

KCTU Launches General Strike on November 15th!

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November 15, 2006: Four-hour "Warning-Strike"---200,000 trade unionists to participate.

November 22, 2006: Full-pledged General Strike

Over 50,000 workers from every industry across South Korea convened in City Hall in downtown Seoul to participate in the annual National Workers Rally sponsored by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) on Sunday November 13, 2006. The National Workers Rally is held every year on the second Sunday of November to commemorate Chun Tae Il, who had self-immolated himself in 1970 in the name of worker rights. His death is considered to be one of the pivotal moments of South Korean modern democratic labor movement. Prior to the main rally, various affiliates of the KCTU such as the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF), Korean Federation of Transportation Public and Social Service Workers Union (KPSU), Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions (KFCITU), Korean Government Employees Union, and the Korean Cargo Transport Workers Union (KCTWU) conducted separate rallies throughout downtown Seoul highlighting issues particular to each union.

The National Workers Rally kicked off the KCTU's plans for the 2006 General Strike. This year's General Strike focuses on the South Korean government's failure to once again address the major concerns of South Korean workers---ensuring fundamental worker rights. When South Korea joined the OECD ten years ago it had promised to reform its labor laws to meet international standards; however, as it has been pointed out by several international institutions such as the ILO and international trade unions such as the ICFTU (now ITUC), TUAC and the GUFs, the South Korean government has failed to do so. In fact, the government has stepped up its repression against trade union rights, specifically against members of the KGEU, KFCITU, and irregular workers.

The 2006 General Strike will start with a four-hour Warning Strike on November 15, 2006. Should the government fail to adequately meet the major demands of the KCTU---- to stop trade union repression, to stop the Irregular Workers Bill, to rescind the current Industrial Relations Roadmap Agreement, to stop Korea-US Free Trade Agreement negotiations, and to fundamentally reform OHS insurance bill---then, the KCTU will launch a full-fledged General Strike on November 22. On this day, the KCTU along with a broad coalition of peasant's groups, women's organizations, and other civil society associations will be holding a mass people's rally for worker rights and peasant's rights.

Although the majority of the KCTU affiliates will launch the General Strike on November 22, the Korean Construction Transportation Workers Union (KCTWU), an affiliate of the KFCITU chose to proceed with its plans to go on strike immediately after the National Workers Rally. Close to 7,000 members of the KCTWU---Dump Truck Drivers and Remicon (ready-mixed cement) Truck Drivers---converged in Seoul to participate in a three-day national campaign that consists of demonstrations in

front of the Government Complex, Blue House, and the National Assembly; meetings with the Ministry of Labor, the Blue House, and the ruling Uri party; and distribution of educational materials to the general public at key central points throughout Seoul. During their campaign in Seoul, the union members have chosen to camp outside in tents in Yeoido Park, near the National Assembly, despite the freezing winter temperature.

According to the current South Korean labor laws both Dump Truck Drivers and Remicon Truck Drivers are not considered to be “workers”; instead, they are considered to be “self-employer” since they have individual business licenses. However, in reality, they are “disguised workers,” who are basically under the direct control of construction companies as a result of the unconditional contracts workers must sign in order to ensure employment. These contracts are completely under the discretion of the company and both the Dump and Remicon Truck Drivers have no say as to the terms. Even though the workers have organized and formed a union, they are not guaranteed their fundamental basic rights. Because of this, one of the main four demands the union has put forth to the government is ensuring the basic three labor rights---the right to organize, the right to strike, and the right to collective bargaining---for “disguised workers.”

As the KCTU gears up for this year’s General Strike, so is the international support to support South Korean workers. To date, trade unions and allied groups in over forty cities in thirty countries such as Australia, Sweden, Germany, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, United States, Canada, Brazil, and South Africa will be conducting a series of actions calling on the South Korean government to stop the repression of trade union rights, implement the recommendations made by the Committee on Freedom of Association of the ILO, reform labor laws in line with international standards, and to ensure the rights for irregular workers.

According to Hans Engelberts, General Secretary of Public Service International, “10 years ago the South Korean government promised both in the OECD and the ILO to start changing the law to make it in accordance with international standards. It is taking the government a long time and we’re still not happy with the way it is being implemented. We certainly will take an active part on the 15th of November, on the international day of action, and we will continue putting pressure on the Korean government that in the end, the laws must be changed in accordance with what is internationally acceptable.”

PSI along with other Global Union Federations and the ITUC, the new international that was established last month in Vienna with the merger of the ICFTU and the WCL will be meeting with representatives with the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea in Geneva to raise their serious concerns about the attack of worker rights in South Korea.

In preparations for the General Strike, union leaders of the KCTU and its affiliates have been crisscrossing all over South Korea to outreach to workers at every work site to educate them on the importance of the strike as well as to get support for the General Strike. Many of the KCTU membership have voted in favor of the strike; however, the KGEU was not even able to vote, as the government forcibly removed voting ballots from the union. In addition, a member of one the KGEU locals was recently arrested, putting the total number of KCTU members arrested as 88 members.

On November 15 and 22, South Korean workers will once again organize and mobilize to make sure that their voices are heard and their demands met. The KCTU believes that only through unity and strength it can preserve the current repression it is facing by the South Korean government.

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The KCTU has produced video highlighting trade union repression in South Korea. This can be viewed by logging into the following website:

http://www.nodong.org/bbs/view.php?id=nodong_tv&no=127