

# Fire kills 14 workers at South Korean auto parts plant

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A disastrous blaze at an auto parts factory in Daejeon, South Korea killed 14 workers and injured 60 others, at least 25 seriously, last Friday. The tragedy again underscores the increasing corporate and official disregard for workers' safety and lives internationally, especially in the auto industry.

Video footage of the fire at the three-storey Anjun Industrial plant in South Korea's fifth-largest city showed people leaping from the first floor. Nam Deuk-woo, a local fire chief, told reporters that the fire had spread so quickly that by the time firefighters arrived, workers had already started jumping out of windows.

Some of the dead were so badly burned that DNA tests were needed to help identify their bodies. Nine of the 14 killed were reportedly found inside a third-floor space that had been used as a makeshift gym and rest area. Some of those injured suffered from smoke inhalation and others hurt themselves when they leapt from the building, emergency workers said.

As of Saturday morning, 28 workers were hospitalised and four of them underwent surgeries for broken bones and other injuries.

About 170 workers are believed to have been inside the factory when the fire was reported at 1:18 p.m. on Friday. It was not extinguished for nearly 24 hours, until Saturday afternoon, local time.

Firefighters were delayed in accessing the building because of fears it would collapse. They could not immediately spray water on to the blaze because sodium—which can explode when mixed with water—was stored at the site. More than 200 kilograms of highly reactive chemicals were eventually removed from the plant.

Officials are still said to be investigating the cause of the blaze, but fire authorities reportedly suspect that oil residue and accumulated dust inside the factory contributed to the rapid spread of the fire, with witnesses reporting an explosion.

The *Korea Herald* reported that fire officials believe the flames erupted on the first floor before black smoke surged

through a stairwell and into the upper levels within minutes. Residual cutting oil and grease coating machinery acted as accelerants, according to the article.

The rest area where nine victims were found together was not part of the original architectural plan, but had been built informally within the factory's interior, according to authorities. "This layout may have narrowed evacuation routes and, with only a few windows on the side, limited airflow," the news outlet reported.

A fire official told the newspaper: "There were no windows on the front of the room, and only a single set along one wall, which meant ventilation was extremely poor. Once the fire broke out, smoke likely had no effective way to escape, and that structural limitation appears to have contributed to the scale of the casualties. There were also obstacles below the side windows, making it difficult for anyone to jump to safety."

This combination of hazardous materials, such as cutting oils and metalworking residues, and the illegal modifications, points to this disaster being the result of systemic factors, rather than simply a terrible one-off.

Anjun Industrial, a medium-sized subcontracting company, makes engine valves. According to its website, it is a supplier for the South Korean giants Hyundai and Kia, among others. Official records reportedly show no documented ownership/control relationship with them, and that Anjun established a US local subsidiary in 2009.

This is the deadliest fire at a factory in South Korea since 23 workers died at a lithium battery plant in Hwaseong, near Seoul, in 2024. It is part of a lethal pattern. More than 10,000 workers died on the job in South Korea from 2000 to 2024, according to official statistics.

This toll has continued despite claims by the Democratic Party administration of President Lee Jae Myung, in office since last June, to be taking measures to improve workplace safety.

Just last November, up to eight workers lost their lives in industrial accidents in a two-day period, when a power plant operated by the state-run Korea East West Power Company

in Ulsan collapsed as it was being prepared for demolition by a subcontracting company, and toxic gas leaked at a POSCO steel plant in Pohang, located near Ulsan.

Government statistics report that deaths are increasingly concentrated at smaller worksites and firms. These are subcontracted on a lowest-bid basis by the chaebol giants like Hyundai and Kia as a means of slashing costs, and driving down workers' wages and conditions, in order to boost their profits.

Studies of South Korean industrial safety have pointed to chronic issues: under-resourced inspections, companies hiding or downplaying non-fatal accidents, and a gap between supposedly strict laws on paper and enforcement for compliance. Dangerous tasks are handed down to subcontractors that employ more vulnerable workers.

At Hyundai Steel's Dangjin plant, for example, injury rates among subcontracted workers are up to ten times higher than for directly employed workers.

The Serious Accidents Punishment Act (SAPA), introduced in 2022, threatens company chiefs with at least one year in prison and fines up to 1 billion won if they fail to ensure safety and a serious accident occurs. In practice, however, from 2022 to 2024, only 15 executives have been convicted, almost all receiving suspended sentences of one to three years and relatively modest fines.

In numbers of cases, courts have acquitted main contractors under SAPA, ruling they had "fulfilled safety obligations," effectively shifting legal responsibility to smaller subcontractors even where investigations found major site-level safety failures.

In a ritual exercise in damage control, President Lee visited the Anjun disaster site on Saturday afternoon, meeting with relatives of the victims and calling for safety measures to prevent the damaged structure from collapsing during search operations. He later travelled to a nearby hospital to visit injured workers.

Various investigations and safety reviews are said to be underway. The land ministry said it plans to reexamine building safety regulations, including those covering the illegally constructed rest room. The National Fire Agency and Labor Ministry said they will conduct emergency inspections of similar facilities nationwide.

Anjun chief executive Sohn Ju-hwan posted a statement on the company's website saying the firm would fully cooperate with authorities and implement all necessary measures to prevent a recurrence.

Given the past record of such official and employer inquiries, the only results will be whitewashes that shield the corporate elite.

The trade union bureaucracy is equally culpable for this record. After last November's workplace deaths, Labor

Minister Kim Yeong-hun, a former head of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), claimed the government would "proactively seek a compulsory investigation, including search and seizure, to thoroughly determine" the causes.

Lee appointed Kim, who led the KCTU from 2010 to 2012, to his position. The KCTU, while posturing as "militant," backs Lee's Democratic Party, one of the two parties of big business in South Korea. The unions have called no strikes to defend workers' lives or to oppose Lee's pro-corporate administration.

Workers globally face the same issues. More than 5,000 workers are killed on the job in the United States every year—a figure that dramatically undercounts the toll when occupational illness is included. The auto industry has been among the most dangerous.

March 7 marked 11 months since 63-year-old Ronald Adams Sr. was killed at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Plant in Michigan. His widow, Shamenia Stewart-Adams, and co-workers have still received no official explanation of what happened. The Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration has issued no findings, and the United Auto Workers (UAW) has said nothing.

An independent investigation conducted by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which presented its initial findings in July 2025, provided evidence of widespread safety violations by management, including a rush to complete the retooling of the engine plant. Far from opposing this, union officials, from UAW President Shawn Fain down, enforced these deadly conditions and joined in the corporate coverup afterwards.

Around the world, the building of rank-and-file committees in opposition to the union collaboration with management is essential in the fight to assert workers' control over safety and production. This must be connected to a political struggle, uniting the full power of workers across industries and national borders, to take control of the global auto industry and convert it into a public utility, as part of the socialist reorganisation of the world economy to protect workers' lives and meet human need, not corporate profit and war.



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