

South Korean unions call off national strike

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South Korean unions have called off national strike action scheduled for June 10 after closed door negotiations with the government of President Kim Dae Jung over mass layoffs and rapidly rising levels of unemployment.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) dropped its central demand for the repeal of amendments to labour laws implemented in February. The amendments ended the country's system of "life-long employment" and allowed for the establishment of contract labour hire companies.

Under the deal reached between the KCTU and the government on June 5, a series of largely cosmetic measures will be put in place to "prevent abuses," "eradicate unfair labour actions" and "punish management". The union's call for a legal working week of 40 hours has been watered down and will only be implemented, gradually, after the year 2000.

In place of strike action, the KCTU has called a meeting of union officials on June 10 to decide whether to participate in the government's proposed Tripartite Commission, together with representatives of big business, government, opposition parties, and the conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), to jointly fashion economic policy.

The KCTU emerged during the strike struggles of the 1980s against previous military-backed regimes and has been semi-legal for most of its existence. But in January, following the election of long-time opposition figure Kim Dae Jung as president, the KCTU participated in an earlier version of the tripartite commission, ratifying the amendments to the labour legislation.

The decision provoked such an uproar among union members that the KCTU leadership was replaced and national strike action called. But within a week, the new leaders had called off all industrial action. Now the KCTU has done so again.

Following a widespread strike on May 27-28 involving tens of thousands of workers, KCTU leaders entered into protracted discussions with government representatives even though the government had announced it would take legal action against 143 union leaders for their involvement in the industrial action.

By May 31, the KCTU was already hinting that it would postpone any industrial action, in order to support President Kim's trip to the US this week for talks with the Clinton administration and to woo big business investors. KCTU head Lee Kap Yong issued a statement saying: "We intend on cooperating as much as possible so that President Kim Dae Jung's visit to Washington can bear fruit."

As the economic crisis has worsened, KCTU leaders have collaborated more closely with government and big business to shore up South Korean capitalism. Earlier this year, the KCTU agreed to legal changes allowing mass retrenchments in exchange for official recognition and permission to engage in political activities.

Under the latest agreement, the KCTU is to become closely integrated with government and big business. As well as moving towards participation in the Tripartite Commission, the KCTU will be involved in a series of labour-management councils established in every industry and economic sector.

The union-government deal gives the green light to employers to accelerate the mass sackings as sales and exports continue to slump. The official unemployment rate has already doubled from 2.5 percent at the beginning of the year to 6.7 percent in April and is expected to reach 2 million or 9.5 percent by the end of the year.

Rising joblessness and falling living standards are exacerbating social tensions, especially in a country in which welfare is virtually non-existent.

Around 14,000 workers from Kia Motors began an

indefinite strike on June 1 over the management's failure to pay wages and to comply with agreements. The company, which is part of the bankrupt Kia Group, has already slashed wages by more than 50 percent.

The prison population has soared in recent months to more than 70,000, the highest since the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945. Poverty-related crimes such as robberies rose by 40 percent between December and April.

The incidence of suicide has also climbed by 36 percent to March this year — an average of 25 South Koreans now kill themselves each day. Suicide has overtaken traffic accidents as a cause of death.

Another incident provides a glimpse into the brutal methods used to enforce the social disaster confronting working people. Low-income tenants from the Seoul suburb of Towon-dong are maintaining a protest camp outside local council offices after being evicted in April from makeshift accommodation on a building site.

Professional eviction agents armed with water cannon, lead pipes and other weapons finally drove out the last of the tenants on April 23. The pitched battle was the most violent of a growing number of clashes between tenants and developers seeking to demolish low-income housing to make way for expensive high-rise apartments.

Rents in Seoul are prohibitive for working class families. The paltry relocation payment offered to residents in the Towon-dong was completely inadequate for families needing alternative housing.



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