

South Korean unions hold token “people’s strike”

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6 March 2014

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) held a “people’s strike” on February 25. The KCTU, one of the major umbrella union organisations in South Korea, has a long record of using such token protests to let off steam and subordinate workers to the opposition Democrat Party.

KCTU leader Sin Seung-cheol declared that the event was “a stern declaration of the people’s struggle against the Park Geun-hye government.” Ostensibly, a one-day strike was called to oppose the government’s plans for privatization and other attacks on workers’ conditions. In reality, its purpose was to contain mounting frustration in the working class over deteriorating living standards and block an independent movement against President Park’s government.

According to the KCTU, 40,000 people gathered in front of Seoul’s City Hall, but other estimates put the number far lower. Throughout the country, 100,000 participated in protests in 12 cities. The KCTU filled out the numbers by appealing to various civil society organisations to take part. The overall figure reflects a lack of support among workers, given that the KCTU claims a membership of 700,000.

The government denounced the strike as illegal and took repressive measures against the protesters in Seoul, mobilizing some 15,000 police to corral them, using buses and fences. These officers were equipped with riot gear, tear gas and water cannons. Riot police were placed at nearby subway station entrances to prevent workers from fleeing a potential police attack.

While opposing the strike, Labor Minister Phang Hanam stressed the friendly dealings developing with the KCTU behind the scenes. “We urge the KCTU to solve the issue through talks amid the budding relations with the government,” he said.

The immediate reason for the stoppage was to cover

up the unions’ betrayal of a protracted rail strike last December against the government’s plans to privatize the Korea Railway Corporation (KORAIL). The Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU), which along with the KCTU kept the strike isolated, shut it down on the government’s terms.

The KRWU held a one-day strike on February 25 in connection with the KCTU’s protest. Just as in December, however, the union allowed replacement workers to be used, nullifying the impact of the strike on public transport or shipping. KORAIL spokesman Im In-sun explained: “The union announced the one-day strike in advance and we already transported most of the cement and coal products yesterday.”

Workers face increasing assaults on jobs and living standards as inequality continues to worsen. Planned privatizations of public entities such as KORAIL have brought fears of layoffs and cutbacks to wages and working conditions.

While the government insists it is not pushing privatization, last November Finance Minister Hyun Oh-seok indicated the government’s plans for restructuring, declaring that “the party is over” for public entities. While the KCTU claims to oppose privatization, the unions have helped suppress the opposition among workers, as the sellout agreement orchestrated by the KRWU makes clear.

Also participating in the protest was the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), which includes workers in the auto industry. Recently, GM Korea announced plans to slash 1,100 jobs at its factory at Gunsan. Jeong Won-yeong, a KMWU official in South Chungcheong Province, declared that the strike was the start of a struggle and called on workers to “make 2014 a victorious year.” In reality, the KMWU has already accepted the GM job cuts.

More broadly, the KCTU is utilizing nominal one-day strikes to channel mounting anger among workers into support for the opposition Democrat Party, which is currently promoting itself as an opponent of privatization. This is nothing more than political grandstanding, especially three months from the Seoul mayoral election.

Privatization of state-owned companies began in earnest under President Kim Dae-jung, a Democrat, following the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. Twelve state-run companies were targeted for privatization in accordance with the demands of big business and the International Monetary Fund. These included Pohang Iron and Steel Corporation and KT, a telecommunication company, as well as KORAIL.

The break-up of these companies involved huge job losses, which began under Kim Dae-jung and continued under his successors. The Democrat administration of President Roh Moo-hyun drew up plans for a “phased privatization” of KORAIL soon after he came to office in 2003. All these plans were built upon by President Lee Myung-bak’s right-wing government and are now in full swing under President Park.

Two decades of betrayals by the KCTU, especially under Democrat administrations, have produced widespread distrust and alienation among workers and youth. A particularly insidious role in propping up the unions and the Democrats is played by the pseudo-left organisation All Together. It promoted the illusion that the February 25 protest would be the start of a campaign against the Park government. Carrying signs that read “Park Geun-hye is the enemy of the workers,” and “Stop labor union repression,” All Together’s message was one of de facto support for the Democrats.

The Democrat Party is a capitalist party that in no way represents the interests of the working class. Rather it is based on layers of the bourgeoisie whose interests are stifled by the economic domination of South Korea’s massive chaebols, or family-owned conglomerates. While posturing falsely as socialist, All Together is seeking to subordinate the working class, via the trade unions, to this wing of the ruling class.



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