

STOP Unfair Labour Practices by Korean Air and its Contractors!

KAL Engulfed in Scandal

Korean Air has been in the news a lot recently. In 2014 KAL Vice President Heather Cho, daughter of CEO Cho Yang-ho, made headlines after she verbally and physically assaulted a cabin crew member over the way he served nuts in first class and then forced the plane to return to the gate and made him get off. Last year the Cho family was again engulfed in scandal due to revelations of the family member's extensive illegal activities including embezzlement, smuggling and abuse of employees. Workers protested and organised, beginning a revolution inside the company. Cho Yang-ho was kicked off the KAL Board of Directors, but problems of abuse of power by the KAL owner family and KAL managers are still widespread.

Justice for KAL Cabin Cleaners!

KAL Cabin Cleaners Join the Fight

The revolution is on-going. The organising efforts of directly employed KAL cabin crew and ground staff have received quite a bit of attention. But they are not the only ones fighting back. For the last two years, cabin cleaners who service KAL planes at Incheon Airport have also been calling out the airline giant and demanding basic respect on the job.

KAL's Contracting Chain

These workers, mostly women in their 50s, are paid at minimum wage level. They face insufficient break time and forced overtime when flight schedules change. Their direct employer is a temp agency called EK Manpower, which pays their wages. In fact however, real decisions get made farther up.

KAL's ground operations are handled by its subsidiary Korea Airport Services (KAS). KAS subcontracts out cabin cleaning to EK Manpower. But it is KAS that controls labour costs through its service contract with EK Manpower. KAS answers to KAL at the top of the contracting chain.



Union Repression

In April 2017, cabin cleaners joined the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union, and formed a union branch at their workplace (the KPTU Air and Sea Port Transport Division KAS Subcontracted Workers' Branch). Since then they have held two legal strikes against systematic wage theft.

In retaliation the employer has filed a civil suit for KRW 110 million (USD 930 thousand) in damages against 12 union branch leaders. Despite the fact that the civil suit is still pending, the union leaders' bank accounts have been frozen.

Internal KAS documents demonstrate that the parent company has been actively involved in these acts of labour repression. KAS operates a Taskforce on Improving Management of Partner Companies. Meeting documents from this taskforce stipulate that KAS will provide 'consulting' on personnel management and other issues to subcontractors. Documents from KAS's Passenger Services Department specifically direct subcontractors to "encourage and support organisations of employees who can be managed and controlled" and call for measures to respond to the branch's strike and isolate union officers. Yet KAL and KAS refuse to take responsibility or sit down and negotiate with cabin cleaner and their union.

These actions violate recommendations by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which call for an end to the use of claims for damages against peaceful industrial actions by employers in South Korea and warn against the use of in-house subcontracting companies as a mean to avoid responsibility for bargaining by parent companies (ILO CFA Case 2602, Case 1865, Case 3047).

Workers Fight Back

KAL cabin cleaners are fighting back against their employer and KAL's attempts to silence them. On April 12 they filed a complaint against KAS for unfair labour practices, and then began a protest encampment in front of the KAL headquarters on April 17. They are now taking collective action. Today airport workers around the world are acting in solidarity with their Korean colleagues calling on KAL and KAS to stop unfair labour practices and ensure that all workers who work for KAL, including subcontracted workers, are treated with the respect they deserve.

