

Self-Presentation

The Korean Government Employees' Union (KGEU)

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Self-presentation of the KGEU taken from its website June 3, 2006.

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Brief history of the KGEU

The Korean Government Employees' Union (KGEU) was successfully established on March 23, 2002, notwithstanding harsh repression by the government. As an independent and democratic trade union of more than 140,000 government employees, the KGEU has fought for full guarantee of government employees' basic labour rights and truthful reform of civil service for people.

The KGEU has proclaimed that government employees are not the lackeys of the regime in power, the agent of graft and corruption and a tool for the powerful, but reborn as a proud part of the working class of this country.

The KGEU has been focusing on campaigns for administration for the poor and excluded, accusing the corrupt power and reform of absurd and unfair institutions and practices in administration. In fact, the truthful reform of civil service for people is the way to full guarantees of government employees' basic labour rights. This is why the government and the powerful have been repressing government employees' union. This is why they are so afraid of unions. They say all the government employees involved in union activities should be punished and excluded from civil service. The KGEU will not step back at any repression, which will result in far stronger struggles.

Establishment of the Korean Government Employees' Union

On March 23, 2002, the inaugural congress of the Korean Government Employees' Union was held with 268 out of 456 delegates present. Seoul National University, the venue for the congress and a mass rally, was blocked by the police. The venue was immediately moved to an auditorium of Korea University and the congress was held. Shortly after the congress started, the police entered the university and stormed into the auditorium. Although platform, constitution, rules, inaugurating declaration, struggle statement of the union were adopted and the Emergency Countermeasure Committee was formed, election for executive board members of the union was stopped. The Police forcefully dissolved the congress and apprehended 198 delegates and observers. After the congress, several union leaders were arrested and more arrest warrants were issued against other union leaders including former president of the KAGEWC, Cha Bong-Chun. But in spite of heavy

surveillance of the police, election for union executives was managed to be held at pre-dawn of April 3. Cha Bong-Chun and Lee Yong-Han were elected as President and General Secretary of the union. 361 out of 456 delegates could take part in this election. After the election the union leaders started a sit-in protest at a cathedral near Seoul.

On February 24, one month ahead of the inaugural congress of the KGEU, its predecessor, the KAGEWC or the Korean Association of Government Employees' Work Councils held a national congress and resolved to establish a union and confirmed the constitution of the union. As of March 14, 65,715 of government employees have joined the KGEU.

February 27, 2002, the MOGAHA submitted a "Draft on Labor Rights of Public Servants" to the Tripartite Commission : "No titles containing 'trade unions' permitted. A separate law to be formulated. The right to conclude a collective agreement and the right to act collectively not allowed. Penal provisions on illegal union activities and violations resulting from union activities to be specified in law. 3-5 year grace period."

Strike in 2002

At the 3rd National Congress on September 15th, the KGEU decided to launch an all-out struggle including strikes in October through November. The 279 delegates in attendance, from almost all government organs, ratified the KGEU's all-out struggle plans for the second half of this year and consolidated the list of KGEU Special Collective Bargaining Demands. Participants affirmed their commitment to the larger aims of the struggle: to secure a full guarantee of government employees' basic labor rights, to improve working conditions, and to promote reform so as to purge corruption in the Korean government. The delegates also set the main objectives for this year's all-out struggle as: withdrawal of the Government's draft bill, legalisation of the KGEU, promotion of better working conditions through direct bargaining between the Government and the KGEU, and strengthening the union through struggle. The Union implemented an industrial ballot for four days from 28th October, and a majority of members have answered positive to starting a strike. 56,411 out of 69,548 members turned out for the vote recording 81%, and 89% of those who voted answered positive. The vote asked the members about launching a strike against the Act on the Establishment and Operation of Public Officials Association(hereafter Public Officials Association Act) and to demand that the Government come out for a direct negotiation with the KGEU. The result shows the resistance of the government employees against the government that has outlawed and repressed the KGEU, and it also shows the passion of the government employees to attain labour rights. In particular, the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs(MOGAHA) has stipulated that this vote "broke the law prohibiting illegal actions by government employees" and has ordered "strict punishment".

The Act on the Establishment and Operation of Public Officials Association(referred to "Public Officials Association Act") proposed by the MOGAHA and passed through the Cabinet on September 15 has basically nothing to do with government employees' basic labor rights. The Act, which is scheduled to become effective after three years in 2006 deprives workers of collective action, disallows collective agreements and even stipulates that the organisation will not be under the application of Trade Unions and Labour Relations Adjustment Act. Despite the purpose of the Act is to secure right to independent association, it limits the scope and method of collectivity, and even stipulates certain prohibitions -distorting the meaning of association right itself. Also, it disallows membership to any umbrella organisation and threatens strict punishment should there be any kind of activities as a labour union.

It is an obvious fact that workers form solidarity with other workers to secure their rights. This is the fundamentals of association right stipulated in the Constitution. Arguing that "association right is

secured” when the organisation is even not allowed to use the name “trade union” is nonsense. Labour rights are rights protected by the Constitution and all workers should have those rights. Also, prohibiting certain workers from joining in the organisation infringes the fundamentals of basic rights. Thus the government’s Public Officials Association Act is retrogressive in that it goes against the democratic development of society and human rights. It is merely a show to establish the so-called “image of a human rights nation” to the international community. It is completely negating the fact that government employees are also workers, and deceiving all requests from in and outside of Korea to secure labour rights of government employees. This Act has nothing to do with labour rights of government employees and labour unions, and is merely an evil law with the objective of controlling government employees.

The KGEU has continuously called for a change in the attitude of the government and has argued for direct dialogue between the government and the workers to assure labour rights of government employees. The union has even asked for special collective bargaining. However, the government has turned a deaf ear to the government employees and has simply repressed and ignored the union. To them, the union that was independently and democratically established by 70,000 government employees is simply “illegal” and does not qualify as dialogue counterparts.

On November 4 and 5 more than 30,000 union members participated in the strike using their annual leave. And the KGEU tried to hold a rally then. But the police had been blockading almost all the universities in Seoul, where the rally was likely to be held. Despite the police blockade and violent suppression, more than 2,000 KGEU members were able to enter into the rally venue, the Hanyang University. But lots of them were injured by the police violence. The rally began around 9:00 pm. But an hour after then riot cops stormed the campus to break down the rally and arrested around 770 members of the KGEU.

President Kitaoka of JICHIRO (also vice president of the PSI), who joined the rally on behalf of the PSI and was expected to make a solidarity speech, witnessed the police violence again. He took part in the KGEU’s inaugural congress on March 23, which was broke down by the police as well.

The Government said that maximum punishment as far as the laws allow should be taken to the all the government employees, who joined any illegal activities. Some KGEU leaders were arrested as soon as they declared launching of the strike and arrest warrants had been issued against other KGEU leaders. All over the country the police tried to block KGEU members getting to Seoul and they even illegally detained some leaders of KGEU regional branches.

After thousands of KGEU members were arrested and dispersed at the rally on Nov. 4th, other KGEU members tried to see their colleagues who were detained in police stations. But the police arrested some of them as well.

To full guarantee of government employees’ labour rights

It is said that this government under President ROH Moo-Hyun will legalise a government employees’ union. Yet it is far from reality. A government employees’ union in the rhetoric of the government shall not be based on the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act. This means that a government employees’ union is different from other unions and therefore anything important like membership eligibility, organizational structure, scope of labor rights permitted and matters subject to collective bargaining should be specified by an act called ‘the Act on Establishment and Operation of Government Employees’ Unions’ to be legislated. The Ministry of Labour made a pre-announcement of ‘a bill on the establishment, operation, etc., of public officials trade unions’ on June 23, 2003. Since then many unions, NGOs like MINBYUN(Lawyers for Democratic Society) and the KGEU criticised injustice and unilateral legislation process of the bill, and demanded legalisation of

government employees' unions through revision of the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act(Trade Union Act). According to the bill, even though government employees could establish and join a union, the union can not conclude a collective agreement which effectively covers most matters that affect government employees' work. Needless to say, the right to collective action will be denied. This is not to guarantee government employees' basic labour rights but to limit government employees' unions activities. At this moment the bill was passed through examination of the Ministry of Legislation and waiting for Cabinet Meeting to be confirmed as a government bill. After then it will be submitted to the National Assembly.

Facing this unilateral legislations by the government, the KGEU is holding a 1,000,000 people's signature campaign against the bill and for demand of truthful reform of civil service to make known that only vigorous activities of government employees' union could make a real change of civil service for people and the bill would limit government employees' basic labour rights to make it.

"All KGEU Officials and Shop Stewards Rally" was held on October 18 in Seoul. This rally was to confirm and consolidate KGEU's determination to struggle against the special act on public servant unions and to fight for truthful reform with purge of civil service.

Despite that this rally was legally reported in advance as part of the rally of the Public Workers' Solidarity, which is composed of 6 public sector unions such as Public Service Union(KPSU), Teachers' Union(KTU), Medical Workers' Union(KHMWU), Professors' Union(KPU), University Workers' Union(KUWU), Government Employees' Union(KGEU), the police totally blockaded the rally with violence. Thousands of riot cops surrounded and broke into the rally venue and questioned all the people who tried to enter the place.

Indeed, as soon as the rally was declared to begin, the riot cops attacked the participants. The cops, even climbing up to the stage, took the microphone away from the chairperson and arrested him. Hundreds of participants were arrested and 9 of them were detained into the police station. Lots of KGEU members were wounded. The riot cops even chopped them with their shields and one of KGEU members fainted on the stage to be taken into the hospital.

In fact the police tried to sweep away any moves on government employees' basic labour rights. In the morning on October 18, in Pyeongtaek-si(city) of Gyeonggi-do(province), the riot cops entered the city hall, and arrested the director-general of Pyeongtaek chapter of the KGEU with handcuffs put on and detained for 2 hours, saying that he was likely to participate in the 'illegal rally' on the day. In Ulsan Metropolitan City, hundreds of riot cops were arranged to local bus depots, stations and airport to prevent any government employees from coming up to Seoul to participate in the rally. Whether the act would be 'the Act on Establishment and Operation of Government Employees Association' or 'the Act on Establishment and Operation of Government Employees' Unions, it is a special law clearly different from 'the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act' which deals with trade unions in general, and far from what the union has been asking for. The point is that they want to limit and confine the rights and activities of government employees' unions in favour of them. A right to collective bargaining would be limited as a union couldn't negotiate and conclude a collective agreement in most areas concerned with working conditions of government employees. Needless to say, a right to collective action would be denied. In short, they don't want a democratic and independent union of government employees.

What's more, the government has kept saying that government employees who have joined 'illegal activities' for their basic labor rights should be punished, because they have 'violated existing laws'.

The KGEU has proclaimed that, if 'the bill on public officials trade unions', that shall seriously limit and confine the rights and activities of government employees' unions, is submitted to the National Assembly by the government, all the government employees will go on an all-out struggle including a general strike.

KGEU new leadership launched

KIM Young Gil and AHN Byung Soon have been elected KGEU President and General Secretary by a direct vote of union members on February 12 to 13. 87,390 out of 101,739 members turned out for the vote recording 85.9 percent. Two teams had run in this election. The President/General Secretary-elects grabbed 50,276 votes, or 57.5 percent of support. Unlike the last election that had been voted by delegates under severe police blockade and repression, this poll was implemented peacefully at about 500 polling stations of 199 chapters nationwide throughout National Assembly, ministries and local governments.

President KIM Young Gil has been Chair of Gyeongnam Regional Branch that has led the way of KGEU struggle. He had been imprisoned for about 3 months accused of 'illegal union activities'. With the establishment of KGEU and strike using annual leave in 2002, he had been taken to disciplinary committee. He was sentenced to Removal, the heaviest disciplinary measure.

Shortly after the election, president KIM Young Gil gave his word with his message to union members that the union will launch a campaign for substantial improvement of working conditions and truthful reform of civil service for people, and a struggle against government policies for disruption of government employees' unions. Moreover he promised of more active strategies for basic labour rights in general election in April, strengthening of union's organising capacity, putting together with other government employees' unions, and propelling union's affiliation to a national center of trade unions with a poll of union members.

Proclaiming freedom of political activities for government employees and the oppression

The KGEU proclaimed freedom of political activities for government employees and its support for the DLP, while the government threatening with arrests of union leadership and mass disciplines against union members. The Korean Government Employee's Union (KGEU) has been facing unjust oppression from the government for its resolution for the end of corrupt politics, assertion of freedom for political activities, and declaration of support for the Democratic Labor Party (DLP).

KGEU held its annual congress on the 23rd of March and adopted a special resolution, criticizing the corruption and undemocratic practices of established political parties. It also resolved to end corruption and support the DLP. The resolution adds that, while it will remain strictly neutral in the work of its members, it is a constitutional right not to be discriminated against in its political life because of the social status of its members.

On the 30th of March, the KGEU held a press conference and declared that government employees will take part in the historic task of democratizing society. To do this the KGEU announced

- it will support the DLP candidates in local constituencies and the party-list votes
- it will set the social agenda on the political freedom of government employees to engage freely in political activities, and to adamantly struggle against those in opposition to it
- Policy inquiries to general election candidates
- Political education and organizational activity plans.

However, on the 1st of April, Minister of Government Administration and Home Affairs HUH Sung Kwan called the declaration by the KGEU "a serious and intolerable challenge to state power" and announced that "disciplinary action and legal measures against the leaders" would be taken, while also making clear "all participants will be seriously disciplined." The Korean government issued warrants for the 9 members of the leadership of the KGEU, including President, vice-presidents, and general secretary the following day(2nd of April). It also requested to regional government offices that serious disciplinary action(dismissal, displacement etc.) be taken, and that the several hundred

members who participated in the KGEU conference on the 23rd of March be disciplined. In response, the KGEU demanded the following in a statement announced on the 3rd of April: 1) that the government stop repression of the KGEU and its right to express political views, which are practices reminiscent of military dictatorships, 2) retract the arrest warrants for the union leadership, 3) immediately cancel disciplinary action requests to the regional government offices, for it is a direct challenge to the independent decision-making procedures of the union and an obstruction to sound labour-management relations. The KGEU strongly demanded measures regarding these calls, and warned that the government will face strong resistance from its 130,000 members.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions(KCTU) has supported the declaration by the KGEU and criticized the repressive measures by the government in statements and press conferences on the 25th of March, and the 2nd, 3rd of April.

Vice-president KIM Jung Soo of the KGEU arrested on April 3rd, 18 members of the KGEU were forcefully detained in the morning of April 4th while visiting the police office to protest the arrest of KIM and to ask for an interview with him and holding a press conference. Two lawyers from the KCTU legal center were also detained. During the police attack on the KGEU members, a member was even injured by police violence. The KCTU and the KGEU immediately announced statements criticizing the actions taken by the government and police. And the police even carried out illegal infringement of human rights such as illegal surveillance and shadowing on KGEU members' family and a illegal house search without any warrants.

Government violently represses KGEU's demand for collective bargaining

On the afternoon of May 12, members of the KGEU gathered in front of the Kyobo building in Kwanghwamoon, Seoul, to hold its national local leaders' rally for the attainment of its 7 goals, stop the retrogression of public employees work regulations, and the release of arrested members. The police declared the KGEU demonstration illegal even before it started and surrounded the entire site of the event. The 300 or so local union leaders from the KGEU responded by protesting the police blockade and moved towards the Ministry of Information and Communication building, where the demonstration had originally been planned. As soon as the participants began to move, the police, using violence attempted to break the demonstration. As a result 66 participants were illegally arrested including the Deputy Secretary and many were injured.

Later that afternoon, the remaining members reconvened and participated in the Public Sector Workers Solidarity Rally, which had previously been scheduled. The Public Sector Workers Solidarity, which includes the Public Services Union, the University Professors Union, University Workers Union, Korean Teachers Union, the Health and Medical Workers Union, and the KGEU, urged the government to strengthen the public sector by increasing the budget and to guarantee basic labour rights including the right to bargain for public sector workers.

At the rally, KGEU Acting president JUNG Yong Chun remarked, "Police violence is part of an irrational scheme by the government that fears public workers solidarity. It is a scheme to separate government workers from the rest of the public sector workers. The KGEU will be at the forefront of the struggle of the Public Sector Workers Solidarity."

In the process of breaking the strike, the police shouted, "Arrest only the KGEU members!" The police also slashed many workers with their shields and twisted the arms of many of the participants as they hauled them to the police station. Chair of Geochang-gun(county) Chapter, SOHN Cheol Sang suffered pulled ankle ligaments, and Vice-chair of Busan-si(city) Chapter, LEE Geun Young suffered finger fractures and a bruised knee.

66 government employees were detained and underwent investigations at various stations in Seoul. They were released after 33 hours of detention. In response, a representative of the KGEU visited the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs to protest the police's illegal actions. In addition, an official letter requesting collective bargaining and improvement of working conditions for government employees was also delivered.

Meanwhile, since KGEU General Secretary AHN Byung Soon's father was near death, the KGEU repeatedly requested for the release of AHN on humanitarian grounds; however, the government refused to answer this request. As a result AHN was unable to say good-bye to his father before he passed away. General Secretary AHN was only temporarily released to attend his father's funeral on May 17 and then he had to voluntarily turn himself in the next day.

KGEU leadership released

On June 8, the National Officers of the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU)---President KIM Young Gil, Vice-President KIM Jung Soo, and Secretary General AHN Byung Soon---were released. They had been jailed for publicly supporting the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in the recent National Assembly elections, which took place this past April. Since public servants are to play a neutral role during the electoral process, the government declared the actions of the KGEU an infringement of election laws. President Kim was sentenced eight months for violation of election laws, four months for violation of local civil servant laws and given a two year suspended sentence. Both Vice President Kim and Secretary General Ahn were sentenced four months, six months, and suspended for two years respectively for the same violations. LEE Joon Ki, Deputy Secretary was sentenced for six months and given a one year suspension for illegal election activities.

At a rally held in front of the Seoul Prison immediately following the release of the KGEU officers, over 100 supporters including NOH Hee Chan, a National Assembly member from the Democratic Labor Party joined in the celebrations. In his welcoming speech, First Vice President JEONG Yong CHun stated, "The conservative forces feel threatened because we now have a strong worker presence in the National Assembly. Because of this, they will attempt to repress us. However, the KGEU under the leadership of President Kim will unite our members and become the hope for all of us." President Kim reiterated the commitment of the KGEU and proudly proclaimed, "The KGEU's 130,000 members will unite in our struggle to attain the three labor rights and political freedom." Vice President Kim Jung Soo said, "We now have a National Assembly that represents workers. Let us continue our struggle until our voices are heard in Kwanghwamoon (where the Central government complex is located)." Secretary Ahn Byung Soon said, "We went to prison to break the walls of gloom. Let us fight together for full legalization of our union."

Activities for the second half of the year

The government's stance that basic labor rights of government workers and trade union activities must be limited through the legislation of special laws has not changed with the formation of the 17th National Assembly. The government has proclaimed that it will attempt the legislation of such laws again during the latter half of the year. The KGEU will overcome the attempts of the government to repress and deny basic labor rights of government workers through the joint struggles of all its members, and will fight for the revision of the Trade Union and Industrial Relations Act, in order to fully attain the three labor rights. The KGEU has requested to the government several times to form a negotiating team consisting of the Prime Minister's office and related ministries, and to participate in the bargaining process; however, the government has consistently denied the unions request and continues to repress the activities of the KGEU. The KGEU also demanded the recognition of the KGEU as one of the subjects in the reformation of civil servants, and bargaining on the seven demands made for the improvement of working conditions of government workers. However, the

government has yet to respond and has unilaterally proposed revisions to job regulations that will deteriorate working conditions, including a negative five day workweek that will in fact increase working hours.

During June and July, the KGEU has been formulating its bargaining principles and direction of its struggles through trainings for members and bargaining commission members. The KGEU is also strengthening its collective determination in the struggle for the three labor rights. In the latter half, the KGEU plans an all-out struggle including strike actions, and strong solidarity struggles with other public sector workers such as the KTU in their fight against the Special Law on Teachers' Unions.

Foundation Declaration

O, This Day, How long is it that we have waited for this moment. Today, we are at this moment, after persevering so long in the long tunnel of darkness, about to take the first step into the world of bright light.

Looking back, we, the government employees in the civil service, have, for the last fifty odd years, stood at the beckoning of the powerful and the capital, to do as their bidding, meek to receive whatever they gave.

In the eyes of the people, we were the lackeys of the regime in power, object of anger and rebuke as the agent of graft and corruption, and a tool for the powerful in their machination to perpetuate their power.

Every time of change in the government, we were served up as the sacrificial lamb in the new government's thrive for legitimacy, to suffer their sword of clean-up campaign. Even while every group of people in the country came forward to make their declaration and to mobilise their energy to win back what is theirs by justice, we remained submissive and silent, trapped in the special status of power within the state system.

Now we won't, however, do long remain retarded in the history of submission. The Korean Government Employees Union, which comes solemnly out to the world despite all the obstruction and repression, shall win back our legitimate name as workers that has been taken away in the past by the military dictatorial regimes, and participate in the democratic labour movement as workers, and take the first steps to contribute to the development of history.

We shall rebuild the civil service, that has been usurped by the powerful and the rich, on proper foundations. We shall bring about the renewal of the civil service, that has been tainted with years of graft and corruption, from within, to stand proudly as a responsible force for building a country and society where common sense and justice are restored to their rightful place.

So, we declare to the world, in the name of 900,000 workers in the civil service that Korean Government Employees Union, that will join in the effort to right the world and to stand the country in the good stead, has been formed.

March 23, 2002

Korean Government Employees' Union

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