

South Korea unions abandon strike

13 February 1998

Only three days after rejecting an agreement to legalize mass layoffs, officials of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions called off a general strike that had been set for February 13 to demand new talks with president-elect Kim Dae Jung. As many as 100,000 workers were expected to join the strike, hitting the most important sectors of South Korean heavy industry, including auto, shipbuilding, steel and electronics.

The February 9 agreement to scrap South Korea's "life-long employment" policy was reached between KCTU leaders, leaders of a second, state-sanctioned union federation, officials of the country's major business conglomerates and representatives of Kim Dae Jung, the longtime bourgeois opposition leader who had heavy union backing in the election and takes office February 25.

A specially convened meeting of KCTU union delegates rejected the tripartite deal, forced the resignation of the entire leadership, and installed an emergency executive committee headed by Dan Byung-Ho, president of the Korean Democratic Federation of Metal Trade Unions. According to one report of the meeting, delegates heatedly denounced the KCTU leaders as no better than "business union leaders who absolutely ignore the opinions of their rank-and-file union members."

But the vote by the 272 delegates—all officials in the KCTU's member unions—was aimed above all at containing the mood of anger and betrayal felt among industrial workers. Despite tough sounding statements from the new KCTU leaders, their political perspective is identical to that of the leadership that has just resigned.

In the days between the rejection vote and the cancellation of the general strike, the new union leadership caved in to the same pressures that led the ousted leaders to accept the tripartite agreement in the first place. The value of the South Korean won fell

sharply on money markets, the stock market plunged, and the union leaders bowed to the argument that they must do what was in the interests of the "national economy"—in other words, in the interests of South Korean capitalism.

A powerful factor in the cave-in was the threat of police-military repression. The government mobilized tens of thousands of riot police in Seoul and other major cities, and announced plans for widespread arrests of labor activists in the event that the general strike went forward.

President-elect Kim Dae Jung, widely touted in the international press as a "democrat" and a "liberal," released a statement saying: "We will take whatever action necessary to put down the strike." More than 500 riot police were deployed on February 11 to prevent union leaders from gathering outside the Myongdong Cathedral in central Seoul.

Han Kwang Ok, chairman of the panel that worked out the tripartite agreement, called union demands for renegotiation "out of the question." He declared, "The agreement must be carried out and there is no back-pedaling."

Legislation to allow for mass retrenchments is one of the IMF's central demands in return for a \$57 billion package to prop up the South Korean economy. Kim Dae Jung is concerned that strikes by KCTU members could win support from other social layers hard hit by rising prices and unemployment, and thus jeopardize the implementation of the IMF austerity measures.

In particular, South Korean students, who have a record of militant protests, will be hard hit by soaring levels of joblessness. According to Park Young Ki, a professor at Sogang University, 470,000 graduates are due to enter the labor market this year and fewer than 100,000 will find jobs.



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