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South Korea: Crackdown on "illegal" strike action unjustified

As thousands of workers belonging to South Korea's two main trade union federations prepared to take strike action, Amnesty International said it was alarmed at renewed government threats to crack down on "illegal" strikes and demonstrations.

"A crackdown with mass deployment of riot police will only increase tension and may lead to violence, arrests and further human rights violations," Amnesty International said. "The government may not like demonstrations and strike action but they are legitimate forms of protest in an open, democratic society."

In May Amnesty International protested as government officials responded to strike action by threatening to arrest trade union leaders on criminal charges of "obstructing company business". Ministers are now warning of tough action to break up the current strikes, using the riot police and the courts.

The strike has been triggered by recent decisions to close down five banks and privatize a number of state companies, threatening thousands more jobs in a country with little social security provision.

Trade unions and human rights groups claim that the authorities have failed to prosecute companies resorting to illegal layoffs, including discrimination against women who are often laid off before their male colleagues. They want the government to do more to protect jobs and to create a social security net.

"It is simply unjust to threaten those suffering the worst effects of the economic crisis," Amnesty International said. "Rather than crack down in this way, the authorities should be looking at better ways to protect people's basic economic and social rights."

The economic crisis has had a devastating effect on South Korea. Thousands of people have lost their jobs without redundancy pay leading to homelessness, family disintegration and increasing numbers of suicides. Thousands of migrant workers have been ordered out of the country, while many have not been paid for months and cannot afford a plane ticket out. The authorities have done little to protect the rights of vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and unemployed women.

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