

South Korea: On May 21, Han, Sang-gyun, ex-president of the labor confederation KCTU, is to be released on parole!

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KCTU warmly welcome the jailed Han, who is back to the movement as an organizer!

On May 21, KCTU ex-president Han, Sang-gyun will be freed on parole, after serving 2 years, 5 months and 12 days in prison on charge stemming from protesting the corrupt Park Geun-hye government. The new government under President Moon, which was elected from the 'candlelight movement', spent one year and 12 days before it decided on the parole, at the time when Han has only 6 months and 20 days left to serve. In that sense, it is hard for us to express a simple 'welcome' on the news.

However, we don't want blame Moon's government on this belated decision. Han, Sang-gyun already wrote from the prison, when he was excluded from the presidential pardon in last December, "I haven't expected to be pardoned and I don't want to blame the Government", "It is true that the government promised that it would build a nation respects labour. However, if such a society is made not by the power of unity of our own, it is merely a mirage." We reflect on ourselves rather than blame others, facing the fact that we are not powerful enough to make him be freed earlier. We will strive to build workers' power.

We still do not know on what ground he had to be sentenced such a severe punishment- 3 years' jail term. At that time the police and the prosecutors even tried to apply for a sedition charge against Han, insisting that he caused a social disorder. However, it was Park Geun-hye government itself that produced the real disorder. What Han really did was organising a general strike to stop the regressive labour reform driven by Park's government, hosting 130,000 big mass mobilization against the anti-democracy and anti-labour government, and crashing through the bus barricades which were illegally installed to hide the truth of the Sewol Ferry disaster.

On occasion of the parole of Han, the November 14 Peoples Mass Mobilization on 2015 should be reassessed historically, politically and judicially. The right to peaceful assembly and demonstration is not a crime. It is no longer justified to imprison someone who violate the existing laws to protest against the unlawful and violent government. Lee, Young-joo, the ex-general secretary of the KCTU who is under detention for the same charge, is waiting for a jury trial which will be held on 11 12 of June, 2018. We will keep our eyes on the trial to see whether or not the court rewrite the justice.

Since December 10, 2015, when he walked out of the Jogye Buddhist temple and was arrested, a lot of things happened. Mr. Baek, Nam-gi, a farmer activist who join the people's mass mobilization passed away. On November 12, 2016 one million people got together in another peoples' mass mobilization, which led up to the massive candlelight movement. When Han was elected as the KCTU president he declared he would shorten the term of Park's government and this was realized when Park was ousted by the candlelight movement. Former president Lee, Myoung-bak, who

spearheaded the mass lay-offs of 2,646 workers in Ssangyong Motor and the former president Park, Geun-hye, who tried to destroy the KCTU by the notorious labour reform, followed him into prison. Han maintained that a decent work society will not come until an independent and democratic trade union is established in Samsung and finally, Lee, Jay-yong, the vice chair of Samsung and the main culprit of non-union management in the group, followed into prison as well. Ironically, the corrupt 2 former president and the head of the conglomerate and the head of trade union who led a struggle against them were imprisoned during the same period.

From all the sectors of society, domestically and internationally, the voices for the release of Han was vigorous. UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the deprivation of his liberty is an arbitrary detention and a violation of the international human rights standards. ILO also recommended the Korean government to take all the measure to release him and other imprisoned trade unionist in relation to the Mass mobilization. Sharan Burrow, ITUC general secretary requested the government to release Han when she met president Moon in person. Global Unions, international human rights organizations and trade unions in different countries ran a several round of campaign for his freedom including sending petitions and letters to the government. Together with global labour movement, KCTU will take bigger step to deepen and extend the international solidarity.

Han is to be released but there are still a lot of conscientious prisoners. Along with Lee, Young-joo, Jang, Ok-ki, the president of the Korean Construction Workers Union is under detention for organizing a massive protest for construction workers rights. Others are being imprisoned for violation of the National Security Law based on the outdated ideological confrontation, at the time of peace in Korean peninsular. If the government wants to call itself as “government of candlelight” but denies its obligation to release all the prisoners of conscience, it is a misuse of the meaning of the “candlelight”.

Han has decided to serve as an organizer to bring end to the social inequality and to build a society where all workers can exercise the trade union rights without any repression. He has expressed his ambition “I will be one of the numerous organizers who work with unorganized, low-paid and precarious workers to increase union density up to 30% and union membership up to 6 million”, “I hope to get older seeing the future generation who would be proud of being a worker”. KCTU will be with him when he take a fresh step. The 800,000 members of the KCTU warmly welcome Han, Sang-gyun to the world which has changed by the candlelight movement sparked by him.

P.S.

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