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Implications of the Large-Scale Protest by North Korean Workers in China's Jilin Province: Crisis of Overseas Slave Labor

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North Korean workers dispatched to China's Jilin Province staged a protest on January 11, 2024. The number of workers who took part in the protest against North Korean authorities' wage arrears amount to more than 2,000.¹⁾ This article analyzes the characteristics and implications of the recent North Korean workers' protest.

Overseas Workers: Modern Slavery to Secure Funding for and by the North Korean Regime

North Korea is dispatching tens of thousands of workers overseas to countries including China and Russia to secure funding for the regime.²⁾ The massive revenues

1) “<独自>北朝鮮労働者が中国でスト・暴動 数千人規模を初確認…コロナ禍で賃金不払い,” 『産経新聞』, January 19, 2024., <<https://www.sankei.com/article/20240119-F5K4USURTBP4HK3MCP2IJH6CPI/>> (Accessed on February 18, 2024); “中国に派遣の北朝鮮労働者、賃金ピンハネで怒り工場占拠ストライキ…管理職に暴行で死なす,” 『読売新聞』, 2024.2.17., <<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/20240217-OYT1T50010/>> (Accessed on February 18, 2024).

2) Department of State, 『Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2021 Human Rights Report』 (2021), p. 19.

generated through the dispatch of workers are obtained by forcing them to work as ‘slaves.’³⁾ In order to maximize profits, the North Korean authorities coerce the dispatched workers into working excessively long hours that exceed 12 hours per day and collect 70–90% of their wages as contributions to the state. From the authorities’ standpoint, overseas dispatch equals dedication to the state and not a means of accumulating private wealth.

The UN Security Council banned overseas dispatch of the North’s workers by adopting the UNSC Resolution 2375 and 2397 in 2017, but North Korea continues to circumvent sanctions and maintain the dispatch of workers.

Notable Aspects of the Protest by North Korean Workers in Jilin Province

The direct cause of the protest by North Korean workers in Jilin Province was numerous years of wage arrears by the North Korean authorities. While this incident appears as an inevitable outcome of past human rights abuses and wage exploitation, it is distinct from previous incidents of defiance by overseas workers.

First, it was a reaction by a group of people and not individuals. Previously, overseas workers sought their own ways to deal with the dire circumstances they were in instead of holding the North Korean authorities accountable. However, this protest involved tens of thousands of workers organizing and voicing a single message collectively. This is profoundly shocking considering the fact that freedom of assembly and protest is suppressed in the North Korean society. The incident could be interpreted as the birth of a North Korean labor movement.

Second, the workers were conscious of the issue they faced and demanded the North Korean authorities to take direct responsibility for violating their legal rights. The

³⁾ The human rights situation of North Korean overseas workers began to receive attention through the report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK in 2015. The report highlighted that overseas workers were working under conditions amounting to forced labor. Marzuki Darusman, 『Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea』, March 15, 2015. In South Korea, the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights used the expression ‘slave labor’ in its report published in May 2015 and a symposium it organized with Korea Economic Institute of America in Washington D.C. on May 12 of the same year. Yeon Sang Lee-Seung Joo Lee, 『Labor and Human Rights Conditions of North Korean Workers Dispatched Overseas』 (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2015); “Plight of North Korean Laborers Overseas,” VOA, May 13, 2015.

North Korean residents have abandoned hope in the ‘state that is responsible for our lives’ and learnt to take matters into their own hands since the Arduous March. Now, a new trend has emerged where they explicitly express complaints based on the concept of the ‘state that violates our rights’ that they have established.

Third, since the participants of the protest were skilled workers highly trusted by Chinese companies, it was difficult for the North Korean authorities to penalize them as they had to consider their relations with the local companies to maintain government revenues. As the result, although the workers who participated in the protest were major criminals by North Korean standards, North Korea ended up repatriating only around 5% of the total participants of the protest.⁴⁾

Fourth, there is a possibility that North Korea’s diplomatic considerations were at play to avoid provoking China due to the recent close ties between Russia and North Korea. North Korea must have felt considerably burdened to make an attempt at replacing a large number of workers while circumventing sanctions by asking the Chinese government to cooperate.

A Storm in a Teacup or the Development of Cracks in Control?

North Korean authorities demonstrated a significant loss of control of the large-scale protest in Jilin Province. This could be the result of the distinct features of the strike participants coupled with the diplomatic considerations of North Korea.

Nevertheless, from a broader perspective, it is possible to interpret the incident as one of the examples of the North Korean regime’s loss of control over its residents. North Korea is currently faced with the spread of Korean Wave and ideological hazards of its residents. North Korea’s enactment of draconian social control laws including Reactionary Ideology and Cultural Rejection Act (2020) in recent years and the declaration of severing inter-Korean relations suggest a growing internal rift that cannot be mended by exercising control over the residents alone as it has been doing previously.

4) “中国に派遣の北朝鮮労働者、賃金ピンハネで怒り工場占拠ストライキ…管理職に暴行で死なす,” 『読売新聞』, 2024.2.17., <<https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/world/20240217-OYT1T50010/>> (Accessed on February 18, 2024).

The North Korean regime's control is least effective and weakest for overseas workers due to physical distances. In addition, it is highly likely that the freedom they enjoy will expand further in the future because of the characteristics of the modern society where spread of information continues to accelerate. Therefore, the community of overseas workers could potentially become the scene where the weakening of North Korean regime's control becomes apparent first.

Recently, there have been indications that North Korea newly dispatched overseas workers to Russia, and this is unlikely to be a one-off event. The South Korean government should collaborate with the international community to prevent North Korea and Russia's blatant violations of sanctions. Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to overseas workers securing a relatively favorable position from the North Korean authorities as with the case of the Jilin Province, resulting from North Korea's obsession with foreign currency earnings and close ties with Russia. The South Korean government must maintain a strong sense of humanitarian responsibility towards North Korean residents and devise response measures for similar incidents in the future.

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