

KGEU Newsletter #3

Saturday 3 June 2006, by [KGEU](http://inter.kgeu.org) (Date first published: 1 June 2006).

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Korean Government Violently Represses KGEU Rally

107 KGEU members arrested, 4 detained, several injured during demonstration against restructuring at Rural Development Administration

On 25th May, riot police raided a peaceful and legal demonstration of the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU), which took place in front of the Rural Development Administration (RDA). The violent raid and suppression resulted in severe injuries and mass arrests. Several union members including KGEU's General Secretary, KIM Jeong Soo, and Secretary of Public Relations, CHOI Nak Sam, were severely beaten by both riot and plain clothed police, and had to be taken to the hospital. One member ended up with a broken finger and another, a broken tail bone.

200 members of KGEU had gathered in front of the RDA to protest against RDA's restructuring plans and repression on the union. Although the rally was legally notified in advance, riot police blocked the participants from joining the rally. During this process, a clash broke out during which 8 union members were arrested.

After the rally, participants went to Suwon Joongbu Police Station where the 8 were being held, and protested against such an illegal arrest of KGEU members and demanded their immediate release. However, another 99 members were arrested as well in front of police station while the union leaders were asking for negotiation with the police. The police refused and instead arrested almost everybody.

Out of the total 107 arrested, warrants of detention had been issued against 8 members. And 4 of them have been detained. The police had specifically pinpointed and detained the Secretary of Organising & Dispute and his assistant, as well as two vice presidents, leading to allegations that the police and the prosecutors were aiming to intentionally decapitate the KGEU. Those detained are Mr. PARK Kee Han, Vice President, Mr. HAN Seok Woo, Vice President, Mr. PARK Woon Yong, Secretary of Organising & Dispute and Mr. LEE Jeong Soo, Director of Organising.

Violent suppression continued the next day. On 26th May, the RDA management called in security guards to suppress a peaceful rally that was taking place in front of the main building. In the process, women workers were beaten and harassed by male security guards.

In the meantime, the RDA is continuing to push forth with its plans to restructure its workforce, breaking agreements between the RDA and the KGEU.

Struggle of the RDA workers started when KIM In Sik, the former presidential advisor of rural affairs, was appointed as the administrator and broke his predecessor's agreement with the trade union on the adoption of a single grade system for researchers and managerial staff, and pushed ahead with plans to promote upper level staff.

However, the problem runs deeper than a mere conflict over personnel management.

The ROH Moo Hyun government has been introducing mechanisms to restructure public offices under the neoliberal idea that anything 'public' should be cut down. Corporate ideas of productivity and cost reduction are being introduced into public offices, as well as labour flexibility and performance pay. In the case of RDA, workplace restructuring should particularly be seen in the context of agricultural liberalization and neoliberal free trade. It is no coincidence that these restructuring plans are taking place at the same time as the WTO Doha Agenda negotiations, as well as the Korea-US FTA that is causing much confrontation within Korean society at the moment. In other words, the neoliberal free trade regime is changing the idea of 'rural development' from one based on traditional small farming to that based on export substitution and mass agribusinesses, which in turn requires overall transformation in the public office that deals with such matters.

Neoliberal restructuring inevitably also requires weakening of trade union power. In general, the Korean government is promoting its so-called roadmap on 'advancement of industrial relations', aimed at degrading industrial relations to benefit transnational capital, together with a bill that would expand use of irregular labour. Specifically for public workers, the government has passed a draconian bill that allows unionization of government employees but it severely limits their basic labour rights and substantially restricts union activities. Under this new law, it had identified the KGEU to be an 'illegal organization' and is explicitly repressing the KGEU. It is not surprising that RDA was the first organization among central government agencies that had executed the directive from the Ministry of Home Affairs and Government Administration to 'transform illegal organizations into legal trade unions(voluntary withdrawal of membership)'.

In summary, the violent suppression of the demonstration against restructuring at RDA that ended in mass arrests and legal prosecution is a clear expression and direct result of the government's attempts to decapitate a democratic trade union while introducing policies that transform the public office from one that serves the people to one that serves only corporate interests.

The KGEU has resolved to continue its struggle against RDA's breach of agreement with the union and the adoption of restructuring plans, as well as counteracting any form of attempt to weaken the union, including sexual harassment against women workers. At the same time, it is planning to file lawsuits against the police for violent suppression on a legal demonstration, violation of human rights and unlawful arrests with support from civil society and human rights organizations.

Gyeonggi Provincial Office Closes Down KGEU Branch Union Office in an Early Sunday Morning Raid

At early hours on 28th May, SOHN Hak Kyu, Governor of Gyeonggi Province sent in security guards and his staff to raid and close down protest tents and the Gyeonggi branch/chapter union office of KGEU, located inside the provincial office building. By 10am that morning, the tents had been confiscated, the office door sealed and union members blocked from entering. This is yet another attempt to dissolve the democratic and independent KGEU.

Ever since the Ministry of Home Affairs and Government Administration ordered central and local government bodies to 'transform illegal organizations into legal trade unions' - in other words, close down the KGEU and promote government-controlled and submissive 'unions' - attempts to explicitly repress the KGEU and close down its branch and chapter offices are on the rise. Local governments around the country such as Wonju City and Ulsan City are physically trying to incapacitate the union by closing down union offices and forcing banks to stop automatic transfer of union dues. At the same time, central and local government bodies are pressuring workers to form an 'alternative' union - one that is obedient, and without the right to collective action.

In the case of Gyeonggi province, the provincial government started a variety of measures to repress the KGEU, including infiltrating into the ranks and pressuring a group of workers to initiate a vote to withdraw membership from KGEU and instead make and join a so-called 'legal' union. The ballot failed, but around the half of the KGEU members at the provincial hall left the KGEU after then.

KGEU members formed an emergency committee and set up tents to implement sit-in protests against Governor SOHN's measures to breakup the KGEU. The provincial government retaliated by cutting electricity and internet access to the union office. Threats to actually raid the office were constant, however, the government waited until 28th May - a Sunday - when the KGEU was still recuperating from the mass arrests made on 25th May.

Nonetheless, with the support of majority of workers, the emergency committee is strongly counteracting against the raid on the branch office. The KGEU is planning to hold a national rally together with the KCTU to call for compliance with international labour standards in guaranteeing full labour rights to government workers and stop to labour repression.

Also, the KGEU and KCTU will be sending a delegation to Geneva on 4th June to participate in the International Labour Organization (ILO) conference. The ILO had already issued several recommendations to the Korean government to comply with international labour standards, as well as recently resolving to directly intervene and make a formal complaint to the Korean government for its repression against the KGEU.