

Thousands strike in Korea despite arrests

Mike Head
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Thousands of workers marched through Seoul and more than 100,000 struck across South Korea on Wednesday on the second day of a national strike against mass layoffs and rising unemployment.

Determined to crush resistance to its privatisation and restructuring program, the government of President Kim Dae Jung declared the strike illegal and obtained court warrants for the arrest of four dozen union officials, including Dan Byung-ho, president of the Korean Metal Workers Federation.

Several hundred riot police surrounded the metal union's offices and police agents raided union officials' homes in the Masan-Changwon region, a metal industry centre. At least one union president, Kang Jung-man of the Han-il Danjo Workers Union, was reported captured by police.

Other officials took refuge in Seoul's Myongdong Roman Catholic church, a traditional safe haven for dissidents under previous military-backed dictatorships. About 10,000 striking workers and supporters, including students, rallied outside the church watched by riot police.

Kim Dae Jung, once a jailed opponent of the previous regimes, has adopted their methods. Among the union officials subjected to the government's manhunt are Kim Kwang-shik, head of the Hyundai Motor union, and two of his colleagues. Hyundai car workers have been on indefinite strike since Tuesday to fight plans to axe 5,000 jobs at the end of the month.

The two days of wider walkouts, primarily involving workers in the large vehicle plants, steelworks, shipyards and metal plants, as well as public sector and finance industry workers, followed a 12-day strike by subway employees in Pusan and protest rallies on Sunday joined by more than 100,000 marchers.

There is mounting unrest over the jobless toll, now estimated by the unions to have reached four million, with 100 companies said to be shutting their doors

every day. These estimates far exceed those of the government, but even it states that unemployment has more than doubled since December, taking the total to 1.5 million, or 7 percent. The social crisis is expected to worsen in coming weeks as major companies such as Hyundai begin mass sackings.

Last week the government announced it was selling all or part of its stakes in 11 firms, including Pohang Iron and Steel Co (POSCO), the world's second-largest steelmaker, Korea Telecom, Korea Tobacco, Korea Electric Power and Korea Heavy Industries and Construction. Tens of thousands more jobs will be eliminated as a result.

Industries hit by this week's strikes included Daewoo car plants and shipyards. Members of both major union federations took part -- the once banned Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the former government-controlled Federation of Korean Trade Unions.

However, two major unions called off planned strikes at the last minute. The Korean Federation of Banks and Financial Unions, with a membership of 100,000, pulled out after late-night meetings of union leaders and talks with the government.

This is despite the fact that thousands of bank workers have already lost their jobs under the government's scheme to force five ailing banks to merge with stronger institutions. The scheme allows the takeover banks to acquire profitable assets and bear no responsibility for employees.

Backed by a mass media witchhunt, Kim Dae Jung has personally attacked the bank workers for hampering the takeover process by not showing up for work, changing computer passwords and withdrawing their severance pay just before the banks closed on June 29. Prosecutors have threatened to arrest workers for obstructing business.

The labour union of the state-run Korea Telecom,

affiliated with the FKTU, also decided not to strike at the 11th hour. Nevertheless, about one-fifth of the union's members walked off their jobs.

Many other industries were unaffected by the strike, despite it being called a general strike by the unions. The only perspective offered by the unions was one of appealing to Kim's administration to consult with the union leaders in implementing closures, retrenchments and privatisations.

'We had an agreement with the government to set up measures to prevent illegitimate and reckless layoffs,' KCTU president Lee Kap-Yong said. 'But the government went ahead with the unilateral corporate and banking sector restructuring, so we have no choice but to launch this general strike.'

By 'reckless' the union leaders mean retrenchments which threaten to spark unrest that the unions cannot contain. They do not oppose the destruction of jobs. 'We have never opposed the restructuring itself and agree restructuring is necessary to make our economy healthier,' Metal Workers Federation deputy secretary general Sim Sang-jeung said. 'But the government should discuss with labour in advance.'

On the eve of the strikes, Kim Dae Jung bluntly reminded the union bureaucrats that they had in fact agreed to mass layoffs. 'Permission for corporate layoffs was a national agreement which had been made by the first labour-management-government committee,' he said. He was referring to the unions' acceptance of amendments to the labour laws in February to permit large-scale dismissals and end the 'lifetime employment' system.

This agreement has paved the way for the wholesale layoffs now underway. At the same time, the regime headed by Kim, supported by the unions as a supposedly democratic alternative, has proven to be no less repressive than its military-backed predecessors when it comes to outlawing strikes and threatening trade unionists.

Kim Dae Jung's privatisation and job-cutting program is one of the key stipulations of the International Monetary Fund bailout package last December. The unions have not opposed the package but urged the government to renegotiate it in order to prevent a social explosion.

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