



Public Services International  
Internationale des Services Publics  
Internacional de Servicios Públicos  
Internationale der Öffentlichen Dienste  
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21 February 2014

Your Excellency and Ministers,

## **Urgent call to the Government of South Korea to respect workers' rights**

On behalf of Public Services International (PSI), I write to express our deep concerns about your government's extreme and repressive actions against workers and their trade unions in the Republic of Korea, made in blatant disregard of international labour standards.

Of particular concern to us is the wrongful imprisonment of 12 labour leaders for engaging in industrial action that would be legal elsewhere in the world. Korea routinely applies the 'obstruction of business law' to criminalize strike action, despite clear decisions from the International Labour Organization (ILO) that imprisonment of trade unionists for engaging in peaceful strikes is strictly prohibited. These efforts to destroy unions by removing their leaders are often compounded by outrageous lawsuits for financial damages against that have no purpose but to intimidate and bankrupt unions. We understand that some 125 billion Korean Won (US\$ 117 million) has been claimed in damages against the KCTU and its affiliates or individual members. Such malicious damage suits against individuals have led to suicides in Korea. These are not the acts of a mature democracy, but constitute a declaration of war against workers and trade unions.

Despite campaign promises to strengthen basic pension benefits for the elderly and not to privatize public services, your government is now weakening the national pension system and seeking to privatize transport, health, education, water, energy and other vital public services. These actions go hand-in-hand with your government's attacks on public sector unions which stand up for quality public services.

Your government's de-registration of the Korean Teachers Union and continued refusal to register the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU), are further evidence of this concerted attack. What is more, your government is seeking to unilaterally revise public sector workers' collective bargaining agreements to weaken benefits and rights. Again, the international community, including the ILO, has vigorously condemned these decisions but has been met only by silence from your administration.

It has been two decades since the Republic of Korea joined the ILO, and 17 years since it joined the OECD. Your country gave commitments to bring your laws and practices into line with international standards on fundamental workers' rights, including on collective bargaining and freedom of association. Any progress made in this direction is now being tragically reversed.

Public Services International (PSI) is a global trade union federation representing 20 million working women and men who deliver vital public services in 150 countries. PSI champions human rights, advocates for social justice and promotes universal access to quality public services. PSI works with the United Nations system and in partnership with labour, civil society and other organisations.

In this regard, we fully support the People's Strike on February 25, 2014. We will stand with the Korean trade union movement to ensure that quality public services and human and trade union rights are fully respected in Korea. We are asking our governments to review their engagements with Korea, and we will join with others to review commercial business with Korean corporations. The systematic repression your government is directing against its citizens, against workers and trade unions are not the actions of an open democracy.

We call on your government to immediately release all workers jailed for their union organizing or strike activities, to recognize the legal rights of public service workers and their unions, and to stop the widespread practice of using damage suits to harass unions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rosa Pavanelli". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'R'.

Rosa PAVANELLI  
PSI General Secretary

Cc

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