

South Korean government threatens to ban teachers union

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The South Korean government is widening its anti-democratic crackdown on its political opponents, revolving around trumped-up accusations that the opposition United Progressive Party (UPP) plotted a coup. President Park Geun-hye's administration is attempting to illegalise the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU), accusing its members of being involved in the alleged conspiracy to overthrow the government.

The coup allegations have all the hallmarks of an anti-communist witch hunt and political diversion. The UPP was formed by former factions of the Democratic Labour Party, which was initially established by Korean trade unions. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) accused UPP lawmaker Lee Seok-ki of leading a group with links to the Stalinist North Korean regime that was supposedly preparing to stage armed attacks on public infrastructure.

The coup claims came after revelations that NIS agents actively worked for Park Geun-hye's election in last December's presidential election, a scandal that triggered enormous public anger. (See "South Korean opposition lawmaker arrested") Now the NIS and Park administration are going on the offensive, targeting their political opponents.

An unnamed government source last month told the *Korea Herald*: "We have confirmed that some of the participants [in the plot] were members of the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union." The source claimed that Lee Seok-ki's "Revolutionary Organisation"—a group that Lee denies ever actually existed—held a secret planning meeting last May and that 40 of the 130 participants were public servants and school teachers.

The government has previously pursued the KTU. The union, which has about 70,000 members, operates

within the orbit of the UPP and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). It has won support from layers of teachers opposed to South Korea's rigid and ultra-competitive education system. The government previously demanded that the union expel 22 members from its ranks after they were fired from their teaching positions for signing statements critical of the Lee Myung-bak government in 2009. The government maintains that because the teachers were fired, they can no longer legally be union members. It threatened to withdraw legal recognition of the KTU, using the issue as a pretext. On September 23, the government issued an ultimatum to the union to expel the members within a month.

The further allegations of involvement in a coup plot are a clear threat—the KTU must entirely subordinate itself to the government and its education agenda, or face being banned and subjected to police and intelligence agency raids and arrests similar to those orchestrated against the UPP.

The KTU has a record of selling out struggles waged by teachers. Like the other Korean trade unions, it will not wage a fight against the government in defence of democratic rights and for the interests of ordinary workers. The threats against the KTU are aimed primarily against the working class amid growing social tensions and a worsening economic crisis. They are designed to intimidate anyone critical of the government or who seeks to defend their basic rights.

The ruling Saenuri Party, along with other conservative groups, has called for the disbandment of the UPP and the expulsion of its elected representatives from the National Assembly. Saenuri Party secretary general Hong Moon-jong declared: "The public's opinion is that the UPP should disband voluntarily if the allegations are true. If not, then the government

should demand the UPP's dissolution.”

The threat to outlaw the UPP and KTU recalls the anti-communist witch hunts common under the dictatorship of President Park's father, Park Chung-hee, during the Cold War. The government's ability to revive such methods is a product of the betrayals of the KCTU unions in suppressing the struggles of workers.

In the 1980s, the KCTU led a series of militant workers' struggles that led to improved conditions and the formal dissolution of the military regime. But the KCTU leadership worked to ensure that these struggles never challenged capitalist rule in South Korea.

Amid the 1998-99 Asian financial crisis, the KCTU played the key role under Democrat President Kim Dae-jung in enforcing the imposition of the International Monetary Fund's agenda of pro-market restructuring, including ending life-long employment guarantees. Since then, the KCTU has integrated itself more closely into the establishment and collaborated with government and big business.

Far from challenging the government's frame-up, the opposition Democratic Party has accepted the national security agency's accusations against Lee Seok-ki and the UPP. The party's head, Kim Han-gil, raised no opposition to the demands for the banning of the UPP. “Isn't the decision for dissolution made by the courts?” he raised. “The right thing to do is to leave it up to the courts.”

The UPP itself has offered only token statements of protest against the government's anti-democratic attacks, while pledging to participate with the official investigation against it. Both the Democratic Party and UPP have similarly refused to condemn the moves to ban the teachers union.



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