

Korean labor calls general strike to free union president

written by Scott Scheffer

October 16, 2021



Korean Confederation of Trade Unions president Yang Kyung-soo waves to supporters while police transfer him to a detention center. Photo: KCTU

Yang Kyung-soo, the president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) — South Korea's largest and most militant trade union confederation — has been

jailed and is on a hunger strike.

A general strike had already been called for Oct. 20, and has now taken on demands to release Yang. Police had attempted the arrest in mid-August at the KCTU headquarters but were fought off by union members and forced to retreat.

Although the Moon Jae-in government rode a wave of support by labor unions, and in particular the KCTU, repression against the labor movement has not changed and is continuing.

Since its foundation in 1995, there have been 13 presidents of the KCTU. All 13 were at one time or another jailed by the U.S.-backed South Korean state.

There has been no international outcry over the arrest, no word of it in the U.S. media. Compare that to what you'd hear if the head of a labor union were arrested in Cuba, China, Nicaragua, Venezuela or any other country that struggles to remain independent. Where are the cries for human rights in South Korea?

Instead, the New York Times writes that South Korean workers have lost "enthusiasm" for strikes. They fail to mention that the KCTU has grown to become the largest trade union confederation based on its history of militant and determined struggle.

The percentage of temporary workers in South Korea is among the highest in the world, ranging between 25% and 35% over time, mostly women, children and elderly. Secure, living-wage jobs with benefits are disappearing. Similar to but even more pronounced than the "gig economy" of the U.S., temporary workers in South Korea are forced to work long hours at low wages without even basic benefits.

The pauperization of the working class

The disappearance of jobs with pensions has led to a 50% poverty rate among

elderly workers, many of whom are now homeless. This pauperization of a large section of the working class has enabled South Korea's giant corporate monopolies — chaebols — to run roughshod over the lives of the working class. The chaebols dominate the South Korean economy and have an incestuous relationship with U.S. financial institutions.

Claiming that South Korean workers have lost enthusiasm to fight back is not just twisting facts or taking things out of context — it is an out-and-out lie. The U.S. media hasn't reported what happened in South Korea just last summer.

In June, some 2,100 couriers struck against unbelievably long hours and overwork that caused the deaths of 16 union members. They won a cap on hours and several delivery companies have committed to hire more workers to sort packages. During the strike, the workers rallied just blocks away from parliament and the skyscraper headquarters of the chaebols.

Workers at HMM, South Korea's biggest container ship company, carried out a strike that lasted 77 days until the end of August. They won a 7.9% pay increase and incentives of up to 650% of workers' monthly wages.

In August, healthcare workers' threat to strike won many pandemic-related demands including the establishment of a nurse-to-patient ratio; the establishment of at least four public infectious disease hospitals by 2024; a detailed set of nurse deployment guidelines based on the severity of COVID-19 patients by October; and more funding to subsidize those treating contagious diseases, to go into effect in January 2022.

When South Korea's economy collapsed in 1997, representatives from the U.S. arranged an International Monetary Fund "rescue." Some of the biggest U.S. banks, as well as bankers from Europe, swooped in and demanded restructuring in return for a bailout.

The crisis gave the Western banks even more control over the half of the Korean nation that they divided and have dominated and used since the terrible destruction that they carried out in the 1950-53 Korean War. The 1997 restructuring of the South Korean economy was accompanied by a campaign to drive down wages so that the short and long-term loans that the U.S. arranged could be repaid. Those loans were at higher interest rates than the rate at which major global banks normally lend to one another. Now, South Korea's external debt is growing once again and the financial burden is being placed on the working class.

All trade unionists and working-class activists, especially in the United States, should join the call to free Yang Kyung-soo! Solidarity with South Korean workers and the 2021 general strike!

