

## ***What We Can Learn From our Fellow Workers in Japan and South Korea***

RWU is committed to building global solidarity and has welcomed international guests to speak at our last three conventions. As we build relationships with rail workers from around the world, we can learn from each others' struggles. Two unions that have reached out to build a relationship with RWU are Doro Chiba in Japan and the Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU) in South Korea. Doro Chiba is a rail union that has a history of fighting for their members' jobs when other unions were not willing. The KRWU is an industrial union representing all crafts on the railway. Members of both unions attended RWU's 5th Convention this past Spring, and invited us to participate in their joint rallies in the Fall. We accepted, and the RWU members who attended were inspired by both the Japanese and Korean labor movements, their warm welcome, and their serious commitment to building international solidarity.

The first rally was hosted by Doro Chiba in Tokyo on November 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>. Speakers from Doro Chiba described the history of struggles that Japanese rail workers face within the private Japanese Railway (JR) companies that have a very rigid management culture, apparently one far worse than those of North America. Speakers from the KRWU, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU, the progressive union federation), RWU, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), LabourNet Germany, and other labor organizations all addressed the crowd. The outdoor rally of thousands of union members was followed by a march of 5,800 union members and supporters through the streets of Tokyo. The following day rail workers gathered to share further details of our struggles. Members of another rail union, Doro Mito, described the alliance they have built with communities and environmental groups (much like RWU has) following the Fukushima disaster as JR East continues to run trains through the radiation-contaminated area.

The second round of the joint rally was hosted by the KCTU in Seoul on November 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup>, and coincided with the massive demonstrations against current President Park Geun-hye. South Korea has only been a democracy since 1987 despite a very close diplomatic relationship with the US following the Korean War. Park Geun-hye was democratically elected in 2013 but she is the daughter of Park Chung-hee, the dictator who ruled over South Korea from 1961 until 1979. For thirty years, Koreans have had to fight constantly to maintain their democracy, and have a culture of mobilizing around political issues. The latest protests and strikes began as union-led demonstrations against labor law changes that intend to introduce performance-based pay and measures that would make it easier for employers to fire workers and contract out jobs. As the public learned of Park's corrupt actions involving her close personal friends who used their positions to extort millions from South Korean companies, anti-Park demonstrations had grown each week with crowds gathering every Saturday evening. By November 12<sup>th</sup>, a million protesters from all parts of society were in the streets calling for her resignation. More protests followed each Saturday and on December 9<sup>th</sup> the South Korean Parliament voted to impeach her. Though ranked one of the most powerful people in the world by Forbes in 2014, she has been brought down by a movement started by union members and regular people.

Though KCTU leader Han Sang-gyun is still in prison as retali-



***RWU members from the U.S. join Korean workers at a rally to bring down the anti-labor government in Seoul, South Korea. Note the Railroad Workers United flag flying in the center of the photo.***

tion for the strikes and protests undertaken by the KCTU in the past, the labor movement has much more power within South Korean society than American unions have here at home. When faced with an authoritarian, corrupt, anti-labor president whose primary goal has been increasing her and her friends' personal wealth, the labor movement in South Korea - spearheaded by transport workers - led the push back. We can do the same thing in the USA and elsewhere. In the near future we are going to see attacks on our unions' ability to maintain the union shop, threats to railroad retirement, unilateral changes in our pools, terminals and assignments, plus further attempts to introduce single-employee operations. We have a choice. We can do nothing, sit back and watch, and in a few years the carriers and politicians will take away everything that railroaders and our unions have won over the last 150 years. Railroaders do not get the pay, benefits, and job protections many of us enjoy because the company values us. If you want to hang on to the things we still have, get involved in your union at more than just the local level. Get to know railroaders from other crafts and companies and familiarize yourself with the problems they face on the job. Stay informed about the rail industry and the labor movement as a whole and get involved in other union members' fights. If you don't have a union you can still fight together with others in your workplace and push for what you want. And get involved in RWU. We are proactive and ready to fight for the interests of the rank & file rail worker regardless of what the various union leaders might do. Rail workers are getting to the point where we don't have much to lose before many of our jobs are replaced by technology or contracting-out. Instead of giving in to the defeatism that only leads to failure, let's use the coming years as a time to build our unions and the labor movement, use our power within the workplace and the economy as a whole to get the things we want - a safe, dignified workplace, and a better quality of daily life.

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