

“Human rights are labour rights” says the Asian woman vying to lead the ILO

*The International Labour Organisation is concerned about the descent into poverty by millions of informal workers. One of the top running candidates for the role, Kang Kyung-hwa from the Republic of Korea, believes she can help address the crisis.*

Seventy per cent of workers in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region do not have formal jobs. They must therefore work without contracts or sick leave, depending on doing tasks such as driving rickshaws for a living.

During the Covid outbreak, millions of people involved in this type of work faced a terrible dilemma. Should they isolate or keep working? Without a safety net of state support, many workers felt they had to choose between getting sick, or going hungry. India’s lockdowns were often breached and five million lives were lost to the virus, the highest death toll in the world, according to *The Economist* magazine.

The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) concludes that millions of Indians have fallen into poverty. Its recent study suggested that the share of the population earning less than \$1.90 a day – the World Bank’s threshold for extreme poverty – has increased sharply since 2020.

One of the organisations which is seeking to improve the conditions for informal workers is the ILO, a tripartite body made up of governments, trade unionists and employers from 173 countries. It has been going since 1919 and this month (March 2022) it will select a new director general.

A prominent candidate, Kang Kyung-wha, former Minister of Foreign Affairs for South Korea, has pledged to focus on helping developing countries to rebuild their economies and promote dialogue between organised labour, big business and governments.

Director generals are elected to a term of five years, which can be renewed pending review by the board of directors. The current director general, Guy Ryder, from the United Kingdom, has held the office since 2012.

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Image source: ILO

Another candidate is Greg Vines, of Australia, who is currently serving as the ILO’s deputy director general. Also campaigning for the role are Gilbert Houngbo of Togo, Mthunzi Mdwaba of South Africa and Muriel Pénicaud of France.

As an experienced female candidate from the Asia Pacific, Kang Kyung-wha has already garnered some support within the region. For example, Professor Sandip Kumar Mishra of Jawaharlal Nehru University wrote in the *Times of India* that “the quest for justice, representation and inclusiveness demands that Kang Kyung-wha should get a chance over the other candidates.”

During her campaign, she has often spoken of the best ways to meet the needs of the most marginalized in society. She is familiar with India’s situation, having met the Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj in New Delhi in 2018. She continued her dialogue when S Jaishankar took up the role of External Affairs Minister the following year. They have discussed issues of the post-Corona world and considered the lessons that India can learn

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from South Korea, which has graduated from being one of the world’s least developed countries to becoming one of the strongest economies in Asia.

Speaking to reporters in India recently, Ms Kang said her candidacy for the role of director general of the ILO could act as a catalyst for young women in the Asia Pacific who are looking to make their mark in the world. She promised to work towards bridging the gap on gender equality - which has persisted despite years of hard work by the ILO - and addressing social inequality exacerbated by the pandemic.

She explained that she would draw on her considerable experience in international roles by encouraging the ILO to work closely with the UN and financial institutions.

As South Korea’s foreign minister, Kang Kyung-wha represented the country during a turbulent period when Donald Trump launched a trade war on China. She tried to avoid being too closely associated with the Trump administration, whilst maintaining commitment to the US-South Korea alliance.



Secretary Pompeo’s Meeting with ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha.  
Image source: US Embassy Seoul

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Commenting on her departure from the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one prominent diplomat told the *Hankyoreh* newspaper: “There aren’t many foreign ministers you’re able to take pride in on an international stage. Kang Kyung-wha inspired pride not just with her excellent command of English, but with the way she conducted herself as a diplomat representing South Korea.”

Dialogues between the candidates and governments continue this week. The next stage in the election process will be candidate hearings conducted in private by the ILO’s Governing Body at the start of its session on 14 March 2022. The election ballot will take place on 25 March and the result will be made public soon afterwards. The new Director-General’s term will begin on 1 October 2022.

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