

South Korean court issues arrest warrant for KCTU union leader

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South Korea's Seoul Central District Court issued an arrest warrant on August 13 for Yang Gyeong-su, the chairman of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), one of the largest union organizations in the country. Prosecutors have accused him and the KCTU of organizing rallies between May and July that were banned on the pretext they violated COVID-19 social distancing measures.

Yang and 22 others have been accused of violating the Assembly and Demonstration Act and the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act. Rallies were held in Seoul on May 1, June 9, and June 19. An overnight protest involving 4,000 striking delivery workers took place on June 15-16, shortly before the union sold out the strike. The largest of the demonstrations was held on July 3, which included 8,000 participants.

Workers this year have been demanding better working conditions and a higher minimum wage. The minimum hourly wage for 2021 rose only 1.5 percent over last year to 8,720 won (\$US7.47), the smallest increase ever. Laborers in various industries took strike action this summer in addition to the delivery workers who remain highly exploited. This includes construction workers facing deadly conditions at job sites and ship builders. Workers at Hyundai Motors and GM Korea both voted to strike, but the Korean Metal Workers Union, the most influential union in the KCTU, rammed through concessions contracts at both companies over worker opposition.

Following the July 3 rally, police summoned Yang for questioning three times, which he ignored, before finally agreeing to speak to the police on August 4. Police sought an arrest warrant two days later, with prosecutors filing the request with the court.

Yang told reporters on August 4 before being

questioned, "It has been confirmed that there were no [COVID-19] infections resulting from the [July 3] workers' rally." He continued: "In order to solve workers' issues, [the government] must listen to their voices. We have requested a meeting with the president, prime minister, and labor minister several times but heard nothing back."

Despite the KCTU's militant pretensions, Yang's comments reflect the trade unions' real position as a wing of the bourgeois establishment, particularly of the Democratic Party. The KCTU strives to bind workers to the Democrats and prevent them from fighting against capitalism for their own independent interests. As such, this summer's rallies, as Yang stated, were aimed at winning an audience with the top government officials who uphold the capitalist system, while trying to convince workers President Moon Jae-in and his administration can be made to carry out pro-working class policies.

KCTU leaders have in the past courted arrest. Former KCTU leader Kim Myeong-hwan had his sentence of probation related to protests in 2018 and 2019 confirmed by the Supreme Court on August 12. Kim was accused of organizing violent demonstrations outside the National Assembly building and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, suspended for four years, as well as 160 hours of community service.

Currently, Yang has not been taken into custody. To avoid arrest, he is reportedly staying at the KCTU headquarters in Seoul, located within the building of *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, a liberal newspaper. Police attempted to arrest Yang on August 18, but clashed with KCTU members, who prevented the officers from entering the building. The police reportedly did not try to force their way in as they lacked a search warrant. In

2013, police forcibly entered the KCTU offices in an attempt to arrest Kim Myeong-hwan, mentioned above, who was then head of the Korean Railway Workers Union. The Constitutional Court later ruled the action was illegal.

The fact that the police still appeared at KCTU headquarters was clearly meant as a provocation, one that officers could have potentially seized upon to force their way into the building. The police reiterated on August 23 that they intended to arrest Yang. Nam Gu-jun, head of the National Investigation Office at the National Police Agency, stated, “While the situation the first time we attempted to proceed was poor, the arrest warrant still remains.”

While the government may not wish to alienate its KCTU ally at the moment by ordering a raid on the union building, the arrest warrant demonstrates the government is willing to use police-state measures to suppress workers. It is a warning to workers more broadly that opposition to the government and big business will be met with arrests and police violence.

However, for Yang and the KCTU, the refusal to comply with the investigation and threat of arrest is designed to bolster their so-called “militant” credentials even as they continuously betray workers’ struggles. For the government, it is aimed at reining in the KCTU, not because the union bureaucracy represents a genuine threat, but as a means to clamp down on workers fighting for improved wages and conditions, especially amid the worsening COVID-19 pandemic.

The police and prosecutors’ attempt to justify their repressive measures are utterly cynical. The government is reopening schools for the second half of the academic year, even as South Korea is experiencing its worst surge in cases throughout the entire pandemic. Under the highest Level 4 restrictions, Seoul, Incheon, and Gyeonggi province were originally required to move all classes online. In violation of its own measures, the Moon government is sending thousands of students, teachers, and school workers back into classrooms and buildings where they risk exposure to the highly contagious Delta variant, now the dominant strain in the country.

On Wednesday, Seoul announced that it had discovered 677 new cases in a 24-hour period, a record number for a single day in the capital city. Of those, 93 percent were caused by the Delta variant. Despite the

surge in cases, Seoul is working to remove social distancing measures in order to protect the profits of big business.

Workers and genuinely progressive layers in South Korea must oppose the police-state measures being used by the government and police but place no faith in the unions. To wage a genuine political fight for improved working conditions and democratic rights, workers need to break with the KCTU and the Democratic Party, establish their own independent rank-and-file committees and unify their struggles on a socialist perspective.



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