



Name: **Sung-Ok Jo**

Name of Union: **Korean Metal Workers' Union**

Providence/Country: **South Korea**

Job/Title: **National Vice-President**

Please tell me something special about your hometown.

I am from Gunsan, a town about 220 kilometres southwest of Seoul, our capital city. Gunsan is a port city, on the Yellow Sea, about 1,000 kilometres from China. There are a lot of industrial plants there, such as General Motors and the former Kia Specialty Steel, where I worked and which was taken over by SeAH Beesteel.

What kind of work do the members of your union perform?

We have 150,000 members throughout the metal sector, in auto plants, auto components, tire plants, ship building, metal machinery, semi conductors, agricultural machinery and some workers who are not strictly tied to metal industries. We have members who make guitars and their reason for joining our union was that the strings on the guitars are made of metal.

What is the most-pressing issue(s) facing workers in your country today?

As the Korean economy has been integrated into the global economy, we've been subjected to neo-liberal policies and restructuring and one of the consequences of that is companies are trying to lay off full-time, permanent workers and re-hire them as precarious, temporary workers. And a lot of public, common good services are being privatized and becoming more profit-driven, like our rail sector and our health-care system. But there has been a lot of union and public opposition and we are making a difference.

What do you hope to accomplish during your time here at the Convention?

It's such a great opportunity to see how trade unionism works on the ground in North America. For example, right now our steelworkers work on a four-crew, three-shift system and we are trying to move to a better system. We want a five-crew, three-shift system, to make jobs safer, improve working conditions, reduce long hours and create more jobs. So we're interested in learning more about how the United Steelworkers deal with these kinds of issues.

How do you think it benefits workers in your country when you meet with workers from unions in other countries?

As our economy and industries have grown, a lot of corporations have become global operations that can move their operations from one country to another. Workers everywhere are victimized by this upheaval. So we can all help one another by building alliances and working to improve and maintain standards everywhere. This is even more crucial since Korean and the United States signed a trade agreement. We have to work together to fight the goal of capital to pit us against each other in a race to the bottom.

What is your impression of Las Vegas?

When we first received the invitation to come here, there was a serious debate within our union as to whether it was appropriate to travel to this flashy, profligate capitalist place. But we also learned that there's a highly unionized workforce here and a lot of progressive people and groups. But we haven't had much time to see the city because we've been too busy working with the United Steelworkers – the Union that Works!

