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South Korea

Increased repression of the trade-union movement in South Korea

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV501 - October 2016 -

Publication date: Wednesday 26 October 2016

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The South Korean government wants to liquidate once and for all the militant trade-union tradition that has its historic roots in the resistance to the dictatorships of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1987). The National Council of Trade Unions (NCTU, founded in 1990) and afterwards the Korean Confederation of Trade Union (KCTU, which succeeded it in 1995) have embodied this tradition. Not without difficulties and crises, this tradition has sought to adapt to changing conditions of struggle.

Since December 2012, the country's president has been Park Geun-hye, the dictator's daughter: governing by decrees, her regime is increasingly authoritarian. As for the Korean conglomerates (Chaebol), they are actively engaged in the offensive against trade-union rights.

The recurrent repression against the KCTU has today reached a new level. The public sector strike against the regressive reform of working conditions and the system of performance-based pay has been declared "illegal". Nine leaders of the Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) are victims of the infamous accusation of "obstructing economic activity". To break the strike, the government is planning "emergency arbitration", a practice denounced by the ILO as a violation of the freedom of association. The self-employed lorry drivers, who were also planning to strike, are also faced with criminal and civil prosecutions.

More than twenty trade-union leaders and activists are in prison, although their only crime is to have defended workers' rights. Among them are the president of the KCTU, Han Sang-gyun; the vice-president of the KPTU (transport), Cho Sung-deok; and the president of the KPCWU (factory construction), Lee Jong-hwa.

On July 4, Han Sang-gyun was sentenced to five years in prison for his role in organizing thirteen demonstrations against the government of Park Geun-hye, between 2012 and 2015. The police put out arrest warrants for more than 1500 trade unionists who had taken part in these demonstrations. Judicial proceedings were opened against 585 leaders and members of the KCTU. The authorities had even envisaged using against Han the charge of "sedition", which has never been used since the fall of the dictatorial regime, more than thirty years ago.

Over the years, many sectors have suffered severe attacks against their right to organize. Thus, in 2013, the government wanted to force the teachers' federation, KTU (which is part of the KCTU) to modify its statutes authorising sacked personnel to remain members of the union. For the same reason, it refused to register the federation of government service workers (KGEU). In 2012, migrant workers were forbidden to look for another job than the one they already had, thus putting them at the mercy of the employers. For years the authorities have repressed the MTU, a migrants' trade union founded in 2005, whose leaders have been arrested and deported.

The offensive against trade union rights is constantly becoming broader, to the point where the conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) has led a joint campaign with the progressive confederation KCTU. The government of Park Geun-hye has in particular published new "administrative guiding principles" by virtue of which enterprises can dismiss workers considered to be "under-performing" and modify arbitrarily working conditions without the consent of the work force.

The anti-trade union policies in Korea have been widely condemned on an international level, by organizations in defence of human rights such as Amnesty International and the ILO.

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Today, in the face of the new wave of arrests, an inter-union call for international solidarity has been launched with the backing of the International Transport Federation (ITF).

Sign the letter in defence of South Korean trade-unionists [here](#)