

South Korean unions hold one-day token strike

Ben McGrath
30 April 2015

South Korea's second largest umbrella trade union organization, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), called a 24-hour strike last Friday to protest against the austerity measures being prepared by President Park Geun-hye's government. Related protests continued throughout the weekend.

The KCTU is facing rising discontent among its members over plans to slash workers' wages and benefits, as well as labor market restructuring that would make it easier to fire full-time workers. The union federation has a long history of staging one-day token strikes to allow workers to let off steam, while channeling their anger back into the parliamentary establishment.

The strike took place in several cities across the country. Estimates on the number of participants differed greatly. While the KCTU stated that 260,000 workers took part, the Labor Ministry claimed only 40,000 strikers were involved. Workers from various industries came out to denounce the government's measures, notably teachers and civil servants from the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU) and the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU). About 400 union members at Seoul National University Hospital began a separate strike on Thursday.

Approximately 20,000 people gathered in the capital, at Seoul Plaza in front of City Hall, to protest against the government's plans. Demonstrators also demanded that the country's minimum wage be raised to 10,000 won (\$US9.20) an hour, up from 5,580 won.

Workers shouted slogans such as "Let's smash the labor market restructuring" and "Let's end the Park Geun-hye administration." KCTU head Han Sang-gyun, however, called on the government to change direction, saying: "The Park Geun-hye government

must shift from current policies that serve only chaebol [Korea's largest business conglomerates]."

The government mobilized 9,500 police officers, many equipped with riot shields and water cannons, despite the fact that the demonstrations were largely peaceful. Government spokesmen denounced the KCTU and the strike, branding it illegal, and vowed to take action against any civil servants who took part. "We are ready to crack down on those who are joining the illegal strike," the government said last Thursday. "There will be no leniency for unionized teachers and public workers who are taking to the street."

As opposition to Seoul's austerity measures grows, the government will turn to more vicious forms of repression in order to impose on the working class the burden of the slowing economy, which grew by just 0.4 percent during the final three months of last year, the slowest rate in two years.

A bill to "reform" civil servants' pensions is currently being debated in the National Assembly. A government plan, unveiled last year, would push back the age at which workers can access their pensions from 60 to 65, while increasing the amount paid from 7 to 10 percent of one's salary.

The finance ministry also announced last Thursday a so-called peak wage system that would slash the wages of older public sector workers, supposedly in the name of "job-sharing." The government claims that the money saved would allow younger workers to be hired.

A similar "job-sharing" program was implemented in 2009. Workers surrendered up to 30 percent of their pay checks, supposedly in order to keep their jobs, while their employers received tax breaks. In some cases, workers who agreed to the wage cut were fired anyway.

Undoubtedly, these measures will be imposed on

wider layers of workers in the future. “The move [to cut wages] is designed to have the public sector play a leading role on this issue so the private sector can follow suit and forge their own job-sharing programs,” the finance ministry stated.

Big business is also demanding that regular workers become easier to sack, in the name of being more globally competitive. Regular employees are full-time workers, with benefits and some protection from being fired “without cause.” So-called irregular workers already have no job security. They can be part-time workers or dispatch workers, employed by a third party and make only about 60 percent of what their regular counterparts are paid, despite doing the same jobs.

The corporate elite is stepping up its pressure on this issue. The World Economic Forum (WEF) last year downgraded South Korea’s global competitiveness by one spot to 26th, blaming the country’s allegedly rigid labor market. Korea Employers Federation director of public relations Kim Dong-uk declared: “Shedding staff is really difficult, even if there are real laggards, unless the company is on the verge of going under.”

Workers are widely in favor of a struggle against the government’s policies. In a ballot conducted from March 21 to April 10, 428,800 KCTU members cast votes on whether to strike, with 84 percent voting for the walkout. However, the KCTU and its affiliates did everything possible to limit the strike’s impact.

The Hyundai Motors union, which is a part of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), refused to mobilize its members. The KMWU is the largest union within the KCTU. The teachers’ union only called out 10,000 of its 53,000 members.

The KCTU is aligned with the main opposition party, the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), formerly the Democrat Party. Its criticisms of the Park Geun-hye administration are nothing but de facto support for the NPAD, implying that a government led by the opposition would be more worker-friendly.

In reality, both the ruling Saenuri Party and the NPAD represent the interests of big business. During the administrations of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the Democrats carried out widespread corporate restructuring, privatizations and layoffs, in the wake of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis.

Since then, South Korea’s ruling elite has worked to create a low-paid, part-time work force—with the aid of

the KCTU, which has suppressed or headed off workers’ opposition. The shutting down of the 2013 railway workers’ strike and the 2009 Ssangyong auto plant occupation are just two examples of the more recent betrayals by the KCTU.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact