees must be created in every workplace, factory and neighborhood to organize against military and police dictatorship. These committees must be under the control of the workers themselves and independent of the union bureaucracy and the state.



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