
amnesty international

£Republic of Korea (South Korea)

@Appeal for the Release of Trade Union Leader Soh Son-won

MARCH 1995

AI INDEX: ASA 25/08/95

DISTR: SC/CO/GR

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Soh Son-won, a 37-year-old railway engine driver serving a two-year prison term under South Korea's Labour Dispute Mediation Act. It considers him to be imprisoned solely on account of his non-violent trade union activities.

At the time of his arrest, in September 1994, Soh Son-won worked for the government-owned Korean National Railroad and was a leading member of *Chongihyop*, an unrecognized trade union. South Korea's Trade Union Law, under Article 3, forbids the establishment of a second trade union at one workplace "when the organization has the same organizational object as an existing labour union, or it aims to interfere with a normal operation of such a union". *Chongihyop* was established in 1989 and was not recognized because another trade union already existed at Korean National Railroad. *Chongihyop* has some 7000 members, all of whom are engine drivers or engineers.

Because it was not recognized as a trade union, the management of Korean National Railroad refused to enter into negotiations with *Chongihyop* concerning the union's demand for a wage increase and better working conditions. In mid-June 1994 over 90% of *Chongihyop's* members voted to take strike action. Under South Korea's Labour Dispute Mediation Act, government employees are prohibited from taking part in acts of dispute. On 23 June riot police entered the offices of *Chongihyop* in nine different cities and arrested over 600 striking members. The majority were released without charge on condition that they agree to return to work. As a result of this strike, over 800 workers were temporarily suspended from work, 63 were dismissed and 140 transferred.

In late June eight *Chongihyop* officials, including Soh Son-won, started a peaceful sit-in protest at Chogye Buddhist Temple complex in Seoul. All were wanted by the police for taking part in the illegal action. They remained at the temple until 1 September when riot police entered the complex and arrested them. On 28 September Soh Son-won was charged under the Labour Dispute Mediation Act with taking illegal strike action. An additional charge of violence was also brought against him. It concerned an incident, dating back to May 1994 when Soh Son-won had been physically prevented from addressing a union meeting at Korean National Railroad. The charge is believed by Amnesty International to be unfounded and motivated solely by the authorities' wish to single out Soh Son-won for his trade union activities. Soh Son-won was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and is currently held in Seoul Prison.

During 1994 over 100 workers were arrested during disputes at seven different workplaces. Most were charged under labour legislation with taking illegal strike action, violence during confrontation with riot policemen and disruption of company business. In March 1993 the International Labour Organization (ILO) made a series of recommendations to the South Korean Government regarding workers' rights. These included a recommendation that public employees be given the right to organize and that all workers be permitted to join a trade union of their choice.

Soh Son-won's family have suffered as a result of his imprisonment. His wife and two small children, aged nine and four, were threatened with eviction from public housing as a consequence of his arrest and subsequent dismissal from the Korean National Railroad. Between June and September when Soh Son-won was at Chogye Temple, the family were under constant surveillance. His wife said that police officers followed her and teased her children when they were playing outside their house. In October 1994 Soh Son-won's mother died but he was not allowed out of prison to attend her funeral.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send letters and faxes:

- ◆ Expressing concern that trade union leader Soh Son-won has been sentenced to two years' imprisonment as a prisoner of conscience for his non-violent trade union activities.
- ◆ Calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Appeals to:

- ◆ President Kim Young-sam
The Blue House, 1 Sejong-no, Chongno-gu, Seoul
Republic of Korea Fax: +822 770 0253
- ◆ Mr Ahn Woo-man, Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
1 Chungang-dong, Kwachon-myon, Shihung-gun, Kyonggi Province
Republic of Korea Fax: +822 504 3337
- ◆ and to diplomatic representatives of South Korea in your country.

This is one of a series of appeals, sent to South Korea action file groups for action

KEYWORDS: PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE1 / TRADE UNIONISTS1 / DRIVERS / STRIKES /
FAMILIES /

INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT, 1 EASTON STREET, LONDON WC1X 8DJ, UNITED KINGDOM