

South Korean government uses police measures against striking workers

Terry Cook
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Under pressure from international and domestic investors, it has not taken long for the government of South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, whose impeachment was overturned by the Constitutional Court less than three months ago, to show its true colours.

Hopes sown by trade union leaders that Roh, bolstered by a new parliamentary majority, as a result of general elections in April, would be more supportive of the demands of workers for jobs and decent conditions have been quickly dashed.

Strikes by petrochemical workers, hospital staff and autoworkers, part of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) summer campaign for improved wage and conditions, have met with repressive measures. So too have disputes by bank workers, teachers and public transport employees.

An ongoing strike by about 800 workers at LG Caltex Oil Corp in Yeosu, the country's second largest refinery, was the latest to be dealt with. The National Labor Relations Committee (NLRC) intervened to mediate and impose a "settlement" in the dispute that erupted on July 19.

The NLRC dismissed the workers' claims for a 10.7 percent pay increase and a shorter working week and ordered a return to work. When workers defied the order, the strike was declared illegal and arrest warrants were issued for five strike leaders. Police had already been used to clear workers from key refinery control rooms they had earlier occupied.

Even as the LG Caltex workers came under attack, subway unions called off a strike on July 24 after just four days without realising key demands for improved staffing and wage increases. The strike was deemed "illegal" after the government's mediation body imposed a 15-day cooling off period. Hundreds of police were deployed at rail stations as subway authorities threatened strikers with "punitive" action and filed charges against 25 union

leaders for violation of labour laws.

At the beginning of July, the government also threatened to use police to end an occupation of KorAm Bank's headquarters by striking workers who were defending jobs and benefits after the recent takeover of the bank by US banking giant Citigroup. Government prosecutors issued warrants for the arrest of five leading bank union officials.

Not only did the government back KorAm and Citigroup throughout the protracted 18-day dispute—the longest strike ever in Korea's financial sector—it also moved to revise existing labour laws to prevent workers employed in computer centres in the financial or banking industries from striking in the future.

The government persisted with its crackdown on strikers despite attempts by the KCTU and other unions to curb industrial action. When launching the "summer offensive" at the beginning of June, KCTU secretary-general Lee Soo-ho declared that the time had come to "normalise" industrial relations with the government and employers. He pledged the KCTU would "do its best not to go on strike" or would work to limit industrial action.

In line with its declaration, the KCTU's affiliate, the National Health and Medical Industry Labor Union, covering workers employed in 100 hospitals ended a protracted strike in mid-June. The union dropped its claim for a 10.7 percent pay increase and agreed to rises of between 2 and 5 percent. The settlement also meant that the five-day workweek, a key KCTU demand, would not be implemented in many hospitals.

Unions in areas such as auto, heavy engineering and manufacturing followed suit after a series of token strikes. The union at GM Daewoo Auto & Technology Co abandoned its claim for a 16.6 percent pay increase and took up the company's 11 percent offer, while the Hyundai Motor union dropped its 10.5 percent pay claim, accepting just 6.8 percent.

Even so the trade unions were not able to shut down all industrial action as quickly as they wanted. As is the case of the LG Caltex Oil Corp strike, workers in number of industries have persisted in their push for improved wages, shorter working hours and job security. According to a recent Ministry of Labour report, one out of five companies reduced or froze wage levels during the first half of this year, while the wage increase granted by the remaining companies was the lowest since 2000.

Workers are determined to improve pay and conditions for casual workers. The rapid spread of temporary and part-time work has resulted in irregular employees making up almost 60 percent of the country's workforce. They are paid around \$US748 a month, about half the wage of permanent employees.

The efforts of the KCTU and other unions to stifle industrial action are bound up with their political accommodation to the President Roh and the Uri Party, which won a majority in the national assembly in elections held in April, defeating the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) and the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) of former president Kim Dae-jung.

The Uri Party was formed in November last year after a split in the MDP over Roh's "liberal" policies. Roh, a former human rights and labour lawyer, won the presidency in December 2002 promising to help working people and advocating support for the "Sunshine Policy" aimed at opening relations with North Korea to facilitate investment.

His popularity soon plunged, however, when he continued to implement the economic restructuring agenda of the previous president Kim Dae-jung and enforce to harsh labour laws. Opposition was further compounded by Roh's deeply unpopular decision to commit troops to the US-led occupation of Iraq.

The GNP and MDP, which retained control of the national assembly, seized on Roh's falling support to impeach him in March on a series of trumped-up charges. But the move backfired as voters, angry at what they viewed as a parliamentary coup by the country's conservative political establishment, flocked to the Uri Party. Roh's impeachment was subsequently overruled in the country's constitutional court.

Prior to the election, Roh could defend his actions by pointing to a hostile majority in the national assembly. Now, however, he has no excuse. Like Kim Dae-jung, who was also promoted by the unions as a "democrat" before he came to power, Roh has not hesitated to use police and the legal system against striking workers.

The election also resulted, for the first time, in the election of 10 representatives of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which was formed with the KCTU's backing. Just days after election, the KCTU issued a statement declaring that the government would not "be able to ignore the impact of the DLP in its new role as the third major party". The DLP, it declared, would apply "political pressure" to push for "popular legislation that would improve people's livelihood and support trade union activities".

In fact the opposite was the case. Far from defending the interests of working people, the DLP and KCTU have accommodated themselves even more closely to the Roh government and big business. The DLP's policy director Lee Jae-young reassured a visiting representative of US investment bank Morgan Stanley by saying the unions, "will likely stage fewer strikes since the party will serve as a channel between labour and management".

Since the election the KCTU has sought to strengthen ties with the government and business leaders. On July 20, in the midst of the government crackdown, KCTU leader Lee Soo-Ho held a press conference to warn the government and employers that the resort to police and compulsory arbitration would mean "the tripartite relationship will not be able to move forward".

Far from seeking to defend workers, Lee's comments were an appeal to the government and business to use its services. The KCTU has been engaged in discussions to reestablish the Korea Tripartite Commission—a corporatist body of government officials, corporate leaders and trade union bureaucrats aimed at imposing further economic restructuring and privatisation while smothering any opposition by workers.



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