

Arrest of workers continues as

South Korean president releases rival's wealthy son

By Terry Cook
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Despite widespread public opposition, South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung used his presidential powers last weekend to pardon Kim Hyun Chul, the convicted son of the country's former president Kim Young Sam, who left office at the end of 1997.

Kim junior was arrested on corruption charges in 1997 as part of a broader scandal involving several leading businessmen. Evidence at his trial in the District and Appeals Court revealed that between 1993 and 1996, while his father was still in office, he had accepted 6.6 billion won (about \$US5 million) in bribes from six businessmen in exchange for “government favours”.

Even though he was sentenced to three years jail and ordered to pay a 1.57 billion won fine, he was released in November 1997 on bail for “health reasons” after serving only six months. In July this year the Supreme Court commuted the sentence to just two years.

While not fully restoring Kim Hyun Chul's civil rights, the presidential pardon wipes out the remaining one-and-half year jail term. He will only be obliged to pay the outstanding fine. As well, about \$US5.8 million remaining from his father's 1992 presidential election campaign fund will be handed over to the state.

Civil rights groups, angered by the decision, charge that Kim Dae Jung granted the pardon, for “overt political reasons”, namely to persuade his former presidential rival, Kim Young Sam, to tone down his strident criticisms of the present government. Suspicions that some kind of behind-the-scenes deal had been struck, were heightened when Kim Hyun Chul, confident that a pardon was forthcoming, suddenly dropped his appeal to the Supreme Court to have his conviction overturned.

In an attempt to downplay the unpopular pardon, Kim Dae Jung granted it as part of the 54th National Liberation Day amnesty announced last weekend. National Liberation Day marks the end of Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula. The “grand amnesty” will see the release of some 2,864 people from the country's prisons, including 800 labour, union and student activists and 300 other people who fell foul of the government's reactionary National Security Laws.

The government's kid-glove treatment of Kim Hyun Chul—a wealthy individual connected to the ruling political circle—stands in sharp contrast to that meted out to hundreds of workers and others whose only crime to defend their basic rights, jobs and working conditions.

Hundreds of these “offenders” are still in prison. The government has refused to include in the amnesty 180 political prisoners who are awaiting trial, many of them arrested under security laws that include a ban on anyone supporting North Korea or having “communist sympathies”.

Even as some worker activists and union leaders are being released after months and years of incarceration, the police, armed with warrants issued by the Prosecutors Office, are hunting down hundreds more.

These include scores of activists who were targeted after the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) called off its campaign of strikes in June. Arrest warrants have been issued for the entire leadership of the KCTU's largest affiliate, the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF) as well as leading officials of the Health and Medical Workers Union and 66 members of the Seoul subway workers union. Some

of these are now behind bars.

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As the amnesty of Kim Hyun Chul was being announced, police arrested Park Young Choon, the leader of the MBC broadcasting labour union, and Park Jin Hae, the Secretary General of the National Federation of Broadcasting Unions. They were charged over their involvement in an “illegal” strike and protest last month. Three other broadcasting union members, including Korea Broadcasting Systems Union president Hyun Sang Yoon, were arrested earlier on similar charges. Last month's strike was called to oppose new legislation before the National Assembly strengthening the government's control over broadcasting.

Earlier in the week, riot police attacked about 1,000 workers from the National Livestock Cooperatives Federation (NLCF), who were demonstrating in front of the National Assembly Building in the capital of Seoul. Some 20 protesters were hospitalised after sustaining serious head injuries and 200 more were taken into custody. The NLCF workers declared an indefinite strike to oppose the government's plan to absorb the livestock companies into the Korean Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives to cut costs and eliminate jobs.

Students have also been arrested. Last Sunday riot police armed with tear gas and wielding batons assaulted students at the Seoul University. More than 8,000 police surrounded the campus to prevent 5,000 students from marching towards the “truce” village of Panmunjom, 25 miles north of Seoul, to hold a joint Liberation Day unification rally with North Korean students. Earlier the government declared the rally illegal and issued arrest warrants for seven student activists, including one who had visited North Korea to attend unification ceremonies.

In a further announcement, Kim Dae Jung said he was now considering a series of pardons at the end of the year to celebrate the “dawning of the new millennium”. These are to be granted mainly to offenders charged with “economic crimes”—that is, influential business and corporate figures involved in graft. Quite possibly it will provide an opportunity to grant Kim Hyun Chul his full civil rights.

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