

KGEU Newsletter 2007-06-01

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Let's fight back to restore our rights, people's rights!

KGEU statement in commemoration of the 117th Mayday (excerpts)

Today, the 117th Mayday is the 17th day since Brother HEO Se-Wook, who set himself on fire as an act of resistance against the KorUS FTA, passed away. But, our people's lives are not much different from 17 days before and 117 years before.

The captial and the government, wielding a sword of Neo-Liberalism, propelled the KorUS FTA, worsening of national pension service and fierce extension of irregular jobs, which trample future of next generation as well as lives of workers now.

Given that workers are being driven to antagonism and indefinite competition, Mayday is still stained with workers' bloods and tears and therefore nothing but a day for fighting back.

Government employees are no exception. Although being workers as well, our basic labour rights are not recognised yet and our freedom of political expression as part of civil rights is deprived. We are only forced to serve the government and the ruling class like their tools. The government is forcibly retrenching government employees in the name of competitiveness and efficiency, deceiving people that it is low ranking government employees that put burdens to civil service.

Yet, the KGEU, as a proud part of working class, is yelling out again that we are workers and fighting back to serve people not the ruling class and the powerful.

In commemoration of the 117th Mayday, we, the government employees, are pledging again that we will be in the forefront of the struggles not only for guaranteeing our basic labour rights and protecting our rights to livelihood but also for defeating neo-liberalism and strengthening public services for people.

Mayday Press Release of Public Services International (PSI)

... PSI is particularly concerned at the situation in Korea where the Government has persistently denounced the Korean Government Employees Union, a PSI affiliate, as an illegal organisation and actively suppresses, arrests and imprisons union activists performing what are normal unions

activities. "In South Korea, PSI is concerned that the government is not meeting its commitments to bring the labour legislation in line with ILO Conventions. The situation is currently under review at both the ILO and the OECD. The struggle of the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU) is an example to many other Asian countries where there are no full trade union rights", said Hans Engelberts. ...

KGEU's extraordinary congress held on May 19

Delegates decides fighting back and all-out struggles in June

On May 19, the KGEU held an extraordinary congress and the delegates decided to keep struggling to get the government to come out for talks and negotiations.

The main decision of the congress was as follows;

"In order to revise the malignant clauses of the special act and to solve the matter on the dismissed, the union will launch and take intense struggles and active negotiations in the first half of this year, and hold a general vote in July on whether to accept the result of the struggles and negotiations, and then, in accordance with the vote, the union will decide union's direction including whether the union leadership to resign."

The second agenda was deciding bargaining subjects. Actually this agenda was to confirm what President KWON Seung Bok proposed on March 23 in commemoration of union's 5th anniversary.

The agenda decided could be summerised as follows;

o The major bargaining subjects will be guarantee of basic labour rights and resolving of the matter on the dismissed.

o The government negotiating representative should be the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, while negotiation may begin with the Labor Ministry at first.

The union negotiating representative will be the KCTU and the KGEU, while the KCTU may be committed to negotiate on behalf of the KGEU.

o The union's demands for basic labour rights are based on international labour standards including the ILO recommendations. Those will be extension of right to associate, substantial effectiveness of bargaining and agreements and guarantee of right to collective action, while the demand for the right to strike shall be postponed. In fact, the special act stipulates that any kinds of collective action "including strikes, work slowdowns and other activities undermining normal business operation" should be prohibited.

The June Struggle started

On MAY 29, the KGEU held a press conference to declare its all-out struggle started. The 4 main demands are guarantee of government employees' basic labour rights, reinstatement of the dismissed, no to worsening of government employees' pension, and no to forceful retrenchment of government employees.

After the press conference, the union leadership started a sit-in protest with indefinite hunger strike in front of the Central Government Complex. And on June 2, the union will organise a rally of grassroots leaders and a protest rally against corporatisation of national universities. From June 4 to 23, there will be a nationwide action tour. On June 23, a mass rally in which more than 5 thousand

KGEU members are expected to participate will be organised together with KCTU's all-out struggle.

Korea: monitoring still needed

from PSI World News, May 25

A TUAC delegation met with the OECD Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee (ELSAC) on April 23 for a Consultation at which the main topic was the question of whether the OECD's special monitoring of Korea's promise to bring its labour legislation and practice into line with international standards should continue. Whilst there have been some positive developments in this regard, the government has still not implemented full trade union rights in the public sector. It still represses the Korean Government Employees Union and actively suppresses and arrests/imprisons union activists performing what are normal unions activities in other OECD countries. The Korean government presented material to the OECD and the ILO arguing that it has resolved virtually all required questions (with the rest on an agreed timetable) and that it therefore should now be free of further monitoring. This position is strongly supported by BIAC (the employers' body at the OECD). TUAC and KCTU/KGEU presented countervailing data to show that the questions are far from resolved and arguing that the Korean Government only moves when it is under the international spotlight. PSI was part of the TUAC preparatory meeting that determined the union approach to the issue. It is likely that the OECD Council meeting in June will hear the ELSAC recommendation on the monitoring. It would help if PSI affiliates in OECD countries could press the issue with their government representatives at the OECD. We have prepared a sample letter which you may want to use: see the link below.

Letter to OECD representative

Water privatisation booklet published

The Korean Government Employees' Union (KGEU) and Joint Action against Water Privatization has published "Problems of Water Privatization and Responses in Korea", with support from Jubilee South-APMDD. (download)

The paper is a broad analysis into public sector privatization, focusing particularly on introduction of public-private partnership into waterworks, the expected effects and how Korean people's movement is responding.

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Korea-EU FTA negotiations started

Negotiations for the Korea-EU FTA started on 9th May. As expected, services and non-tariff barriers seem to be the main areas, although there is no direct mention of public services as yet. Below is a translation of a statement issued by Joint Action against Water Privatization, a coalition of organizations in Korea, on water and Korea-EU FTA.

Korea-EU FTA will force privatization of water supply and deterioration of public services

The European Union and the Korean government each made their final approval for the start of Korea-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations on 24th April and 1st May at the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council and the Foreign Affairs and Economy Ministers' Meeting respectively. The first round of talks is scheduled to start on 7th May in Seoul.

The Korean government is venturing upon its FTA with the EU, despite that the Korean people are still very angered by the Korea-US FTA (KorUS FTA), which took away the life of Huh Se Wook and is bestrewed with lies and deception.

We oppose the Korea-EU FTA for various reasons.

First of all, the Korean government is manipulating public opinion with the same logic that FTAs will "bring about a prosperous future" used a year ago, when it started the KorUS FTA. One year ago, at the start of the KorUS FTA, allegations were raised that the government and related institutions had fabricated statistics and manipulated public opinion on the 'positive' effects of the FTA. What we witness one year later is series of evidence that the concluded KorUS FTA negotiations were completely in favour of US interests. However, the Korean government is about to start another important negotiation without any reflection nor responsibility for its past errors. Once again it is insisting, without any substantial evidence, that the Korea-EU FTA will foster the services industry which in turn will improve the lives of ordinary Korean people.

Secondly, the consecutive conclusion of KorUS FTA and Korea-EU FTA will have detrimental effects on the Korean society, particularly on public services. The KorUS FTA is symbolically labeled "NAFTA plus" because it is the most profound among the FTAs that US has concluded. Now European governments and corporations are calling for a FTA that is at least just as profound or more. In other words, due to the 'most favoured nation (MFN)' clause in all FTAs, negotiating governments and capital are competing with each other for a higher FTA, for more liberalization, commercialization and flexibilization of labour. In particular, the so-called 'future MFN' clause of the KorUS FTA will bring detrimental results. Should public services be more liberalized through the Korea-EU FTA, public services will have to be opened to US capital as well. For example, if water supply, which was exempt from commitments during KorUS FTA, is included in the Korea-EU FTA, it will in turn have to be bound to the KorUS FTA as well.

Thirdly, the Korea-EU FTA will force privatization of water - our life itself. Already the government,

relevant research institutions and business circles are saying that EU is very much interested in services, while Korean capital is looking forward to another opportunity to promote another wave of restructuring. Public services such as education, healthcare, electricity, gas and water supply are likely to be included in this process. In particular, because most of top 10 water transnational corporations are European, even the government has acknowledged that water supply can be liberalized through the Korea-EU FTA. The problem is that the Korean government does not seem to have any will to negotiate otherwise.

Already the government has revised the Water Law several times in order to allow private capital to participate in waterworks, which is at the moment operated by municipal governments. Out of the 164 municipal waterworks around the nation, 9 have been commissioned to Korea Water Resources Corporation (KOWACO), 33 have signed basic agreements, while Incheon City has signed a MOU with a transnational corporation, Veolia. Furthermore, the government is pushing forth its 'Plan to Foster the Water Industry', which identifies water not as a public service but as a commodity and market, and is scheduling relevant legislation during latter half of this year. Concluding the Korea-EU FTA under these conditions, whereby national laws and institutions are being revised to allow participation of private capital in waterworks, will only force privatization and commodification of water. Regulations that protect waterworks as public entities are expected be attacked by the various clauses in the FTA, such as national treatment, competition rules, investor-state dispute settlement to name a few. Water will become target of profiteering for transnational capital.

Water is our life itself. The catastrophe that water privatization will entail is beyond our imagination. Cases such as Bolivia where water rates soared 10 20 times, South Africa where water was cut off for millions and 300 died of cholera, and Philippines where cholera also spread and water service limited to 4 hours a day for ordinary households are now well known to us. Already water rates are getting higher, while 'water polarization' between urban and rural areas is becoming more serious. Local governments are paying immense amount of money to companies as operation fees, and waterwork workers are facing job insecurity. Promoting the 'Plan to Foster the Water Industry' and negotiating the Korea-EU FTA under these circumstances will only bring nationwide disaster.

The Korea-EU FTA negotiations will soon start. We reaffirm that the concluded KorUS FTA is void, and strongly demand that the government immediately reconsider its plan to start negotiations with EU. We also call on the government to stop all attempts to privatize water including the 'Plan to Foster the Water Industry' as well as commissioning of waterworks to the private sector, and to come up with alternatives that are more public and environmentally friendly.

30th April, 2007

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