

South Korea: Pulmuone Truck Drivers in Struggle

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Pulmuone Truck Drivers Begin High Altitude Sit-in Protest for Safe Rates and Working Conditions and Union Recognition

On 24 October, two owner operator truck drivers who haul goods for the food products company Pulmuone began a high altitude sit-in protest atop a 30 meter high billboard tower in front of the South Korean National Assembly building. The two workers, member of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division (KPTU-TruckSol) began this protest because Pulmuone is refusing to negotiate despite its drivers having been on strike now y 51 days. Instead, the company is engaging in union repression, which has left many union members injured.

Pulmuone drivers began their strike on 4 September calling on Pulmuone to uphold past agreements to raise rates and improve unsafe conditions, stop union repression and recognise the workers' union.

Pulmuone's excessive efforts to cut costs means these workers drive 12-13 hours a day, delivering Pulmuone's fresh good all over the country. The company pressures them to illegal alter their trucks so they can overload. In addition excessive work force cuts mean drivers now take care of loading and unloading themselves in spite of the significant dangers involved. Yet, because they are considered 'independent contractors' by law, these owner drivers are not covered by industrial accident insurance. They frequently become injured or ill as a result of the difficult work and long hours, but Pulmuone drivers have to cover all of their own hospital bills. On the other hand, Pulmuone drivers' rates have been frozen for the last 20 years.

These conditions are not only harmful to drivers. By forcing drivers to engage in dangerous driving practices that can easily lead to accidents, they put the public at risk as well. Roughly 1200 people die a year on South Korean roads due to truck accidents.

The Pulmuone drivers' high-altitude protest comes only a week after an ILO tripartite meeting on safety and health in the road transport sector passed resolutions acknowledging the role of cargo owners (clients) like Pulmuone in pressuring workers to engage in dangerous driving practices in an effort to maximise profits. The meeting's tripartite participants passed a resolution calling for ILO research on best practices to counter this problem, including the Australian Safe Rates model, with the goal of developing a handbook and eventually a code of practice for guaranteeing fair remuneration and safe roads. [\[1\]](#)

In South Korea, KPTU-TruckSol has been fighting to win a Standard Rates System very much like Australian Safe Rates, which would hold cargo owners (clients) like Pulmuone accountable for fair rates and safety for drivers and the public throughout their supply chains. Despite a government promise, this system has not yet been in acted in South Korea. Sadly if it had been, the Pulmuone drivers would not have to be on strike or living 30 meters in the air in protest at this moment.

The message of the recent ILO meeting and of that of the Pulmuone drivers' protest are essentially the same. Cargo owners (clients) at the top of supply chains must be made accountable to treat workers with fairness, pay them decently for the work they do and ensure that they do not have to put themselves or others at risk while they do it. It is time to put this principle into practice in South Korea by introducing safe standard rates. Until this happens we can be sure that disputes like the one at Pulmuone will continue to occur, truck drivers will continue to suffer under dangerous conditions and community members will continue to die on our roads.

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* [KPTU website](#)

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.itfglobal.org/en/news-events/press-releases/2015/october/un-agency-agrees-ride-sharing-and-road-safety-action-plans/>