

South Korea: The Situation of KRWU and Korean Railway in 2014

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Introduction

The Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) organises workers employed for the Korea Railroad Corporation (Korail), South Korea's public rail operating company, and some of its subsidiaries. The KRWU is affiliated to the Korean Federation of Public Services and Transportation Workers' Unions (KPTU), which is member of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). In December 2013 the KRWU carried out a 23-day long strike against the government's plan to further fragmentise and privatise the railway. This strike led to the establishment of a Subcommittee on the Future of the Rail Industry in the National Assembly, but also to massive repression against the union.

Continued Struggle and Repression

2014 was a difficult year marked by continued struggle against rail privatisation and continued repression on the part of the government and the Korail. Following the December 2013 strike, 4 KRWU leaders were imprisoned and 176 charged with 'obstruction of business' (a criminal charge). The Korail filed a lawsuit for damages against the KRWU worth KRW 16.2 billion (approximately US 16 million). The courts have temporarily seized KRWU assets up to KRW 11.6 billion in relation to this suit.

The Korail also slapped disciplinary actions on 404 KRWU officers and members, including 99 dismissals. In addition, the Korail pursued structural adjustment, including the introduction of single-driver trains on some rail lines, in preparation for further privatisation.

In the first part of 2014 the KRWU responded to these measures with diverse protest actions, including a high-altitude protest, hunger strikes and a second one-day strike on February 25 in timing with the KCTU's 'people's general strike'.

Again, the Korail retaliated with more disciplinary measures and dismissals. While some of these measures have been overturned by regional labour commissions, hundreds of workers have faced suspensions and docks in pay, while 77 have yet to be reinstated. Moreover, in March of 2014, the Korail began transferring workers who played an important part in the strike to different jobs and regions in order to weaken the union. As a result of the stress of being targeted for forced transfer one KRWU member committed suicide on April 3.

Fake 'Normalisation' of Public Institutions

Throughout 2014, the Korean government pursued a policy of so-called 'normalisation of public institutions'. This policy, which is continuing in 2015, entails forcing the revision of collective bargaining agreements at public corporations like the Korail to weaken hard won benefits and rights. While the government justifies this policy under the false pretext that it will reduce public sector debt, the real goal is to demonize public sector workers and weaken their unions.

In line with this false normalisation policy, the Korail forced the KRWU into concession bargaining in

mid-2014. Under tremendous pressure from the continued repression, the leadership reached an agreement with management in August, compromising on some provisions on the condition that the Korail would reduce the severity of disciplinary actions in return. It was a difficult decision, and one which in the end, did not receive the support of the majority of the membership.

With the agreement voted down, the KRWU leadership made the political decision to resign. The Korail used this leadership vacuum created to further attack the union, threatening a wage freeze if a new agreement was not reached and pressuring members to disaffiliate. Fortunately, a new leadership was elected in October, and an improved agreement reached in November. The KRWU's situation has since stabilized.

In December, a district court found 4 central KRWU's leaders not guilty of obstruction of business in relation to the 2013 strike. This was a small, but important victory, made possible by an amicus brief submitted by the ITF and continued pressure applied on the government by the ILO, ITUC, ITF and unions around the world. It is possible the ruling will be overturned in appeal, however.

The Continued Fight against Privatization

Despite tremendously difficult conditions, the KRWU has continued its struggle against rail privatisation. While the government had announced plans to complete the next phase of its privatisation plan - the splitting off of the freight sector - by the end of 2014, continued public opposition as the result of the KRWU's strike and campaigning delayed this process.

The road ahead is not an easy one. In 2015, the government seeks to renew its efforts to establish a new company to run part of the high-speed rail (KTX), split of freight, sell off the airport railway and introduce private operators and competition on regional lines. For this reason, the KRWU is preparing itself for a new phase in the struggle by conducting research, developing policy alternatives and carrying out membership education. It is also seeking to strengthen solidarity with rail unions around the world.

P.S.

* 2015/01/08. <https://www.kptu.net/>