

South Korea: Another Accident Following the Sewol Tragedy - “The Seoul Subway Train Collision is a Result of Indiscriminate Structural Adjustment”

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In the wake of the tragic Sewol ferry sinking, Korean workers have become deeply aware of the safety problems inherent in Korean society. A systematic disregard for adequate safety systems and enforcement mechanisms, the result of excessive cost cutting, deregulation and privatisation, affect the entire transport industry - spanning the public and private sectors. On May 2, only 3 weeks after the Sewol ferry disaster, these problems led to a train collision on the Seoul Metro line 2 at Sangwangsimni Station in which 170 people were injured. Below is a translation of the KPTU-Seoul Subway Labour Union’s statement in response to this incident.

[Seoul Subway Labour Union Statement] The Seoul Subway Train Collision is a Result of Indiscriminate Structural Adjustment

- We must seize this opportunity to eliminate the subway’s accumulate safety risks

Seoul Metro management has identified the cause of the train collision that occurred at Sangwangsimni Station as a signal failure that occurred after changes were made to the data inputted in the signaling apparatus. While a deeper investigation of the causes of the accident is required, the information already available is enough to send shivers down the spine, as it has made clear that the collision could easily have become a much larger tragedy. This accident was a matter of much more than a partial technical failure. Rather, it is a red flag pointing to problems endemic in the subway’s entire operating system.

The public Seoul Metro’s signaling system is now operated by a private subcontracting company. This company is also in charge of revisions to the data entered into the signaling apparatus, the area of work where the mistake that led to the accident occurred. While the exact cause of the failure is currently under investigation, many are pointing to the likelihood that it resulted from a structural problem in the 2 line’s entire operating system.

Unlike the other lines operated by the Seoul Metro (1, 3 and 4), line 2 uses two train operating systems (ATS and ATO). The ATO (Automatic Train Operation) system was installed on top of the original ATS (Automatic Train Stop) system as part of an improvement effort begun in the beginning of the 2000s in preparation for a switch from using two drivers to single-driver or driverless trains. Frequent malfunctions from the time of installment, however, led many to raise concerns about the

joint use of the two systems. Replacement of old trains, which has the potential to alleviate the problems, moreover, has been delayed as a result of relaxed regulations and budget limitations. In addition, a complete transfer of technology to accompany the new system did not take place and maintenance has been poor. As a result, it is difficult for employees in charge of the system to accurately assess the cause of malfunctions. The Seoul City government and Seoul Metro management, however, have turned a deaf ear each time the union raised these concerns, thinking only about reducing crew and cutting personnel costs.

The relationship of the 2 May collision to indiscriminate structural adjustment that took place under the previous two Seoul Mayors (Lee Myung-bak Lee and Oh Se-hoon) is also great. Outsourcing of central functions in a public transport system that requires integrated management has been a particular problem. This severity of this problem is clear when one considers that the nature of the subway makes it easy for a small error to easily escalate into a large accident.

Obstacles to prompted replacement of old trains and sufficient maintenance inspections are also important problems. The legally allowed durability life (the time a train can run before it has to be replaced) was increased from 15 to 25 years and then to 40 years when Lee Myung-bak was president. As if this was not enough, current President Park Geun-hye, a staunch champion of deregulation, completely abolished the legal durability life last March. In addition, the Seoul Metro maintenance and inspection workforce has lost 600 workers over the last ten years, while the use of subcontracted workers has increase and the period between inspections lengthened. The more older trains there are the more inspections should be strengthened, and yet the opposite has happened, increasing the risk of accidents.

We wish to make clear our belief that blindness to the hazards of workforce reductions and indiscriminate cost cutting were the root causes of the massive accident on 2 May.

The Seoul Subway Labour Union expresses our deep regrets and condolences to the passengers who were injured and inconvenienced by the accident. At the same time, we demand that a thorough investigation of the causes of the accident be carried out and all measures needed to prevent a similar accident from occurring be taken. The common after-the-fact response to accidents - severe punishment of a few individuals without an adequate investigation - must not be repeated in this case.

The 2 May accident should be used as an opportunity to do a comprehensive review of the subway's entire safety system to eliminate the safety risks that have accumulated over the years. Even after a massive accident in the Daegu Subway several years ago, the problems caused by single-driver trains have not been taken seriously. Instead, there is move towards driverless trains. And the elimination of safety regulations, outsourcing and workforce reductions have gone on continuously. The 2 May accident is an eye-opening sign of the dangers of relentless cost cutting without attention to safety issues. If we cannot learn from this incident, we will inevitably face an even greater tragedy in the future.

The Union's demands for improvement in subway safety:

- ▶ Prompt replacement of old trains and strengthening of regulations related to durability life and safety assessments
- ▶ Unification of line 2's signal control system and reinforcement of the maintenance workforce to compensate for previous reductions.
- ▶ Elimination of single-driver and non-driver trains and introduction of a requirement for 2 drivers.

- ▶ Bringing out-sourced primary functions back in-house and direct employment of subcontracted workers.
 - ▶ Replacement of punishment-oriented after-the-fact responses to accidents with thorough investigations into root causes and strengthening of preventative measures.
 - ▶ Creation of a tripartite (union, management, Seoul City government) instrument charged with developing a plan for fundamental improvement of the subway's safety system.
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* Source:

http://www.kptu.net/mboard.asp?Action=list&strBoardID=KPTU_PDSENG&intCategory=&strSearchCategory=|s_name|s_subject|&strSearchWord=&intPage=1