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Korea

World Cup Campaign for Trade Union Rights in Korea

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INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT has received the following statement from the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU):

KCTU and Korean workers extend warm welcome to all the football teams and all football lovers coming to Korea for the 2002 Korea-Japan FIFA World Cup.

KCTU, however, feels it is important to remind ourselves that not being among the 32 is in no way a sign of failure or shortcoming, and that everyone involved - from the players on the field, spectators on the stands, and people following the matches in their own countries - should not forget the spirit of solidarity in the heat of competition.

It is sad, however, that many Korean workers will not be able to share in the excitement and festivities of the World Cup in a wholehearted manner. This is especially true of the trade unionists held in prison. KCTU president Dan Byung-ho, sentenced to two years' imprisonment for leading the activities of the KCTU, is one member of the Korean World Cup Organising Committee who will not be able to attend any of the matches or ceremonies. (The officers of the Organising Committee called on the KCTU to request the KCTU to remain silent, and refrain from taking industrial action in the days before and during the World Cup. They returned instead with KCTU's reminder that the Committee should have made some efforts to bring about the release of one of the Committee's members, and a request to raise awareness about the child labour issue in the football business.)

The international trade union movement has not overlooked the mismatch of trade union rights violation in Korea and the World Cup being co-hosted by Korea.

Hans Engelberts, the General Secretary of the Public Services International, who came to Korea to congratulate the inauguration of the Korean Government Employees Union, only to witness thousands of riot police storm the auditorium where the inaugural congress was being held and hundreds of delegates arrested, wrote to the FIFA [the international footballing body responsible for organizing the World Cup - ed.], 'If it is not possible for freedom of association to exist in Korea, then it should not be possible for FIFA to conduct the World Cup there.'

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, International Metalworkers Federation, and the Public Services International are initiating special campaigns on the occasion of the World Cup being co-hosted by Korea to demand the release of imprisoned Korean trade unionists, the recognition of the Korean Government Employees Union, and an end to the repression of trade unions.

KCTU is appealing to all trade union movements to take up the campaigns being organised by the global union organisations. ICFTU, under the leadership of the new general secretary Guy Ryder, is initiating a Global Unions awareness raising campaign on the imprisonment of trade unionists in Korea. The IMF and PSI are joining in calling for an international day of action on June 27 to protest the Korean Government's continued attacks on trade union rights. PSI will, in cooperation with the ICFTU, organise a special workshop on trade union rights violation in Korea in Geneva during the International Labour Conference.

KCTU is calling especially on the trade union movements in the countries whose national football teams make up the 32 finalists taking part in the World Cup matches in Korea and Japan to send letters of protest to the Korean government, organise parliamentarians to write appeals to the Korean government, and to approach their national football teams to show their concern.

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The SIGTUR (Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights) network is currently engaged in an ongoing solidarity campaign with Korean workers' struggles.

On April 16, the National May Day Committee in Indonesia organised a demonstration in front of the Korean embassy in Jakarta to call for the release of KCTU president Dan Byung-ho. In Pakistan, All Pakistan Trade Union Federation, held a similar protest rally of more than 150 workers on April 17 in front of the Korean embassy. More than 100 workers carried out colourful and forceful action on April 24 in front of the Korean embassy in Bangkok in a demonstration organised by CLIST. In these demonstrations, the workers of the South declared a full support for the Korean power workers struggle against privatisation.

KCTU hopes that June 27 can be adopted as an international day of action against the Korean Government's persistent trade union rights violation. The various separate and joint initiatives could make June 27 even more successful than the landmark January 22 international day of action when workers and unions in 34 countries took action.

The planned actions will have great impact in Korea.

The recent ILO Committee on Freedom of Association decision to call for the release all trade unionist imprisoned as a result of trade union activities and to 'recognise, as soon as possible, the right to establish and join trade union organization for all public servants' and the recent OECD decision to extend the Korean Labour Law Monitoring for further three years have jolted the Korean government.

On May 19, the Korean Government included 7 (out of 41 then held in prison at the time) trade unionists in the wider amnesty on the occasion of Buddha's Birthday. While the release has not meant a total change in the government's attitude, as can be seen by the arrest of more trade unionists after it, it is material evidence of the impact of international pressure.

In Korea, KCTU has begun a post card campaign on the child labour issue. KCTU, the Korean Government Employees Union, and a number of civil society organisations will hand out post cards calling on the FIFA to comply with its agreement with the ICFTU and its own code of conduct to guarantee and demonstrate that no child labour is used and trade union rights are respected in the entire process of football production. KCTU-produced post card also calls on the FIFA to use its international prestige, in collaboration with trade unions and various child labour action groups, in the effort to end all forms of child labour. KCTU's teachers union will hold special classes on child labour during the World Cup period.