

South Korea: The Jailing of KCTU Labor Leader Han Sang-gyun

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The South Korean government is attempting to squelch worker militancy by locking up the country's leading labor figure.

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Last month, South Korean prosecutors called for an eight-year jail term for Han Sang-gyun, leader of the country's eight-hundred-thousand-strong independent union federation. The request is outlandish even in a country that was once moving toward democracy but is now rapidly retreating back into authoritarianism.

All eight charges against Han stem from the unauthorized rallies the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) called between April and November 2015. The government was forced to use a technicality — traffic violations — to interfere with the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of assembly.

Nevertheless, at the sentencing hearing this Monday, the prosecution will seek a lengthy jail term. It claims Han attempted to incite violence at a November 14 rally in central Seoul when he yelled, "Let's advance towards the Presidential Palace."

The rally indeed turned violent — but not because of the tens of thousands of workers and citizens who were protesting two-tier-wage legislation and government austerity measures. Riot police cordoned off the streets and water-cannoned the otherwise peaceful protesters. A high-pressure streak of capsaicin solution from a water cannon felled Baek Nam-ki, a sixty-nine-year-old farmer activist. Baek remains comatose with irreversible brain damage.

After the rally, Han, already wanted on an arrest warrant, took sanctuary at Jogye Buddhist temple in central Seoul, where he stayed for twenty-four days before turning himself in. The government summoned about 1,500 other rally participants for investigation.

A Pledge to Fight

In December 2014, Han was elected KCTU president in the first non-delegate, direct vote in the federation's nineteen-year history. He was also the first president elected on a pledge to organize a

general strike. “They [the government and business owners] were aiming to annihilate the KCTU, and we had little option but to fight back,” Han said in court on June 13, explaining why he had run.

Under Han’s leadership, the KCTU twice called for a general strike. But both ended in only symbolic stoppages, adding to a grim picture for South Korean labor.

The country’s unions, once one of the best organized and most militant segments of the global labor movement, have suffered a series of setbacks since the late 1990s, when the government made it easier for employers to lay off workers and hire casual laborers with fewer legal protections. Now, less than 10 percent of the workforce is unionized — the country’s lowest level ever, even including the 1970s and 1980s, when Korea was under a harsh military dictatorship.

One in seven workers takes home less than the approximately \$5.15 minimum hourly wage because they are casual workers and thus not fully protected by law.

These defeats, coupled with the ongoing economic recession, have divided union leaders and demoralized members.

Much of the religious establishment, once a shelter for political dissidents, has turned a blind eye to labor’s agony. Han initially planned to organize a general strike while at Jogye temple, home to the country’s largest Buddhist sect. But from the first day of Han’s sanctuary, the sect’s leadership, implicated in a series of corruption scandals, quietly mobilized a group of loyalists to evict him. During his twenty-four-day stay, Han often scuffled with these henchmen who, on one occasion, stripped him almost naked.

A Dictator’s Daughter

South Koreans are seeing the clock rapidly turned back on the democracy they won in the late 1980s after three decades of campaigning against military rule.

Since she took office in 2013, President Park Geun-hye, daughter of the deceased military strongman Park Chung-hee, has dissolved a small left-leaning party (for purportedly having links with North Korea) and outlawed a two-hundred-thousand-member teachers union (for financially supporting members who were fired for union activity).

The country’s intelligence agency is widely believed to have run massive online campaigns to tilt the electoral balance in Park’s favor. Revamped under Park’s government, the National Intelligence Service has allegedly placed much of Koreans’ texting under real-time surveillance.

In addition, one of Park’s aides funneled funds from a big-business lobby to a far-right group that routinely mounted counter-protests to left rallies.

The Labor Crackdown

Faced with an ever-slowing economy, the South Korean government has chosen to ratchet up the pressure on labor.

This month it said it would raise \$95 billion in public funds to bail out shipbuilders, the country’s cash cow hit hardest by the global recession. Not a single dime was earmarked for job protection, and mass layoffs are expected.

Businesses are attempting to impose a wage ceiling for employees fifty-five years and older — a move ostensibly aimed at addressing youth unemployment that would slash wages for both first-time job seekers and senior workers.

Rank-and-file anger and popular frustration are so palpable that periodic rallies by the KCTU and other opposition groups draw tens of thousands of citizens and workers.

South Korea's government and business leaders want to put Han away because he represents a pivotal segment of what is left of labor militancy. Indeed, Han is one of a handful of individuals who have led during critical moments in South Korea's volatile labor history, when anger and frustration turned into action.

"I Was Feisty and Young"

Han was born and raised on the outskirts of Kwangju, the site of a 1980 student and worker uprising against a military coup. In a country where, for decades, regime change occurred only through putsches or martial law, coup organizers could generally silence opposition with mass arrests and violent crackdowns on protests.

But Kwangju was different. In May 1980, students and workers fought paratroopers for five days, eventually driving them from the city. Some protesters formed a militia with the firearms they seized from city armories. Han, then a seventeen-year-old high school student, joined the militia, which for five more days controlled the city.

"I was feisty and young and could not sit by when the bloody carnage was underway," Han later recalled. "Although I was young, I knew it was wrong [of the paratroopers] to kill innocent people."

But the uprising ended in massacre. While the number of civilian casualties has never been determined, it is believed to lie between two and six hundred, including at least forty high school students.

Militant Unionism

In the summer of 1987, Han again found himself at a critical moment in South Korean labor history. Mass protests forced major concessions from the Chun government and triggered an independent union movement that formed 2,600 new unions in three months. Han helped found a union at Ssangyong Motor.

In 2008, when Han was elected chair of the union, Ssangyong was in crisis. Korea's top producer of SUVs, the company was sold to China's SAIC Motor in 2004. Since then, it had launched no new models. The new owner did not seem to want to capitalize on the global SUV boom, instead shipping sensitive technology to its Chinese headquarters.

In 2009, Ssangyong sought receivership and said it would lay off 2,646 workers — 37 percent of the workforce. In response Han and 1,700 fellow unionists took over the plant. The occupation lasted for seventy-seven days until it was quashed by a bloody police crackdown.

Han was arrested and served a three-year jail term. But management had to make concessions, too. It put 48 percent of the 2,646 on unpaid leave and promised to hire them back when business picked up.

For Ssangyong workers, and other South Koreans in similar situations, layoffs were painful because they lost not only jobs but company-subsidized housing and other benefits. Their desperation was captured in the strike's two slogans: "Layoff kills" and "Let's survive together."

The seventy-seven days of occupation were deadly stressful. At the end, the more than seven hundred remaining occupiers were blacklisted and could no longer find jobs in the industry. About twenty-eight Ssangyong workers have since committed suicide or died of PTSD-related conditions.

In November 2012, after his release from prison, Han staged a 171-day sit-in at the top of a 164-foot, 124,000-volt electric transmission tower near the Ssangyong plant, demanding the reinstatement of his fellow workers.

It took yet another three years of campaigning before, in December 2015, Ssangyong, now part of India's Mahindra Group, finally agreed to hire back 179 workers over the next two years and to prioritize those affected by the 2008 cuts over other candidates when filling future vacancies. The company also dropped lawsuits against the union and created a \$1.5 million fund to help laid-off workers and their families.

At a Crossroads

Once again, Han is at the center of a crucial point in Korea's labor history. He and his fellow KCTU members have taken up the fight for labor and democracy against the Park Geun-hye government.

By imprisoning one of workers' most important leaders on trumped-up charges, the government hopes to suppress resistance to austerity measures and authoritarianism.

More than ever, Han, and the Korean labor movement, need our solidarity.

Yi San

P.S.

* "The Jailing of Han Sang-gyun". Jacobin. 7.3.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/han-sang-gyun-south-korea-labor-kctu/>

<http://labornotes.org/blogs/2016/06/south-korea-independent-labor-leader-faces-eight-years-jail>

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