

# South Korean unions scuttle power workers strike

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Power union leaders in South Korea endorsed a deal brokered by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) with the Kim Dae-jung government this week and directed more than 5,000 striking workers at Korea Power Electrical Corp (KEPCO) to end all industrial action. The power workers walked out on February 25 to oppose government plans to privatise five KEPCO thermal generating plants and remained on strike for 38 days defying government repression and dismissal threats.

The KCTU struck the return-to-work agreement at midday on Tuesday after 18 hours of closed-door discussions. The peak union body, the second largest in South Korea, immediately called off a nationwide solidarity strike by 120,000 members minutes before it was scheduled to begin.

Power union head Lee Ho-dong ordered strikers to resume work by 9am today and instructed union locals to convene member “gatherings” to declare the industrial action over. While admitting that the unions “had failed to prevent the privatisation of public enterprises”, Lee claimed power workers had succeeded in “drawing public interest to the importance of protecting infrastructure companies”.

The agreement, however, is a total cave-in and a major blow against the power workers. It clears the way for the privatisation of the KEPCO plants and leaves the government free to take punitive action against the strikers. Under the agreement, unions will accept a March 8 National Labor Relations Commission ruling that “privatisation is not an item for collective bargaining”. Other issues, including demands for a reduction in working hours, will be submitted to the National Labor Relations Commission for arbitration.

The government declared the power strike illegal under legislation prohibiting industrial action in

essential services and commenced legal action to force power workers to compensate KEPCO for about 25 billion won (\$18.99 million) in losses incurred during the strike. Union negotiators asked only that the government “minimalise” criminal charges and other punitive action against strikers.

On Tuesday KEPCO announced that it would “ensure fairness in determining civil and criminal responsibility” and an “appropriate” number of workers would be penalised. According to a management spokesperson, about 600 workers will be dismissed for their role in the strike. Over 340 workers have already been sacked.

The KCTU claimed that the deal was “obscure” on privatisation and “open to interpretation” but government officials made clear that the sell-off “not a subject for negotiation”. Within hours of the agreement being signed the Minister for Commerce Industry and Energy Shin Kook-hwan and the Minister of Labor BangYong-suk issued a statement declaring that sale of the five plants would proceed as scheduled and be completed by early next year.

With the deal wrapped up, union leaders joined the government to issue a joint statement beseeching “the general public’s forgiveness over the protracted labour strike” and promising that “labor, management and government will work together in the future to ensure that such a dispute is not repeated by honoring concerned laws and principles”.

The KCTU-government settlement and power union back down is the final act in a protracted campaign by the union leadership to wear down the power workers and break up their opposition to the sale of state-owned enterprises. Above all, the unions were desperate to avoid an all-out political confrontation with President Kim Dae-jung who warned that continued opposition to

his “reform” program would discourage international investment.

On Tuesday, while negotiations to end the strike were proceeding, Kim issued a statement declaring that foreign investors were deeply concerned about “outrageous labour activities” in Korea and that “unless the problem is solved, the country can neither open to the world, nor gain competitiveness”.

When power workers began their strike on February 25, Korean Gas Corp Workers’ Union and the Korean Rail Workers Union joined them in support. But this action was sabotaged within 48 hours after rail and gas union leaders, with the assistance of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), Korea’s largest peak union body, ordered their members back to work and struck separate government agreements allowing privatisation.

The power workers were further isolated when their own union cancelled a strike ballot of 3,700 members in the state-owned Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power Company, which produces 40 percent of the country’s electricity needs. This action strengthened the government’s hand by ensuring that there were no power shortages.

Despite promises of widespread industrial action to back the power workers, the KCTU only allowed a four-hour “sympathy” stoppage by Hyundai Motor Co and Kia Motor Corp employees during the 38-day strike. Union officials refused to act, even after the government threatened to sack all power workers who failed to report for work by March 25. The KCTU leadership delayed calling a national strike until April 2, while the FKTU merely said it would monitor the situation.

There are clear signs of mounting opposition to the betrayal. Strikers gathered in Jongmyo Park in central Seoul on Tuesday night demanding union leaders immediately repudiate the agreement, as did 60 power workers who have maintained a 37-day sit-in at the Myongdong Cathedral.

In an attempt at damage control, the entire KCTU leadership resigned after issuing a statement on Wednesday apologising to members for calling off Tuesday’s planned general strike. The statement claimed the union body had made a “mistake” giving the government “a green light” on privatisation. It was no mistake, however. The decision flows directly from

the KCTU bureaucracy’s acceptance of the government’s basic program—that South Korea has to be internationally competitive.

This is not the first time that KCTU leaders have resigned en masse. In 1998 the leadership was forced to step down after signing an agreement with the government accepting the end of “life-time” employment. The newly elected leadership, which continued the union’s policies, endorsed the government’s new labour laws and presided over the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.



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