



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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South Korean campaigners prevent government intention to weaken unions and facilitate lay-offs, 1997

Time period notes: *General Strikes began on the 26th of December following the passage of the controversial bill at 6am that morning.*

Amended bill following the strike was passed on the 10th of March.

December

1996

to: March

1997

Country: South Korea

Location City/State/Province: Seoul

Location Description: *Strikes also held nationwide especially in industrial cities such as Ulsan*

Goals:

Retraction of the labour reform bill

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 028. Symbolic sounds › Beating of gongs and drums
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › by international organisations
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television › international organisation delegates supporting union leaders on news conferences
- 016. Picketing › in 22 countries outside South Korean embassies
- 028. Symbolic sounds › Beating of gongs and drums
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

- 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 114. Limited strike › A series of one-day strikes

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Threat of future strikes by unions

Notes on Methods:

General strikes came to an end after the government agreed to a talk on the 21st of January. Limited half-day strikes continued for a period of time, but many workers returned to work. Not as many workers participated in the strikes that followed. After the passage of the amended reform bill, the labour unions expressed dissatisfaction, and threatened strikes in May.

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Citizens associations
- International labour and human rights organisations
- Members of trade and labour unions
- Opposition political parties
- Skilled labourers
- University intellectuals
- students
- transportation workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Kwon Yong-Kil (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)), Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU)

Partners:

National Alliance for Democracy and National Unification, Korean Catholic Priests' Association for Justice, Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice, Lawyers for a Democratic Society, University intellectuals (students and professors)

External allies:

National Congress for New Politics (NCNP), United Liberal Democrats (ULD), International Confederation of Free Trade

Unions (ICFTU), International Labour Organisation (ILO), Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD), Amnesty International

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice
- FKTU
- KCTU
- Korean Catholic Priests' Association for Justice
- Lawyers for a Democratic Society
- National Alliance for Democracy and National Unification
- University intellectuals (students and professors)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Amnesty International
- International Labour Organisation (ILO)
- Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD)

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

International organisations sent letters and delegates but it remains unclear whether they gave other forms of assistance.

Segment Length: 12 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

New Korea Party (NKP), Kim Young Sam (President of South Korea).

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known.

Campaigner violence:

Throwing of rocks, and fire bombs.

Repressive Violence:

Use of tear gas.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Much of the amendments simply reflected watered-down versions of the original bill. Flexible working hours and no-work no-pay principle were reiterated in the bill. The KCTU however did win immediate legal recognition and the right to form multiple unions in the industry was written into law.

President Kim Young Sam started his first attempt at changing labour laws in April, 1996. The government formed the Labour-Management Relations Reform committee composed of labour group leaders, management community, academics, and civic groups. It was the first attempt by the South Korean government to reform the country's authoritarian labour relations, and labour unions were hopeful of structural changes that would guarantee their long-delayed rights. As the bill was debated in the committee, however, the corporate lobbyists held greater sway in influencing policymakers and when the bill was finally announced on 3 December 1996, the unions were not happy. The proposed bill included various clauses favourable to the business community including the incorporation of voluntary retirement schemes, no-work no-pay principle, and the freedom to not pay for full time union members. Labour unions only gained in that they would now be allowed to form unions at national and industry levels. Legal recognition of the second largest labour union, Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), would be delayed until 2000 and the right for collective bargaining of schoolteachers put off until 1999. The labour unions and the political opposition denounced the bills, resulting in a deadlock in the committee. Unwilling to be slowed down by the unions, however, the ruling New Korea Party (NKP) railroaded the bill secretly and suddenly at 6am on the 26 December. The bill was passed in seven minutes in the absence of any opposition political MPs.

The KCTU responded immediately to the passage of the bill by calling a general strike. By afternoon, 145,000 had walked out of their jobs, led by the major auto-industry workers of Hyundai and Kia. On the following day, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), the largest (and legal) labour union declared a limited strike of its 1.2 million members to add to the numbers. By the next day on the 28 December, almost 372 000 workers had walked out of their jobs, shutting down key export industries such as auto and ship-building industries. The widespread strike was remarkable in its cohesiveness in that KCTU and FKTU were rival unions and in the past, cooperation had proved difficult.

Strong support from the public and the opposition political party also characterised the growing strikes. A poll conducted on the 29 December showed that 87.4% thought that the passage of the labour bill was invalid or should be repealed and 54.5% sympathised with the on-going strikes. Civic groups such as the National Alliance for Democracy and National Unification, Lawyers for a Democratic Society, the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice, the Korean Catholic Priests' Association for Justice threw its support behind the strikes by denouncing the government and filing petitions. Law professors declared the bill to be illegal, and public funds poured into the strikes and individual donations amounted to 100 million won by the end of the strike. The opposition political parties, the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP) and the United Liberal Democrats (ULD) declared the strikes to be "righteous and legitimate."

International organisations also offered support from the beginning. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) immediately lobbied the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on the 28 December. The ILO sent a letter of protest on the 9 January and dispatched delegates to Seoul. The ILO publicly appeared on the news alongside union leaders and expressed international support for the strikes. Amnesty International also supported the strikes by sending a letter of protest on the 13 January 1997 when the government issued arrest warrants for union leaders. Unionists abroad also supported the strike by picketing outside South Korean embassies in 22 countries.

The general strike continued for 23 days, and Kim's approval rating fell sharply following the strong solidarity for the strike both at home and overseas. By January, Kim's approval rating had fallen to 13.9%, and his party, to 7.2%. The economy had also taken a bruising from the strikes with estimated losses of \$3 billion. In light of these developments, Kim offered dialogue with the union leaders and his willingness to change the bill on the 21 January. Unionists responded by ending the now 23-day general strike and limiting themselves to a one-day strike on Wednesdays.

On the 28 January, the KCTU declared a halt to all strikes but promised a nationwide general strike on the 18 February. By this time, the unions faced many difficulties in continuing the strikes. Their coffers were empty, workers were gradually returning to work to receive wages, and the media attention had drifted from the strikes to the recent outbreak of the corruption scandal and the bankruptcy of the Hanbo Steel Corporation.

Thus, strikes weakened in February as the battleground for reforms moved to the legislative arena. By 24 February, the joint proposal was made ready by the parties and debates ensued. The KCTU matched the debate period with half-day strikes on the 28 February, joined also by the FKTU.

The government passed the revised bill on the 10 March. The revised bill, however, did not represent a great victory proportional to the enormous support that the strikes had garnered. The no-work no-pay principle was reiterated in the bill and so was the refusal of pay to full time union members. The small concessions that the unions did achieve included the two-year postponement of flexible lay-off policies and immediate legal recognition of the KCTU.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

The 1997 strikes marked the first time that South Korean labour unions successfully managed to launch an organised strike that aimed for long term economic improvements to its constituents. Past protests have tended to reflect outbursts of workers' discontent and were not organised.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Dong Shin You, 02/22/2015

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