

NORTH KOREA: Why do North Koreans workers choose to be exploited by their own state abroad?

Paper presented on the occasion of the screening of "Dollar Heroes" at the European Parliament on 9 October()*

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HRWF (29.10.2018) – Over 100,000 citizens of the DPRK work in about 40 countries around the world including: Mongolia, Russia, Poland, Kuwait as well as China. Cumulatively, these workers earn approximately 900 million dollars a year.

North Korean overseas workers have to submit 70% to 95% of their earnings to the authorities in the form of 'state-assigned earnings' or a 'state fee.' They work over 8 hours a day, sometimes up to 20 hours according to former North Korean overseas workers.

Why do such many North Koreans come to work in foreign countries despite the fact that around 90% of their salaries will be confiscated by the state? In order to find this answer, we must investigate the system of forced labor in the DPRK.

There is a law in North Korea which punishes the unemployed. Article 90 of the Administrative Punishment Law states that “those who do not take a job at a company where they have been dispatched to within 6 months, without fair reason, or those who do not report for duty at a company for over a month, will be sentenced to up to three months of forced labor in a labor-training camp (rodong dallyeondae). In serious cases, culprits may be sentenced to longer than three months.”

The North Korean economic system is, as everybody knows, a state-planned economy where enterprises, factories, and other workplaces must operate in accordance with the state economic plan, regardless of their realistic capacity. The salary system is also included in the state plan.

In fact, the state-designated monthly wage for most employees is around 2,000 North Korean won, only enough to purchase 500 grams of rice. Therefore, many North Korean people go to their workplaces not to earn a living but to avoid punishment for the crime of unemployment. No North Korean expects to receive a living wage from their company. Perversely, North Korean companies extort money and resources from their employees. It is how and why the companies exist.

Let's imagine how the North Korean people survive with 2,000 won of monthly wage, which is equivalent to 500 grams of rice. The solution used to be the food distribution system, but now it is markets. Through producing, selling, and circulating goods privately in markets, a North Korean can earn a living wage. However, to work in markets, one must escape from duties at their assigned workplace. In order to avoid the punishment for unemployment, market operators pay monthly bribes to their employers. The amount of bribe is at over score times their

monthly wage. About 30% of company employees pay bribes in order to attend to their private businesses.

These days, markets are home to thriving private businesses such as transportation, distribution, manufacturing and various other companies. But, working for these private businesses is not fully authorized as an official occupation in North Korea.

Many state-run enterprises and factories don't operate efficiently enough to make a profit, however, their role is to supervise and control employees' political beliefs. This is conducted through weekly self-criticism meetings and more than three times of political lectures for a month organized by the Workers Party committee. If an employee wants to skip such political activities, they must offer over 100,000 won per month in bribes to the company.

In addition, all workplaces are required to provide labor and resources for national construction projects. When a state-planned construction project is undertaken, employees of factories and enterprises across the country will be mobilized to provide labor for the project.

Laborers are mobilized for constructions through a systemized rotation process in a company. However, if you offer over 400,000 North Korean won a year, you can avoid the mobilization. The monthly salary is around 2,000 won.

Therefore, it is poorer employees who are most likely to be

mobilized for national construction projects. For the duration of the project, they will continue to receive insignificant remuneration from their companies but, more damagingly, be deprived of the opportunity to earn money through market activities for the entire duration of the construction project. There is no additional compensation.

In terms of resources for the construction, enterprises have to provide most of the construction materials, with the authorities only supplying cement, sand, and gasoline. The remaining necessary materials are the responsibility of the local employees to provide.

Since Chairman Kim Jong Un took office, the state has been actively pursuing construction projects. In Pyongyang, they built Scientists Street, Changkwang Street, and Ryeomyung Street and, in the northern city of Hyesan and Chongjin, new apartment complexes, and a few tourist resorts in a coastal city. For these projects, authorities do not appropriate a budget for labor and most construction materials, as they are the responsibility of enterprises and their employees.

There is another forced labor system, which is used also for major national construction projects and can be considered a contemporary form of a slavery. It is the permanent dolgyeokdae, a shock brigade or a military-style construction youth brigade. It is set up as a supplementary military service, but designed for meeting the labor needs of national construction projects.

The structure and management of this dolgyeokdae brigade are

almost the same as that of the People's Army. The dolgyeokdae is a formal alternative to military service, with a service period of seven years, as opposed to 10 year service period for the army.

Technically, members of dolgyeokdae receive a salary, though it is around one third of normal workers' salaries. However, of the 30 former dolgyeokdae members I have met in South Korea, none received salaries during their service, for almost ten years.

Due to the dire working situation and high intensity labor requirement, only the most vulnerable class of people are dispatched to dolgyeokdae after their graduation from high school.

To summarize, a workplace of North Korean workers exists not to provide for the economic lives of employees but to extort money, resources and labor from employees and control their political lives and ideological beliefs. These are ordinary practices for North Korean workers, including those who work in foreign countries.

North Korean workers in foreign countries can pick up construction contracts as a second job after work and during the weekends. Experienced engineers can even leave their own workplace to work contract jobs. Like in North Korea, however, they must pay massive bribes to managers in order to leave their workplace during the daytime.

This system puts double or triple burden of labor on shoulders of N. Korean workers both in the country and foreign countries. To bring an end to forced labor, the North Korean government must decriminalize unemployment, recognize private businesses as a legally valid profession to allow citizens to earn a living privately, and importantly dismantle the *dolgyeokdae* system in the long run.

There is one additional point that I'd like to speak on.

While the money that North Koreans earn overseas makes its way into state coffers, the little money that they earn through contract jobs functions as a driving force for vitalization of markets and has a stabilizing effect on people lives.

I don't expect North Koreans to return to the dire situation while operating a strict state-planned economy as they suffered until the early 1990s. We expect people's economic activities in markets to become more vitalized and to bring comparative stability to their lives. (It is one of a few solutions for human rights improvement in the DPRK.) (As the human rights situation improves, the path for normalization of the country will become clearer.)

If North Korea follows through on promises of complete denuclearization, Kim Jong Un will expect economic development with much international support in near future. This support should be given for the sake of the people's betterment and the international community must make it clear that forced labor cannot be involved in any way and that all laborers must be compensated with a fair salary and work in enhanced working

conditions.

The 3rd cycle of the Universal Periodic Review is coming in May next year. I hope the stakeholders and relevant officials at the EU accept my suggestions for your recommendations to the DPRK, so that North Korea can implement practical solutions to end the forced labor.

() The conference and screening of the movie "Dollar Heroes" had been organized at the European Parliament by MEP Laszlo Tokes with Human Rights Without Frontiers.*

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