

Korean unions call off subway and Telecom strikes

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Thousands of striking subway workers in the South Korean capital of Seoul returned to work on Monday and Tuesday after a week of industrial action against the decision to destroy more than 2,000 jobs as part of widespread cutbacks to public services and state-owned enterprises.

The strike was meant to be the spearhead of a national campaign by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's second largest union body, against the plans of the government of President Kim Dae Jung to push through extensive economic restructuring of South Korea's conglomerates or *chaebol*.

The government had declared the strike illegal and threatened to sack all of the subway workers if they did not return to work by 4am on Monday. The state prosecutor's office issued arrest warrants for 66 union officials. The Seoul City Council and Seoul Subway Corporation began legal action against 259 union members for losses of 6.1 billion won for the eight-day strike.

Pressure on the subway workers was intensified over the weekend when riot police, backed by helicopters and armoured vehicles, were mobilised against strikers and their supporters at Myongdong Cathedral and the Seoul National University where thousands of unionists have been camped in tents. Several workers were injured and one was beaten unconscious in violent clashes with police that lasted for hours. At the university, about 50 people were arrested but the police failed to clear the campus.

According to the KCTU, senior personnel from the Seoul Subway Corporation engaged in continual harassment and intimidation by phoning the families of striking workers to warn that they faced not only dismissal but the loss of their retirement allowances and possible imprisonment. Officially the unemployment rate is already at 8.1 percent and unemployed workers face enormous hardships, as South Korea has virtually no welfare programs. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, real levels of unemployment are twice the official rate--16.6 percent or 3.5 million out of work.

The crackdown was initiated after an emergency cabinet

meeting last week to map out plans to "take strong measures against strikes including the arrest of union leaders". Justice Minister Park Sang Chun warned the strikers that they faced the same situation as the 10,000 US air traffic controllers who were sacked in 1981 by the Reagan administration and "never worked again".

Yet confronting the obvious escalation of intimidation and violence, the KCTU leadership did little to support the subway workers. More than half of the 9,000 strikers defied the government's deadline on Monday morning, only to find that supporting industrial action by Telecom workers had been called off. Despite a rally by an estimated 10,000 Korea Telecom union members in Seoul last weekend, and a vigil by 2,000 members at the Korea University campus on Monday night, union leaders claimed that there was too little support and a strike would be "counterproductive to the overall concerns of the organisation". Korea Telecom immediately announced plans to accelerate its restructuring--5,000 jobs have already gone since the beginning of the year, and another 7,000 are to be cut by the end of next year.

Having left the strikers isolated, the KCTU, Seoul Subway Workers Union, Korean Federation of Transportation and Public and Social Services Union concluded it was necessary to "suspend" the subway strike in order to "reposition within the workplace" and "prepare to engage in future developments". At the same time, the unions called off strikes by subway and Telecom workers in the industrial city of Pusan. The KCTU justified its decision in terms which will no doubt be familiar to workers around the world--"the situation...had to be assessed in the context of the KCTU's overall consideration"; "what additional gains could be made by continuing"; it was not a question of "as the saying goes, a mile race but a marathon", etc., etc.

Behind the KCTU's hollow self-justifications, one obvious fact stands out: thousands of subway workers have been sent back to work under conditions where they face dismissal and legal action. In one extraordinary passage in its April 27 news bulletin, the KCTU commented: "In terms of the Seoul

subway itself, the ball--so to say--is now in the hands of the Corporation and the government. The pressure is now squarely on the authorities to respond. Whether they will go ahead with dismissals as threatened, whether they will arrest and imprison union leaders as if they were criminals, whether they will insist and push through with their restructuring program, now that the union has decided to suspend the strike and return the members to work." In other words, the unions are giving the government a free hand.

The Seoul Metropolitan Subway Corporation has already dismissed 43 strikers and plans to sack another 39. The state prosecution, using special teams of police, has tracked down and arrested or charged more than 100 unionists with obstructing subway operations or making verbal threats against those who returned to work. The leaders of the subway union and the KCTU have taken no action other than to issue a plea for negotiations, limply suggesting that a second strike may take place if the management refuses to talk.

Having ended the subway strike, the KCTU was said to be "adjusting its strategy" for the "spring offensive" against corporate restructuring that was to include a national strike on May 1. A KCTU statement proclaimed that the unions would continue the struggle "without end to force a change in the mind of President Kim Dae Jung who believes the mass retrenchment-oriented restructuring and union-busting undertaken by Thatcher and Reagan are **the** model for Korea to follow".

On Wednesday, members at the Hanbo Steel and Dongyang Aluminium were due to join Daewoo shipbuilding workers on strike. Other strikes were scheduled for metal union members at Korea Heavy Industry, Daelim Motors, Daewoo Heavy Industry, Daewoo Motors, Daewoo Precision Industry and other factories, as well as workers in the public sector, universities, health and transport industries.

The Kim Dae Jung government, however, has repeatedly refused to negotiate with the KCTU or to accede to any of its demands. At a cabinet meeting this week, Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil warned: "The vicious cycle of compromising with illegal acts and pardoning striking unionists should not be repeated." The government is insisting that the restructuring and job losses are necessary to meet the IMF's demands and attract foreign investment.

From the outset, the KCTU leaders have accepted the overall economic framework of the government, but in place of job cuts, they are calling on the government to impose shorter hours and a wage cut. The union's chief demand is that the unions be more directly involved in the process of implementing the IMF measures. In February, the KCTU walked out of the Tripartite Committee of government,

union and corporate representatives, saying that it would rejoin the body if it were given legal standing and powers. More recently KCTU chairman Lee KapYong demanded the establishment of a task force to include officials from labor-related government agencies such as the Planning and Budget Commission, the Financial Supervisory Commission, the Finance and Economy Ministry and the Ministry of Labor.

The KCTU, which claims a membership of 550,000, is the smaller of the country's two peak union bodies. It was formed in the 1980s as a result of the widespread industrial action by workers, particularly in the country's conglomerates like Daewoo and Hyundai, for democratic rights, higher wages and better conditions. For most of its existence, the KCTU has been either illegal or semi-legal. But as the country's economic crisis has deepened, the KCTU has played a crucial role in suppressing the opposition of workers to economic restructuring and rapidly escalating job losses.

In an interview with the Reuters news service after the end of the subway strike, KCTU International Secretary Yoon Young Mo laid out the union's perspective. The unions, he insisted, did not want a confrontation. "The onus is on us to come up with creative strategies to get away from a head-on collision because it would not be good for either us or the government." Then after suggesting that a national strike might be replaced by a series of partial strikes and rallies, Yoon added: "What the government should recognise is that union actions help douse the flames of discontent, which could lead to eruptions that would be even more dangerous."

It is clear from Yoon's comments that the union is not concerned with the jobs, conditions and rights of workers. Rather the KCTU is seeking to exploit the strikes and protests to demonstrate to the Kim Dae Jung government that its services are required to head off any "dangerous eruptions" of the South Korean working class.



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