

South Korean government cracks down on public sector strike

Carol Divjak
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The South Korean government of President Roh Moo-hyun last week meted out savage repression against striking workers opposed to planned changes to the country's labour laws in line with the demands of big business and foreign investors.

President Roh, a former human rights and labour lawyer, won the presidency in 2002 but initially faced a hostile majority in the country's national assembly. In April, however, the Uri party, which is closely aligned to Roh, won a narrow parliamentary majority by exploiting widespread outrage over attempts by the assembly to formally impeach the president.

Far from defending the rights of workers, the government has bowed to demands for greater workforce "flexibility". The legislation will restrict union activities and allow companies to hire more temporary workers in the private sector, a key demand of investors.

The proposed legislation has provoked sharp opposition, especially from government workers who are currently barred from forming a union or taking industrial action. The new laws would legalise public sector unions and allow them to bargain collectively on behalf of their members but would maintain the ban on strikes.

A strike last week by the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU)—the first ever by government workers—was met with an extensive police crackdown. Even before the strike began, the government dispatched thousands of police in a bid to prevent union members from voting over the proposed action at 200 polling booths set up in government offices. Police arrested 186 people and seized documents in raids on 47 offices.

After the strike began on November 15, Roh's administration declared that all those involved in the

walkout would be dismissed or otherwise punished. By the second day, only 300 workers remained on strike, and union leaders called it off on November 17.

Heo Seong-gwan, minister for government affairs and home administration, indicated that he intended to press ahead with disciplinary proceedings against any civil servants who actively backed the strike. Initially he indicated that as many as 3,200 central and local government employees could face dismissal—a figure that was later dropped to 2,488.

While declaring that it was a personally painful experience, Heo declared that the government would do whatever was required to establish law-and-order. To date, authorities have been asked to instigate disciplinary action against more than a thousand strikers.

In addition, police have laid charges against 457 union members, including 17 strike leaders. At least five union leaders, including the KGEU's policy planning director, have been arrested. The government has also threatened to press charges against the heads of two regional governments for aiding and abetting the strikers.

The repressive measures against public sector employees have fueled anger among workers against the government and its planned labour legislation. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), one of the country's two main umbrella unions, held a rally of more than 20,000 in Seoul on November 14 to oppose the new laws. The government reacted by deploying 9,000 riot police who used hundreds of buses to set up barricades around the rally.

As well as calling for the rights of government employees to be recognised, the KCTU is opposed to legislative changes that will allow private companies to employ even greater numbers of "non-regular

workers”. Currently comprising about 60 percent of the country’s workforce, casual workers receive on average about half the pay of permanent employees and frequently suffer ill treatment and poor conditions.

The KCTU has called an indefinite general strike on November 26 to oppose the new labour laws. But there are already signs that the union leadership is preparing to do a deal with the government. At a press conference on Monday, KCTU head Lee Su-ho declared that the KCTU was prepared to form a bargaining party to negotiate with the government. “According to how the dialogue goes, the level of strike may be reconsidered,” he said.

Over the past seven years, the KCTU leadership has repeatedly called for general strikes, both under Roh and the previous administration of Kim Dae-jung, only to accommodate to the government and its policies. KCTU leaders promoted first Kim then Roh as “democrats” who would protect the interests of working people. In fact, both administrations pressed ahead with restructuring measures that have severely undermined the jobs and living standards of workers.

During its “summer offensive” this year for wages and conditions, the KCTU ran a fragmented campaign, encouraging its affiliates to strike separate agreements that most times fell far short of original claims. The demand for improved conditions for irregular workers—supposedly a key component of the campaign—was largely unrealised.

In the current standoff over the labour legislation, the union leaders will once again adapt themselves to the government and the demands of big business.



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