

This is KCTU

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We reproduce below the self-presentation of the KCTU, titled “This is KCTU”, as published on its website on September 12, 2005.

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Labour pains

Korean Confederation of Trade Unions traces its roots to the nascent workers’ struggles ignited by the self-immolation of a garment worker Chun Tae-il on November 13, 1970. The tenacious struggles of women workers in export-oriented light industries laid the foundation of the modern labour movement. As light industries gave way to heavy industries as the focal point of the export economy in the 1980s, the early militancy inspired the awakening of the regimented workforce in large-scale industries which became the hotbed of the Great Workers’ Struggle of 1987. The explosion not only galvanised the uniformed workers of industrial complexes and the neck-tie corps of office buildings, but shook the entire society. The need to mount effective struggles to resist crackdowns, confront the military regimes, and reform labour laws led to the creation of frameworks for solidarity which transcend enterprise, regional, and industry boundaries. The joint struggles under the banners of the National Headquarters for Labour Law Reform in 1988, and then the National Council of Regional and Industrial Trade Unions in 1989 were the first expressions of nation-wide unity and solidarity of the democratic trade union movement. The National Council successfully held a nation-wide May Day rally in 1989 for the first time since the 1945 liberation from Japanese colonial rule. In 1990, the democratic trade union movement organised into the Korea Trade Union Congress (KTUC, Chunnohyup), consisting mainly of unions in the manufacturing sector; the Korea Congress of Independent Industrial Trade Union Federations (KCIIF, Upjonghweui), formed by white-collar workers including Chunkyojo (the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers’ Union organised in 1989); and the Hyundai Group Trade Union Federation and the Daewoo Group Trade Union Council, which united the workers of Hyundai and Daewoo companies respectively. The efforts to consolidate unity and solidarity led to the successful ‘1990 National Workers Rally’ demonstrating the united force of manufacturing, office, and professional workers. In October 1991, the four major national configurations came together as one in the Joint Committee for Ratification of ILO Basic Conventions

and Labour Law Reform in response to the government's decision to seek membership in the ILO. At the '1992 National Workers Rally' in November, the unions mobilised by the Committee set in motion programmatic efforts to build a consolidated national organisation. The subsequent efforts led to the formation in June 1993 of the Korean Council of Trade Union Representatives (KCTU, Chonnodae), which brought together leaders of all democratic trade unions into a single national body.

The birth

On November 13, 1994, the Preparatory Committee for Korean Confederation of Trade Unions was launched to build on the work of the previous body. Its main task was to prepare and facilitate the reorganisation of individual unions into various industrial federations and the formation of the Confederation. After one year, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU, Minju Nochong) was officially established on November 11, 1995, with 862 enterprise unions and a total membership of 418,000. As of June 1997, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions has increased its membership to over 526,300 in 1,144 unions. In less than two years since the establishment, KCTU has emerged, not only as the representative organisation of Korean workers and the trade union movement, but a leading force for democratisation. As the successor to a century of unflinching struggle of Korean workers, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions is committed to advancing workers' empowerment by combining struggles for economic, social, and political reform.

The baptism by fire

On December 26, 1996, barely past the first anniversary of our establishment, KCTU catapulted into the centre stage of Korean society and politics. The month-long nation-wide general strike, triggered by the commando-like railroading of new labour laws and the National Security Planning Agency Act, above all else, paved the way for the powerful entry of workers into national life after more than thirty years of exclusion.

The number of individual unions and organised workers who took part in the General Strike for at least one day amounted to 528 and 403,179 respectively. This accounted for 81.1% of the total membership of KCTU. The actual number of people on the streets, however, registered much higher on account of widespread participation by un-unionised workers and ordinary citizens. The General Strike was an immediate response to two interrelated concerns. The first concern was the drastic changes and shortcomings in the new labour laws. The pursuit of exclusionary 'flexibilisation' aimed purely at a radical retrenchment of workers' welfare, working conditions, and labour rights, alongside the continued denial of freedom of association and absence of a system of social protection, was met with an explosion of anger. The second concern was the way the 'passage' itself was executed. The unprecedented clandestine pre-dawn session, in which the legislators were found to be mere string-pulled puppets, aroused popular fears about a precipitous rollback in what has always been a fragile and sporadic progress towards democratisation. The Korean General Strike was one of the first massive popular responses to the uncontrolled rampage of 'globalisation' which is threatening to reduce systems of social justice and economic democracy to shambles. It also marked the emergence of organised workers as the central engine of democratic progress which has been derailed by elitist politicians and outdated institutions. The Korean General Strike was also an inspirational demonstration of international solidarity, suggesting the potential for a new trade union internationalism.

Basis of unity and struggle

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT for DEMOCRACY: KCTU is committed to building a truly democratic and just society. KCTU fights for the repeal or revision of repressive laws such as the National Security Law (NSL) and others which restrict or suspend basic democratic rights. KCTU affirms that labour rights, including freedom of association, are not only fundamental components of democracy, but prerequisite for participation of workers in the economic, social, and political affairs of national life.

BUILDING a POLITICAL FORCE: The Korean General Strike reinforced the awareness that effective struggles and progress on wage, economic, social, and political concerns are only possible by combining popular activism and systematic intervention in institutions of policy- and law-making.

KCTU recognises that the effort to build effective political participation and presence requires an independent political vehicle. Such an organisation will enable workers and unions to attain positions in local government, the National Assembly, and take part in the formation of governments. KCTU's near-future plan for political empowerment is to put up candidates in the local government elections in 1998 and form a negotiating body in the National Assembly in 2000. KCTU is resolved to intervene and participate in the 1997 Presidential election on the basis of advancing the medium-term goal of building a mass-based political party.

KCTU's political empowerment programme is firmly embedded in the aspirations for democracy, national sovereignty, and peaceful reunification shared by all progressive sectors of society which have developed in the struggle against dictatorial domination. The political organisation of workers, rooted in an alliance of democratic forces from all social sectors, will develop into a central vehicle for structural transformation towards genuine democracy.

BUILDING INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM: KCTU is committed to transforming the current enterprise-union system into an industrial-union system. Industrial unionism strengthens worker unity from company to company, promotes the organising and struggle capacity of unions, and effectively distributes finances and resources among large and small unions. Industrial unionism will also create the structural opening necessary to tremendously expand the unionisation of unorganised workers and facilitate KCTU's development of effective and alternative industrial policies in the interest of all workers, including irregularly employed workers and workers in small and medium enterprises.

ENHANCING WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY: KCTU works to abolish suppression of workers and to create workplace institutions for effective union and worker participation in management-related decision-making processes. Workers face increased insecurity and alienation in the workplace, especially as a result of the rapid introduction of automation and 'rationalisation'. Guaranteeing union and worker participation in management decisions is an essential mechanism not only for the promotion of workers' rights and welfare but also to encourage companies to become socially responsible. As an extension of workplace democracy, KCTU shall also seek to develop effective participation in various tripartite bodies set up by the government, such as the Labour Relations Commission, Minimum Wage Review Committee, and Industrial Accident Insurance Review Committee.

STRUGGLE for LABOUR RIGHTS and WELFARE: KCTU works to reduce working hours, improve working conditions, build fair and safe working environments, protect a decent living wage, guarantee employment security, and eliminate all forms of discrimination.

- **WOMEN WORKERS:** KCTU strives to break the system which marginalises women workers as a 'supplementary' workforce and withholds their labour rights. Through collective bargaining and

demands for reform of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, KCTU is making a concerted effort to achieve gender equality in employment and promotion opportunities, pay, and job assignments. Also, KCTU insists on the implementation of policies to address sexual harassment. KCTU firmly believes that women workers must be guaranteed employment stability. Consequently, unions are countering the entrenched practice of companies' targeting women workers first in layoffs brought about by restructuring. KCTU gives priority in collective bargaining to various protective measures for maternity ' regular medical examinations, 90 days of maternity leave, childcare facilities at the workplace, and eradication of hazardous work.

KCTU recognises that these tasks must be realised through greater participation of women workers in trade union activities. To this end, KCTU is working to transform the internal working style and structure of trade unions at all levels and to develop a purposeful organising drive to increase women workers' union membership. KCTU is committed to promoting creative and equal participation of women workers in all areas of trade union activity, especially in the sphere of leadership.

- **JUST WAGE:** KCTU pursues a wage policy based on the overall objective of obtaining dignified incomes commensurate with the cost of living and a fair redistribution of wealth. KCTU endeavours to reduce wage differences, especially between large and small enterprises; men and women workers; and regular and irregular workers. KCTU's wage campaign, grounded in the principle of solidarity, is, therefore, a struggle against the divisive efforts of employers to pit workers against each other (through means of different kinds of employment contracts for similar work and a sub-contracting system amongst companies) in a destructive competition for the lowest possible wages.

- **WORKING HOURS:** The greatest factor in recent increases in wage levels in Korea — apart from the advances made by the trade union movement — has been long working hours. Long working hours have also been a key factor for high industrial-accident rates. An average manufacturing worker works more than 54 hours a week, 10 hours more than the legally stipulated weekly working time. While the reduction of working hours has become one of the central concerns for labour law reform, KCTU unions have begun to make significant inroads through collective bargaining. Working hours will remain a central issue as a part of the broader concern for the humanisation of labour and enhancement of the quality of life.

- **EMPLOYMENT:** The government and business are intent on retrenching the system of regular employment to replace it with an expanded system of subcontracting, a multi-tier wage structure, and an increase in irregular employment based on various forms of contract labour, such as temporary, part-time, daily, and dispatched labour. KCTU struggles for secure and stable employment, reinstatement of unfairly dismissed workers, prevention of mass layoffs, and expansion of viable employment for the handicapped and aged. In order to counter attacks on employment, KCTU calls for greater union participation in the decision-making processes concerning investment, company relocation, diversification, and personnel management. At the same time, KCTU is undertaking a long-term campaign to demand and build a comprehensive and coordinated system of skills training, job placement, and unemployment benefits. KCTU also identifies the diverse and serious implications of employment issues as reinforcing the urgency of developing an industrial union system to overcome the limitations of enterprise unionism.

- **INDUSTRIAL SAFETY and HEALTH:** Korea continues to record one of the world's highest (fatal) industrial accident rates. This is caused by long working hours, poor working conditions, and callous disregard for safety by employers. KCTU aims at bringing about a fundamental change in the philosophy and attitude of employers on the issue of work safety. KCTU struggles, on the one hand, to strengthen union involvement in preventive efforts and measures to make worker safety a first priority, and on the other, to consolidate the compensation and rehabilitation system. KCTU has also

been developing greater efforts to specifically address work-related health hazards and illnesses which have long been 'sidelined' by the sheer enormity of industrial accidents.

- **MIGRANT WORKERS:** Since 1991, Korea has seen a tremendous influx of migrant workers who are working under some of the most strenuous and exploitative working conditions. As of 1997, there are over 200,000 migrant workers in Korea. KCTU is working with civic, labour, and religious organisations to enact a migrant worker protection law which will abolish the 'industrial trainee system' and affirm migrant workers' full rights as workers. To secure migrant workers' rights, KCTU also demands the amendment of the Labour Standards Act to extend the law's application to migrant workers. Furthermore, KCTU has begun a campaign to organise migrant workers into geographically-defined unions and enterprise level unions, as it recognises that unions are the most effective means to defend the rights and welfare of migrant workers and to develop solidarity between migrant and local workers. The need to unionise migrant workers is another source of the urgency for transforming enterprise unionism to an industrial-union structure.

STRUGGLE for SOCIAL REFORM: KCTU is developing and demanding policy measures to regulate abuses and domination of foreign and domestic monopolistic corporations, and to protect and promote small and medium enterprises and agriculture. KCTU endeavours to comprehensively reform policies regarding social security, retirement, housing, education, medical care, taxation, prices, finance, land, environment, transportation, and other social concerns. Under bureaucratic and corrupt government control, the gains of Korea's developing economy are focused into the hands of chaebols (conglomerates) while the burden of economic crisis is meted out to workers. KCTU believes that the government must assume the duty of relieving social burdens on individuals by developing and enhancing social protection and welfare vital to all the people of Korea. In our struggle not only for wage hikes and labour law reform but for all of society's interests, KCTU embraces an all-out struggle for social reform.

COMMITMENT to INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY: KCTU's growth and success in making demands on the government are significantly attributable to international support, as seen in full force for the first time during the General Strike. To strengthen the capability of workers' movements around the world, KCTU is actively participating in organisations internationally and in the Asia-Pacific region, including the ICFTU and ITSs. KCTU rejects state-unionism and any unionism controlled by employers, and fully supports democratic trade union movements across borders through joint activities in education, policy development, and campaigns. In order to engender greater international worker solidarity, KCTU is also committed to supporting workers' fighting abuse by Korean companies abroad and struggling for their trade union rights.

Structure

Decision Making Bodies

National Congress (statutory session once a year in January)

Central Committee (statutory sessions 4 times a year)

- Executive Bodies

Central Executive Committee (statutory sessions once a month)

Standing Executive Committee (weekly)

- Permanent Committee

Women's Committee
Industrial Relations Taskforce Committee
Social Security Committee
Reunification Committee
Political Empowerment Committee
Education Committee
Special Committee for Dismissed Workers

- Special Committee

Trade Union Movement Development Strategy Committee

- Regional Councils

14 Province level regional councils with district level offices in each of the councils
Regional councils have their own decision making structures and elects their own leaders
Regional councils are at the same time extension of the National Secretariat

- Secretariat

General Administration Office
Finance
Communication
Administration

- Policy-Planning Office
Planning
Employment Policy
Social Policy
Industrial Relations Policy
Industrial Health and Safety Research and Statistics

Organising-Industrial Action Office
Internal Relation
Women Workers
Mass Action
Field Mobilisation
Organising Campaign

Education and Publicity Office
Education
Newspaper
Culture
Publicity

Solidarity Outreach and External Relations Office
Government Relations
Social Movement Relations
International Relations
Reunification Issues

Employment Security and Service Centre

AFFILIATES

Korean Federation of Construction Trade Unions (KFCTU)
Korean Federation of Construction Workers Unions(KCWU)
Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (Chunkyojo)(KTU)
Korean Federation of Transportation, Public & Social Services Workers Unions(KPSU)
National Lecturers Union(NLU)
Korean University Workers Union(KUWU)
Korean Metal Workers Federation(KMWF)
Korean Federation of Hospital Workers Unions(KFHU)
Korean Federation of Clerical and Financial Labour Unions(KCFLU)
Korean Federation of Institution Management Trade Unions(KFIMTU)
Korean Federation of Press Unions(KFPU)
Korean Federation of Chemical Workers Unions(KFCW)
Korea Federation of Chemical-Textile Workers Unions(KCTWU)
Korea Cargo Transport Workers Federation(KCTWF)
Korea Federation of Taxi Workers Unions(KFTWU)
Korean Federation of Women Workers Unions(KFWWU)
Korean Bus Workers Union(KBWU)
Korean Federation of Commercial Workers Unions(KFTU)
Korean Federation of Tourist Workers Unions(KFTWU)
* Hyundai Group Trade Union Council(HTUC)
* Daewoo Group Trade Union Council(DTUC)
* unions affiliated to KCTU through Regional Councils

The total membership as of July 1999 stands at 573,490 in some 1,226 individual unions. These are organised into 19 industrial federations, including the Korean Federation of Women Workers Unions (which was formed in July 1999). Unions in Hyundai Group and the Daewoo Group have developed a special group-level network and coordination. 2 individual unions are affiliated to the KCTU through such a group-level council. 28 individual unions are affiliated through KCTU regional councils.

The Korean Federation of Public Sector Workers Unions, the Korean Federation of Professional and Technicians Unions, and the Korean Federation of Railway and Subway Workers Unions have amalgamated to form KPSU. The Korean Federation of Clerical Labour Unions and the Korean Federation of Financial Institute Workers Unions have merged to form the KCFLU. Efforts for consolidation are underway among the three transport workers unions; the two federations of construction workers unions; the chemical and chemical-textile workers federations; and the unions in the commercial and tourism sectors. Further efforts are underway to transform the current enterprise union structure into industrial unions. More than 95% of hospital and health workers are organised into national Korean Health and Medical Workers Union, and more than half of the member unions of the Korean Cargo Transport Workers Federation have merged to formed a single union with an objective to form a single industrial union. The KMWF, the largest KCTU affiliate, plans to transform itself into a national metal industry workers union by October 2000.

All KCTU affiliate organisations are now legal, with the legalisation of the Chunkyojo in July 1999.

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