

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

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Fatal beating of South Korean trade unionist reveals disrespect for fundamental human rights

Brussels, 8 August 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): The ICFTU called on the Korean Government to restrain its police force from using brutal tactics in repressing strikes following the death last week of Ha Joong Keun, a striking worker beaten to death by riot police.

Joong Keun, a member of the Korean Federation of Construction Industry Unions (KFCITU), which is affiliated to the ICFTU affiliate KCTU, was one of thousands of workers who on July 16 held a support rally for the peaceful sit-in which fellow construction workers began on July 13 at the headquarters of the Pohang Steel Corporation (POSCO), the world's fourth largest steel producer.

Thousands of riot police surrounded the rally and Ha Joong Keun was one of a number of workers beaten repeatedly with riot shields. Following hospitalization he slipped into a coma, and passed away at 2.30 am on August 1.

"We remind the government of South Korea that under its international obligations, it has the duty to protect the right of workers to strike, to belong to a union and bargain collectively. The POSCO experience shows that not only is the government not fulfilling its obligations, it is deliberately using the police to quell strikes in a most violent manner," Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the ICFTU said.

"The tragedy of Ha Joong Keun's death comes only a year after the death of another trade unionist, who was killed during industrial action over the use of strike-breakers. We condemn the use of violence to solve industrial disputes and demand that the government urgently order an independent investigation into his Ha Joong Keun's death and that those responsible be held to account," Ryder continued.

The sit-in followed protracted negotiations between the union and POSCO over workers' demands for a pay rise, a five day working week and the right to be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace.

The striking workers currently work an 8 to 10 hour day, 7 days a week. They live in undignified conditions, with only 7 bathrooms for 3,000 workers and no eating facility. The work involves the handling of hazardous chemicals and despite the illegality of asbestos in South Korea, the deadly material is still used in POSCO plants.

POSCO maintains that as it outsources the hiring of workers to subcontractors it is not responsible for the welfare of the workers employed on its building sites.

"With \$US 6 billion in profits last year, POSCO can well afford to sit

down and negotiate more humane working conditions for its workforce," Ryder concluded.

The ICFTU is also considering lodging this latest incident of anti-union repression with the International Labour Office (ILO), within the framework of a long-standing formal procedure it has launched against the Korean government.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 241 affiliated organisations in 156 countries and territories: <http://www.icftu.org> ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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