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Attorney says detained Korean Hyundai workers had special skills for short-term jobs

He said no company in the U.S. makes the machines that are used in the Georgia plant, so workers had to come from abroad to install or repair equipment.



Manufacturing plant employees wait to have their legs shackled at the Hyundai Motor Group's electric vehicle plant Sept. 4, 2025, in Ellabell, Georgia. | Corey Bullard/U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement via AP

By ASSOCIATED PRESS
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SAVANNAH, Georgia — A lawyer for several workers detained at a Hyundai factory in Georgia says many of the South Koreans rounded up in the immigration raid are engineers and equipment installers brought in for the highly specialized work of getting an electric battery plant online.

Atlanta immigration attorney Charles Kuck, who represents four of the detained South Korean nationals, told The Associated Press on Monday that many were doing work that is authorized under the B-1 business visitor visa program. They had planned to be in the U.S. for just a couple of weeks and “never longer than 75 days,” he said.

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“The vast majority of the individuals that were detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that were South Korean were either there as engineers or were involved in after-sales service and installation,” Kuck said.

The raid Thursday at the battery factory under construction at Hyundai’s sprawling auto plant west of Savannah resulted in the detainment of 475 workers, more than 300 them South Koreans. Some were shown being shackled with chains around their hands, ankles and waists in video released by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

South Korea’s foreign minister was flying to the U.S. on Monday to secure his citizens’ return on a charter flight to South Korea, where many people have expressed confusion, shock and a sense of betrayal.

President Donald Trump said the workers “were here illegally,” and that instead, the U.S. needs to arrange with other countries to have their experts train U.S. citizens to do specialized work such as battery and computer manufacturing.

But immigration lawyer Kuck said no company in the U.S. makes the machines that are used in the Georgia battery plant, so they had to come from abroad to install or repair equipment on-site — work that would take about three to five years to train someone in the U.S. to do, he said.

“This is not something new,” Kuck said. “We’ve been doing this forever, and we do it — when we ship things abroad, we send our folks there to take care of it.”

While neither government has revealed details about all the workers’ visas, it’s not unusual for foreign companies to save time and money by sending workers from abroad to set up U.S. factories, and then train U.S. workers, said Rosemary Coates, executive director of the Reshoring Institute, a nonprofit that encourages U.S. manufacturing.

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“We saw the same thing happening in the ‘80s with Japanese carmakers setting up U.S. factories, and in the ‘90s with German carmakers,” she said.

A B-1 visitor for business visa allows foreign workers to stay for up to six months, getting reimbursed for expenses while collecting a paycheck back home. There are limits — for example, they can supervise construction projects

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but can't build anything themselves — but if it's spelled out in a contract, they can install equipment, Los Angeles immigration lawyer Angelo Paparelli said.

Also, South Korea is one of 41 countries whose citizens can use the U.S. Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which provides a visa waiver if they can provide “a legitimate reason” for their visit, and this basically gives them B-1 visa status for up to 90 days, said immigration attorney Rita Sostrin in Los Angeles.

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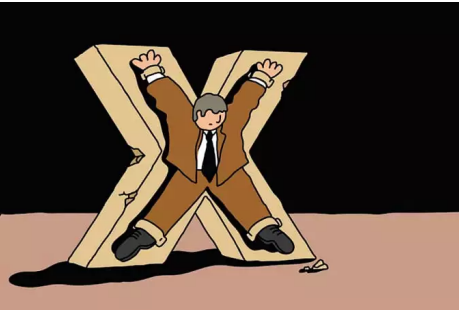
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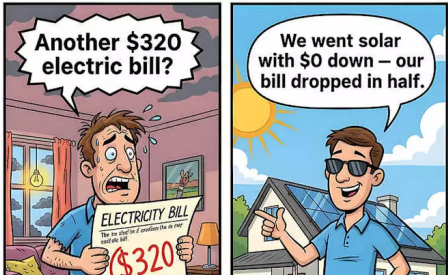
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