South Korean police raid unions over railway strike

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More than 4,600 police surrounded the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) headquarters in Seoul yesterday as 500 heavily-armed special police officers raided the building to arrest workers involved in ongoing strike action at Korea Railroad Corp (KORAIL). Up to 6,500 members of the Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU), which is affiliated with the KCTU, have been on strike since December 9 in protest against moves towards the privatisation of the rail system.

The massive police operation that lasted nine hours is a clear attempt by South Korea President Park Geun-hye's administration to break any resistance by Korean workers to the attacks on jobs and living standards being demanded by the country's giant chaebols and their transnational partners. The Park government has declared the strike illegal and denounced workers for "taking the nation's economic arteries hostage."

According to the *Korea Herald*, yesterday morning "police declared an all-out war" against the striking workers and "deployed some 4,000 officers on the scene and fired tear gas into the building," which they claimed was a "safe haven" for strikers. Korean Security and Public Administration Minister Yoo Jeong-bok said: "The court has issued warrants for leading figures in the railway strike, and no organisation or individual can be an exception."

No leading union members were found but police arrested 120 supporters protesting against the attack. The *Korea Herald* wrote: "Police broke windows on doors and fired tear gas to break up protesters who barricaded themselves and sprayed fire extinguishers."

Yesterday's operation followed police raids on two KORAIL union offices in Seoul last Tuesday, during which about 30 hard drives and other documents were seized. Two days later, police raided unions in Daejeon, Busan and Suncheon in South Jeolla Province and Yeongju in North Gyeongsang Province. Two officials have been arrested and arrest warrants issued for 25 officials, including union chairman Kim Myeong-hwan. KORAIL has suspended 7,900 rail workers.

The police raids on the union offices are part of a broader assault on basic democratic rights since Park—the daughter of former dictator Park Chun-hee—came to power this year. This includes the illegalisation of a political party, the United Progressive Party (UPP), for the first time since the Syngman Rhee era in the 1950s, on bogus allegations that it was planning an "armed revolt" on behalf of North Korea. The UPP was formed by various former activists associated with KCTU.

KORAIL runs the national rail system as well as Seoul's subway lines 1, 3, and 4, jointly with Seoul Metro. KORAIL management has filed a lawsuit totalling 7.7 billion won ($US7.2 million) against 186 union members who are believed to be the leaders of the strike. KORAIL is threatening to increase the amount to 10 billion won if the strike continues.

According to KORAIL, the strike has reduced freight services by 70 percent. The rail passenger services of KTX, Saemaeul and Mugunghwa are expected to be running at 89.6 percent, 57.7 percent, and 63 percent respectively. An 84-year old woman was killed on subway line 4 on December 15 after she was trapped between the rail car and the glass doors separating the platform from the tracks. A 19-year-old student hired by KORAIL to replace striking workers has been blamed for the accident.

The strike began over KORAIL's plans to open a new line from Suseo in southern Seoul to the city of Busan. While KORAIL says it will have a 41 percent stake in the new line, investors will own the other 59

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percent. Workers fear that this will open the way for private investors to purchase shares in the railway lines and lead to job losses and attacks on working conditions.

The KRWU and KCTU have done their utmost to contain the strike, ensuring it only remains a political safety valve for dissipating workers' anger over privatisation. While there are 20,400 union members, only 7,900 are involved in the strike action. The union has been guaranteeing that trains, particularly passenger and subway services, continue to operate.

Last Tuesday, Seoul Metro's two main unions, Seoul Subway Labor Union and Seoul Metro Subway Labor Union, threatened to join the walkout only to call it off the same day. Union officials made a deal with management, which agreed to increase the retirement age from 58 to 60, provide higher retirement payments, and maintain severance pay. While a joint strike could have had a major impact on city transportation, the Seoul metro unions' backroom deal has left striking KORAIL union members isolated. Both unions are also part of the KCTU.

The KRWU has issued five modest demands, primarily aimed at urging the government to reconsider the privatisation plans, including KORAIL's decision to corporatise the Suseo KTX line, as well as the suspension of a corporate license by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation. The union has made no demands for increased wages or improved working conditions.

The KCTU and its affiliated unions emerged during the struggle against the former Korean military dictatorship in the late 1980s. While more militant than the official unions, their perspective was always limited to securing union rights within the framework of capitalism.

Over the past two decades, the KCTU and its affiliates have systematically integrated themselves into Korea's corporate and political establishment. Major strikes of auto workers at Hyundai, KIA, GM, Ssangyong have been systematically isolated and betrayed, with thousands of jobs lost and productivity speedups imposed. (See: "South Korea: The political lessons of the Ssangyong occupation")

Politically, the KCTU has sought to subordinate the workers to the main opposition Democrat Party (DP). The DP has responded to rail strike with mild criticism of the Park administration while warning it that the police attacks would lead to greater social conflict.

After the police raids of the KCTU headquarters, DP floor spokesman Park Soo-hyun declared: "The repression is not the end of the strike but the beginning of a bigger disaster." DP chairman Kim Han-gil visited the KCTU office and said he sent a letter to President Park requesting her to take "measures to stop any violence."

Park's approval rating has fallen nearly 20 percentage points from its high in September to just 48 percent last Friday.

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