

“The President Forced Our Comrade To Die”—South Korea’s Workers Confront Yoon Seok Yeol’s Labor Crackdown

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After the self-immolation protest death of a union leader, South Korean construction workers have held daily candlelight vigils and mobilized in the tens of thousands against President Yoon’s war on labor.

On May 1, 2023, Yang Hoe-Dong, district leader of the Korean Construction Workers’ Union, fatally set himself on fire in protest of the Yoon Seok Yeol’s racketeering charges against him. Yang was just one of over a dozen of union leaders facing trumped up charges under President Yoon’s war on unions, which he has compared to “gangsters” and the “mob.” Since Yang’s death, construction workers have mobilized in the tens of thousands to demand an apology and an end to the Yoon government’s anti-labor crackdown. The Real News reports from Seoul.

DONGMIN YANG (narrator): Tens of thousands of construction workers in South Korea went on strike and occupied a street around the city hall of the capital Seoul where they staged a sit-in.

“Let’s inherit the spirit of the martyr!”

“Crush union busting!”

“Let’s inherit the spirit of the martyr

and crush union busting!”

“Crush union busting!”

“We shall struggle

to inherit the spirit of the martyr!”

“Let us struggle to death!”

DONGMIN YANG (narrator): After gaining a popularity boost last year for cracking down on a strike by the “Cargo Truckers’ Solidarity Division”, who were fighting for a safe (freight) rates system, The Yoon’s regime planned a crackdown on the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the Korean Construction Workers’ Union (KCWU), labeling them as “gangsters”.

Since the beginning of the year, police have conducted 13 raids on the construction union offices, 40 personal searches of union members, and 950 summonses, detaining 17 people.

MINHO JUNG(leadership of the Tower Crane Subcommittee, KCWU): The Yoon government is

using prosecutors prosecutors are using the police, and the police chiefs are using special one-level promotions to suppress us (construction workers).

16 union members were detained and over a thousand were investigated. On May 12, in the Daejeon-Sejong area, the homes and offices of two members were raided at 6 a.m. and police confiscated the cellphone.

What is unbelievable is the grounds for the search warrant. that there was enough circumstantial evidence to believe that if the collective agreement was signed, it would cause massive damage to the company's operations. That is, all the investigating and detaining of construction workers, have only been based on circumstantial evidence and predictions. They're saying workers can sign a collective bargaining agreement, but they can't demand it. Workers shouldn't strike, and shouldn't make high-pressure demands to the company during negotiations. The Yoon administration is ignoring the three basic labor rights.

DONGMIN YANG (narrator): The vast majority of construction workers in South Korea are day workers, exposed to constant job insecurity. Workers are forced to bribe informal managers called "Oyaji", those who hold power over who gets what jobs.

The construction industry runs on illegal subcontracting structures, that lead to severe intermediary exploitation, while subcontractors often withhold wages. Construction sites are unsafe, rampant with illegal practices, leading to nearly 400 workers dying on construction sites every year. The KCWU is fighting to transform the construction site into a safe workplace, eliminate the illegal multi-level subcontracting employment structure, and ensure the basic labor rights of construction workers.

MISUNG PARK (Vice Chairperson of the KCWU): How did they treat construction workers? When we were not in the union, we moved from Incheon to Busan or to the Jeolla Province, and then we could only return home once a month. We worked like that.

There was a time when it was hard for construction workers to simply share dinner with their families. This was too much for us, and we came together to the KCWU, right? ("Struggle!") Yes, you're right. With the KCWU, we could now have dinner with our families. That's what the KCWU did.

A few years ago we spent a few nights on a tower crane when we were up there fighting. Then it got dark in the evening like now. The apartment lights up, and I look at it and I'm like: "Wow, who built that building?" Didn't we build it, comrades? ("Struggle!") So that people can sleep comfortably in their homes, with electricity, air conditioning, and warmth.

There were no toilets, no water, and the workers ate crappy food while the office staff stuffed themselves full. We were abused like that. Isn't all this abuse what the KCWU got rid of, no? ("Struggle!")

Agitation from the speaker: Construction, has for a long time, been subcontracted until the lowest level receives only one-sixth of what the main contractor was paid for. For the case where several citizens died, after a demolition project in Gwangju led to the building's collapse, the original contract was awarded at 280,000 won per square meter. Demolition was subcontracted for three, four, five, no, seven times, until the bottom level only received 50,000 won per square meter.

How could good materials and safety be secured? Construction time needed to be reduced, and work was forced against precautions. This was how the accident happened, and the people dying from that are construction workers. These illegalities and complete disregard for safety has been

prevalent in the construction industry.

DONGMIN YANG (narrator): The Yoon government has treated the KCWU as a “mob”, charging them with “blackmail” and “joint racketeering”, for their legitimate union activities. Treating construction unions as gangsters and unscrupulous criminals has destroyed the dignity of KCWU leaders who have been at the forefront of fighting for workers’ rights. This is why Yang Hoedong, a KCWU leader of the Gangwon region, on the 1st of May, set himself on fire to protest against the government’s repression.

Hoisun Yang (Yang Hoedong’s brother): I can only imagine how painful, humiliated, and unfair you must have felt until May 1st, the day the court was to substantively examine your warrant, the arrest warrant that labeled your legitimate union activities as joint blackmailing.

all since February, 1st, 2nd, 3rd... Three summonses, seizing your phone, a warrant for arrest, How much pain pulled you down? The strength to protect your family, to persist and hold yourself together, how that all fell apart.

Yangseop Lee (leadership of the Gangwon Regional Council, KCWU): The president of our country, who supposedly studied law, forced our comrade, who had nothing left but his pride, to die by calling him a gangster, a thug. Yoon Seokyeol is a murderer. Using the sweet allure of a one-class special promotion for the police, he killed a citizen, whom he was sworn in to protect.

Also, let us not forget the police who called the construction managers, those who wrote petitions and applications for non-punishment for the KCWU, and nitpicked whether there was pressure from the union. This is the reality of this country, now a prosecutor’s republic.

Even after receiving a text from his child, Yang Hoedong sprinkled oil on his body and set himself on fire. When I went to the scene, the surrounding flower beds were burned white, and the leaves all dried up. Let us never forget Comrade Yang. Let us not be divided! Let us bring our hearts together, and under unity, bring down this regime! Let us struggle firmly until the day when workers are no longer slaves, but the true masters of the world. Let us struggle!

“Struggle!” (“Struggle!”) “Struggle!” (“Struggle!”)

DONGMIN YANG (narrator): The construction unions are continuing their struggle, by demanding the resignation of President Yoon Seokyeol, of the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport, of the Police Chief, and the dissolution of the ‘Task Force to Tackle Corruption in the Construction Industry’. KCTU members organize a memorial ceremony every evening, at the Seoul National University Hospital Funeral Home.

On the evening of the 16th, a joint memorial ceremony was held to mourn the victims of the Itaewon disaster and martyr Yang Hoedong. Last year, on October 29, just before Halloween, 159 people were crushed to death in the streets of Itaewon, Seoul. Despite various pre-warnings about a massive crowd gathering, both police and local and metropolitan administrations did not prepare to manage the situation. which led to the disaster. The bereaved families have organized themselves, and are demanding the dismissal of the Minister of the Interior and Safety, and a thorough investigation into the tragedy.

The Yoon Seokyeol government prevented the families of the victims of the Itaewon tragedy, from setting up a memorial near (Seoul) City Hall, and continues to engage in malicious propaganda, against the bereaved families. May 16th was the 200th day after the tragedy, so the KCWU organized a joint memorial with the bereaved family members. After a joint memorial ceremony, 30,000

construction workers slept in the street, to show their will to protest against the government.

After the resolution rally on May 17th, construction workers marched towards the presidential office, until they were blocked by a wall made by police. On the other side of the barrier, the right were holding a demonstration, repeatedly chanting, "Disband the KCTU! Disband the KCWU!"

"Disband the KCTU!"

"Disband the KCWU!"

The KCWU and KCTU said they would continue to organize more workers in various sites, and continue their struggle calling for the resignation of President Yoon Seokyeol.

"The road will be difficult, full of hardships, but let's put faith in our comrades and struggle together! Let's struggle firecely at our job sites!"

"Struggle!"

Dongmin Yang

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