On December 18, 2018, at Seoul’s Gwanghwamun Square, I encountered a drawing of a young Korean man whose eyes conveyed that he had many stories to tell. I realized it was part of a temporary memorial arranged for the young man, Kim Yong-gyun. I took out my phone to search for his name on the Internet.

Kim’s name appeared on top of the trending news section, which featured articles from international news agencies. They detailed that one week prior, 24-year-old Kim, a subcontractor, was working a night shift alone at a thermal power plant when he was found dead at midnight. He appeared to have died after getting trapped under a conveyor belt, though his body was in a terrible state because the machinery could not immediately be shut down. When his family later searched his bag, they found a container of Cup Noodles and a broken flashlight.

Some distance from the memorial, a group of South Korean (sub)contractors, or “irregular workers,” congregated before news cameras to commemorate Kim’s death and announce a massive rally against employment inequalities and discrimination scheduled for the following weekend. Spreading containers of Cup Noodles on the ground, they further bemoaned that the outsourcing of dangerous, dirty, and difficult projects led to Kim’s death. They cried, “We are all Kim Yong-gyun” and demanded an end to the “outsourcing of danger and death.” But how did this tragedy happen in the first place?

Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the number of contract workers in South Korea increased as Korean companies which had replaced lifelong jobs with temporary positions under the flag of flexible employment.

The statue of Admiral Yi Sun-shin stands at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul, seemingly guarding the young Korean man in the picture. Because of its geographical proximity to the Blue House (the Korean President’s office) and national government offices, sociopolitical issues in South Korea often flow into this open public space.
the companies began hiring young, unskilled contract workers on a temporary basis to further reduce costs—the companies did not even properly train them before letting them work alone like Kim's case. As a result of the disappearance of lifetime employment, employment stability decreased, widening the gap between working classes, generations, and genders, and it deepened socioeconomic inequalities in terms of quality of life.5

In response to Kim's death, the South Korean National Assembly passed a revised industrial safety bill, the Kim Yong-gyun Bill, at the end of 2018.6 In March 2019, Lee Sang-heon, the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Employment Policy Department Director, visited Seoul. While commenting on Kim's death, he recommended that South Korea ratify four of the ILO's eight key conventions.7 The ratification of these conventions could make it possible for irregular workers, including laid-off workers, to organize and join a labor union and negotiate their labor environment with their employers, as well as not be forced to work.

The European Union has also been urging South Korea to pass such a bill as the ratification of the ILO's key conventions was one of the South Korea-EU FTA provisions.8 Both South Korea and the EU agreed to establish an expert panel that is currently investigating the South Korean government's progress towards ratification. In addition, the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recently joined the EU in criticizing Seoul for insufficient legislative efforts.9 Some researchers warn that the international community will likely exert more pressure on the South Korean government with economic sanctions.10

On August 19, 2019, eight months after Kim's death and my time at Gwanghwamun Square, a special investigation committee concluded that Kim had followed all the rules, and the outsourcing of dangerous work without proper safety measures was the main cause of his death.11 The international community has become increasingly concerned with South Korea's labor conditions and its failure to ratify the four remaining ILO conventions. Consequently, South Korean "irregular workers" remain vulnerable to low incomes, violence, danger, and even death. ■
태안화력 24세 하청노동자
故 김용균님의 명복을 빕니다.

죽음의 외주화를 중단하라, 직접고용 정규직 전환하라...
1년 넘게 외쳤던 발전소 비정규직 노동자들은
12월 11일 새벽, 또 한 명의 동료를 잃고 말았습니다.

나 김용균은 화력 발전소에서
석한 설비를 운전하는
비 정규직 노동자 입니다!

비정규직, 이제는 그만
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tae Yeon Eom is a Ph.D. candidate in Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. His research covers a wide range of theories and case studies in international relations and diplomatic history. He is deeply interested in capturing contemporary and global socio-political issues with his camera and also likes to write articles for photojournals.

ENDNOTES


Previous page: One of the items in Kim’s bag was Cup Noodles, which he presumably ate because he did not have enough money or time for regular meals as a subcontractor. The contract workers at the demonstration spread Cup Noodles containers on the ground to symbolize their poor working conditions.