

Thousands of workers in South Korea strike against repressive labour laws

By Terry Cook
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Over 150,000 South Korean workers participated in a one-day strike and large demonstrations on November 12 to protest at the government's repressive labor legislation. Called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the protests involved workers from car making, metals, textile and chemicals industries across South Korea demanding the withdrawal of existing legislation and opposing a raft of new laws aimed at giving even greater powers to employers. Strikers also called for measures to protect the rights and conditions of "irregular workers" (casual labourers).

Over 10,000 workers rallied outside the National Assembly in Seoul during the afternoon, where the government had deployed over 3,000 riot police. Despite the refusal of the police to grant permits—in line with instructions from the government—demonstrations also took place in 20 other cities.

One of the major issues at stake is the "provision seizure" law—a law that allow companies to seize the assets of union officials and workers, and to garnishee up to 50 percent of an employee's weekly earnings, in order to recover court-imposed damages for losses caused by so-called illegal strikes.

While the law was already on the books before President Roh Moo-hyan came to power in February this year, employers have begun using it more frequently in an attempt to stem the growing number of industrial disputes. According to the KCTU, unionists at 46 workplaces now face indemnity suits amounting to more than 140 billion won (about \$US110 million), including claims worth 40 billion won filed by the government's own public transport sector.

Numbers of unionists have committed suicide in protest at the asset and wage seizures. Last month, Lee Hae-Nam set fire to himself in front of the head office of the Sewon Corporation, which had been conducting an anti-union campaign since 2001. The company first hired thugs to

attack workers to stop them forming a union, and last year began to use the seizure laws to snatch the assets of those involved in organising strikes.

Also in October, the union president at Hanjin Heavy Industries, Kim Ju-Ik, hung himself from a crane on the company's premises. Kim, who had led a protracted dispute with the company over poor working conditions, was subjected to asset seizures resulting in the loss of his home. Two other workers committed suicide over the issue earlier in the year—Bae Dal-Ho, an employee at Doosan heavy industries, and Park Doon-Joon at Daehan Synthetic Fibre.

Suicides have also taken place over the poor conditions and treatment of "irregular workers". In one instance, Lee Yongseok, a member of the Korean Welfare Corporation representing casual workers, died from burns after setting fire to himself on October 31. Comprising almost 60 percent of the country's workforce, causal workers are paid only \$US748 a month, about half the wage of permanent employees. Home-based casual women workers are paid just \$311.

Despite widespread anger, the government has refused to retract the seizure laws, promising instead only to draft guidelines to ensure employers do not "abuse their right to file compensation suits". Given that the government itself had made extensive use of the laws, it is unlikely to guard against their "abuse".

Furthermore, in September the government provocatively unveiled its intention to implement even more draconian anti-worker legislation, under conditions where, according to the Samsung Economic Research Institute, one-third of Korean firms have either cut manpower or intend to by the end of the year. The new measures will include lifting the current criminal penalties for wrongful termination, making it easier for employers to sack workers; widening the range of circumstances under which employers can implement

lockouts; and allowing public corporations and companies deemed to be essential services to use contract labor during strikes.

Since taking office, Roh has been under increasing pressure from investors and big business to crack down on the escalating industrial action over wages, working conditions and layoffs. On November 5, the Korean CEO's Association of Multinational Corporations declared that Korea "must improve its investment environment" and complained that excessive wage demands were undermining the country's "competitiveness in the global arena". It called on Roh's government to establish a "taskforce to deal with labour disputes" and to "designate special economic zones as industrial action free areas".

Roh is attempting to use an incident on November 9 involving violent clashes between workers and riot police in Seoul as the pretext for implementing the tougher measures. At the 35,000-strong demonstration—an annual event to commemorate worker-martyr Jeon Tae-Il who died in a pro-democracy struggle—workers armed with steel pipes fought pitched battles with baton-wielding police sent to break up the protest. Over 130 demonstrators were arrested, 100 workers seriously injured and one remains in a coma.

Asked by the media if the aggressive actions of the police provoked the clashes, the head of the National Police Agency Choi Key-moon replied: "What we did was to exercise the governmental authority we are fully entitled to."

On November 10, one day after the clash, Roh insisted that the government would "fulfill its obligation to protect people from violent demonstrations" and "maintain public order". After meeting with key cabinet members, Home Affairs Minister Huh Sung-kwan announced, "leaders and participants of illegal and violent demonstrations will be ferreted out and punished..." Government prosecutors issued arrest warrants for 56 "union activists" they alleged threw firebombs at the police lines, while police claimed to have found a "large cache of firebombs" in a unionist's car. KCTU chairman Tan Byung-ho and five other union leaders were ordered to "present themselves" for questioning. So far, they have refused to comply.

There are strong indications that the government may have deliberately provoked the November 9 incident. It knew feelings were running high over the spate of suicides. It refused to grant a permit for the annual demonstration and then deployed riot police in large

numbers—measures virtually guaranteed to create an explosion.

The government has now announced it will implement what it calls a Prevention-Response-Post Management agenda to deal with demonstrations and protests. This will include banning protests by any organisation deemed to have "exerted illegal violent demonstrations" in the past. Under this definition, many labour, student and civil organisations could be prohibited from protesting, including the KCTU and its affiliates.

Despite the escalating level of government repression, the KCTU and other trade union bodies continue to refuse to wage a political fight against the Roh regime. Union-organised protests, even the most militant, are mostly called to let off steam and the demands are confined to puerile appeals for Roh to change his big business orientation. A statement issued in September by the KCTU called on the government to "give up its obstinacy on pro-business labour policies" and "to sincerely put an effort into implementing, even at a minimal level, the promises it ... made during the first period of its regime".

The unions' relationship with Roh replicates their outright class collaboration with the regime of former president Kim Dae-jung, whom they supported to power in 1998, hailing him as a "democrat". Having gained office, Kim rapidly moved to enforce the demands of the International Monetary Fund, including amending the country's labour laws to abolish life-long employment, opening up the economy to greater penetration by overseas investment, and privatising state-owned enterprises. Moreover, the "democrat" Kim did not hesitate to use the most brutal police-state methods to break strikes and protests.

Roh, who also trades on his past involvement in the pro-democracy movement and his reputation as a human rights lawyer, came to office at the beginning of this year.

Like his predecessor, Roh has proven to be neither "progressive" nor democratic. Instead, he has demonstrated that he will not be swayed by protests, but will act just as ruthlessly to suppress the working class in the defence of corporate interests.

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