

South Korea's "second wave" of strikes winds down

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A "second wave" of industrial action in South Korea, called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) against widespread economic restructuring and job losses, is on the brink of folding up just days after the campaign was launched on Wednesday.

A number of the unions affiliated to the Korean Health and Medical Workers Union and the Korean Metal Workers Federation, which spearheaded the new offensive, failed to take strike action or returned to work after just a few hours.

According to the KCTU, the number of strikers dropped from 20,000 to 17,000 on the second day of the strike. Workers at the Seoul National University Medical Centre returned to work on Thursday after their union officials struck a separate deal with management. Other medical centres called off planned strikes. The hospital workers were protesting against plans by hospital authorities to carry out lay-offs, cut wages by 7 percent and reduce holiday entitlements.

In the metal industry, a key KCTU base, workers at nine conglomerates went on strike, including Hyundai Precision and Industry, Korea Heavy Industries & Construction, Ssangyong Motor, Daewoo Motor, Orion Electric, Hanbo Steel, Hankuk Heavy Industry and Kangwon Industries. Strike action planned at another 25 major companies, including Hanjin Heavy Industries and Hyundai Motors, which has one of the country's largest unions with 28,000 members, was called off at the last minute.

Early on Thursday about 3,000 unionised workers at Ssangyong Motors returned to work after striking for a day in protest at the company's merger with Daewoo Motor and possible job losses. The government of President Kim Dae Jung has been pressing the country's major conglomerates to undertake a series of "big deals" in line with the restructuring demands of the

International Monetary Fund, which will lead to the further destruction of jobs and working conditions.

The media and government officials put the number of strikers as low as 7,000. According to a Labor Ministry spokesman, the KCTU would probably wind up the campaign at a rally of strikers to be held in Seoul today. The union body, which is South Korea's second largest with a membership of around 530,000, has announced no further industrial action.

The collapse of the KCTU campaign stems from a number of sources. Firstly, the aims of the union leadership have been limited to pressuring Kim Dae Jung for negotiations and for the formalisation of the Tripartite Committee of government, unions and corporate management. The KCTU walked out of the committee in February. In place of job losses, the KCTU is proposing a shorter working week and cuts to pay and conditions.

Just prior to the strike, the government extended an olive branch to the KCTU leadership by passing a bill making the Tripartite Committee "a legally binding institution". By insisting on making the body a legal entity, the KCTU is seeking to integrate itself more firmly into the restructuring process.

The government has also offered to enter direct talks with the KCTU leaders. Labour Minister Lee Ki-Ho stated: "If the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions cancels its strikes, the government is ready to talk with labour." According to government officials, the union has indicated that it is willing to enter discussions. The offer of talks and Tripartite Committee legislation is a clear recognition by the government that it needs the KCTU's collaboration to contain workers opposition and to clear the road for mass lay-offs.

Secondly, the government has intensified its measures to intimidate workers. A hastily convened

meeting of labour-related ministers held only days before the strike was due to begin issued a stern warning that the government intended to deal even more harshly with "illegal and violent labour protests" than it did with the subway workers' strike.

When Seoul subway workers launched a strike last month to fight plans to destroy more than 2,000 jobs, the government declared the industrial action illegal and issued a series of warrants against 66 union officials. Heavily armed riot police attacked thousands of subway workers camping at Myongdong Cathedral and at the Seoul National University. Finally, the workers were threatened with the dismissal of the entire workforce if they failed to return to work.

Even though the strike was meant to be part of the KCTU's so-called first wave campaign, the subway workers were left isolated in the face of the government's unprecedented threats and intimidation. At the last minute, a stoppage by Telecom workers was called off and the subway workers were driven back to work on the management's terms. A subsequent threat by the Seoul subway workers' union to take action yesterday was also aborted.

The ending of the subway workers strike resulted in the collapse of the "first wave" campaign and has strengthened the hand of corporations to take punitive measures against striking workers and union officials. The Seoul subway management has sacked at least 43 strikers and has indicated that it will dismiss others involved in the strike.

Other employers have registered more than 144 complaints with the state prosecutor's office urging the government to take legal action against unionists. Daewoo sacked six workers for participation in past strike actions and the Daewoo union president has been arrested. In another incident, police without a warrant seized a unionist from the Ssangyong automobile workers union.

Finally, and most fundamentally, workers themselves lack a political program, with which to oppose the IMF-government economic restructuring plans, which are being carried out with the tacit collaboration of the KCTU leadership. The KCTU emerged out of the militant strikes struggles of the 1980s when, under conditions of economic expansion, workers were able to make certain limited gains in wages and conditions, particularly in the major conglomerates.

Following the eruption of the economic crisis in South Korea and throughout the region, the KCTU, which has been illegal for most of its existence, has been drawn more and more closely into the implementation of economic restructuring via the Tripartite Committee. At the beginning of last year, the KCTU accepted the government's legal changes that effectively abolished the so-called lifetime system of employment and sent the unemployment soaring. To fight the wave of sackings unleashed by the IMF and the government with the complicity of the KCTU, means to challenge the profit system itself and that requires the turn to a socialist perspective.



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