

South Korea: “Let us not pass precarious employment on to our children” - The Struggle of Hyundai and Kia Irregular Workers

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Suicide and Self-Immolation at Hyundai and Kia Plants

On April 14 an in-house subcontracted and later contract worker at Hyundai Motor's Ulsan plant put a noose around his own neck and committed suicide. This man had first got a job at Hyundai Motor on the advice of his father, who had worked for automobile manufacturer until his retirement. He had wanted to be a Hyundai worker like his father.

As an in-house subcontracted worker this 28-year-old youth moved between the jobs left vacant by regular workers and eventually folded to the company's pressure to accepting employment under a short-term contract, convinced by Hyundai's promise that his contract would be maintained for at least two years. In violation of this promise, the worker was dismissed last year before the two years were up. Driven to despair by his sense of betrayal, he eventually took his own life.

In order to avoid a clause in the Act on Temporary Agency Work implemented on August 2 last year, which calls for the direct employment of temporary agency workers (many in-house subcontracted workers are considered temporary agency workers as a result of recent court cases) after two years, Hyundai had rehired this worker and 1,500 other in-house subcontracted workers on short-term contracts. The company then fired these workers in rounds. This policy was the cause of the workers' death.

On April 16, only two days after the suicide, a 37-year-old worker who had worked in Kia Motors' Gwangju plant for seven years lit himself on fire in protest self-immolation. The worker, Jong-hak Kim, had been an organizer for the Gwangju plant in-house subcontracted workers' local. With his body ablaze Kim cried out continuously, “Let us not pass precarious employment on to our children,” and “Let us abolish precarious employment so we can live as human beings.” The father of three young daughters, Kim is now hospitalized, lying in pain. It was in response to management's decision to hire new workers, rather than directly employ in-house subcontracted workers who had worked at the plant for 10 years to fill a labor shortage that Kim committed protest self-immolation.

Hyundai and Kia Irregular Workers Protest

The protest of irregular workers in Gwangju continues. In addition, since April 22, dismissed irregular workers from the Hyundai plants in Ulsan, Jeonju and Asan have been in Seoul where they have set up a protest encampment in front of the Hyundai and Kia headquarters. The demands of these workers are the imprisonment of Hyundai Motor CEO Mong-koo Chung, who has illegally employed temporary agency workers under the guise of in-house subcontracting for the last ten years, and the regularization of these workers' employment status. In response to the protest, Hyundai Motor has mobilized hundreds of manager-level employees who have joined riot police in

repeated violent attacking against the protesting workers. Despite this repression, the workers continue to hold daily rallies and maintain their encampment night and day.

On April 26, the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), the industrial union to which the workers are affiliated, staged a protest and set up a tent at the protest site, which was torn down by the police that night. On May 4, workers in Seoul and Ulsan held simultaneous rallies to commemorate the 200th day of the high-altitude protest being carried out by Byeong-seung Choi and Ui-bong Cheon at the Ulsan plant.

On May 10, the three Hyundai irregular worker locals went on strike. That day 800 workers protested in Seoul, taking over the four lane road in front of the Hyundai and Kia headquarters. On May 15, the KMWU held a major rally at the same location in which 3500 union members and officers participated. A 'Committee to Respond to In-house Subcontracting' has also been formed to support the workers' struggle, with a hundred organizations participating around the country.

People's Solidarity for Social Progress (PSSP)

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