

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

Wednesday 24 April 2013, by [PSSP](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2013).

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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 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

The vast majority of 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 to 40,000 in roughly a 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 principles.

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.

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