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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

ICFTU OnLine...

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Korea police action against government employees designed to "destroy" their union, says ICFTU

Brussels, 12th November 2004 (ICFTU OnLine): Barely a week after protesting at the detention of 84 members of the Korean Government Employees' Union (KGEU) at the end of October (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220720&Language=EN>), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has written again to Korea's President Roh Moo-Hyun, in protest at a renewed wave of arrests and police raids on KGEU offices around the country (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220739&Language=EN>). The police action is aimed at preventing the union from holding a ballot of its members about a general strike scheduled for 15 November. It included searches of union offices and confiscation of ballot papers and poll boxes, as well as riot police attacks on trade union rallies which left dozens of unionists injured and scores arrested.

Over 100 KGEU members and leaders have been detained between 6 and 8 November and many remain behind bars at the time of writing. In its 4 page letter to President Roh, the ICFTU charged police had detained unionists in several districts of Korea's capital, Seoul, as well as in Ulsan, Gokseong-gun County, Gangwon-do, Gyeongnam-do, Jeonnam and many other locations. It said police had also searched union leaders' private homes, cars, and homes of their relatives.

On 9th November, 35 union branch offices were raided by the police. Furthermore, 99 union branch offices were blockaded and occupied by the authorities. As a result of police action which also saw ballot papers and boxes being confiscated, more than 101,408 members (over 88% of those who had registered for the ballot) were prevented from voting.

The union rallies and related actions aim at preventing the adoption of a restrictive bill, known as the "Public Officials' Trade Union Act". The bill is opposed both by the KGEU and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, one of the ICFTU's two affiliated organisations in Korea. The KGEU, a member organisation of KCTU, is also affiliated to Public Services International (PSI), a Geneva-based Global Union Federation associated with the ICFTU.

In his letter to President Roh, ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder said the latest police action may be designed to "destroy the KGEU altogether". He urged Mr Roh to instruct government agencies to exercise restraint and to order the release of all detained unionists. He added the ICFTU would "not hesitate, if this pattern of repression continues, to ensure that Korea would be compelled to answer for this unacceptable behaviour before the relevant bodies of the International Labour Organisation".

Last April, the ICFTU, PSI and many trade union organisations around the world had already protested against the arrests of several top KGEU leaders, including its President, Kim Young Gil and General Secretary, Ahn Byung Soon. Both are once more subject to arrest warrants. There are arrest warrants for a further 5 KGEU leaders.

At a press conference on 10th November, the KGEU called an end to the ballot in a climate of intense intimidation by the authorities and announced that it would pursue its plans for the strike, intended for 15th November 2004. This is in line with the KGEU's decision, unanimously adopted at its 8th congress on 21st August, which stipulated that the union would halt voting and launch a strike if government

suppression meant that more than 20% of KGEU branches and members were being prevented from voting, which indeed has been the case.

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 152 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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