

South Korean factory fire investigation exposes indifference to safety

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Two weeks since the deadly blaze in Daejeon, South Korea that killed 14 workers and injured 60 more at an auto parts plant, the investigation has revealed the complete disregard for safety that led up to the tragedy. These disasters are not unpredictable accidents, but are the result of capitalism's relentless drive for profit at the expense of the working class.

The fire took place on March 20 at a plant operated by Anjun Industrial, a key supplier for Hyundai and Kia Motors, where workers produced 70 million engine valves annually for cars and ships. The South Korean state went into damage-control mode, as is typical in order to contain and suppress workers' anger.

President Lee Jae-myung, who came to office last year pledging to reduce South Korea's high workplace death rate, offered a pro forma apology, stating, "As workplace accidents continue to occur, I feel deeply sorry as the person responsible for state affairs." He declared the government would "conduct thorough inspections of high-risk workplaces and ensure that safety-related systems are functioning properly." In reality, as previously with such disasters, nothing will be done.

Investigators barred six executives from Anjun from leaving the country, including company CEO Son Ju-hwan, and began to expose some of the dangerous conditions that existed at the factory. However, they focus blame solely on Anjun, giving the impression that the disaster was the result of individual negligence or corruption.

However, the unsafe conditions are the result of pressure of major corporations like Hyundai Motors to ensure the uninterrupted flow of components and thus profits. Hyundai's chief concern following the fire was not the fate of the workers and their families, but obtaining a new parts supplier, one that will no doubt

reproduce the same dangerous conditions elsewhere.

Hyundai encouraged and rewarded Anjun handsomely for doing whatever was necessary to be a reliable supplier. Sales flourished at Anjun in recent years, nearly quadrupling from 35.8 billion won (\$US23.7 million) in 2005 to 135.1 billion won (\$US89.4 million) in 2024.

Whatever punishment, if any, is meted out to Anjun and its executives will be purely for show, while the underlying production system that encourages dangerous practices will remain untouched.

Workers at Anjun stated that the fire began on the first floor of the factory before rapidly spreading to the second and third. "While working on the processing line, I saw sparks coming from the duct of Line 4 and was on my way to get a fire extinguisher when the flames rapidly spread, forcing me to flee," a worker stated.

The interior of the factory was covered in oil residue from the production process which contributed to the rapid spread of the fire. "Inside the factory, everything from the ceiling to the floor was covered in oily substances," Song Yeong-rok, a representative of the bereaved families, told the media.

The fire alarm initially rang, then turned off. It was assumed that the alarm had simply malfunctioned or had been shut off after a fire that was under control, both of which had happened in the past. This delayed the evacuation.

Citing evidence from workers, the Daejeon Metropolitan Police Agency's Metropolitan Crime Investigation Team stated, "People only began evacuating after directly perceiving the fire, either by hearing others' screams or seeing smoke."

This was not an isolated incident. The plant had experienced at least seven fires over the past 15 years,

though these were only the ones reported. Those fires also began due to sparks that then ignited oil residue or dust collected during the manufacturing process, which had not been properly removed. Small fires were often put out without the help of firefighters. In fact, workers were actively discouraged from calling for help as it would halt production and potentially draw increased attention from authorities.

A family member of an injured worker told the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper: “I heard that in the past, when a fire broke out at the factory, one employee called emergency services and was scolded by a supervisor.” The family member stated that fires were extremely common, occurring “once or twice a year.”

Employees have also stated that CEO Son would verbally abuse anyone who raised safety concerns, a type of abuse known as *gapjil* that is common in South Korea. Workers have told investigators, “The company’s obsession with factory operations over safety led to this major disaster.”

Hwang Byeong-geun, the head of the labor union at Anjun, stated “We told the company in safety meetings to fix facilities and dust collection systems because they posed fire risks. We also stressed the need to regularly check and clean the dust collection systems because oil vapors and residue build up.” He called the accident a “man-made tragedy.”

This is clearly true, but the union took no serious steps to protect workers’ safety. Workers were kept on the job and no attempt was made to unite workers at the plant with those throughout the auto and other industries who face similar dangerous conditions. The union is affiliated with the Federation of Korea Trade Unions (FKTU), considered the more “moderate” of the two major union confederations in South Korea.

In fact, the FKTU was founded as a yellow union organization and existed for decades under the former military dictatorship as the sole legal union body. It continues to enjoy close relations with the state and big business, by preventing strikes from taking place while regularly enforcing sell-out deals on its members.

Workers often flagged other safety violations that were ultimately ignored by the company and the union. Under the law, the company merely had to conduct its own inspections and report to fire safety authorities. Year after year, the same issues were found and not resolved. These included faulty fire alarms, low water

pressure in fire suppression sprinklers, and emergency exit lights that did not work.

The company had also illegally expanded the plant’s east wing to include a gym and rest area between the second and third floors that blocked workers ability to access emergency exits. Nine of the 14 workers killed were found in this area.

Investigators also reported that the company did not hold fire safety drills, though they existed on paper. Under the law, the company was required to hold one safety drill a year and one training session.

In addition, an unlicensed sodium storage facility also existed at the plant that worsened the blaze, and making it harder for firefighters to extinguish. Sodium is used in the company’s production process and there was a refining area on the third floor. A permit is required to store even 10 kg of sodium, but at the time of the fire, 101 kg were present at the site. Sodium and water are an explosive mixture.

The reckless and dangerous operations at Anjun are not the exception but the rule around the world where workers are sacrificed in industrial slaughterhouses for profit. Regardless of its rhetoric, the Lee Jae-myung administration will take no genuine measures to improve workplace safety.



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