

Workers' View of Korea #4 (Jan. 2013)

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Phone: 82-2-778-4001(2) Fax: 02-778-4006 Email: psspawm@gmail.com Web: www.pssp.org/eng/

NOW IN KOREA

Irregular Education Support Worker Engage in First Ever Strike at Korean Public Schools

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=389>

Korea Education Support Workers – Precariously Employed, Underpaid and Ill-treated

In South Korea, public schools are among the many public sector workplaces that employ a high percentage of irregularly (precariously) employed workers. Public school irregular workers account for more than 40% of the total irregularly employed public sector irregular workforce. These workers, who serve school lunches, run school libraries, aid science labs, assist disabled students, teach physical education, run after-school programs and perform administrative functions, are directly and indirectly responsible for the education of Korea's elementary, middle and high school students. Nonetheless, for several years no law has existed to define their status. This has meant that various education authorities including the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, local offices of Education and the administrators of individual schools continuously attempted to pass responsibility for their working conditions off to one another.

Under individual contracts with school principles, irregular education support workers, the vast majority of who are women, have suffered from low wages, high levels of work intensity and an overall lack of respect at work for the last twenty years. Any time there is a decrease in school enrollment or a lack of funds, these workers face the threat of dismissal. They are also regularly required to do personal tasks for superiors while only receiving a fraction of the salaries made by school administrators, who hold the rank of public servant, and regularly employed schoolteachers. While teachers and public servants are given bonus and pay raises



Workers embrace during strike protest in Northern Chungcheong

based on experience, irregular education support workers have no pay scale. This means that no matter how many years they have worked, their salaries remain the same. Public schools, which should model the values of equality and respect, are instead sites of gender discrimination and the violation on labor rights.

Irregular Education Support Worker Organizing

Education support workers went without union representation for many years. This changed in 2011 with the election of progressive education commissioners in Seoul, Gangwon Province, Northern Jeolla Province, Southern Jeolla Province and Gyeonggi Province. At this time, workers' desire for change, the potential for forward movement represented by the education commissioner elections, and the efforts of unionists came together in a massive organizing drive. Union membership grew with to 40,000 in roughly one year.

While these numbers are impressive, this organizing effort has not been without its problems. Various factions within the labor

movement have engaged in competitive organizing such that education support workers are now members of four different unions - the Irregular Education Support Workers Division of the KCTU-affiliated Korean Public & Social Services and Transportation Workers' Union (KPTU), the KCTU-affiliated National Irregular Education Support Workers' Union, the KCTU-affiliated Seoul General Union and the non-affiliated Korean Women's Union. Clearly, overcoming divisions and building unity is an urgent task.

The Fight in 2012

The main demand of education support workers is that local offices of education and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology acknowledge their responsibility as education support workers real employers and engage in collective bargaining with them. This is seen as the best way to change the current irrational system, under which education support workers are contracted with, and therefore tied to the will of individual school principals.

Education workers have had some success in getting this demand met. In February of 2012, the Ministry of Employment and Labor stated its opinion that, "The responsibility for collective bargaining with irregular education support workers' unions falls with the relevant offices of education." The Lee Myung-bak administration has also acknowledge that education offices should be seen as the real employers of education support workers.

Local education authorities have continued to avoid negotiations, however. To up the pressure, the Korean Women's Union, the KPTU Irregular Education Support Workers Division and the Korean Irregular Education Support Workers' Union formed a coalition and began planning a collective response. Leaders of each union carried out a hunger strike and sit-in protest in front of the National Assembly from October 24 to November 3. On the last day of the sit-in protest 10,000 workers gathered in Seoul for a massive protest, at which they called for legislation to regularize their status as public sector education workers, the introduction of a pay scale and direct employment under the Education Commissioner. A week later on November 9, 16,000 union members at 1400

schools around the country carried out the first ever strike of education support workers, followed by a second strike on November 23 in Northern Chungcheong Province. Protests continued throughout December. Unfortunately, outside of the 10 regions where progressive education commissioners are in office, education authorities continue to refuse to negotiate.

Tasks for 2013

The strike carried held on November 9 was the first ever strike of education support workers in Korean history. The fact that education support workers have organized and gained the confidence to strike so quickly is an amazing achievement. The struggle of education support workers is also significant as an example of women workers' collective action. Education support workers succeeded at the end of 2012 in minimally improving their conditions and also getting a budget proposal to cover the introduction of a pay scale introduced in the National Assembly. Sadly, this proposal was thrown out in the wake of conservative Park Geun-hye's election as South Korea's next president.

Nonetheless, the struggle in 2012 was a giant leap forward, and has created the basis for an ever more determined struggle this year. The expansion of membership, unity among the various education support workers' unions, achievement of regular employment and improvement of working conditions are all important tasks for 2013.

The Struggle against Privatization must go on

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=407>

December 8 Protest against Privatization

"Stop privatization!" "Strengthen quality public services!"

These were the slogans chanted by some 3000 thousand workers who braved the snow and cold weather to gather at Seoul Plaza last December 8 in protest against President Lee Myung-bak's end-of-term dive to privatize public services. Sang Moo Lee, President of the Korean Public & Social Services and Transportation Workers'

Union (KPTU), captured the thought of the crowd aptly when he stated, “More than this cold weather, it is the biting wind of privatization wrecking havoc in the lives of common people that makes us shiver,” in his opening speech.



Press conference against privatization of the KTX

A Global Trend

Public sector privatization, promoted by international economic institutions like IMF and World Bank, has become a global trend over the last thirty years. Since the advent of the global financial crisis this trend has accelerated with government use claims about the need for austerity to justify the sale of public corporations and outsourcing of public services. As was recently recognized at the 29th Congress of the global union federation Public Services International (PSI), however, “privatization... (is) often used to drive down wages and conditions of workers and generate profit for the private sector” and, by raising costs and limiting access, is depriving “millions of people... of their fundamental human rights” (PSI, Programme of Action, 16, 31).

South Korea’s Anti-Privatization Struggle

South Korea is no exception to the global trend. Over the past several years, successive administrations have sought to privatize utilities, rail transport and other public services. They have, however, met determined resistance from South Korean labor unions, many of whom are members of PSI. Most notably, in 2002 a joint strike by the Korean Power Plant Industry Union, the Korean Railway Workers’ Union and the Korean Gas Corporation Union succeeded in stopping the Kim Daejung administration’s

plans for direct privatization in these areas. For many years afterwards, the government was unable to pursue blatant sale of public corporations, although it did pursue privatization through roundabout means, such as allowing the entry of private companies into utility provision and the contracting of local public services to private companies.

With the advent of the Lee Myung-bak administration, however, privatization got a second wind. Under his policy of ‘the advancement of public enterprises’, Lee sought to facilitate the entry of private corporations into gas distribution and expand privately owned power plants, calling these changes the ‘introduction of competition to eradicate irrationality’ in public corporation management.

End-of-Term Privatization Drive

With his term coming to an end, Lee has sped up privatization efforts even further. Last February, the right to operate Cheongju International Airport for the next 30 years was contracted to a partially U.S.-owned holding company for the bargain price of 25.5 billion won (roughly 15 million USD). The Lee administration has also been pursuing sale of shares of the Incheon International Airport Corporation and recently announced plans to sell Incheon Airport’s duty free shops to private capital. Recently, it also announced removal of legal and structural barriers to make way for private operation of the KTX rapid transit train from Suseo to Busan. The construction of the rapid-transit rail line and the private railway operator’s use of the government-owned tracks would be subsidizing with taxpayers’ money. In as much as private companies are sure to put money-making above security and public access, airport and rail privatization has been heavily criticized as sacrificing safe and user-friendly transport for capitalist profits. Workers and community members have also been fighting the administration’s plans to allow for-profit hospitals and the contracting of water provision to private companies fearing the reduction of access to quality and affordable healthcare and clean drinking water.

Prospects under Park Geun-hye

The protest on December 8 was organized by several coalitions of labor unions, social movement organizations and community groups, which have been formed to fight privatization on all fronts. Unfortunately, the work of these groups is far from over, especially considering the recent election of the conservative Park Geun-hye as South Korea's next president. While Park shied away from the subject during her election campaign due to negative public opinion, her past statements have indicated her support for privatization, and numerous news outlets have predicted that pro-privatization forces in the administration will gain confidence from her victory. Moreover, clauses in the U.S.-Korea FTA, pushed through the National Assembly last year, which allow foreign investors to sue the government for 'anti-competition' policies, will make privatization irreversible once it is achieved.

The anti-privatization struggle will have to get several notches stronger in 2013. To make this possible, unions and other anti-privatization forces must begin putting forth concrete alternatives to privatization that make the provision of quality public services financially and structurally viable. They must also remember the power they wielded in 2002 when public sector unions in three industries went on strike together, and seek to connect knit their struggles in to a global anti-privatization movement. Only with unity and determination will the labor movement be able to defeat privatization and defend the people's right to quality public services during the next 5 years of conservative rule.



Labor and civil society protest against for-profit hospitals

UPDATES

The Ongoing Struggle of Hyundai Motor Irregular Workers

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=418>

January 5 marked Hyundai Motor irregular workers Byeong-seung Choe and Ui-bong Cheon's 81th day of protest atop a power transmission tower located at the Hyundai Motor Ulsan plant. Irregular workers at Hyundai's plants in Asan, Jeonju and Ulsan have carried out partial strikes on November 29 and December 5, a full strike on December 7, and two more partial strikes on December 12 and 14 in conjunction with this high-altitude protest.



Byeong-seung Choe in the midst of high-altitude protest

Hyundai management has attempted to bring in scabs during the strikes to keep production going, forcing the striking workers to make efforts to block the scabs' entry. In response, Hyundai management has brought in contracted security forces who have rained down violence upon the workers. Many workers have been taken to the hospital for severe injuries, including bloodied faces and broken fingers. Of 22 workers brought to the hospital on December 14, 7 were admitted for treatment.

While violently suppressing the workers' struggle, Hyundai management continues to insist on its proposal for new hires as an alternative to regularization of irregular workers, a proposal already rejected by the Hyundai irregular workers union. In a special bargaining session held on December 13, management proposed to raise the number of new hires from the original proposal of 3000 to 3500. Moreover, management said it would begin on December

ISSUE IN FOCUS

Evaluating the Presidential Election

- What the Labor Movement should take away from Park Geun-hye's Victory

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=436>

On December 19, the ruling conservative New Frontier Party (NFP) candidate Park Geun-hye was elected as South Korea's next president. Park received 51.6% of the popular vote beating opposition Democratic Unity Party (DUP) candidate Moon Jae-in by over 3% points and becoming the first presidential candidate to win with majority support since the introduction of direct elections in 1987.

The election results dealt a grave blow to the labor movement and other progressive forces in South Korea. Given popular dissatisfaction with the current Lee Myung-bak administration, it is hard for unionists and activists within and outside of Korea to come to terms with the fact that Park, the daughter of the 1960s and 70s dictator Park Chung-hee, won with such a wide margin. To contribute to the process of regrouping, this article analyzes the reasons for Park's victory and what the election results mean for left-progressive in Korea.

Two Candidate Race, High Voter Turnout

At 75.8%, the voting rate in this presidential election was the highest it has been since the beginning of the 21st century. Many commentators attribute the high turnout to the fierce competition leading up to the elections. A truly two-person race was held for the first time in Korean elections history, with the NFP uniting behind Park early on and the non-affiliated liberal Ahn Cheol-su and the Unified Progressive Party's (UPP) Lee Jung-hee dropping out to allow for the DUP's Moon Jae-in to stand alone against Park. Analysts believe that conservative voters were particularly motivated to go to the polls because of the threat presented by a united opposition. Older voters in particular, turnout in high numbers to vote for Park

17 with the hire of 420 new workers, even posting job announcements throughout its plants and distributing applications through subcontracting companies.

In response to protests from the Hyundai regular workers union, management agreed to put off acceptance of applications, but it has persisted in its position that it will only make new hires and not regularize the irregular workers. The company insists that a 2010 Supreme Court ruling, which found that the employment status of Byeong-seung Choe, an illegally hired dispatch worker, must be changed to direct hire, applies only to Choe as an individual, and says it will wait to hear the results of suits filed by other workers.

If workers are rehired per Hyundai's plans, it would mean that they are not recognized as illegally employed dispatch workers who should, by the Supreme Court ruling, be taken on as directly hired workers. The workers' years of work for Hyundai would not be recognized. They would also forfeit their rights to back pay.

The number of workers participating in the struggle has grown over the course of several strikes reaching as many as 1,000. This is a much higher level of participation than at the start of the high-altitude protest, when only a fraction of that number came out to rallies. Solidarity from the regular workers' union has also increase, with delegates and worksite activists helping in efforts to block scabs from entering the factories.

On January 3, however, the Ulsan District Court accepted Hyundai Motor's application for an injunction against the workers engaged in the high-altitude protest. The same day, court officers visited the protest site to deliver a notice ordering the workers to clear the area. In this situation, solidarity is more important than ever.

On December 13, over a hundred organizations, including PSSP, held a press conference, at which we announced a declaration of support for the Hyundai irregular workers' strike. This sort of solidarity must grow. In addition, the attitude of the regular workers' union will play an important role in determining the struggle's outcome. Only with solidarity between regular and irregular workers will victory be possible.

The Liberals' Ineptitude

Nonetheless, Park's success should not be attributed primarily to voters' age or the sense of urgency felt by conservatives. One of the main reasons Park was able to win, despite considerable dissatisfaction with the Lee administration, is that she spoke to voters' immediate concerns and at the same time distinguished herself from Lee Myung-bak.

Throughout the election race, Moon criticized the Lee administration for its role in increasing social polarization and its authoritarian style. In response, Park emphasized the economic and political inexperience of the liberal Roh Moohyun administration, which preceded the Lee administration, and of which Moon is a product. For the majority of Korean people, the problems of increasing social polarization and worsening living conditions are not so much associated with one or the other political party, but rather a fact of life that has been consistent over the last ten years. Moon Jae-in's election's campaign message, which emphasized the need for a change in the ruling party, did not speak to this experience. On the other hand, Park, in addition to emphasizing the failings of liberal administrations, spoke about expansion of the middle-class, increasing welfare and political reform, touching on issues close to people's everyday lives and highlighting the ways in which she is different from the widely disliked Lee. In addition, by invoking the myth of rapid economic development deeply associated with her father, Park was able to ride on many common people's desire for a solution to the current economic crisis.

Conversely, Moon failed to put forth a coherent message other than one about the need for an end of NFP rule. This ineptitude, as much as Park's successful messaging, has to be blamed as one of the main reasons for Park's success. In other recent elections, including the municipal government elections in June 2010 and the by-elections for Seoul mayor in 2011, the liberals were able to make gains due to widespread dissatisfaction with the Lee administration. In the lead up to the presidential election, however, liberal forces failed to critically examine the mistakes of past liberal administrations and instead put forth contradictory positions. The DUP, for instance criticized Lee for forcing

passage of the U.S.-Korea FTA and called for its renegotiation, failing to acknowledge that it was Roh Moohyun who had pursued FTA negotiations in the first place. Having no plan for fundamental reform of South Korea's neoliberal, export-based, conglomerate-centered economic structure, or its unequal and dependent relationship with the United States, the DUP simply heaped criticism on Lee Myung-bak. As such, they failed completely in shaking the criticism of Roh Moohyun and his followers as economic and political amateurs and in presenting themselves as a real potential alternative to Lee.

Progressives' Ineffective Response

Sadly, rather than positioning themselves as critiques of both mainstream parties, the main 'so-called' progressive party, the UPP and many other progressives followed along the path carved by the DUP's ineptitude. Like the DUP, these forces repeated the hollow criticisms of Lee Myung-bak the individual, failing to put forth a concrete and principled critique of the policies of the ruling class. Light parodies, like those likening Lee Myung-bak to a rat, and a few words here and there about workers' rights within the ruling-class dominated discussion of 'economic democratization' took the place of a fundamental critique of Korea's economic and political structure.

In addition, instead of explaining clearly how their platforms were different than Park Geun-hye's or what they would do to reform the government, the UPP focused on Park's family history and position. Making recourse to this vague sort of demonization removed from common people's everyday realities, UPP leaders and their supporters stayed within their comfort zone rather than capturing the attention of the wider public. Thus, the election campaign of Lee Jung-hee did little to expand their base of support.

This tendency for the main progressive party to follow in the pattern set by the liberal block is not new. Already in 2008 the Korean Democratic Labor Party (KDLP, the UPP's predecessor), put forth the platform of uniting with the liberal opposition against Lee Myung-bak. Instead of shining a light on the liberal's contradictions, they turned a half-blind eye to

them, focusing on the goal of achieving a few seats in the National Assembly and expanding political power. Given this strategy, the KDLP and the UPP after it focused on mobilizing unions and other mass organizations – their base of support – to protests focusing on issues set by the liberals, rather than focusing on campaigns around issues they thought should be central.

It is little known outside of progressive circles within South Korea, but two left-progressive candidates also ran on platforms criticizing the UPP's alliance – Soyeon Kim, a leader among female irregular workers, and Kim Sunja, a cleaning worker and former proportional representative candidate for the New Progressive Party, which split from the KDLP in 2009. These two candidates, however failed to rally together various other left-progressive forces and ended up with only .1% and .2% of the vote.

Progressives need to reflect on the fact that the message focusing on the faults of Lee Myung-bak did not resonate in a meaningful way to the majority of Korean, voters and thus was not enough to lead to a change in administration. The lesson here is that without putting forth a clear and principled analysis of Korea's economic and political circumstances, and putting forth an independent platform based on that analysis it is possible for progressives to appear as an alternative and therefore impossible for us to win wider grassroots support.

Regrouping for a renew Struggled in 2013

With the conservative turn by UPP and other progressive forces, the divisions within the progressive movement and Park's election, the labor and wider social justice movement in South Korea is at a low point. The despair felt

by many has manifested in a chain of worker suicides in the wake of the elections.

Unfortunately, we cannot give ourselves much time to recover. It is likely that Park will push forward symbolic reforms during the transition period and in the beginning of her administration, that will distinguish her from Lee, such as measures to alleviate social polarization, support for the middle class and political reforms. Without a proper response, the labor movement and wider progressive forces are likely to lose even more ground in this situation. We need an awakening that will give us the clarity with which to respond.

In order to ready ourselves for a fight against this new government, our first task is to strength the KCTU. Next, activists who agree on the need to overcome deepened ideological divisions within the labor, focus on rebuilding or bases at the worksite level and strengthen the democratic labor movement need to regroup based on locality and industry. These activists need to take up the work of concretely analyzing the government and capital's strategy, in the context of economic crisis, in each industry and at each workplaces, and use this analysis as a basis for building a national front for a renewed struggle. In addition, we need to critically evaluate the old and worn methods of unionism and find means of reform.

Finally, given the loss of the workers' and wider progressive moment's traditional left identity after the formation of the Unified Progressive Party, we need now, more than ever, a return to a class-based politics located firmly in the struggle against new liberalism and for social and economic justice. Based on these principles, we must focus on discussion and debate at the local level to establish a unified strategy for confronting the Park administration.

People's Solidarity for Social Progress:

Is a social movement organization in South Korea struggling against neoliberalism and working to build an alterglobalization movement by (re)constructing revolutionary social justice thought and theory, searching for internationally-based people's alternatives to neoliberalism's financial and armed globalization, and reforming and revitalizing the workers and women's movements.

IN MEMORY OF THE DECEASED



With Grief, Anger and Determination...

Within only a week of the election of New Frontier Party presidential candidate Park Geun-hye, four workers took their lives with their own hands. A fifth died from heart complications experienced while attending his comrades' funeral. The death of these workers is an expression of despair felt at having struggled for years against injustice and repression only to be faced with the election of the daughter of a dictator and the prospects of five more years of conservative rule.

The first death was Gang-seo Choe, an organizer for the Hanjin Heavy Industries & Construction Chapter of the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU). Choe had struggled valiantly with his fellow workers against Hanjin's plans for mass dismissal, finally winning reinstatement last year. After Hanjin workers returned to work on November 9, however, the company began sending them back out on unpaid leave, and persisted with a lawsuit claiming 15.8 billion won in damages from workers who had participated in the struggle. On the morning of December 21, Choe declined to take part in the morning outreach that was usually part of his daily routine. Instead, he hung himself in the union office, leaving a note denouncing Hanjin's repression and lamenting, "Nothing will be possible for the next five years." A father of two young sons, he was 35 years old.

The following day on December 22, Yun-nam Lee, Vice Director of Organizing for the KMWU Hyundai Heavy Industries In-house Subcontractor Chapter also took his life. Lee had participated in the union's establishment in 2003 and struggled fervently for the elimination of discrimination against irregular workers. Lost in grief when he heard of Choe's death, and blaming himself for having been able "unable to help" Choe and other struggling workers like him, Lee threw himself from the top of an apartment building. He was only 42.

The same day, Gyeog-nam Choe, an activist with the Seoul Alliance for Democracy, Public Welfare, Peace, Reunification and Self-Determination also took his own life. A former student activist, Choe was only 41 when he died.

Only three days later, Ho-il Lee, Chair of the Hanguk University of Foreign Studies Branch of the Korean University Workers' Union also committed suicide after struggling against the university's repression for many years. Having help to organize a strike in 2006 as the union's policy director, Lee was illegally dismissed. He won reinstatement in Supreme Court decision in 2009, but the university administration refused to reinstate him to his original post, instead ordering his transfer to Daecheon. He hung himself in his union's office on Christmas day, taking his own life at the age of 47.

The following day, Vice Chair of the Hanguk University of Foreign studies union Gi-yeon Lee collapsed from heart failure and passed away after surgery failed to revive him. He had been keeping watch at Ho-il Lee's memorial alter. He was 49 years old.

Coming on the heels of the deaths of 23 Ssangyong Motor workers and the suicide of a Yoosung Enterprises union member last December 4, these five sudden deaths have brought renewed shock and grief to the Korean labor movement. While our hearts are made heavy by these tragedies, however, we must not let our spirits be crushed. It is now more important than ever that we find our will to fight and come together to do so.

The Research Institute for Alternative Workers Movements and People's Solidarity for Social Progress express our heartfelt condolences to the family, friends and comrades of the deceased. We pledge to move forward in the face of hardship to build a strong and united movement. We commit ourselves to fight until we win an end to mass dismissals, the regularization of all irregular workers and respect for all workers' fundamental labor rights so that the souls of the deceased may finally rest in peace.

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=423>

The Research Institute for Alternative Workers Movements (RIAWM):

Is PSSP's research institute dedicated to revitalizing the workers movement in South Korea and beyond. Through empirical and theoretical study and dialogue with workers themselves, we are working to critically analyze the conditions workers face amidst the structural crisis of capitalism, and develop concrete policy for a workers movement that both improves workers' lives and strives towards an alternative political-economic system.

Central to our work is the concept of social movement unionism, which calls for unions and other workers' organizations to play a leading role in political and social transformation. Social movement unionism also signifies union collaboration with social movement forces and the articulation of the struggle for labor rights with struggles against other forms of structural oppression, including the women's, anti-war, anti-racist and environmental justice movements.

By fostering social movement unionism in South Korea we seek to cultivate the Korean workers movement as part of a worldwide alterglobalization movement.