



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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South Korea's 300 Day Aerial Sit-in Strike Highlights Plight of Precarious Workers in Korea and the Philippines (Updated Nov. 10)

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November 1 marks the passage of day 300 of the [aerial sit-in strike being waged by Kim Jin-suk](#). The former employee of Hanjin and current Direction Committee member for the Busan chapter of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and other union members face subzero temperatures and enforcement fines of one million won per day. Currently, management and labor are reviewing a parliamentary proposal to reinstate laid-off workers, as numbers continue to grow supporting "A World without Redundancy Dismissals & Precarious Work." The case, and the solidarity movement it prompted, illuminates issues of precarious, contract and migrant labor in South Korea, the Philippines, Germany the United States and beyond.

Hanjin Industries face growing popular support

From atop the No. 85 crane's cab 35 meters above Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction's (HHIC) Yeongdo Shipbuilding Yard in Busan, Kim Jin Sook has been protesting the company's Dec. 15, 2010 announcement of a [reduction in force plan](#), supported on the ground by the Korean Metal Workers' Federation (KMWU).



Not long after HHIC gave notice to workers, the company's shareholders received dividends of 17.4 billion Won, more than three times the combined annual salaries of the 170 dismissed workers who have refused to comply. Over the past decade HHIC has made profits of 430 billion Won, and bought 15 billion Won in shares in another company. During the January strike, management reportedly fired 290 manufacturing workers.

On July 9, 2011 175 "Hope Buses" and 50 vans, a figure approximating the total number of days of Kim had been occupying Crane No. 85, arrived at Busan's Central Bus Terminal carrying approximately 12,000 riders from cities and regions across South Korea, including Gwangju, Pyeongtaek, Daegu, Suwon, and Seoul. While the [Hope Bus riders were met en route](#) by 2,000 police officers blocking the last 700 meters to the Yeongdo Ship Yard with a temporary barricade and a mixture of liquid tear gas and pepper spray, nearly 3,000 of the Hope Bus riders remained steadfast throughout the night and the monsoon rains determined to act as witnesses in behalf of Kim Jin-suk. As a point of comparison, [the first Hope Bus caravan held on the 158-day](#) of the HHIC struggle was comprised of approximately 750 participants who joined nearly 7,000 workers and local citizens demonstrating. At the time, 100 unionists had roped themselves around the crane's base and the number has since declined due to illness and other factors raising concerns about the nature of Kim's isolation.

On July 30, the numbers for the third Hope Bus caravan climbed to 15,000 people. Leaders of faith including Protestant Churches, Buddhist Orders, and Catholic Dioceses from all over South Korea, members of the press, university professors, lawyers and leaders of civil society joined together to demand a just resolution. Mid-July to August is a time when many South Koreans take their summer vacations, and observers found it striking that growing numbers of non-unionists were willing to take their time and pay the 30,000 Won roundtrip bus fare to support Kim Jin Sook.

On August 27-28, a fourth Hope Bus caravan with an estimated 5,000 individuals supporting both the reinstatement of the discharged HHIC workers and conversion of temporary workers to regular workers changed course and headed to Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction Co. Ltd Seoul Headquarters, and Seoul's downtown Gwanghwamun.¹ They were met by a Seoul Police Agency deployment of 9,000.

In September and October, venues of support continued to vary and statements of support emanated from those participating in the funeral procession of Lee So-seon, the mother of South Korea's revered labor activist Chun Tae-il. Her son was a garment worker whose self-immolation in 1970 in protest of sweatshop working conditions sparked nation-wide protests and is now commemorated as a national hero. It also included a pledge of support from a group of 1,543 South Korean film workers traveling to South Korea's Busan International Film Festival, Asia's largest and increasingly significant film hub, via a self-declared Hope Bus. And, on October 8 at 9:30 p.m. ET, Kim Jin-suk spoke at the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) general assembly addressing "friends who fight in Wall Street, in the heart of neoliberalism" via her mobile phone and human mic about the HHIC situation saying, "We are fighting the same fight."

Unionists point to one factor contributing to the growing popular concern for Kim Jin-suk: the collective memory of Hanjin Union leader Kim Ju-ik's suicide while on the same Crane 85 during a 2003 strike against HHIC's layoff of 650 workers, and the death of imprisoned Hanjin Trade Union President Park Chang-su in 1991. At age 51, Kim Jin-suk enjoys a longstanding reputation that stems from her stint as a skilled welder after graduating from Korea Shipbuilding and Engineering Corporation's training institute for women in 1981, leading to her election in 1986 as the first woman shipbuilding union representative (Heavy Industries took over KSEC in 1989). Her perseverance as a labor activist for the past three decades inspired many others, among them the late-Kim Ju-ik.

Further clues to the growing support for Kim Jin-suk and the HHIC workers is provided by labor scholars including University of Washington Professor Hwasook Bergquist Nam, who have documented Kim Jin-suk's extraordinary contributions to labor history in South Korea. They contextualize Kim's place in a shifting gendered division of labor in which union organizing centered on men's claims as heads of households demanding a family living wage has been challenged since the 1980s. Indeed, Kim Jin-suk has emerged in the past decade as the champion of irregular workers, the majority of whom are women. If the themed Hope Buses are indicative, solidarity also extends to caucuses of workers differentiating themselves according to regions, special interests and constituencies (including: human rights, disability, LGBT, civil society) all united in a motto aspiring to "A World without Redundancy Dismissals & Precarious Work."

Public demonstrations of this size and variety, characterized by inter-regional and cross-sector participation, have not been seen since the summer [2008 candlelight vigil demonstrations](#), which grew to nearly 100,000 in South Korea's major urban centers. Indeed, a Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) report cites 2010 as the most stable in terms of industrial relations where wage and collective bargaining was concluded without resorting to a strike since the IMF bailout. As a result of labor statistics that will indicate that this 2011 year will prove otherwise taken together with the unprecedented nature of the public's involvement in the HHIC action, attention has turned to the responses of civil society leaders and lawmakers to widespread employment and labor



Police block demonstrators marching towards the shipyard of Hanjin Heavy Industries in Busan on July 10, 2011 (Photo: Reuters)



Police use water cannons to prevent citizens walking toward the Yeongdo Shipyards (Photo Ryo Woo-jong)

issues that undergird the strike.

Drawing the attention of lawmakers

Reports from the *Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI)* that provide a longer view of the past decade indicate a shrinking middle class that perhaps contributes to an upsurge in popular support for strikes and links to this year's student-led struggle to reduce university tuition fees, mounting criticisms of the South Korea U.S. free trade deal currently

debated for its constitutionality, and the low turnout which led to the defeat of Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon's referendum calling for an end to universal free lunches in school. Early analysis of independent candidate and human rights lawyer Park Won-soon's victory in the October 26 Seoul mayoralty by-elections following Oh's resignation indicates it was precipitated by the failure of the ruling Grand National Party's (GNP) campaign to "end welfare populism." Regardless, Park's win by nearly 10 percentage points over the GNP candidate, Na Kyung-won, suggests close public scrutiny will continue in the runup to April's general election and the December 2012 presidential election with the handling of the HHIC situation and other major issues pertaining to the economy, labor and welfare as signature issues.

To date, lawmaker's involvement with the HHIC case has resulted in arrest warrants for union leaders issued earlier this summer and the arrest and fining of 50 supporters for the second Hope Bus caravan, including Progressive New Party Former Chair Shim Sang-jung, National Farmers Federation Chair Lee Gwang-seok, and Democratic Labor Party Chair (DLP) Lee Jung-hee, who had to be rushed to the hospital after being tear gassed. HHIC's management has pursued a lawsuit against the workers and individuals for 5.3 billion Won in damages under South Korea's Penal Code 314, or "Obstruction of Business."

Responding to public pressure, the National Assembly's Labor Affairs Committee stepped in during the summer and twice urged HHIC's Chairman Cho Nam-ho to explain the labor dispute, but he remained overseas for the month of July through August 7 citing business reasons. According to KMWU, this hearing on the Hanjin mass dismissals marks the first time in 14 years, since Hanbo Group Chairman Chung Tae-soo, that a chaebol chairman has been called to appear before the National Assembly.

During the second and third Hope Bus caravans and throughout the course of the hearing, references surfaced to HHIC management's violation of the internal agreement of 2009 on employment and protection against outsourcing, which stipulate that workers at the South Korean plant not be fired as long as its overseas plants remain in operation. The 2009 agreement was brokered by the Busan Regional Labour Office following HHIC's previous attempt to restructure and lay off 600 workers. Not only has HHIC-Philippines been busy, but projections of sales for 2012 have also been positive. The Subic Bay shipyard has secured shipbuilding orders for 56 vessels, mostly bulk carriers, worth \$4.8 billion. [In his Aug 18 appearance](#) before the National Assembly's Environment and Labor Committee, Chairman Cho stood by HHIC's decision to fire workers, and suggested more time was needed to resolve management issues.

As lawmakers from both ruling and opposition parties increasingly become involved in securing a resolution to the HHIC situation, including in October drafting a parliamentary mediation proposal to reinstate 94 of the laid-off workers, disagreement continues over matters that include the recalculation of severance pay for all 400 workers, compensation for hardships incurred by workers' families, and management's insistence on an apology from Kim Jin Sook. Meanwhile, joint actions and messages of support flow in from abroad, including the Philippines.

HHIC Philippines

In light of and despite challenges to solidarity resulting from intraregional differences, workers at the plant in the Philippines launched a comparable "[Caravan for Decent Work and Human Working Conditions](#)" and on July 3, 50 vehicles traveled to both the Korean Embassy and the Hanjin National Office in Fort Bonifacio. Report during Hope Caravans from members of the [South Korean delegation to the Philippines](#) consisting of Kim Kyung-choon, a dismissed HHIC Busan worker, and Chong Hye-won, of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) relay resonant concerns across plants over workplace safety and other labor rights violations.

"[Caravan for Decent Work and Human Working Conditions](#)" traveling to the Korean Embassy and the Hanjin National Office in Fort Bonifacio, July 3, 2011. Photo Credit: National Union of Building and Construction Workers (NUBCW) <http://vimeo.com/25933940>.

According to Building and Woodworkers International's (BWI) Migration, Gender, and Campaign Director Lee Jin Sook, whose role had formerly been to facilitate a construction network project working with Hanjin workers, solidarity with affiliates such as the National Union of Building and Construction Workers (NUBCW) predates the formal launch of the HHIC Philippines Workers' Union (HHICPIWU) on July 6 2008. Lee notes efforts as far back as 2003 to develop

a bilateral campaign between HHIC South Korea and Philippines, and across shipbuilding and construction sectors. Lee says, "As companies evolve and become involved in different sectors, this initiative is a good example of the kinds of multi-sector, multi-national union initiatives that will be needed in the future."

In September, representatives from HHICPIWU and NUBCW visited South Korea to attend BWI's regional conference. In addition to the issues brought forward by the HHIC Busan workers, members elaborated on the differences in workplace conditions and respective government responses. They concurred with findings in labor group Partido ng Manggagawa's (PM) report that 5,000 accidents and at least 31 deaths have occurred due to poor working conditions since Hanjin began its Philippines operation in 2006. The night before the third Hope Bus caravan, a job-related death of a worker at the Subic Bay plant was announced bringing the total to four as of January 2011. HHICPWU says an average of 5 accidents per month have been reported this year; A sample report included cases of broken fingers and limbs, severe burns, and occupational diseases. They are urging the building and proper staffing of a 190-bed hospital inside the facility as recommended by the Philippine Senate Labor Committee Chair following a February 2009 visit, as required by the Labor Code, and a follow-up Department of Labor and Employment investigation.

The situation of HHIC workers is gaining attention domestically in both South Korea and the Philippines, as well as internationally as it has raised questions about whether South Korea is a good place to do business and on the behavior of Korean multinationals. KMWU's Chong Hye-won confirms protest letters have arrived from nearly 70 countries from Algeria to Zimbabwe. These include letters of support from Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, India, Norway, Pakistan, and South Africa. During the summer, US-based AFL-CIO cited the events at Hanjin in their request to US representatives to refuse consideration of the proposed free trade agreement with South Korea until the fundamental rights of South Korean workers to organize and bargain collectively are respected. Some are [citing this growing spotlight on HHIC](#), together with the [protest of naval base construction on Jeju-do](#) as comprising some of the biggest issues confronting Lee Myung-bak and the ruling coalition.

Precarious workers and South Korea's neoliberalism

The HHIC situation is an important test case for the multiple union system/union pluralism that went into effect in South Korea on July 1, allowing multiple labor unions at the same company. Within the first two weeks of July, [167 new unions have been created](#). An agreement announced between HHIC labor and management in late June included canceling criminal cases and accusations on both sides. But the refusal to withdraw the layoffs is said to have spurred divisions among unionists regarding representation. According to a Labor Ministry report, a total of 91 percent (152) of these conflicts arose in workplaces that already have a union, and involve metalworkers' and builders' unions.

In 2009, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concerns about the effects of the amendment to the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act (TULRAA) that regulates the formation of trade unions as well as collective bargaining on the labor relations environment, including the multiple union system and the banning of wage payment of full-time union officials who in turn can only be recipients of paid time-off for union activities. Some unionists have indicated enthusiasm for the establishment of new unions for workers in companies that are said to have installed a [phantom union under the previous "one company, one union" rule](#), while others are concerned about labor laws that prohibit labor solidarity or otherwise impede the unfolding of labor-labor conflict. Some like Oh Min-gyu working on behalf of the national council of Temporary Worker Unions, whose founding in 2000 addressed the growing trend of labour casualization under IMF influence, point to the ongoing practice of illegal dispatch employment and the difficulties that temporary workers and subcontracting workers have in gaining recognition and benefits as workers.

As a result, some experts say that the HHIC case is best understood as a response to changing employment conditions in South Korea since the economic crisis of 1997, noting the comparable changes in the US in the 1980s when work became less stable and corporate demands for flexibility undercut expectations of lifelong employment. International Labor Organization (ILO) documents point to the fact that precarious work in South Korea over the last decade includes a differentiation between short-term and fixed-term work, special employment, and indirect employment where employee relations are disguised. (South Korea joined the ILO in 1991 and the OECD in 1996.) Earlier this summer, minor opposition People's Participation Party (PPP) Chairman Rhyu Si-min issued a related apology for policies he enacted while serving in the previous Roh's administration.

A representative of one of South Korea's largest umbrella unions, Korean Confederation of Trade Unions' (KCTU) International Director Ryu Mi-kyung points to the Act Relating to Protection, etc. for Dispatched Workers, which was adopted February 1998 that legalizes temporary work (dispatched work) for jobs requiring expertise, special skills or experience enacted by Presidential Decree. The Act in essence has denied equal treatment of permanent and fixed term workers for over a decade.

Not long after the Act went into effect making working conditions more precarious rather than offering protection or placing restrictions on new forms of temporary work, the E-land union comprised of both irregular and regular workers launched a struggle to protect contract cash register workers who had been employed by the company for over 18 months against layoffs. Scholars like University of British Columbia Professor Jennifer Jihye Chun cites the E-land case as a successful precursor to the current HHIC situation.

The range of Hope Bus Riders is further telling of the situation South Korea's precarious workers have inherited. They include ten workers fired from the Ssangyong Motor in 2009. They worked averaged 10-15 years at the factory. They joined the Hope Bus Riders together with workers from the 77 day Pyeongtaek auto plant strike against mass layoffs and those engaged in long-term struggles from YPR (the major supplier of piston rings for Hyundai Motor diesel engines and four other major auto assemblers) and Valeo Compressor. Ssangyong Motors has been acquired by India's Mahindra Group, but measures to hire laid-off workers have still not been forthcoming. An estimated 400 workers still remain on 'unpaid leave'.

The Hope Bus Riders also include thirty in-house subcontracting workers at the nearby Hyundai Motor Ulsan plant, the world's largest automobile factory, who lost their jobs after demanding conversion from irregular dispatch worker status to regular worker status. In [the case of Hyundai workers](#), KCTU's Ryu notes a ray of light for those affected by indirect employment or disguised employee relations following a July 2010 ruling to reinstate the workers. The Supreme Court ruling says, "Hyundai Motor's in-house subcontracting corresponds to illegal temporary employment disguised as subcontracting and as such, the court views those workers who have been employed for more than two years as being directly employed by Hyundai Motor according to the Temporary Workers Act." It also states, "Whereas other temporary workers, including contract and dispatch workers, have legal protection, no regulations exist for in-house subcontracting."

Large corporations involved in industries such as automobiles, shipbuilding, electronics and steel are increasingly engaged in in-house subcontracting, paying half what regular workers make. Workers are concerned about a growing trend toward "no regular employee factories," and demand that the Temporary Workers Act be enforced to place limits on work included under this classification.

HHIC situation highlights Asia region trends for labor

Of the 20,000 workers employed in HHIC Philippines, expected to increase to 25,000 in 2012, NUBCW says a majority are employed by 101 subcontractors. Affiliates across BWI's Asia-Pacific Region, whose country members include the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and East Timor, have expressed concern about how the movement of capital, transfers of technology, and restructuring of employment relations to create vulnerable employees are effected by trilateral arrangements. NUBCW National President Ernesto Arellano speaking on the HHIC case says, "Only 19 of these 101 subcontractors are legitimately registered with the Philippines' Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), and the HHICPW registration as a union with the government is still pending due to these disguised employer relations that are in violation with Article 270 of the Labor Code of the Philippines." Arellano adds, "Based on our survey, none of these registered 19 subcontractors have sufficient capitalization or heavy machinery required to fulfill the scope of work required under contract filed with DOLE." The survey finds that Hanjin is supplying the subcontractors with capital, machinery, materials, and buildings, and that it is controlling stockholders. It notes that the workers who do the assembling are recruited from throughout the Philippines by HHIC management and trained in South Korea. Both Arellano and Chong suggest that HHIC's diagnosis of redundancies is a misnomer as projections of an increase in the HHIC

Philippines workforce by 5,000 are deemed necessary, while HHIC South Korea attempts to restructure and terminate employees without liability and conditions for secure employment are diminished in both countries.

Among those in solidarity with the HHIC workers are migrant workers in South Korea and Korean workers employed overseas. South Korea currently has agreements in place with 15 migrant-worker sending countries participating in the Employment Permit System (EPS), and was conferred a first place in [UN Public Service Awards \(UNPSA\)](#) in the category of improvement in areas of transparency of foreign workforce selection and introduction process, human rights and illegal overstaying of workers. EPS is intended to ensure the application and observance of labor laws and policies. While commendations of South Korea's foreign workforce policy in comparison with China or the U.S. have been forthcoming, industry-wide and industry-spanning unions, including the Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions (KFCITU) and the Migrant Trade Workers Union (MTU), and global unions like BWI are increasingly concerned about the rights of migrant workers who are often excluded from company-based unions in the Asia Pacific region.

Speaking on both the union's global priorities and its regional migration project BWI's Lee says, "The reality for our sector is that increasingly the workforce is becoming migrant and the work is becoming temporary. We are working with our affiliates to not only recognize the rights of migrant workers, but also develop policy on organizing migrant workers into trade union structures." Lee clarifies,

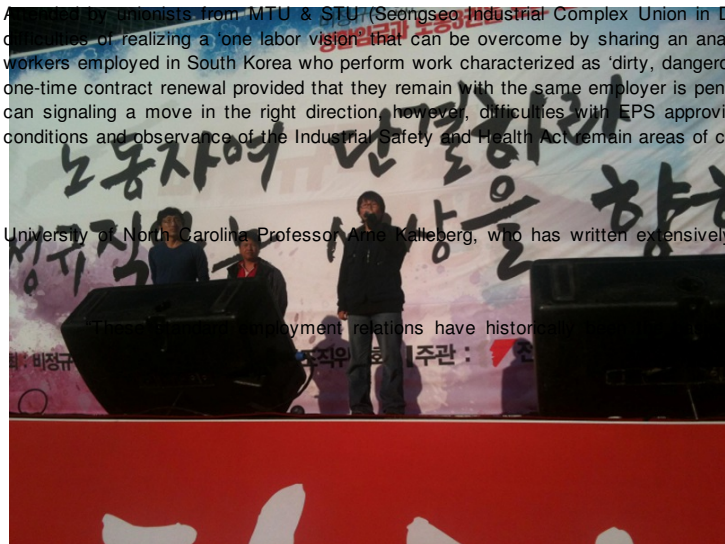
"It's easier in some countries than in others, where priorities have been to organize national workers. But as sectors have changed to the extent that in some places forty percent of the workers in construction sites are migrants, it's important for unions to develop pro-migrant worker policies, and for the inclusion of migrant workers rights in collective bargaining agreements so that wages and working conditions are the same for migrant workers and national workers."

A recent BWI, KFCITU, and MTU supported work-out case that illustrates shared cause for concern involves Vietnamese migrant workers working for Taehung Construction, a subcontractor for Hyundai Construction constructing a container wharf in Incheon, South Korea. Vietnam accounts for 25 percent of the total number of migrant workers in South Korea and has participated with South Korea's EPS program for the last six years. Prosecutors are claiming the workers went on an illegal strike for what organizers call a work-out demanding reinstatement of three free meals, implementation of guaranteed minimum meal and break times, and weekends off as stipulated in their employment contracts.

Migrant workers in the Taehung case further contend that compared with their counterparts, who may be earning 100,000 Won per day for an 8 hour shift, they and fellow workers in Subic receive an estimated 38,000 Won (a minimum hourly wage of 4,110 Won multiplied by 8 hours) for 12 hour shifts, and are sometimes required to work two or three shifts in a row despite a Monday to Friday work week contract. With the support of the unions, workers are fighting the charges of obstruction of business and inciting of violence for the two walkouts by citing Taehung's violation of South Korea's Labour Standards Act.

The October 22 Irregular Worker Rally highlighted numerous cases where corporations are being negligent in fulfilling legal obligations to contracted workers.

Addressed by unionists from MTU & STU (Seongseo Industrial Complex Union in Daegu) and several others, MTU President Michel Catiura spoke on the challenges of realizing a 'one labor vision' that can be overcome by sharing an analysis of the challenges facing approximately 400,000 of 600,000 migrant workers employed in South Korea who perform work characterized as 'dirty, dangerous, demeaning' and short-term. A relevant bill allowing migrant workers a one-time contract renewal provided that they remain with the same employer is pending review in the National Assembly. MTU's position on the bill is that it can signaling a move in the right direction, however, difficulties with EPS approving workplace change requests and a general lack of oversight of work conditions and observance of the Industrial Safety and Health Act remain areas of concern. Others concur and suggest that a more significant area of reform is provisions in the Labor Standards Act that do not apply to workers in the farming or fishing industries.



Irregular Worker Rally with MTU & Seongseo Industrial Complex Union in Daegu (STU) October 22, 2011. Photo Credit: MTU

University of North Carolina Professor Arne Kalleberg, who has written extensively on contemporary labor issues, points out in his American Sociological Association Presidential Address of 2008,

"Standard employment relations have historically been the basis for labor laws and social protections. Employers often try to dismantle these standard employment relations by hiring temporary and dispatched workers and by subcontracting and outsourcing work in order to avoid responsibility for workers' protections."

He suggests, "Addressing these issues requires a cooperative effort on the part of the government, business and labor who must realize that providing business with the flexibility they need and workers with social protections from the insecurity produced by business flexibility are both necessary and will benefit all parties."

The issues of precariat labor are, of course, by no means limited to Korea and the Philippines. Some analysts estimate the precarious in the US to be 29 percent of the entire workforce, and many such as Kalleberg are proposing that South Korea's government could learn from countries like Germany or Sweden in terms of developing policies to address these issues. For HHIC workers, recommendations include regularizing all workers and restricting the category of work that permits temporary workers, while some supporters urge HHIC to follow the lead of German automaker Volkswagen. In contrast with the Hyundai case last year, the largest European carmaker hired 400 dispatch workers as regular employees and agreed to a wage deal to keep pace with inflation.

Others like Lee suggest that in addition to improved government policies, stronger organizing is needed to keep pace with global companies like HHIC that increasingly move their operations across countries and sectors and apply different labor standards in different locations, as recently illustrated in the IKEA manufacturing workers' struggle in the US. Rather than adhering to the European minimum wage standard and the five-week government-mandated vacation period or to international labor standards, fulltime workers for the Swedish company employed in the U.S. start at 8 dollars an hour with 12 vacation days. This summer 72 percent of the workers voted to form a union at IKEA's Danville plant. Lee also suggests the necessity to examine how regional or bilateral migration affects short-term contract workers as they move from country to country. BWI, for example, has shifted its strategies for regional exchange networks from organizing migrant workers in destination countries like Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia and Hong Kong towards developing bilateral and regional organizing campaigns with sending countries of origin.

Despite minimum wage increase announcements, precarious work concerns mount

There are indicators of worsening economic and employment conditions in South Korea as an increasingly precarious labor market coincides with widening disparity in ability to afford education, healthcare and housing. South Korea is Asia's fourth-biggest economy and the top 20 percent of income earners take home nearly three quarters of the earnings reported. In light of this, the Minimum Wage Council announced over the summer an increase in the minimum wage rate of 260 Won, bringing it to 4,580 Won per hour. The Minimum Wage Alliance, including both the KCTU and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), contends, "The [new] minimum wage fails to take account of reality facing low-paid workers." It argues that the new minimum wage is insufficient as it is taken as an upper limit of wages for precarious workers who might receive only half the wage regular workers receive, and who call for a raise to 5,410 Won that is more in line with the average wage of all workers.

Meanwhile, the government has released a report that the jobless rate among those aged 15-29 was 7.6 percent this summer, down from 8.3 percent a year earlier. However, some analysts suggest these numbers not only obscure the decline of the middle class, but also hides several mismatches that are especially important to understand now regarding precarious work, and why so many young workers and mothers are becoming Hope Bus Riders. According to research conducted by Prof. Kalleberg, mismatches include: over-education where college graduates are unable to find skilled jobs in the economy; earnings mismatches where people work in jobs that do not provide sufficient levels of wages to satisfy their needs and those of their families; work-family mismatches in which people lack sufficient job flexibility to care for their families' needs; and under-working in which people are not able to work enough hours to earn enough to fulfill basic needs. Kalleberg states, "Precarious and insecure workers are especially vulnerable to earnings mismatches and work-family mismatches."

These observations come at an interesting time as South Africa unveils its New Growth Plan (NGP) introduced by Economic Development Minister Ebrahim Patel based on a favorable assessment of several Asian economies, while recent reports circulate of the impact of increasing rates of Asian women across Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and South Korea who choose not to marry and a rise in divorce rates. Prof. Chun combines these to suggest an analysis of the gendered labor situation in South Korea: "Despite the male-bread winner ideology shared culturally amongst South Korea's government policy makers and even amongst some women workers themselves, women are in many cases the primary wage earners and heads of households and continue to experience the [largest gender pay gap of any OECD country](#)." Taken together with the HHIC Hope Bus riders' attempt to highlight the plight of precarious workers, this suggests the need to examine more carefully the nontraditional, hidden and disappearing forms of employment and mismatch that reliance on unemployment figures, schemes for growth for cutting unemployment rates and curbing trade unionism can render invisible.

Nov. 10 update:

A peaceful resolution to the HHIC strike and crane occupation in Busan has been reached. A workers' assembly took place at 4 pm November 10, and the provisional agreement was passed unanimously. Kim Jin-suk came down from the crane at 5 pm and is currently in the hospital recovering.

The provisional agreement stipulates that 94 dismissed workers shall be rehired within one year of the date of the agreement and the Company shall recognize those workers' years of service as well as all the working conditions related to years of service. During the next 10 days, HHIC is to pay out the first installment (10,000,000 Won) of the total agreed upon compensation pay (20,000,000 Won) to all dismissed workers. In addition, both labor and management have agreed to drop the criminal and civil cases against one another, including damages claims suits that HHIC filed against the union branch, the local union and individuals.

For more in the coming weeks:

International Metalworkers' Federation. www.imfmetal.org

An earlier version of this article appeared in *The Hankyoreh* July 25, 2011 Special thanks to all of the workers and individuals who graciously consented to interviews, and to Jung-eon Park, Shelly Woyla, and Kimberly Campbell.

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Recommended citation: tammy ko Robinson, 'South Korea's 300 Day Aerial Sit-in Strike Highlights Plight of Precarious Workers in Korea and the Philippines,' The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 45 No 4, November 7, 2011.

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Photos

Second Hope Bus Caravan HHIC Busan July 10, 2011. Photo Credit: Hungying Chen

Notes

¹ If deemed necessary, a fifth Hope Bus caravan to Busan is provisionally scheduled for November 26 to coincide with the National Workers' Rally.

For up to date announcements, see [this link](#).

