

## Workers' View of Korea #2 (June 2012)

International newsletter of the PSSP-Research Institute for Alternative Workers  
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### NOW IN KOREA

#### Korean Cargo Truckers, Construction Equipment Operators Prepare for Joint Struggle

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=284>

On May 29, 2000 cargo truck drivers and construction equipment operators gathered in protest near the National Assembly building in the Yeouido District of Seoul. These workers, officers of the Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union (KPTU), Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division and the Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU) voiced their demands for fundamental changes in their working conditions and declared their determination to fight together until their demands are met. The KPTU cargo truckers and KCWU equipment operators have put forth the following demands: 1) repeal of the tax on gas and decrease of diesel gas prices, 2) increase transport and construction equipment rental rates (i.e. workers' wages), 3) guarantee of unionization rights, 3) full access to industrial accident insurance and other social benefits.

South Korean cargo truckers and construction equipment operators are brought together by their similar employment form. Both groups of workers are considered 'self-employed' or 'independent operators' under Korean law. In addition, both groups work at the bottom of multilayer subcontracting systems. Together, these conditions mean super-exploitation and the denial of basic labor rights.

Technically, cargo truckers and construction equipment operators own the vehicles they drive, which they pay for in installments that come out of their earnings every month. The commercial licenses for these vehicles, however, are held by trucking/construction equipment rental companies, which claim a part of the drivers' earnings. These small-scale companies, in turn contract with larger transport and construction companies, who in turn contract with still larger

companies who make the initial orders for shipment and construction work.



May 29 joint KPTU, KCWU protest in Yeouido

At the top of this system, the manufacturing, logistics and construction subsidiaries of Korea's massive *chaebols* (conglomerates) make huge profits, while at the bottom truck drivers and equipment operators receive a pittance. For construction equipment operators, the widespread practice of delayed payments only adds to the burden.

As 'independent operators' cargo truckers and construction equipment operators must cover all the costs of gas and repairs. Over the last two years, gas prices have risen 20%, while transport rates for cargo truck drivers have fallen by 2%. Gas prices have soared, not only due to the increase in global oil prices, but also because *chaebol* oil subsidiaries keep prices high seeking to make a profit, while the South Korean government adds excessive taxes.

In addition, because they are not recognized as workers, cargo truckers and construction equipment operators access to industrial accident insurance and other social benefits is extreme limited. Worse still, they are not afforded the right to unionize under Korean law. This effectively means they are denied the right to collective organizing to fight for improvements in their working conditions.

Clearly, however, these workers have not allowed the denial of their rights in law stop them from proclaiming them in fact and uniting

in struggle. Challenging the government's unjust prohibitions, they have formed their own unions and now determine to demonstrate their collective power. The Korean Construction Workers Union has announced an indefinite general strike to begin on June 27. For their part, the KPTU-Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division has announced they will launch massive protests without forewarning at a similar time. As the two union's proclaimed at a press conference last month, when this happens, "the flow of goods and construction sites in the Republic of Korea will come to a standstill" and "crises in the logistics and construction sectors will occur."

The struggle of cargo truck drivers and construction equipment operators is more than a struggle about their own interests. Rather, they are fighting against massive *chaebols* bent on making profits of the backs of workers at every turn, and a government bent on labor repression. As such, their struggle is the struggle of all Korean workers, and of workers everywhere struggling against transnational corporations and the governments' that support them.

### **The South Korean Minimum Wage Struggle**

<http://www.pspp.org/eng/?p=298>

Minimum wage in South Korea was set at KRW 4580/hr (roughly USD 4/hr) for 2012. The cost of a Big Mac set at a McDonalds in South Korea is KRW 5200 (USD 4.46). In other words, in a country where the per capita income is over USD 20,000, a minimum wage worker cannot even buy a fast food meal after an hour of work.



KCTU calls for KRW 5600 minimum wage

In South Korea, the minimum wage is set by a

tripartite Minimum Wage Committee made up of nine labor representatives, nine employer representatives and nine 'public interest' representatives. This committee meets at the end of June each year to set the minimum wage for the following year. Around this time each year, therefore, unions and social movement organizations carry out a struggle to demand an increase in the minimum wage.

The current minimum wage is only 32% of the average wage. It is workers who work the hardest in the worst conditions - janitorial workers, security guards, restaurant workers and workers in small-scale manufacturing enterprises - who have to get by on minimum wage. For 2013, KCTU is demanding that minimum wage be raised to KRW 5600 (USD 4.80) – 50% of the average wage.

This year, however, the minimum wage struggle has to do with more than simply winning an increase. The reason for this is that the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MoL) suddenly changed the composition of the Minimum Wage Committee without notifying the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) ahead of time. Originally, labor was represented by 4 KCTU representatives and 5 FKTU representatives.

This year, however, the MoL suddenly gave one of the FKTU seats to the recently formed Korean People's Labor Union Confederation (KLUC). The KLUC is so pro-government it has been called the 'Lee Myung-bak Confederation', and progressives fear its representative will not act in the interest of workers. In the past, the labor and employers representatives on the committee have put forth opposing proposals, while the 'public interest' representatives put forth a compromise position. Added to this structure, the KLUC representative is likely to wield excessive power. As such both KCTU and FKTU are currently boycotting the committee in protest.

KCTU is also working together with social movement organizations in a campaign to raise public awareness about the importance of raising the minimum wage. This campaign includes one-person protests, street outreach and street marches throughout the country. Through these actions, KCTU and participating organizations

seek to educate the public about the hardships faced by minimum-wage workers.

So far the response has been very positive, an encouraging sign given that social pressure on the ‘public interest’ representatives to take the side of labor is the only real way to influence the Minimum Wage Committee’s decision.

The minimum wage struggle, however, still has a long way to go before it gains real strength. First, it is important to come up with a means for deciding the minimum wage based on the cost of living. In addition, it is important not only to raise social awareness of the importance of a minimum wage increase, but also to organizing minimum-wage workers into unions so that they may become agents of the struggle. This is the only way that real power to win a fair minimum wage will be developed.

### **Railway Workers to walk out against Government Plan to Privatize Bullet-train Services**

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=304>



**Press conference announcing petition campaign against KTX privatization**

The Korean government is pushing ahead with the privatization of the country’s high-speed KTX trains. The Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs proposed the privatization plan in December 2011. The plan includes allowing a private company to operate two new bullet-train lines, one that connects Suseo in southern Seoul to Busan, and one that connects Suseo to Mokpo, South Jeolla Province. These lines are currently under construction and are scheduled to be complete in 2015.

The government has denied that its policy is real a privatization policy and argues instead that the plan is aimed at bringing competition into the railway sector, which has been monopolized by the state-run railroad operator Korail. It insists that if a private enterprise enters the railroad sector, it will boost the efficiency of railway operation and consequently reduce fares, thus improving the financial soundness of the debt-ridden Korail.

In reality, however, this is just another example of the Lee Myung-bak administration’s “business-friendly” policies, which are designed to provide favors to large corporate groups. Under the proposed plan, the selected private company will be guaranteed a permit to operate a part of the KTX operations for 15 years even though the KTX is the only profit-making business of the deficit-ridden Korail. As such, the new policy would undermine the train’s public purpose and raise train fares. The plan will inevitably result in privatization of the entire system, which will cause poor maintenance and jeopardize passenger safety as private operators will make bringing in profits their priority.

The Lee administration originally proposed a policy of full privatization of the railway sector through the establishment of a private holding company. It scrapped this plan, however, after facing severe opposition. Since then, the government has continued to outsource various operations and take steps in the direction of privatization. The government’s plan is a roundabout way to privatize an essential public service and is in line with other pro-business plans to privatize airports and allow for-profit hospitals.

The members of the Korean Railway Workers' Union endorsed an anti-privatization strike with an approval rate of 86 percent in April. The union has said the timing for the actual strike will depend on the progress of the government's plan. The government said that unionized rail workers' recent decision to walk out to resist the proposed partial privatization of KTX bullet-train operations is clearly illegal and should be scrapped. This is an issue that requires continued attention in the future.



## UPDATES

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=309>

### **Ssangyong Workers' Struggle Continues**

On April 6, Ssangyong Motor workers set up an alter in front of Seoul City Hall as a site of commemoration for the 22 workers and family members that have died since mass dismissals were carried out in 2009. The alter has also become a site of continued struggle. The Ssangyong workers and their supporters have defended the alter against police attacks, even rebuilding it from scratch after police destroyed it on May 24. On May 19 the Ssangyong Motor workers were joined by thousands of allies in a mass protest and march in timing with the anniversary of the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement. In addition, a representative from the Ssangyong Motor branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union participated in the International Autoworkers Council Meeting in Germany in May to share news of their struggle. Another massive march and all-night protest were held in support of the Ssangyong workers' struggle on June 16-17.

### **Janitorial Workers win Wage Increase, Continue Struggle**

On April 19 janitorial and security workers organized by the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers Union's Seoul-Gyeonggi Branch won a collective bargaining agreement that covers workers at 6 worksites. Under this agreement workers will receive a 10.87% wage increase to KRW 5100/hr (USD 4.37/hr), a KRW 60,000/mth (USD 51.46/mth) allowance for meals and KRW 150,000 (USD128.66) in holiday bonuses. Workers at Hongik University continue to fight with the support of their colleagues, however, as the Hongik administration and cleaning companies refuse to recognize the KPTU affiliate and claiming that a yellow union is the real bargaining representative. On June 15, workers from all worksites held a joint "Janitorial Workers March" calling for an end to the repression at Hongik University and decent conditions for all janitorial and security workers. The American SEIU-Service Workers West Local sent a solidarity video played at the Korean workers' rally. SEIU janitorial workers also celebrate June 15 every year to mark their 'Justice for Janitors Campaign.

## ISSUE IN FOCUS

### **The Crisis of the United Progressive Party and the Path to building Working-class Political Power**

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=321>

#### **What is the United Progressive Party?**

The United Progressive Party (UPP) is the most recent incarnation of a party formed original to represent the interests of the Korean working class.

From the time it was founded in 1995, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) has seen 'building workers' political power' as an important strategy. In line with this strategy, KCTU made an organizational decision to build a workers' progressive party. In 2001 the Democratic Labor Party (KDLP) was founded with KCTU's president as the party's leader. KCTU adopted "building political power through the KDLP" as its official policy.

In the 2007 presidential elections, however, the KDLP candidate received many less votes than had been expected. This led to tensions within the party as the minority left wing of the party criticizing the dominant nationalist tendency (known as National Liberation or 'NL') for being undemocratic and too close to North Korea. This conflict led to a split in the party with the left-wing faction leaving to form the New Progressive Party.

The split within the KDLP also led to increased sectarian conflict within KCTU. Ahead of general elections scheduled for April 2012, KCTU tried to overcome these problems and bring the two parties back together throughout last year. Members of the two parties along with several progressive and people's organizations formed the "Committee for Grand Unity of the Left" through which they discussed the formation of a new party. The dominant part of the NL tendency (known in Korean as *danggwonpa*) within the KDLP, however, moved in a different direction, trying to join forces with the Participation Party, a party that had been widely criticized as supporting the interests of neoliberal capitalism. As a result of this drive by the *danggwonpa*, the attempts to bring the KDLP and the New Progressive Party back together failed. Instead the KDLP, the

Participation Party and a small group of the New Progressive Party led by a few well-known individuals came together to form the United Progressive Party (UPP).

### **Evaluation of the UPP**

Several forces within the Korean progressive movement opposed joining forces with the Participation Party. They have maintained that given the involvement of neoliberal Participation Party, the UPP cannot be seen as a truly progressive party. In particular, they pointed to the fact that the Participation Party was formed by members of the previous Noh Mu hyun government, which was responsible for severe labor repression, the retrogressive revision of the law on precarious workers and pursuit of the U.S.-Korea FTA.

Nonetheless, the dominant NL group within KCTU attempted to apply its previous policy of full electoral support for the KDLP to the UUP. In response, left-wing forces created the “KCTU Union Members’ Front to Oppose the Policy of Exclusive Support for the UPP and realize true Working-class Politics”. This group called on the KCTU leadership to hold an emergency delegates assembly to discuss the issue. In the end, the KCTU leadership was unable to adopt a policy of exclusive support for the UPP. It did however, force through a policy by which union members were required to vote for the UPP in the election of proportional national assembly representatives in the general election held on April 11.

Meanwhile, the UPP forced an electoral alliance with the Democratic United Party (the centrist opposition party, hereafter ‘DUP’). Through this strategy it won 7 seats in electoral districts and 6 proportional representative seats in the general elections.

### **Election Corruption and the Deteriorating Image of the Left**

Directly after the general elections, questions about the legitimacy of the UPP elections to select proportional representative candidates surfaced. An internal investigation was carried out, the report of which was released on May 2. The investigation found that grave irregularities and corruption had occurred during the internal elections leading the construction of the list of proportional representative candidates that favored the *dangwonpa*.

The results of the investigation were immediately picked up and played over and over again in the mainstream leading to widespread criticisms of the UPP and progressives in general among the Korean public. The criticisms of the UPP *dangwonpa* were particularly strong. Nonetheless, the *dangwonpa* rejected the findings of the report and expressed its opposition by disrupting a party Central Committee meeting on May 12, chanting and eventually resorting to physical violence.



**Violence at the May 12 UPP central committee meeting**

These incidents were reported by the mainstream media leading to growing criticism of the UPP and the left in general as undemocratic. In other words, the conflict within the UPP has led to severe deterioration of the image of the entire labor and progressive movement. Even worse, the Prosecutors’ Office used the election corruption issue as an excuse to raid the UPP’s office and confiscate the party server, an incident which has no precedent in the history of the Korean movement. The UPP crisis has given the government yet another tool through which to repress the left.

### **Never-ending Turmoil**

The UPP tried to overcome the situation by creating an “Emergency Committee for Party Renewal”, which adopted the position that all elected proportional representatives should step down. The *dangwonpa*, however, refused to accept this decision and instead formed its own ‘*Dangwonpa* Emergency Committee’ to challenge the Renewal Emergency Committee. The *dangwonpa* insists that if a more complete investigation of the proportional representative election finds real corruption they will agree to the resignations. In fact, however, it has come to light that the *dangwonpa* is planning to regain control of the party leadership

in the upcoming party elections at the end of June.

### **Problems in KCTU's Position**

Despite criticism coming both from within KCTU's membership and from other progressive forces, the KCTU leadership adopted the policy that all members should vote for the UPP in the proportional representative elections and carried out a campaign to win support for the UPP. The KCTU leadership believed that if that opposition forces (the UPP and the DUP) could gain a parliamentary majority the left could win changes favorable to workers through a legislative strategy focused on "the passage of 10 bills in 100 days." The opposition, however, failed to win a majority. In shock and without a clear idea of how to respond, the KCTU leadership revised its plan and has instead called for a general strike later in the year to demand abolition of mass dismissals and precarious work and the progressive revision of labor law.

he crisis surrounding the UPP - the party the KCTU leadership has supported - has creating serious confusion within KCTU. After much debate the KCTU's Central Executive Committee issued a statement on May 17 expressing, "deep concern that the UPP has currently strayed from the path of a true progressive party based in the working class and the principles of democracy." The statement also announced that KCTU had "conditionally withdrawn support for the UPP until the party regains its working-class basis and puts a plan for renewal into practice," and that KCTU would "establish an internal mechanism for pursuing a second attempt at 'building workers' political power'."

While these measures are a step in the right direction, they do not address the deeper problems of the UPP. In particular, KCTU has put forth no critique of the inclusion of the neoliberal Participation Party in the UPP, nor has it carried out an internal evaluation of its previous policy of exclusive support for the UPP in the proportional representative election. If KCTU does not deal with these more fundamental problems, the second attempt at 'building workers' political power' will most likely lead to failure.

### **Prospects**

It will be difficult to solve the problems within the UPP in the near future. More important than a resolution to the conflict between the *danggwonpa* and the rest of the party, however, is the question of what direction the UPP – or any party that is supposed to represent the interests of the working class – will take. While the original KDLP was committed to 'socialist principles and goals' its platform was later revised to define the party's character instead as 'progressive democratic'. Without a clear statement of the KDLP's basis in and commitment to the working class the party increasingly moved in a more conservative direction, eventually leading the merger with the Participation Party. Without clear criticism of these errors, it is likely that the current "Renewal Emergency Committee" will only deal with cosmetic problems while continuing to take the party in a more and more conservative direction.

KCTU as well, has moved towards the right, focusing on a legislative strategy dependant on an alliance with the centrist DUP and the mobilization of members to vote in elections. The ideological and practical limitations of this strategy must also be seriously examined. Now more than ever, it is important for KCTU to adopt a strategy befitting a truly progressive union – one that is based not on legislative or electoral politics, but on developing rank and file members as real political actors through study and struggle and building real political power through working-class unity. 'Building political power' must be understood as the process of the working class ideologically and organizationally developing into an independent agent of social change. This understanding must form the basis of any new efforts by the KCTU at party politics or to develop as a political force.

<p><b>People's Solidarity for Social Progress (PSSP):</b> Is a social movement organization in South Korea struggling against neoliberalism and working to build an alterglobalization movement by (re)constructing revolutionary social justice thought and theory, searching for internationally-based people's alternatives to neoliberalism's financial and armed globalization, and reforming and revitalizing the workers and women's move</p>
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# SONGS OF THE PEOPLE

## Strike Song

by Hochul Kim

<http://www.pssp.org/eng/?p=333>

*Scattered, we will die. Wavering, we will also die.*

*United as one, we set out towards victory.*

*We shall keep our promises to our comrades*

*Even if our skulls are split.*

*We stood together in our strike,*

*Through it we defeated the violent kusadae\*,*

*We, united in our strike,*

*Set out towards emancipation.*

*Scattered, we will die. Wavering, we'll also die.*

*United as one, we set out towards victory.*

\**Kusadae* - A band of anti-strike workers supported by management. *Kusadae*, which means "Division saving the company", have been organized at many workplaces where labor disputes are occurring and have committed naked violence against striking workers.

In June 1987, a great wave of civil protest against military dictatorship swept across South Korea. A general strike and workers' struggles for building democratic trade unions followed. This period was known as the "Great Workers' Struggle of 1987" or the "7·8·9 Great Workers' Struggle"). This massive wave of organizing symbolized the overcoming of defeatism that had plagued Korea's social movement after the terrible massacre in Gwangju committed by the military in 1980. For workers, it was the first awakening, during which they gained dignity and class-consciousness. The need for cultural forms to express workers' own stories was clear.

"Strike Song", composed in 1988, spread quickly to every workplace where a labor dispute was occurring and became one of workers' favorite songs. At workplaces where trade union did not exist and management's violence was severe, the song was sung to build solidarity among the workers. As the song, which has a powerful and solemn tone, depicts the moment workers go on strike, it has also become the opening song for workers' collective actions.

The composer, Hochul Kim, was a worker himself. He was one of the first to recognize that workers need songs for themselves during the Great Workers' struggle of 1987 and became a father of workers' music. He has composed over 100 songs for workers and the labor movement.

[http://pksong.com/bbs/box.php?ver=\\_71&sanha\\_out=&sno=4952](http://pksong.com/bbs/box.php?ver=_71&sanha_out=&sno=4952) (Sound Only)

University students singing 'Strike Song'

<http://das.jinbo.net/datamenu/NDataView.html?SID=15&DID=42>

DAS Union on the 4th day of a strike in 2010 warming up with 'Strike Song'

**The Research Institute for Alternative Workers Movements (RIAWM):** Is PSSP's research institute dedicated to revitalizing the workers movement in South Korea and beyond. Through empirical and theoretical study and dialogue with workers themselves, we are working to critically analyze the conditions workers face amidst the structural crisis of capitalism, and develop concrete policy for a workers movement that both improves workers' lives and strives towards an alternative political-economic system.

Central to our work is the concept of social movement unionism, which calls for unions and other workers' organizations to play a leading role in political and social transformation. Social movement unionism also signifies union collaboration with social movement forces and the articulation of the struggle for labor rights with struggles against other forms of structural oppression, including the women's, anti-war, anti-racist and environmental justice movements.

By fostering social movement unionism in South Korea we seek to cultivate the Korean workers movement as part of a worldwide alterglobalization movement.