

# South Korea: Workers resist government's 'war on unions'

Friday 19 May 2023, by [TILLMAN Clive](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2023).

**One hundred and thirty thousand South Korean workers rallied across 14 cities on May 1. Organisers estimate 80,000 took part in the country's capital, Seoul. It was the largest turnout for a political rally in the country since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The rally was endorsed by the two major union confederations, the radical Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the traditionally more conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU).

In Seoul, the rally focussed on the repressive anti-union stance of right-wing president Yoon Suk-yeol. The record-breaking attendance rates reflect the popular discontent towards the government. Participants carried signs with slogans such as "Out with Yoon Suk-yeol" and "General Strike Now".

Workers' frustration was well summed up by Kim Byul-sam, head of the Seoul Regional Organisation for Medical Workers Transport Union, who said: "Because the Yoon Suk-yeol government continues to suppress workers and trade unions, we have come out to show them that workers are here to fight against the government."

## **Anti-union witch hunt drives unionist to suicide**

The May Day rallies were tainted by tragedy, however, involving the death by self-immolation of 50-year-old construction unionist Yang Hoe-Dong. His death was the result of false criminal charges imposed on him as part of the government's war on militant unionism.

Yang was one of a number of unionists from the Korean Construction Workers' Union (KCWU) targeted by the Yoon administration in a crackdown on union militancy on construction sites.

Yang had been under police investigation since February for his involvement in striking a collective agreement with construction companies in his area that delivered substantial benefits to union members in the hiring and firing process. He was falsely charged with "racketeering" and scheduled for questioning before the Gangneung branch of the Chuncheon District Court on May 1.

Before his death, Yang issued the following post on a popular construction union social media page: "I carried out union activities lawfully and without committing crimes, but [the charges applied to me] are obstruction of business and intimidation, not a violation of assembly law. My pride cannot abide this."

Kim Jeong-bae, head of the Gangneung branch of the KCWU, said that "Yang would often say that the arrest warrant had been requested based only on the management's side of the story, and that the investigation [into him] was far-fetched".

## **Government attacks**

The Yoon administration assumed office on May 10 last year and immediately proclaimed that it would take a hard-line stance against union “militancy” in order to enforce what Yoon calls the “rule of law in labour-management relations”. Tough criminal sanctions for non-compliance have been advocated as part of a “war on unions”.

Yoon directly intervened in a nationwide truck drivers strike in December, by issuing a return-to-work order that imposed criminal penalties of up to three years jail or a fine of ₩30 million (A\$33,500) for non-compliance.

The administration’s hard-line measures and its direct intervention in an industrial dispute have attracted criticism from a range of international commentators, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which said return-to-work orders violate worker’s freedom of association under international law.

The Yoon administration attempted to raise maximum weekly working hours from 52 to 69, in March. This was met with a fierce backlash from unions and community organisations. Consequently, the government had to backpedal on the proposal — at least temporarily.

The attempt to lengthen the working week coincides with wider attacks on the union movement. As at the time of writing, more than 950 union officials have been summoned for questioning by police, under government-directed “special investigations”, and 16 unionists are detained on criminal charges.

The government also used the authoritarian Cold War-era *National Security Act* to raid the KCTU’s offices on January 18. The following day, police raided eight construction union offices affiliated with the KCTU and FKTU. Dozens of police officers raided the KCTU office again on January 20.

The raids have been condemned by international human rights organisations, the United Nations and the global union movement. The International Trade Union Confederation’s deputy general secretary Owen Tudor said: “This is a shameful attack on trade unions and, as such, an assault on democracy itself in South Korea. As an ILO member state, the Korean government has a duty to uphold ILO standards on freedom of association.”

The global civil society alliance, CIVICUS, has downgraded South Korea’s civic space rating from “open” to “narrowed”.

## **Union fightback**

The Korean union movement has vowed to stand up to the government’s attacks. The KCTU has publicly declared plans for a general strike in July. This will involve strikes across various industries and daily street protests over two weeks. Individual unions have also announced sector-wide strikes.

Healthcare workers staged a nationwide strike on May 11, in protest at the government’s *Nursing Act*, which specifies roles and responsibilities for nurses. Further protests by medical workers are planned for July.

The Korean Metal Workers Union has announced a nationwide strike for May 31 and the KCWU is planning a nationwide strike in July in the construction sector.

Public service and transport workers unions are planning strikes in September and October.

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