

South Korean union leader charged with sedition

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9 January 2016

The leader of South Korea's second largest labor organization, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), has been charged with sedition following his arrest last month. The KCTU has been accused of planning violent acts at a rally in November as well as other "illegal" demonstrations in the past. The charge of sedition has not been used in South Korea since 1986 and represents a deepening of the government's suppression of political dissent.

Han Sang-gyun surrendered to police on December 10 after seeking refuge from arrest at Seoul's Jogye Temple, a Buddhist place of worship, where he had resided since November 16. Shortly before being detained, Han said he would expose the "illegal detail" of his arrest in court.

Following Han's arrest, the police charged him with eight crimes, which included organizing an unapproved rally, obstructing traffic and damaging property. A week later, however, Han was charged with sedition, a crime that carries the threat of up to ten years' imprisonment and a fine of 15 million won (\$12,700).

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency sought to justify the charge by asserting that "the extreme illegality and violence that occurred during the demonstration were not spontaneous acts by a few protestors but were rather part of a detailed plan" by KCTU leaders and related organizations "for a violent demonstration."

When prosecutors formally indicted Han this week, the sedition charge was not included, but they said the charge could be added later, following further investigations into Han's involvement in the November rally. The Seoul Central Public Prosecutor's Office said other union leaders could be charged with sedition as well.

The charge of sedition has not been used in South

Korea since General Chun Doo-hwan's administration, which employed it against protestors at a rally against his dictatorship. Whether or not prosecutors proceed to try Han with the supposed crime, the police and the government are setting a precedent for the use of the sedition charge against other protestors and government opponents.

The November 14 protest, organized by the KCTU and attended by as many as 130,000 people, turned violent in the face of police provocations. Before the event, Justice Minister Kim Hyeon-ung threatened the participants. The police made clear they would utilize bus barricades, which have been declared illegal by the courts, to stop the demonstrators from marching. The government and police have now seized on the violence they provoked to step up a crackdown on dissent.

In particular, the government is seeking to block public opposition to so-called labor reforms, which include the firing of employees at will, as well as to its plans to re-write history textbooks to glorify past South Korean dictators, such as President Park Geun-hye's father, General Park Chung-hee. The government and media have denounced anti-government protestors, as well as the KCTU, with President Park comparing them to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The ruling Saenuri Party is also pushing "anti-terrorism" bills to step up domestic surveillance and ban the wearing of masks at demonstrations. The police raided the KCTU's headquarters on November 21 and arrested other leading members. They claimed to have discovered ropes and tools used to commit violent acts at the protest.

Notwithstanding Han's vow to use the courts to expose the charges against him, the KCTU has in effect capitulated to government pressure. It has not called any significant industrial action by the nearly 700,000

workers it claims to represent. A four-hour work stoppage on December 16 was organized at Hyundai and KIA Motors to allow workers to let off steam, while 5,000 people gathered to protest in Seoul. On December 19, the KCTU held a third “general people’s uprising” protest in Seoul to denounce the government and Han’s arrest. However, according to police estimates, only 2,500 people attended.

The KCTU is a pro-big business organization that poses as a progressive and even at times anti-capitalist group. Politically, it attempts to direct workers’ anger behind the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), for whom it provides a “progressive” cover. It has absolutely no intention of taking a stand against capitalism.

Throughout its 25-year history, whenever strikes began to take a serious political toll or were on the verge of spinning out of the control of the trade union bureaucracy, the KCTU has shut them down. This notably took place during the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis, when the KCTU agreed to massive layoffs under the Kim Dae-jung administration. More recently, the KCTU called off the 2009 Ssangyong auto plant occupation and the 2013 railroad strike after facing increased pressure from the government.

Since taking office in February 2013, Park Geun-hye has gone on the offensive against her political opponents. The Unified Progressive Party, once the political appendage of the KCTU, was disbanded under phony charges of supporting North Korea, the first time a political party had been broken up since the Syngman Rhee administration did so in 1958. The Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU), an ally of the KCTU, was also deprived of its legal status by the government in October 2013.

The Park administration is determined to pursue the KCTU despite its efforts to accommodate itself to the South Korean ruling class by suppressing struggles by workers. The jailing of its leadership represents a serious attack on democratic rights and is above all aimed at preempting any movement of the working class against declining living conditions.

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