

International Labor News

Korean Workers Lead the Way - Depose the Nation's President

South Korean President Park Geun-hye was impeached last December and officially removed from office March 17th because of serious abuses of power, influence peddling, and allowing friends who were not elected to use her position to increase their personal wealth. While the 13 charges brought against her will probably result in a lengthy prison sentence, it is important to note that before the corruption scandal broke last fall that her presidency was ineffective, divisive and authoritarian. Before becoming involved in extorting \$37 million from Samsung to organizations run by a personal friend, Park pursued an anti-labor agenda and pushed for national legislation that would eliminate seniority-based pay in favor of a performance-based pay system. She led the effort to dissolve and outlaw an opposition party, pursued aggressive foreign policy that has strained relations with neighboring countries and had union offices raided and union leaders imprisoned.

Unions have been a powerful advocate for democracy within South Korean society since the first democratic elections in 1987. Before the weekly candlelight protests in the fall of 2016 against Park, many - including rail workers - struck and protested against performance-based pay, the contracting out of work and the government's attacks on workers' rights. The protests started to grow once news broke of her corruption and friends' involvement in government affairs. Throughout the trial, impeachment and removal process, Park has maintained her innocence even though all other major players in the scandal are under arrest. It is a stark reminder that those in power will often refuse to listen to opposition until circumstances either force them to listen or concede wrongdoing. Similarly politicians, business owners, and managers have historically insisted that unions are detrimental to profits and inherently bad for our society. As such, they have justified the use of illegal and violent methods to fight unionization until the growth of the labor movement forced them to deal with unions' power in the workplace, on the picket line, at the bargaining table, and in the legislature.

Under the current administration in the U.S. we are facing another serious attack on the labor movement and our railroad jobs. While many railroaders believed Trump's campaign promises would be beneficial to working people (and especially to workers in the coal and oil industries), the breakdown in national bargaining shows that Trump is the president that the rail carriers wanted as well. The last 40 years has seen American workers' wages and spending-power drop while

Income for CEOs has sharply increased. Declining union membership, automation, offshoring, contracting-out, and deregulation have all played a part in this trend. Instead of picking one of these issues and claiming it as the sole cause, it is important to look at the war on workers that is behind *all* these factors. Our job in the labor movement has always been to fight for what we know to be true - that people will have a better quality of daily life if they collectively fight for better working conditions, hours, pay, scheduling, and safety. In the coming years, union members will have a hard fight against an administration and congress full of politicians who deny that unions should even have a right to exist. They will maintain this position unless we force them to deal with us.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans nor any other political parties are going to save us - the responsibility is on us as unionists to fight for our interests. The initial strikes and demonstrations led by union workers in South Korea grew into a huge movement that brought down a horribly corrupt, anti-labor president. This is an excellent illustration of how working people can exercise real political power in addition to voting, calling their congressional representatives, or donating to their union political action committee. We can defeat *right-to-work*, but only if we're willing to make the effort that was ultimately necessary to create our unions in the first place - organize, build solidarity, and fight for what we know is right.



In November 2016, workers rally against the President at an event sponsored by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. Can their heroic political efforts be successfully emulated in North America?