

Unions isolate striking South Korean power workers

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Power workers at five thermal-generating subsidiaries of the Korea Electric Power Corp (KEPCO) have been left isolated by the peak trade union bodies as the administration of President Kim Dae-jung intensifies its crackdown against their two-week strike.

The workers originally stopped work on February 25 as part of a combined campaign by three public sector unions to protest the government's plan to privatise the five KEPCO power plants, the country's gas supply and rail services. They were also demanding shorter working hours to combat job losses.

Two days after the joint national strike began, the Korean Gas Corp Workers Union (KGCWU) and the Korean Rail Workers Union (KRWU) ordered a return to work. The union leaders cut deals that included limited concessions on pay and shorter hours but cleared the way for privatisation—the government's main demand—providing only that it take place in consultation with the unions.

The two unions are affiliated to the conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), the country's largest peak body, whereas the Korea Power Plant Industry Union is connected to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the second largest union organisation, which previously had a reputation for militancy.

The KCTU, however, have provided virtually no support for the power workers. Its leaders had promised to call a strike of thousands of auto industry workers to support the utility workers' campaign but restricted action to a four-hour "sympathy" stoppage at Hyundai Motors and Kia Motors.

The lack of any serious backing for the power workers has strengthened the hand of the government and the company. KEPCO immediately announced that it was preparing civil and criminal legal action against

the power workers if they refused to end their strike by March 2. Faced with the prospect of large penalties, about 400 returned to work but the rest of the 5,609 strikers defied the threat.

This week, KEPCO broke off all negotiations with the power unions and put further negotiations directly in the hands of the National Labor Relations Commission. At a press conference on March 5, a senior KEPCO official announced the company would "hold no more time-consuming negotiations with the union and to concentrate on keeping power plants operating normally".

The company attempted to transfer 1,800 workers from other state-owned power facilities and hired more retirees to work alongside the 400 workers who had returned to work. KEPCO also announced it will sue the union to recover losses caused by the strike and has called on the court to seize the property of 200 unionists accused of being ringleaders.

The company has sacked at least 152 strikers and threatened to do the same to the remainder. KEPCO has already placed advertisements for replacement workers. A personnel committee meeting is scheduled for March 11 to decide on immediate disciplinary action against another 200 workers who are "actively" supporting the strike.

At the same time, the government has stepped up its repression. From day one the government declared the strikes illegal on the basis of labour legislation outlawing industrial action in essential services. At a cabinet meeting on March 2, Prime Minister Lee Han-dong pledged he would "resort to every possible measure" to break the strike, including the use of riot police.

Last weekend the government issued arrest warrants for 24 power union leaders. Some 10,000 police were

used to search hotels and motels for union officials and strikers, who are dispersed in small groups around the country. The Ministry of Information and Communications closed down a union website used to communicate with the strikers.

Despite the agreement with the rail and gas unions, the government is continuing to hunt leaders and members of those unions charged with leading an illegal strike. So far, 17 union leaders have been arrested, including 15 from the rail union. Both unions are continuing to hold talks with the government to draw up a schedule for the “timing and methods” of privatisation.

Notwithstanding claims that they will not compromise over privatisation, power union leaders are desperately seeking a deal with the government. Condemning KEPCO’s decision to end direct negotiations, a union spokesman accused the company of having “shut off the sole avenue by which labour can call off the strike”.

From the outset, the union limited the strike to ensure there were no serious disruptions to power supplies. Over 11,000 power workers at other KEPCO affiliates continue to work, including those in the country’s nuclear power plants, which supply 40 percent of South Korea’s electricity. While union leaders this week refused to allow the transfer of workers to strike-bound plants, they confirmed that they would only call other workers out “if the government quells the power strike with force”.

Buoyed by the union’s actions, the government has affirmed that would push ahead with the sale of the five plants, which was legislated in December 2000 and was non-negotiable. The hard-line stance reflects growing pressure on the government from both domestic and overseas investors over the slow pace of restructuring and privatisation in the state sector.

Kim Dae-jung came to power in 1998, trading on his reputation as a “democrat” and with the backing of the trade union leadership. But he quickly demonstrated his willingness to use the full force of the repressive state built up over years of military dictatorship to push through the IMF’s sweeping program of economic restructuring. In doing so, he has relied on the complicity of the peak union bodies.

In strike after strike, the government has mobilised thousands of riot police to smash up rallies and

occupations and arrested hundreds of workers and union leaders. The response of the unions has been to restrict strike action, calling protests to dissipate growing anger while at the same time looking for separate deals to break up any unity and finally shut down industrial action. The current strike by power workers is proving no exception to this pattern.



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