

Korean Labor Movement All-Out against Repression

Saturday 6 May 2023, by [HONG Myungkyo](#) (Date first published: 5 May 2023).

On May Day, a local union leader surnamed Yang, from the Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU), set himself on fire outside of a court to protest the concerted prosecution against trade unionists like him for carrying out union organizing activities.

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A number of construction workers' unions have been at the centre of the state repression. So far, the police has conducted more than a dozen raids since the end of last year. More than 900 unionists have been investigated and 18 organizers and leaders detained.

Recently, the local prosecution had requested arrest warrants for Yang and two other construction union officials. They are under investigation for forcing construction companies to hire unionized workers and collecting union membership dues, which the prosecution describes as intimidation and extortion.

Yang was due to be in court at 3 pm on May Day, but instead he chose to self-immolate in protest. He was airlifted to the hospital but passed away the next day. In a social media post shared on the morning of May Day, Yang described himself as only "carrying out union work justly and without wrongdoing." He was disturbed by the fact that the prosecutors were now charging him with "interference and intimidation."

He wrote, "My pride cannot abide this. I should have fought doggedly and struggled tenaciously to win. Perhaps I'm taking the easy way out. I was glad to have been in this together with you. I will stand at the side of my comrades eternally."

The Unhidden Anti-Union Agenda

As we condemn the attacks on trade unions, it is crucial to understand why the Yoon government - working hand in hand with the construction companies - has taken aim at the construction workers' unions.

The government under President Yoon Suk-yeol has never hidden its anti-union and anti-worker agenda. It has mounted attacks on the truckers' strike, and tried to push through anti-worker labor policies. On February 21 this year, Yoon remarked, "At construction sites, powerful vested unions are openly committing illegal acts such as demanding bribes, forcing recruitment, and obstructing

construction.”

Yoon referred to construction site violence as the “Construction Worker Mafia.” He directed that “prosecutors, police, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport, and the Ministry of Employment and Labor work together to crack down on systematic illegal acts such as extortion and violence at construction sites.” He has labeled labor unions as “anti-reform rigid vested interests” and has stepped up the offensive.

The construction industry is subject to economic fluctuations. It is dependent on the fortunes of the real estate sector and the government’s housing construction plans. As the fifth largest in the world by revenue, Korea’s construction sector is now dealing with the deflation of the real estate bubble which has resulted in a severe downturn in construction. One way the construction companies try to overcome this crisis is by attacking stronger labor unions, which the current anti-worker government is more than willing to support.

The Labor Offensive

Workers employed on construction sites are irregular and on short-term contracts. Challenges abound for construction workers from various construction sites to organize themselves into strong labor unions. The temporary nature of construction sites also make it harder for workers to negotiate with employers.

Yet construction workers have been organizing. The construction workers’ movement emerged in 1989 and grew enormously after the mass layoffs of workers during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. Crane and truck operators were unionized in the 2000s. Since the 2010s, the movement has rapidly expanded and significantly improved the situation of low wages and poor working conditions.

From just over 70,000 members in 2015, the organizing efforts have grown the KCWU to a union of 160,000. If counted along with those in the more conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), 250,000 construction workers are now in unions in South Korea. In the past, South Korean Chaebols accumulated huge profits from the construction industry based on the over-exploitation of workers. By gaining control over large construction sites, the unions have significantly increased their bargaining power.

A key victory of the KCWU’s struggle was abolishing the construction “participation system” to eliminate multi-level subcontracting that undermines job security and worker solidarity. The KCWU won an amendment to the Construction Industry Basic Law that abolished the “the lowest-priced winning bid system”. This happened against the fierce opposition of construction companies vexed by the growing power of unions.

In recent years, construction workers have established new unions and negotiated with construction companies over pay and conditions. The KCWU was founded in 2007, comprised of Civil Engineering Construction Regional Union, Crane Operators’ Union, Construction Machinery Union, and Electrical Workers’ Union. In addition, the National Plant Construction Workers’ Union was founded in 2007 that encompassed regional plant unions. These new unions became a force in countering the power of capital in the construction industry.

From the beginning, the construction companies were not at all willing to bargain with the unions. The construction workers fought to hold negotiations several times a month. Their efforts culminated in a landmark labor agreement in 2017, more than a decade later, when the construction union went beyond regional negotiations and demanded a national collective bargaining agreement.

Construction companies did not believe workers could come together as a union capable of bargaining with the companies. Even if they did, they would stop the struggle once the leadership was detained. However, construction workers who built the union knew the power of being united as a union despite the threats and intimidations.

In addition, labor unions, by monitoring the construction companies, have in fact prevented corruption and irregularities in the construction industry and strengthened civil safety by preventing faulty construction.

The State and Capital's Counter-Offensive

The Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport and public prosecutors are now waging a ruthless counter-offensive against KCWU unionists. They have labeled the physical actions by the unions to take over construction sites as "illegal" and are detaining union organizers.

The government and construction companies are attacking the KCWU on two main grounds. One is that it is illegal for the crane operators to receive a monthly bonus (i.e., a separate and additional payment for extra hours worked) from their employers. The other is that the union has control over hiring construction site workers.

The monthly fee is perceived as a performance bonus for crane operators. According to court precedents, the bonus is considered a "wage" because the crane operators work longer than the prescribed hours. It is also a risk allowance for performing dangerous work. But the government ignores this ruling and attacks the bonus as an "illegal, unfair payment." The union made it clear that it is for work performed at the request of construction companies. If the government uses this pretext to attack the union, they will stop accepting the extra payment and instead adopt "work to rule" by not working any additional hours.

Another ground for the repression stems from construction unions pushing for "closed shop." Unions demand medium and large construction sites to require newly hired workers to join a construction union. However, until a "closed shop" agreement is reached with the construction company, union organizers demand that the companies hire union members and contest the control over the hiring. This sometimes involves physical confrontations between the unions and the companies.

Labor's All-Out Struggle

The recent government and construction companies' attacks on the KCWU should be understood in the context of growing union strength and worker power in the construction sector. Against such escalating repression, the labor movement in Korea is not backing down.

Already the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), of which the KCWU is an affiliate, along with other affiliated unions, have announced a series of strike actions and rallies over the next two months.

The Korean Metal Workers' Union is the first to call for a general strike for May 31. The KCWU is aiming to mobilize 100,000 union members to go on strike in July. The KCTU is building a broad alliance of "anti-Yoon Suk-yeol" general strike for July.

As the social and political crisis deepens in South Korea, this fight has rapidly emerged as a key battleground. Its processes and outcomes will undoubtedly shape the future of the labor movement

and Korean society.

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P.S.

- Asian Labour Review, a journal for labour movements across Asia. May 5, 2023 12:52 pm:

- <https://labourreview.org/repression-escalation/>

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