

South Korea:

Government intensifies arrests as union calls off strikes

Terry Cook
26 May 1999

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), South Korea's second largest peak union body, called an abrupt end to its "May offensive" last week after the government of Kim Dae Jung made an offer to conduct direct discussions with union leaders.

The KCTU called off the "offensive" without achieving any of its stated aims—to stop restructuring in the country's major conglomerates and to force the government to end mass lay-offs. Moreover, its actions have created the conditions in which the government and companies feel confident that they can sack or jail union leaders and militants with impunity.

Even as KCTU president Lee Kap-Yong announced the end of the May offensive at a press conference in Seoul on May 15, the Public Prosecutors Office issued warrants for the arrest of scores of union officials and activists.

On the same day, police arrested Lee Sang-Choon, the president of the Korean Health and Medical Workers Union, which covers health workers in 146 hospitals, and also seized the president of the Korean Federation of Hospital Workers (KFHW).

Arrest warrants were issued for Nah Soon-Ja, president of Seoul Regional Branch of the union, and nine union executive members of the National Cancer Center Hospital. All have been charged with "obstruction of business".

Health workers from private and public hospitals across the country are seeking a new work agreement and protesting a 7 percent wage cut. They were part of the KCTU's "second wave" action but most withdrew or returned to work after the health union struck a series of separate deals. Workers at National Cancer Center Hospital, who were unable to secure an agreement,

were left to fight on their own.

On May 17 the government issued warrants for the arrest of the entire leadership of the KCTU's largest affiliate, the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF). Organised in Korea's major conglomerates, the KMWF was to have led the "second wave" of strikes but workers in many major factories—demoralised by earlier betrayals and defeats—did not go out, or returned to work within hours.

Those targeted for arrest included the KMWF's president Moon Seung-Hyun, its general secretary Jeun Jae-Hwan, organising director Han Seok-Ho and three of its vice-presidents. The authorities are still hunting another of the union's vice-presidents, Kim Hee-Joon, for his involvement in the occupation at the Mando Machinery plant in Ulsan last August.

Both Dan Byung-Ho, the former KMWF president, and Kim Kwang, the former president of the Hyundai Motors Workers Union, are still behind bars. The seizure followed the decision by KMWF leadership to call off the Mando workers occupation and to strike a deal that accepted the majority of the company's demands. The isolation and defeat of the militant Mando workers, who had waged a determined battle against thousands of heavily-armed riot police, cleared the way for the government to deepen its assault against the working class.

Other union officials and workers presently under arrest include 14 leaders of the Seoul Subway Workers Union (warrants were issued for 66 in all) and Nah Yang-Joo, the president of the Daewoo Shipbuilding Workers Union. The police are also seeking five union activists from the Hyundai Precision Industry Union.

The Kim Dae Jung government launched this crackdown in the full knowledge that it could count on the KCTU leadership to contain any reaction by workers. From the outset, the purpose of the KCTU's "offensive" was not to mount a serious opposition to the Kim Dae Jung's restructuring plans but to attempt to firm up its relations with the government and integrate itself more closely into the restructuring process.

The KCTU called off the limited industrial action following indications by a government spokesman last week that it was willing to set-up a "working level negotiating team with union representatives" and that it would give other concessions, including the introduction of a "job sharing" scheme proposed by the union, to dissipate hostility by workers to ongoing job losses.

In a statement issued on May 18, the KCTU said the decision to "cool off" the campaign was made in response to "the various informal 'feelers' for negotiation the government has been putting forward". It pointed out with a note of triumph that the announcement to end the strikes "was picked and welcomed by the media as an opportunity for a new development in the relationship between the government and the KCTU".

The KCTU leaders went on to warn: "The glimmer of a new development, however, was dashed abruptly by the sudden escalation of the government's crackdown on the KCTU." Yet far from breaking off planned talks and launching a campaign to immediately free unionists and reinstate sacked workers, the KCTU limited itself to "a petition through the International Labour Organisation" and a rather hollow threat of a "third wave" of strikes—in the future—if government repression continued.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact