

5 South Korean workers killed, 3 more presumed dead, in 2 industrial accidents

Ben McGrath

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Over a two-day period in South Korea last week, up to eight workers have lost their lives in separate industrial accidents. These deaths highlight the continued disregard for workplace safety in the country and internationally as workers' lives are sacrificed for profit.

Last Thursday, a boiler tower at a thermal power plant operated by the state-run Korea East West Power Company collapsed as it was being prepared for demolition. The plant is located in Ulsan, in the southeastern part of the country, just north of Busan.

Seven workers were trapped underneath the rubble as they had been cutting steel pillars in the tower. As of Tuesday, four workers have been confirmed dead, one is presumed to have died while still being trapped, while the locations of the other two workers remained unknown. Two other workers were injured and taken to a hospital in stable condition.

Search operations were reportedly hampered by two other towers nearby also slated for demolition. After those were demolished on Tuesday, the search resumed for the four trapped workers, though they are presumed dead.

The 60-meter tower had been out of operation since 2021, and the workers were weakening the structure to prepare for its demolition. The exact cause of the accident is under investigation, but media reports suggest that a heavier weight was placed on one side of the tower, causing it to collapse.

The workers were employed by a subcontracting company. HJ Shipbuilding & Construction (HJSC) was hired to carry out the demolition for 57.5 billion won (\$US39.5 million) and subsequently used workers from its subcontractor, Korea Kacoh. 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.

This disaster was clearly preventable. Safe demolition requires working from the top to the bottom of a building or structure. However, work on the tower reportedly began near the bottom, increasing the danger. This disregard for basic safety measures points to cost cutting to carry out the work as quickly as possible.

The companies involved in the demolition process were not required to submit a safety plan to the local government nor was the process being supervised. Experts in the engineering field criticized the company's demolition plan, calling it "a patchwork of data compiled without proper on-site evaluation," according to the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper. The plan was completed in February 2024 in a one-month period after HJSC first received the contract.

Seo Gyu-seok, the former chairman of the Korean Structural Engineers Association, stated: "A structural engineer would need at least three months to conduct an appropriate inspection and analysis. Spending 30 million won (\$US20,525) on the safety plan for a 52.3 billion won project is equivalent to rubber-stamping it."

Workers were also inside the tower conducting protective shielding meant to prevent debris from spreading when the tower was demolished. Lee Song-gyu, the head of the Safety Professionals Association of Korea, stated: "Using cranes or aerial platforms from outside would have been safer. They appear to have worked from inside to reduce costs."

The government of Democrat Lee Jae-myung immediately went into the damage control that typically follows such accidents. Lee ordered officials to "mobilize all available equipment and personnel" while Prime Minister Kim Min-seok visited the site of the

tower collapse on Saturday to pose for pictures in a hardhat before meeting with family members of the deceased workers.

Labor Minister Kim Yeong-hun, a former head of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), claimed the government “will proactively seek a compulsory investigation, including search and seizure, to thoroughly determine the cause of the accident.” In reality, any such “investigation” will be little more than a cover-up while the conditions that led to the tower collapse and other deadly accidents remain in place so as not to impact the profits of big business.

Lee appointed Kim, who led the KCTU from 2010 to 2012, to his position to give the impression that a “worker” was heading the Labor Ministry. The KCTU, while falsely posturing as “militant,” has always backed the ruling Democratic Party, one of the two parties of big business in South Korea. The unions have not called any strikes to defend workers’ lives or sought to organize opposition to Lee’s administration.

The integration of the KCTU leadership with that of the government underscores the trade unions’ role as defenders of the capitalist system in opposition to the interests of the working class.

These recent accidents also expose the Lee administration’s fraudulent claims that it is working to reduce workplace deaths. Workplace deaths are routinely underreported in the media. According to the Labor Ministry’s statistics, deaths from industrial accidents regularly top 2,000 annually. Lee claimed in July that workplace deaths were “unacceptable” and amounted to “murder through willful negligence.” Yet absolutely nothing has been done.

Whatever his rhetoric, Lee is not a champion of the working class. He and his Democratic Party are conscious of workers’ growing anger, not just towards workplace accidents, but to stagnant wages, rising prices, and an overall decline in social conditions. The goal of Lee and the Democrats, with the aid of the KCTU, is to block any movement against the attacks on the working class in order to protect big business.

That the government and trade unions are doing nothing to prevent workplace deaths becomes even clearer given that Thursday’s disaster was the second deadly accident last week. Last Wednesday, one worker was killed and three more injured in a toxic gas leak at the factory of steel-manufacturer POSCO in Pohang,

located near Ulsan. The four workers involved were also subcontract workers.

The four workers were preparing equipment on a production line for repairs when they inhaled the toxic gas, believed to be gaseous hydrogen chloride or nitric acid. The exact substance and the cause of the leak is under investigation. Firefighters responding to the accident reportedly stated that a pipeline carrying the substance had become disconnected.

The POSCO conglomerate and its subsidiaries have a long history of industrial accidents. A worker from Myanmar at POSCO E&C, a construction company, was injured in August after being electrocuted on a highway construction site. In July, a worker was killed at POSCO E&C after being trapped by a drilling machine at a separate highway construction site. This was the fourth worker killed at the company this year. In November and December 2020, five workers were killed in three separate accidents at a POSCO steel plant in Gwangyang, South Jeolla province.

After the July incident this year, the POSCO Group claimed that it would launch a “safety task force” to supposedly strengthen safety measures at all of its various subsidiaries. As the deaths and injuries that occurred last week show, such claims by big business or the government are not worth the paper they are printed on.



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