

Yang Kyung-soo, South Korea's Top Independent Labor Leader, Has Been Arrested

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In a predawn raid on September 2, the South Korean government arrested Yang Kyung-soo, president of the country's largest labor confederation. Yang is the thirteenth president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions in a row to be jailed.

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Before dawn on September 2, 2021, hundreds of police encircled the headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and pried open the door. Inside, they arrested Yang Kyung-soo, the president of the country's largest umbrella organization of independent unions.

About three weeks ago, a local court issued an [arrest warrant](#) for Yang after prosecutors alleged that he violated COVID-19 social distancing requirements by organizing a rally in downtown Seoul. On July 3, about eight thousand KCTU members attended the rally, calling on the government to address inequality exacerbated by the pandemic.

Citing super-spreader concerns, the government refused to grant a permit for the rally, despite the KCTU's repeatedly expressed commitment to the COVID protocol. The union members gathered anyway and carefully followed government guidelines for social distancing. After the rally, only three attendees tested positive for COVID, with little evidence tying their infections to the rally.

South Korea's [initial response](#) to the pandemic — including strict quarantines and track-and-trace measures that were made possible by the cooperation and sacrifice of working people — was successful enough to draw international praise. After eighteen months of the pandemic, however, Koreans have grown tired and frustrated with a government that struggles to vaccinate the population and control new variants. This was the backdrop against which KCTU held its rally, where unionists demanded a moratorium on job dismissals during the pandemic and direct cash payouts for workers and small business owners.

Since President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, his government has escalated tensions with the labor movement, which was largely responsible for his rise to power. Yang's arrest, which global labor union organizations [have condemned](#) as "wrong and disproportionate," will no doubt worsen relations between the South Korean government and the country's unionized workforce.

Betrayal and Tensions

Yang's arrest came on the heels of a national strike by nurses and health care workers, which ended just hours before the police raid on the KCTU headquarters. Though health care workers had come to a formal agreement with the government, they were not pacified, and they [threatened](#) additional work stoppages. At the time of publication, workers at five hospitals are on strike, despite the deal.

Tensions had been smoldering between organized labor and the government of Moon Jae-in since before the pandemic began. A former human rights lawyer, Moon was elected president four years ago on a pro-labor ticket after months of mass protests, now known as the [Candlelight Revolution](#), led to the [impeachment](#) of his corrupt predecessor, Park Geun-hye.

The KCTU itself played a pivotal role in Moon's rise to power. In 2016, Han Sang-gyun, then the president of KCTU, was jailed for organizing [anti-government protests](#) that laid the groundwork for the Candlelight Revolution. But rather than parole Han immediately upon taking office, Moon waited a year to set the labor leader [free](#).

As a presidential candidate, Moon promised to implement a pro-labor agenda. But about two years into his presidency, the [government arrested](#) Kim Myung-hwan, president of the KCTU at the time, on a charge of scuffling with riot police at the National Assembly over a controversial bill that could have further extended working hours to dangerous levels. Kim was released on bail, a rarity in South Korea, where bail petitions are routinely denied. A final court ruling is still pending.

A New Breed

In April 2020, in the face of the worsening pandemic, Kim reached out to the very government that had attempted to incarcerate him to strike an "[emergency settlement](#)" aimed at job protection. The KCTU returned to a tripartite commission of the government, labor, and business that it had abandoned in protest over Kim's arrest.

Three months later, Kim resigned as KCTU president after [failing](#) to win delegate approval for an unprecedented but vaguely worded tripartite agreement, under which organized labor would "proactively cooperate" on "the flexibility of working hours" with corporations — which in turn would put "the most effort possible" into the "retention of employment."

Forty-five-year-old Yang was elected president of the KCTU in a snap election in December 2020. Previously a student activist, Yang began his involvement with labor in the mid-2000s, when he was a temporary assembly-line worker at a Kia Motors plant. In 2012, he was elected president of a union representing temporary workers at that plant. He is the first KCTU president to have been a temporary worker.

Yang represents a younger and more militant generation of the South Korean labor movement. Boosted by the effects of the Candlelight Revolution, the KCTU surpassed the symbolically important mark of 1 million members in 2019, supplanting its less strident, pro-government rival, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, as the largest union organization in the country. Yang was elected on a promise that he would call a general strike in October 2021.

At a [press conference](#) after the raid, KCTU officials confirmed that they would call a general strike on October 20. Yang, who remains in custody, has begun a hunger strike demanding release.

The KCTU was formed in November 1995 after two decades of rising [labor militancy](#). The

organization remained outlawed until 1997, when union members staged a national strike and successfully pressed the government to recognize the group. To date, the KCTU has had thirteen presidents, all of whom have been jailed by their respective governments — liberal and conservative alike.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 09.08.2021:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/09/south-korea-labor-yang-kyung-soo-kctu-arrest>
- Kap Seol is a Korean writer and researcher based in New York. His writings have appeared in *Labor Notes*, *In These Times*, *Business Insider*, and other publications. In 2019, his exposé for Korean independent daily *Kyunghyang* revealed an imposter who falsely claimed to be a US military intelligence specialist posted to the South Korean city of Gwangju during a popular uprising in 1980.