

Three Hyundai Motor workers killed in South Korea

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Amid an ongoing attack by the ruling elite on conditions in the auto industry globally, three research workers at Hyundai Motor in South Korea were killed on Tuesday. They were conducting performance testing on a vehicle in an enclosed space that was not ventilated or monitored properly. While the company and government pledged to investigate how the accident occurred, nothing will be done to address safety in the car or other industries.

The accident took place in the city of Ulsan at the electric vehicle quality division in Hyundai's plant 4. The city is located in the southeast of South Korea and is home to Hyundai Motor's primary production center.

According to the initial investigation, the three workers were performing a test in an area just large enough for a car, driven by rollers on the floor, with a space around the vehicle for a person to walk. The test took place around 12:50 p.m., but when they had not appeared in over two hours, another worker went looking for the three and found them unconscious in the test area. They were taken to a hospital, but all three were pronounced dead.

On Wednesday, police ordered autopsies for the workers, who have only been identified as being in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Two were employed by Hyundai Namyang Research while the third was working for a subcontractor.

Hyundai released a perfunctory statement saying, "We express our deepest condolences to the bereaved families. We will promptly determine the cause of this accident and actively take necessary measures." The company added, "We will do our best to prepare measures to prevent such unfortunate accidents from happening again in the future."

The accident exposes the serious lack of safety measures at Hyundai, which is the third-largest

automobile producer in the world. It is clear that the testing facility was not properly monitored to confirm that dangerous gases were fully ventilated. Nor were measures in place to observe the three workers from outside the test chamber to ensure their safety, a point driven home by the amount of time between the testing and when they were discovered.

Safety is being sacrificed for profits. Another worker was killed at the Ulsan facility on November 7 after suffering a 12-meter fall during the construction of a new electric vehicle plant.

Like auto companies in the US, Germany, Japan and other countries, Hyundai is engaged in a cutthroat competition to boost profits by slashing costs. In 2023 alone, the company's operating profits grew 54 percent to 15.12 trillion won (\$US10.8 billion).

This agenda is being carried out as part of the so-called "just transition" to electric vehicles. As these vehicles require fewer parts, they also require less labor. Under capitalism, this means thousands of jobs are on the chopping block. The Korean Metal Workers' Union, which represents workers at Hyundai and other auto companies, has backed this pro-business campaign.

No genuine measures that impact company profits will be taken to address safety at Hyundai or in the auto industry as a whole. This is despite claims from the Ulsan Metropolitan Police, the National Forensic Service, the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency and the Labor Ministry that they would conduct a joint investigation and determine if there was any violation of the Serious Accidents Punishment Act.

The previous administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in pushed this act as a means of posturing as a defender of workers. The act came into effect in January 2022 after being passed the previous year. It imposes up to

one year in prison or a fine of up to one billion won (\$US715,112) on business owners, executives or responsible officials culpable for serious injuries or deaths in the workplace.

However, the act was never meant to genuinely protect workers. When it was passed, the original bill was already watered down. This included reducing the jail time and fines and restricting the criteria under which responsible figures could be found guilty. The law does not apply to businesses with less than five employees, and it did not cover businesses with 5 to 49 employees until January this year.

The law was meant to give the impression that the Moon government was making progressive reforms in order to repress workers' growing anger to the attacks on their living conditions carried out by previous governments. Moon pledged at the beginning of his administration in 2017 to halve workplace fatalities, bringing the number down to approximately 500. There were 964 deaths as a result of workplace accidents that year.

Moon's "pledge" meant he viewed 500 as an acceptable number of workers' deaths. It also meant he refused to take measures to protect workers that would impinge on big business' profits. By 2022, when Moon left office, 874 workers lost their lives on the job.

At the same time, the number of workers falling ill and dying from diseases related to the workplace have sharply risen. This has taken place over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly rising in 2021, the same year Moon declared the beginning of the "living with COVID" era.

In 2017, some 9,183 people contracted an illness as a result of their job. The figure rose through Moon's term in office and continued to do so after the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol took office in 2022. Last year, a total of 23,331 people contracted an illness through work, a figure likely to be surpassed in 2024. Deaths rose from 993 in 2017 and reached 1,349 in 2022.

These figures do not give a complete picture of the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and are undoubtedly a drastic undercounting. During the pandemic, there have been more than 34 million confirmed cases while tens of thousands have died. And while not every work-related illness may be COVID, the fact that thousands more workers are getting sick demonstrates the lack of safety measures in

place throughout the pandemic.

The Yoon government is now working to downplay the number of workplace deaths as it moves to tear up even the limited legal safety measures and penalties for violations. Workers cannot place their faith in any section of the ruling class to protect their safety on the job or conditions overall.



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