

Mad cow disease

Korean candlelight protest

Koreans are not going to accept contaminated US beef. **Sunghee Park** charts a government crackdown on a huge on-going civilian and trade union candlelight vigil to force the government to renegotiate a US beef protocol.

On 2 July in the midst of mass candlelight protests calling for the renegotiation of the 18 April Protocol on the import of US beef, the KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions) decided to go on a general strike. It called for people's right to health and the renegotiation of US beef imports to reflect food safety concerns. Privatisation of health facilities was also an issue.

The Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) played a leading role in this general strike.

US cows are eating animal feeds to make them grow quickly for the profit of livestock owners, but it can cause mad cow disease which takes 10 years to manifest in the body and is similar to dementia. In Korea, teenagers especially expressed their concern about mad cow disease, protesting that "We don't want to die, we are just 15 years old." This was the starting point for protest on the issue.

The US assured people that their beef was safe but Koreans knew that people had been infected in the UK and Canada and they saw cases on TV.

UNION WARRANTS OF ARREST

During the general strike the national prosecutor filed for arrest

warrants and pursued the leadership of KCTU, KMWU and the Hyundai Motor Branch on the grounds of 'obstruction of business', a provision in section 314 of the Penal Code.

The 24 July arrest warrants included Lee Suk-haeng (KCTU President), Jin Young-ok (KCTU first vice-president), Lee Yong-shik (KCTU general secretary), Jung Gab-deuk (KMWU president), Nam Taek-gyu (KMWU first vice-president) and all six of the top elected union officers of the Hyundai Motor Branch, which actively participated in the general strike. Search warrants for the houses of all of the above were also issued.

Since the issuing of these arrest warrants for KCTU leaders, hundreds of police have surrounded the KCTU headquarters building, searching for them. Police began also to conduct an undercover watch outside KCTU leaders' houses. They were thus able to follow the first vice-president's husband and on 27 July, police arrested Jin Young-ok in downtown Seoul, on her way to meet her family.

The president of the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) was also arrested on 20 August in Kyung-gi province.

The South Korean government's violent repression of the candlelight protest has been severe enough to attract the criticism of Amnesty International.

According to President Lee Myung-bak's new South Korean government, the 2 July general strike was illegal. It bases its argument on the fact that the general strike demands were unrelated to wages or working conditions or national industry-level collective bargaining. However, the KCTU made it clear that there was no logical or legal basis for calling the general strike illegal, and that declaring in doing so the government was simply extending its anti-labour movement policies.

The 1996 ILO Committee on Freedom of Association Digest, clearly stipulates that:

"Organizations responsible for defending workers' socio-economic and occupational interests should be able to use strike action to support their position in the search for solutions to problems posed by major social and economic policy trends which have a direct impact on their members and on workers in general, in particular as regards employment, social protection and standards of living."

Today workers are much more



Police buses surround KCTU headquarters



Police search a car leaving the KCTU offices



Tens of thousands of protesters gather in a candlelight march in the centre of Seoul

directly affected by international trade agreements and a wide range of other state processes than in the past. Their working conditions can be directly and indirectly affected by actions of the state. Worker representatives' right to participate in the field of national decision-making should be protected, but when it is not, the right of workers to carry out collective action in order to advance their socio-economic interests must be guaranteed.

It should also be noted that internationally many trade unions have strong policies on health and safety, including food safety. So there is good reason for the KCTU to be involved in trade agreements, including the protocol on US beef importation.

CANDLELIGHT RALLY

In the meantime, the Korean candlelight rally has continued over more than 100 days. The candlelight vigil and marches has been held almost everyday since 2 May.

On 10 June around one million civilians and workers gathered to

demand renegotiation of the US beef import agreement across the country, and to protest government neo-liberal policies.

Their specific demands were for the renegotiation of the US beef Protocol, which includes more than 30 months provision of beef and internal organs, and also to retain control over the quarantine conditions.

After additional negotiations between Korea and the US, they agreed to exclude the 30 months US beef agreement. But people were concerned that a year later it would again be possible to import US beef. It was the inclusion of this additional agreement, which prompted people to continue with the candlelight rally.

People are also questioning other government policies on education, health care and consumer prices, particularly in regard to various privatisation schemes in the public services including the construction plan of the Korea Grand Canal. Consultation is for people a matter of democracy and it concerns their fundamental right to exercise

freedom of expression and to protest.

The most impressive aspect of the candlelight rally is that protestors are composed of very different sectors such as middle and high school students, workers and families with small children including all generations from the twenties through to the seventies. All of them joined the candlelight rally very cheerfully and were especially creative organising spontaneous activities, and thinking up interesting slogans, which have never been seen or heard before. They marched to the city hall and shouted these slogans with great energy and enjoyment.

The candlelight rally is a strong move towards democracy and people's rights and has encouraged voluntarily participation. It also demonstrates a change in people's consciousness and a strongly developing desire for democratic participation. LB

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