

South Korea: Public Service and Transport Workers Participate in General Strike Action and KPTU recent struggles

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Korean Public Service and Transport Workers Participate in General Strike Action

On 24 April tens of thousands of South Korean workers came out into the streets as part of the Korean Confederation of Trade Union's General Strike demanding an end to regressive labour market reform and public pension cuts, introduction of a KRW 10,000 minimum wage and guarantee of fundamental labour rights for all workers.

Within a context of ever-growing inequality, Korean workers and common people's rage against the government is growing around several issues. These include the government's attempts to unilaterally introduce performance-based wage systems, make it easier to fire workers and expand precarious employment, its continued blocking of a fair investigation of the sinking of the Sewol Ferry in April 2014, and recent revelations of government corruption.

Protests have been growing in size and intensity with over 100 thousand workers gathered in 17 locations around the country on April 24th. On the 25th, another massive protest was held by teachers and public servants focusing specifically on the pension reform issue.

Korean public and transport workers have been at the centre of these struggles with 10,000 members of the KPTU participating on the 24th. Precarious workers in public services held a pre-rally before the main general strike rally calling for legislation and funding to improve their conditions and formalise their status as public sector workers. Members of the KPTU Education Workers Solidarity Division (education support workers) were the heart of this protest. They also participated in strike rallies around the country, including Daegu, where water cannons were used against them and other workers.

The KPTU Air and Sea Port Transport Division (KPTU ASPT) also held a pre-rally calling for the reinstatement of transport workers fired by the snack and ice cream producer Binggrae when their jobs were outsourced last year. The company is refusing to reinstate the workers despite Ministry of Labour and court rulings calling on Binggrae to bring them on as permanent employees. Cargo truck drivers, members of the KPTU Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division (KPTU-TruckSol), also participated in the strike, decorating their trucks with banners calling for safe rates and working conditions.

Hospital workers were also a main force during the General Strike rally. In particular, workers at Seoul National University Hospital began an indefinite strike against commercialisation of healthcare and union repression the day before on April 23. They will be joined by workers from Kyungpook National University Hospital on April 29.

The KCTU and KPTU are building up for May Day, followed by more strike action in June and throughout the year.

2015/04/27

Education Support, Hospital and other Public and Transport Workers Join the April 24 General Strike!

On April 24, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) will go on general strike against the Park Geun-hye government and its anti-labour, anti-people policies. Park's government is continuing its attack on the public sector and all workers, seeking to weaken public pensions, cut public workers' benefits and rights, stimulate competition through performance-based pay, and privatise healthcare, transport and other need public services. The government is also pushing a 'basic plan on precarious work' that will expand precarious employment and essentially force it on all workers. At the same time, the government is refusing to move forward with a fare investigation of the sinking of the Sewol Ferry that happened year ago, willfully turning its back on the families of the some 300 victims and repressing their desperate protests with water canons and arrests.

Korean workers, among them the members of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU), are striking to protest all of these measures. KPTU education workers (members of KPTU's Education Solidarity Division) will be at the forefront, striking on the 24th against the government's precarious worker policy and calling for legislation and funding that will make possible secure employment and decent work in schools and other public institutions. KPTU hospital workers (Seoul National University Hospital, Kyungpook University Hospital) will join them, protesting the commercialisation of healthcare and repression against unions who stand up to it. These groups will be joined by other KPTU workers employed in sectors that range from private transport to public utilities.

Seoul National University Hospital Workers' will begin their strike a day early on April 23. KPTU EdSol members will join other public sector precarious workers in a pre-rally before the main strike protest on April 24. Before these actions, on April 21, KPTU members in safety-related jobs (transport, utilities, healthcare, etc.) held an 'Action Day for Public Safety', calling for a just resolution to the Sewol tragedy and the regulation of capitalist greed needed to create a truly safe society.

2015/04/22

KPTU Education Support Workers Return to Work after 20-day Strike

- Real gains made, but more work to be done.

After over 20 days of strike and sit-in protest, Northern Gyeongsang Province after-school instructors, members of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union Education Solidarity Workers Division (KPTU-EdSol), have returned to work. On 1 March they and their union reached an agreement with local school authorities saving their jobs and securing their working conditions. As such, the union members returned to work on 2 March.

Over 500 of the 700 elementary school after-school instructors in the Northern Gyeonggi area are employed through contracts that stipulate extremely short working hours – less than 15 a week. These workers face extreme job insecurity when their contracts end every year in February and often work more than their stipulated hours and pay, but with no guarantee of severance pay, days off or the possibility of permanent employment.

To win correction of this situation, roughly 30 members of KPTU-EdSol began a strike and sit-in protest at the Northern Gyeongsang Office of Education on 11 February. Their struggle led to an agreement with education authorities guaranteeing continued employment, over 15 hours of work a week, the establishment of a principle for transferring workers to unlimited duration contracts and further negotiations to improve conditions.

The agreement is the result of a tenacious struggle during which the female union members spent cold nights on the floor of the Education Office and were brutally arrested, police climbing on top of them to cut the chains with which they had bound their bodies together. The union members gave up spending the Lunar New Year's holiday (18 to 22 February) with their family to continue their fight.

KPTU-EdSol has won an important victory, but the struggle continues as some school principals are refusing to uphold the agreement. Moreover, the long-term task of winning permanent employment remains.

KPTU-EdSol will continue to fight until the rights of elementary school after-school instructors and all education support workers in Korea are respected. As part of this campaign, we are reading ourselves for strike action in timing with the Korean Confederation of Trade Union's General Strike on 24 April.

2015/03/05

Following Supreme Court Ruling, Female KTX On-board Staff Vow Continued Fight

- Supreme Court overturn lower court's decision finding of an actual employment relationship between Korail and subcontracted female on-board staff
- Workers face having to pay back USD 100 thousand in wages and court fees.

For close to ten years, female KTX (high speed train) on-board staff have been fighting for recognition of their direct employment relationship with the Korean Railroad Corporation (Korail).

These workers were formally employed through a subcontracting company and had their contracts terminated in 2006.

In 2008, thirty-four women filed a lawsuit to prove their employment relationship with the Korail leading to victories in both the administrative and high courts. Judges found in favour of the workers' favour on the basis that their work was closely integrated with that of the Korail-employed team leaders who oversaw them.

On February 26, however, the Supreme Court overturned the lower courts' rulings in a surprisingly reactionary decision. Now each of the thirty-four workers faces having to return wages the low court

had ordered the Korail to pay them while the trial was going on, along with trial fees, totalling roughly USD 100 thousand a person.

Distraught and unable to pay back the amount, some workers have begun to talk of divorce in order to spare their families of the financial burden.

But they have not given up their determined to fight. On 4 March, the KTX workers, along with their union the KPTU-Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU), held a press conference condemning the court's decision and announcing a continued struggle.

At the press conference the KRWU KTX On-Board Personnel Branch spoke emotionally about her reaction to the Supreme Court decision. "On the night of the 26th, I couldn't sleep all night after hearing the Supreme Court's ruling. I just stared forward blankly, the tears rolling down. I never thought our bitter struggle over the last ten years would come to this futile end," she admitted. "But, she promised, "We begin our fight anew, and we will not stop fighting until we can return to our jobs on the KTX. Please help us."

In its press conference statement, the KRWU noted the implications of the Supreme Court decision for rail safety. The statement reads, in part, "The outsourcing that began with KTX on-board staff has now spread throughout the railway, threatening safety at every level. The Supreme Court has now given a license to the Korail to avoid its responsibility for rail safety and continue its indiscriminate use of subcontracted workers."

In his speech KRWU President Young-hoon Kim promised to continue the fight and called on the Korail management to "Begin unconditional dialogue with the union to find a responsible solution to the problem."

2015/03/05

Following Strike, Korean Education Support Workers begin Protest Encampment in front of National Assembly

On November 24, Korean education support workers' unions began an indefinite protest encampment in front of the National Assembly building in Yeouido, Seoul. The workers, members of the KPTU Education Workers Solidarity Division (KPTU-EdSol) and other education support worker unions are calling for passage of legislation that will clarify their status as 'public education support personnel' and increasing funding to improve their working conditions.

The protest encampment comes after Korean education support worker unions held a successful 2 day strike on 20 - 21 November in which over 20 thousand workers from over 900 schools participated.

On the first day of the strike KPTU-EdSol held a strike rally at Seoul Station during which they called passage of the aforementioned legislation as well as improvements in their wage system and bonuses. A huge discrepancy exists between the wages and benefits granted permanently-employed school teachers and education support workers. Symbolic of this discrimination, the cafeteria workers who make school lunches receive no meal allowances, while teachers receive 130 thousand won (roughly USD 130) a month.

Education support workers unions have been engaged in bargaining with education authorities in school districts throughout the country. But, in most cases there has been little progress as education authorities have been unwilling to bargaining in good faith. In addition, action on the part of the central government - through passage of legislation and budget allocation - is a precondition for substantial improvement in conditions.

At the strike protest on 20 November, members of other KPTU-EdSol members were joined by other KPTU affiliates, including truck drivers and hospital workers, and by the Korean Teachers Union who showed their support for the education support workers' struggle.

Following the rally the strike participants marched through downtown Seoul.

On 21 November similar rallies were held in the administrative capital of Sejeong City and locally throughout the country.

2014/11/24

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* <https://www.kptu.net/>