

South Korean president threatens to sack striking power workers

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Striking power workers in South Korea last weekend rejected a government ultimatum directing them to return to work by 9am today or face dismissal. The return-to-work order is part of further harsh measures announced by President Kim Dae-jung at a cabinet meeting last Tuesday aimed at crushing the protracted strike by more than 5,000 workers.

Kim told the cabinet meeting that the strike was “unjustified and illegal”. Plans to sell the five Korea Electric Power Corp (KEPCO) thermal generating plants and to restructure state-owned utilities, he said, “are not subject to the collective bargaining agreement with the labour unions”.

Declaring his government “would uphold free-market principles” and “laws banning public-sector walkouts,” the president warned he would take stern action, including the mass firing of strikers and the prosecution of “union members spearheading the strike”. A government spokesman warned: “For those fired this time, there will be no opportunity in the future to come back.”

The cabinet decided to suspend salary payments to the strikers and to withhold severance payments to compensate KEPCO for the alleged cost of the strike—about 25 billion won (\$18.99 million). The ministers also endorsed plans to train over 400 soldiers to help run the plants along with management and contract workers. The first 200 will be deployed into the power plants within four weeks, and the remainder by April 15.

The strike has become a crucial test of Kim Dae-jung’s economic restructuring program. The power workers walked off the job on February 25 in opposition to the government’s plan to sell its 54 percent share in the five plants.

The company has already fired 197 key workers for rejecting an earlier return-to-work order. Legal action is also planned against several management-level KEPCO officials who the government has accused of “colluding

with union members to stage the illegal strike”.

While the government is cracking down on workers, the power union and its peak union body, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), have left the strikers to face the increasing state repression on their own.

As the cabinet met last week, the power union called off a strike vote by 3,700 workers at the Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power Company. Union head Kim Byung-ki claimed that the vote could not proceed “due to strong interference by the company”. Management dispatched workers to scattered work locations making a vote difficult. Even so, the union seems to be in no hurry to reorganise the ballot. Kim Byung-ki told the media: “We’ll resume it later, though at the moment it’s not clear when.”

The company produces about 40 percent of the country’s electricity needs. The continuing production at nuclear plants, along with the limited output from the five strike-bound units, is allowing the government to maintain the supply of power.

Even before cancelling the strike ballot, the FKTU had left the power workers out on a limb. They originally stopped work along with the FKTU-affiliated gas and rail unions as part of a combined campaign against the government’s privatisation plans and for a shorter working week. Within 48 hours the leaders of the Korean Gas Corp Workers’ Union (KGCWU) and the Korean Rail Workers Union (KRWU) called off strike action and cut separate deals, which effectively allow the sell-off of gas and rail services to proceed.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), South Korea’s second largest peak union body, which claims to be more militant than the conservative FKTU, has also helped to isolate the power strike. KCTU leaders promised to call a strike of thousands of auto industry workers to back the utility workers but only held a four-hour “sympathy” stoppage by workers from Hyundai

Motors and Kia Motors.

Even though the KCTU has 500,000 members, the union has only organised limited protests. On March 13, the KCTU Leaders Council, comprising the heads of all its affiliated unions, endorsed a resolution to call a national strike in solidarity with the power workers, but not until March 25.

The KCTU's actions have only encouraged the government to step up its repression. On March 18, KCTU president Dan Byung-ho was sentenced by the Seoul Court of First Instance to a two-year jail term after being found guilty of five charges arising from his role in coordinating a strike in June 2001.

On the same day, the Ministry of Government Administration and Home affairs announced it intended to take legal action against 10 leaders of the Korean Union of Civil Servants under a law that prohibits public servants from joining labour organisations. The recently formed union had applied for affiliation to the KCTU.

The government, which faces local elections in June and a presidential poll in December, is coming under criticism from international investors over the slow pace of privatisations. While Kim Dae-jung is not eligible to stand for a second term, he is determined to crush the power strike and set an example to deter other public sector workers.

Kim came to power in 1998 with the backing of the KCTU and other unions based on his reputation as a "democrat" and an opponent of the previous military regimes. One of his first steps on assuming office was to amend the labour laws to abolish the country's life-long employment system, thus opening the door for mass sackings. Over the last four years, he has not hesitated to use his predecessors' repressive methods to break strikes and protests. As in the case of the power workers, Kim has been able to rely on the KCTU and FKTU to confine the opposition and anger in the working class.



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