

South Korean intelligence officials raid headquarters of union confederation

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The South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) and National Police Agency raided the headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) on January 18 on the basis of allegations that union officials had violated the country's draconian National Security Act.

The NIS, South Korea's counterpart to the CIA in the US, has accused four officials of having connections to North Korean agents. Intelligence and police officers also raided the offices of the Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union (KHMU), a shelter for impoverished workers on Jeju Island, and the homes of the accused officials. All of the raids were supposedly conducted in search of documents related to the charges.

The union officials include a KCTU executive, a KHMU official, a former official at the Kia Motors union, and the owner and director of a shelter and neighboring memorial hall on Jeju Island for the victims of the Sewol ferry sinking in 2014. The last is said to be a former Korean Metal Workers' Union official at steel manufacturer Posco.

While the police have raided or attempted to raid KCTU offices in the past related to strikes and protests, it is the first time they have carried out a search and seizure for documents under the National Security Act. The 1948 law makes socialism illegal in South Korea. It is also the first time the NIS has been directly and openly involved in a raid on the KCTU.

In a statement on January 18, the KCTU, which postures as a militant labor organization, said, "The government is reviving the police state through accusations of supporting North Korea as well as the ideology that put forward the National Security Act in order to cover up the incompetence and realities of the

Yoon Suk-yeol government. The administration is desperately focusing on harming the KCTU and the labor movement, talking about seditious influences that have infiltrated labor unions in conjunction with today's search and seizure warrant."

An article in the right-wing *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper based on anonymous NIS sources alleged that five North Korean agents had been in contact with the four KCTU officials. It claimed that the chief agent Ri Kwang-jin works for North Korea's Cultural Exchange Bureau, which is allegedly tasked with generating dissent in South Korea. The NIS claims the four KCTU members met the North Korean agents between 2017 and 2019 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Hanoi, Vietnam.

The NIS alleges that slogans used by the KCTU during rallies last August 15 marking the anniversary of the end of Japanese rule, included anti-US and anti-conscription slogans that were generated by the North Korean agents. No evidence has been provided to back any of these accusations.

The NIS has a long history of violent repression since its founding in 1961 as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). Military dictator Park Chung-hee, who came to power that year in a coup, established the KCIA as a tool to crush political resistance to his regime. The KCIA participated in a number of operations including the kidnapping and torture of political dissidents; the infamous 1974 fabrication of the "People's Revolutionary Party" and execution of eight individuals the following year amidst anti-government protests; and the kidnapping in Japan and near assassination of Democrat and future president Kim Dae-jung in 1973.

While undergoing name changes, the NIS retains this reactionary character, demonstrating that even after

South Korea has “democratized” in the 1980s, the police state apparatus established under the military dictatorship remains in place.

In recent years, the NIS ran an online smear campaign in 2012 against then-presidential candidate Democrat Moon Jae-in. The NIS also participated in the forced dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party in 2014. It claimed that members of the party had founded an organization to aid North Korea in the event of war even though the courts admitted that no such organization existed.

The current government of right-wing President Yoon Suk-yeol has revived the old KCIA motto “We work in the dark to serve the light” for the NIS—a sign that a campaign of dirty tricks and repression is going to be stepped up.

The chief target of this reactionary campaign is the opposition in the working class to deteriorating economic conditions, the spread of COVID-19, and the integration of South Korea into US war plans against China. Workers and youth speaking out against the government will face accusations of sympathizing with or being agents of North Korea.

Building on the attacks carried out on the working class by the previous Moon Jae-in government, Yoon came to power in May pledging to repress workers’ resistance to assaults on their working and living conditions.

The KCTU does not defend the interests of the working class. Despite its radical-sounding rhetoric, the KCTU leadership signaled to the government in December that it would wage no genuine fight against the stepped-up assaults on workers, when it helped engineer the defeat of a major strike of truck drivers.

During that strike, President Yoon denounced the drivers as akin to a North Korean threat. Under pressure from the government, the truckers’ union, Cargo Truckers Solidarity, and the KCTU called off the strike with none of the drivers’ demands being met. The unions made no attempt to expand the struggle to other sections of the working class.

Workers should take a serious warning from the raids on the KCTU, which are part of a far broader campaign of repression being prepared against the working class. No faith can be placed in the KCTU or their political allies like the Democrats which all defend the crisis-ridden capitalist system. Workers should take matters

into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to organize a fight to defend their social and democratic rights. Such a struggle needs to be waged on a socialist and internationalist program.



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