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Korean Railway and Airport Workers' Strikes Persist Unabated Despite Growing Repression

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Airport and rail strikes enter 14th and 12th days. Arrest warrants issued for 27 union leaders.

The longest strike ever in the history of the Korean railway has now entered its 12th day. Korean railway workers, employees of the public Korean Railroad Company (Korail) and members of the KPTU-affiliated Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU), are striking against the Korean government's unilateral pursuit of railway restructuring and privatization, a policy highly unpopular with the Korean public.

The strike has received widespread support from Koreans from all walks of life. This, along with the determination and courage of the KRWU members, has made it possible for the strike to hold out for so long in spite of the increasingly tough stance taken by the Park Geun-hye administration and Korail. On December 19, the 1-year anniversary of the President Park's elections, tens of thousands of railway workers and Korean citizens gathered in front of City Hall for a mass candlelight rally to show solidarity to the strike and condemn the government.

Although it has received less media attention, an equally as historic labor dispute is also underway at Incheon International Airport. Workers subcontracted with the public Incheon International Airport Corporation (IIAC), members of the KPTU-Incheon Airport Regional Branch, have been on an unlimited strike since December 7, two days before the rail strike began. They are demanding improvement in wages and conditions, job security and dialogue on converting their status to direct employment. Unlike their brothers and sisters at Korail, these workers are precariously employed and, as such, face extreme job insecurity and discrimination in wages and working conditions. Moreover, whereas railway workers have a tradition of unionization that spans over 60 years, subcontracted airport workers have organized only recently. This is the first strike ever in the 13-year history of the IIAC, one which demonstrates that precarious workers - often thought to be powerless and unorganizable - can unionize and stay united in the face of extreme pressure.

While the Incheon Airport and railway strikes are different in many ways there is one thing about them that is very similar - the repression they are facing from employers and the Korean government.

This repression involves the use of illegal poorly trained strikebreakers, which has led to safety risks and accidents in both the airport and railway. It also includes intimidation, criminal charges and the issue of arrest warrants against striking workers and leaders.

The IIAC is working through subcontractors to threaten union members participating in the strike

with dismissal and other disciplinary actions. The Korail has stripped close to 8000 workers of their job titles in preparation for disciplinary measures, and begun the process of deciding disciplinary measures against 145 union officers. Both the IIAC and Korail have pressed charges of obstruction of business against union leaders.

Arrest warrants have been issued for the president of the Incheon Airport Branch and two other branch leaders and the president, first vice president and general secretary of the KRWU and 22 other KRWU central and local officers. There is now news of the first two arrests of local KRWU officers made on December 19 and 20.

Despite this repression, both the Incheon Airport and railway workers have been unwavering in their commitment. The Incheon Airport Branch has steadily escalated its tactics, moving from rallies in the transport center in front of the airport to carry out actions that take place in the main passenger terminal. At the protest on December 19, KRWU President Myoung-hwan vowed that the strike would go on unabated and called on members to participate in nightly candlelight rallies and solidarity protests planned for December 21 and 23.

Korean Federation of Public Services and Transportation Workers' Unions (KPTU)

To follow news of the KRWU strike on facebook and the ITF campaign page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Support-railway-workers-right-to-strike-in-Korea/623128284413850?ref=hl>

<http://www.itfglobal.org/campaigns/campaigns-3867.cfm>

If you have not done so yet, please join the labourstart campaign and send a protest letter to the Korean government and Korail:

http://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=2072

P.S.

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http://www.kptu.net/mboard.asp?Action=view&strBoardID=KPTU_PDSENG&intPage=1&intCategory=0&strSearchCategory=|s_name|s_subject|&strSearchWord=&intSeq=12099