



Korean Confederation of Trade Unions

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Speech of KCTU president Han, Sang-gyun on occasion of receiving Febe Elisabeth Velasquez Trade Union Award

On behalf of the 800,000 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the leadership, delegates and members of FNV. I understand this is your first congress after your merger in creating a powerful and united FNV.

Korea is the only country in the world that is divided after the Cold War. Currently much of the international media coverage has been focused on the heightened military tension fueled by North Korea's nuclear program. However, the people of South Korea is more concerned about the growing inequality. Workers are working harder, longer, but they are becoming poorer. This I believe is the reality of working people throughout the world.

The South Korean government has been consistent in advocating a pro-business policy by pushing economic growth. The government espouses this will make the country richer and powerful as well as enrich the lives of working people. However, in reality this policy has made the country heaven for chaebol-conglomerates and hell for workers.

Being on the side of Chaebols and the elite 1%, the government has regarded the KCTU as thorn on its side rather than an equal social partner and one of the pillars of society. The government has equally been consistent in implementing an anti-trade union policy and destroying the fundamental labour rights of workers. To do this the government has mobilised all of its resources and agencies to crack down against workers and trade union rights.

Capitalism which has destroyed genuine democracy and the livelihoods of workers in my country has become a more dangerous and fearful form of dictatorship than the military dictatorships of our past. In this political climate, where we are seen as the enemy of the state, the KCTU could not kowtow to the government just because of fear of trade union repression.

The history of the KCTU is based on struggle for democratic rights, labour rights, and human rights and resistance from attacks from the government and employers. And we have continued to maintain this rich legacy. As a leader of the KCTU and representative of the

working class, it is only natural for me to be in the frontline. When I was informed that I was to receive the Febe Elizabeth Velasquez Trade Union Award, as I contemplated in small confines my cell, I was very humbled and to be frank embarrassed.

However, I am honoured to receive this award, as I fully understand that this is given not to myself as an individual, but to the KCTU and our struggle. Most recently, the KCTU was in the front lines where we were the fuse and wick of the candle lit by 17 million people who successfully ousted President Park Geun Hye. In her role as President, she used her power to repress on democracy, labour rights, freedom of the press, and the economic livelihood of workers.

I also accept this award as an encouragement to our further determination in the struggle for a just and equal society where workers' dignity and rights are respected.

I am convinced that when workers are united, we are stronger, and we will win. I must be frank, there have been times, when I have felt unsure about the future of our trade union movement and like any normal human being, I have trembled with fear when confronted by violence and brutality. Yet, in these occasions, the knowledge that there is genuine support and solidarity from the global trade union movement including FNV has given me strength.

In our struggle against neoliberalism, I would like to let you know that we are working to dismantle the tragic consequences of it one by one in a small country in Northeast Asia.

In South Korea, Lee, Jay-yong, vice chair of Samsung and a representative of a major chaebol, Park, Geun-hye, the ousted president and myself, President of KCTU are in jail at the same time.

Lee, Jay-young and Park Geun-hye may feel like that they are living in hell every day. But for me, I am grateful and encouraged by the strong determination, commitment, and hard work of my comrades outside fighting and welcoming a new era in South Korea.

In closing, I want to once again express my deepest thanks and congratulations to the leadership and membership of FNV. I would also like to express my thanks to the General Secretaries of all the Global Unions who nominated me for this prestigious award. I will accept this in recognition of the struggle of workers in South Korea.

In solidarity and struggle.

Han, Sang-gyun,
Chuncheon Correction Centre.