

News from South Korean workers' struggles

Saturday 15 January 2011, by [HAN Sang-hee](#), [Hankyoreh](#), [International Metalworkers' Federation](#) (Date first published: 15 December 2010).

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Harsh retribution

Female subcontractors that maintain and clean school facilities in Hongik University, Seoul, engage in a sit-in demonstration in front of the president's office, demanding a meeting with the president and withdrawal of dismissals, Jan. 3.

Around 170 subcontractors in their 50s and 60s were fired last month as the university management terminated a contract with the service company that hired them. It was just several days after they organized a labor union in early December. The contracts of the subcontractors who were charge of cleaning, maintenance and security were in place since 1998 when South Korea was hit by foreign currency crisis, even though the service company hiring them changed. The only defense at this time was the fact that they made a labor union for improving treatment.

The workers usually worked from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. but earned a net income of about 750,000 Won (\$668) and just 9,000 Won for lunch a month. They have shown strong determination to continue sits-in until they can work again.

Dongguk University and Dongduk Women's University have both faced similar situations.

(Photo by Kim Tae-hyung, Story by Jeon Jong-hwi)□

* From the Hankyoreh:

http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_entertainment/457145.html

Temporary workers struggle to regain jobs

Workers eat lunch during a sit-in protest in a building of Hongik University in Seoul, Wednesday. / Korea Times photo by Shin Sang-soon

By Han Sang-hee

More than 30 janitors and cleaning ladies in their 50s and 60s have been holding a sit-in protest in the main building of Hongik University in Seoul for four days since Monday morning, demanding the school withdraw the collective termination of their employment contracts.

Despite freezing weather, they have been eating and sleeping on the cold floor of the Munheon Building on the campus. The first floor of the building was full of workers Wednesday; some chatting with one another and others preparing for another long, cold night.

Many were busy preparing meals for everyone, while others were worried about their family back home.

"I worked at Hongik University for five years, and some have been here even longer, and the school told us to leave without any advance notice," said Seo Bok-deok, 57, who was making coffee for fellow workers sitting on mats covering the cold concrete floors.

"I do wish we could have negotiations with the school, but they have not said anything," she added.

Structural problems

The seeds of dispute were sown when 170 janitors, cleaners and guards of the school formed a labor union on Dec. 1 and demanded higher wages and better working conditions.

They were not directly hired by the school but were working for the school through contracts signed with two labor-supply companies. At the call for higher wages, the service companies asked the school to reflect their demand on contracts between the companies and school.

However, the school refused to sign the contracts, and the labor-supplying companies in turn informed the workers of the termination of contracts on Dec. 31.

The workers said they have been working, receiving hourly wages of 4,120 won, which is lower than the minimum legal wage of 4,320 won, and the school wanted them to extend the contract under the same conditions.

School officials refused to talk to reporters. They have maintained the position that the workers are not the party with which the school should talk with, as they were not directly hired by it.

Non-permanent workers

The conflict at the university is the latest in a series of labor disputes involving temporary workers. From top conglomerates and small mom-and-pop businesses, a growing number of employers are relying on these temporary workers as they can hire them at far lower wages.

The dispute at Hongik University reflects that the problem of non-regular workers is developing into a social issue that encompasses all generations from the youth to the elderly, analysts said.

According to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), many schools have gone through such disputes with workers' unions over the past couple of years.

Some 90 workers at Dongguk University were sacked after the school switched to a different service company, but it agreed to rehire them after they held days of demonstrations and sit-ins in December.

"The problem is that the universities usually avoid negotiations, claiming they are not the direct employers. The only way to solve this is to have them realize that the school is actually in charge of hiring and employing workers," said Ryu Nam-mi, a policy director from the Preparation Committee for KCTU.

The student council at the school expressed their stance Thursday, saying that it in principle supports the workers who were fighting for their rights. It claimed that it was a matter to be solved between the school, workers and the contractors, indicating that the labor umbrella group should not meddle in the case.

Earlier the student council issued a statement that criticized the workers for their alliance with the militant KCTU in their struggle against the school, claiming that such protests could negatively affect the school's reputation.

Most of the workers at Hongik worked 50 hours per week, receiving a monthly wage of 750,000 won plus 300 won for lunch a day.

When asked what she hoped for her and her fellow workers, Seo's voice shook a bit, both from the cold and disappointment.

"There's nothing complicated about it. We have received nothing prior to the layoffs. What more can we want? We just want our jobs back," she said.

sanghee koreatimes.co.kr

* *The Korean Times*:

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/01/117_79288.html

GM Daewoo workers high-altitude sit-in protest

South Korean GM Daewoo workers engage in a high-altitude sit-in protest for over one month. For more than three years precarious workers at GM Daewoo have continuously faced dismissals and union repression. The IMF joins with the Korean Metal Workers' Union in calls for international support.

SOUTH KOREA: The International Metalworkers' Federation joins with the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) in calls for international support for the ongoing irregular workers' struggle at GM Daewoo in South Korea. On December 1, 2010, two members of KMWU's GM Daewoo Irregular Workers' Chapter climbed the arch that stands 10 metres above the entrance of the factory in Bupyeong and began a high-altitude sit-in protest. In addition, Sin Hyeon-chang, President of the GM Daewoo Irregular Workers' Chapter, began a hunger strike, camping out overnight near the factory.

The precariously employed workers are demanding union recognition at the plant and the reinstatement of workers dismissed as a means to break the union and the regularization of employment at GM Daewoo. The right of workers to form and join trade unions of their choosing is protected under the South Korean Constitution, a fact which GM Daewoo is ignoring. Moreover, the Korean Supreme Court recently recognized that workers employed by in-house subcontractors for more than two years should be considered directly employed by the company for which they actually produce.

The management of GM Daewoo has refused to address these issues and continuously rejects requests by the KMWU for negotiations. The company has also rejected requests for a meeting by a support committee composed of local civil society organizations. In addition, police officers stationed

near the protest site have prevented supporters from lifting weatherproofing equipment up to the workers situated on the arch. They are now suffering from hypothermia and frostbite in what may be a life-threatening situation.

IMF has written to the GM Daewoo management in Korea (see letter on website here), demanding it meet and negotiate with the KMWU and regularize the employment of the subcontracted workers at the plant.

The KMWU asks for messages of solidarity to be sent to: dwbi jinbo.net and psspawm gmail.com.

Send letters of protest demanding GM Daewoo negotiate with the workers and address their demands to:

GM Daewoo President Mike Arcamone,
199-1 Cheongcheon-dong,
Bupyeong-gu,
Incheon City,
403-714,
Republic of Korea
webmaster gmdat.com.

Please send copies to dwbi jinbo.net and psspawm gmail.com and unionrights imfmetal.org
Jan 13, 2011 - Cherrisse Fredricks

* From International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF):
<http://www.imfmetal.org/index.cfm?c=25100&l=2>
