

South Korean government cracks down on workers' rights

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Following the suppression of the 77-day occupation of the Ssangyong Motor plant at Pyeongtaek in August, the South Korean government has broadened its offensive against the rights and conditions of the working class.

President Lee Myung-bak hesitated for weeks before ordering thousands of riot police to storm the plant on August 5 and violently break up the occupation. Workers had been fighting to defend their jobs after the company announced a drastic downsizing. The increasingly unpopular Lee had been concerned that a police crackdown would provoke a wave of opposition.

The crucial role was played by the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which left the occupation isolated and, following its defeat, immediately accepted the job cuts. Confident that it can count on the unions, the Lee administration is accelerating its pro-market agenda, targeting public sector workers in particular.

Last Monday, a spokesman for the Ministry of Public Administration and Security told the media that the government had decided to deny legal status to the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU) and had declared the union to be “an illegitimate entity”.

He confirmed the ministry would cease the collection of KGEU union dues via payroll deduction and seek cooperation at the regional and provincial levels of government to close all 125 union offices in their facilities. Workers now acting as full-time KGEU officials, but paid by the government, would be instructed to return to normal duties.

The announcement followed a vote on September 22 by members of the KGEU, the Korean Democracy Government Employees Union and the Court Government Employees Union to merge into a single union in December and affiliate

with the KCTU. The merged union, with a membership of 110,000, would make the KCTU the country's largest union federation for the first time.

The decision to affiliate with the KCTU reflects continuing illusions among workers that the union body will wage a militant struggle to defend their rights. The KCTU still continues to trade on the role it played during the late 1980s when it emerged as an illegal organisation at the head of militant struggles by workers for better conditions and against the autocratic, military-backed regime.

Lee's main concern is not with the KCTU, which over the past two decades has been integrated into the state structures and has played a critical function in containing the opposition of workers. Rather his administration fears that the affiliation is a sign of militancy among public sector workers. Lee is a member of the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP).

The merger was a direct response to plans to revise the Civil Servants' Pension Act to slash pensions in line with the government's “pay more, receive less” proposal. The revision would increase pension contributions from the current 5.5 percent of monthly taxable income to 8.5 percent by 2018, while overall benefits would be roughly halved.

Pension premiums were based on an annual pay increase of 6.7 percent for civil servants this year and next year. But the government has imposed a pay freeze, contributing to an expected pension fund deficit of around two trillion won (\$US1.68 billion) by next year. As an official spokesman admitted last month, even with the proposed revision, the government still faced overspending of 700 billion won, raising the possibility of further impositions on workers.

The outlawing of the KGEU is just one of the measures being used to intimidate public sector workers. On October 12, the government dismissed 14 leading members of three

civil servant unions for participating in “anti-government” rallies outside the National Assembly in July.

The rallies were called by the National Union of Media Workers (NUMW) and opposition Democratic Party against plans to change the media laws to allow large corporations and major newspapers to extend their media monopolies by acquiring stakes in terrestrial and cable television stations. Other sections of workers—including a delegation from the Ssangyong occupation—participated and raised their own demands.

While South Korea’s military regime relinquished its grip in the late 1980s, many of its police-state measures are still in place. In particular, it is still illegal for civil servants to engage in any political activity. Now the government is planning to strengthen these laws.

Currently, public servants are prohibited from forming or becoming members of a specific political party and from advocating or opposing a specific political party or political candidate. Penalties include prison terms of up to one year and fines. The government is seeking legal changes to prevent civil servants from forming groups and planning, leading and hosting events that oppose or interrupt government policies.

The Lee administration has already cracked down on members of the Korea Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU). Under the civil service laws, teachers are prohibited from engaging in political activity or from taking collective industrial action. The government has extended the ban to include even commenting on education policies.

On October 7, five leading KTU officials were summoned to the Seoul Central Public Prosecutors Office in relation to charges over a statement in June criticising the government for prioritising the privileged layers of society and policies favouring private high schools. A second statement in July demanded the dropping of disciplinary action against teachers who put their names to the first statement. Around 28,000 teachers signed the statements.

In a particularly vindictive act, the education ministry filed lawsuits against 89 teachers over the same issue even though 88 had already been suspended or dismissed. Regional educational offices have also disciplined a further 79 teachers. Police and prosecutors are currently investigating the bank accounts of KTU members, with a view to laying charges of misappropriation of public funds.

The persecution of workers involved in the Ssangyong occupation continues. The Suwon District Court this month found one worker, surnamed Kim, guilty of causing 12 billion won in damages to company property and sentenced him to 18 months’ jail. Another worker was found guilty of similar charges and sentenced to one year in jail, suspended for two years.

The attacks on public sector workers are no accident. As in other countries, the Lee administration has introduced stimulus measures in a bid to boost economic growth amid the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s. The government is now seeking to cut public spending. Under the 2010 budget plans, released last month, education spending will be slashed by 1.2 percent.

The response of the unions to the deepening state repression is to seek closer collaboration with the government and state apparatus. Significantly, Labor Minister Lim Tae-hee met with KCTU head Lim Seong-kyu at the union’s headquarters in central Seoul the week before last. At a joint press conference, the two men hinted at the reestablishment of a tripartite arrangement between government, unions and employers that existed under the previous administrations of so-called democrats Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung.

In response to the KCTU head’s appeal for a more even-handed approach to the unions, the minister acknowledged the union body as “an influential social stakeholder” and declared he was willing to discuss policies “to share social responsibility” with the unions. “The biggest problem was that the ministry has broken off talks with the KCTU. Let’s create a new way of solving problems through dialogue and mutual understanding,” Lim Tae-hee declared.

The comments are a sharp warning. This union-government collaboration will inevitably be directed at suppressing any independent struggles by workers in defence of their jobs and living standards.



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