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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION
ITUC OnLine

Korean Police Attack KCTU Headquarters

Brussels, 22 December 2013 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC and the International Transport Workers' Federation are gravely concerned about the ongoing contraventions of human and trade union rights in South Korea. Korean police attacked the offices of the national trade union centre KCTU with tear gas, detaining more than 100 striking railway workers today.

Transport is one of several sectors where workers' rights are under attack; indeed, workers throughout the country are seeing their fundamental rights violated or ignored. The International Labour Organisation has on repeated occasions found the country's laws wanting and have called on the government to respect the right to freedom of association in practice. However, the two global organisations are immediately concerned about the situation on Korea's railways.

A delegation from the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has just returned from a visit to the country to support the national rail strike organised by its affiliate, the Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) in the rail company Korail. The delegation strongly supported the railway workers' right to strike against unpopular government restructuring proposals, and warned that arresting union leaders in retaliation for strike action would be a grave violation of international labour standards. The delegation also found that the government and Korail management were escalating the labour conflict by resorting to the use of strikebreakers (replacement workers) undermining safety standards to the extent that a tragic death of a passenger is now recorded. Since then, the KRWU's offices have been raided, warrants for the arrest of 28 union officers have been issued based on criminal charges of 'obstruction of business' and two union officers have been arrested. Korail has filed damage suit worth 7.7 billion won against the union and its 186 leaders. These developments are deeply troubling and clearly in direct contravention of internationally recognised labour standards.

In a shocking turn of events, hundreds of police were deployed against the headquarters of the KRWU's national centre KCTU in a disproportionate display of aggression. Pepper spray was used and hundreds were injured. Six senior union leaders were arrested. These are most worrying developments, which not only contravene internationally recognised labour standards but also violate civil rights.

The government of South Korea and its anti-union behaviour is again in the spotlight of the international community. Its actions run contrary to its obligations to the ILO and also the labour standards in trade agreements with the US and the EU. Further, the government is failing to fulfill its original commitment to the OECD, upon accession, to respect international labour standards. The ITF, the ITUC and their affiliates call on the government and Korail to stop its anti-union tactics, to drop charges against union officials and to enter into talks with the KRWU about restructuring. Both organisations and their members are committed to continue working collectively with their allies in the international trade union movement and beyond to bring justice to the working men and women in South Korea.

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 156 countries and territories and has 325 national affiliates.

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