

SKorean workers rally against free trade pact

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SEOUL — Thousands of South Korean workers rallied Thursday against a planned free trade pact with the United States and the pro-market policies of new President Lee Myung-Bak.

An estimated 5,000 unionists gathered in central Seoul for a May Day rally sponsored by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), a militant umbrella labour group.

They denounced a deal struck last month to further open South Korea to US beef imports and demanded that the US-South Korea free trade agreement (FTA) be scrapped.

US legislators had warned they would not pass the free trade pact until the beef trade was freed up. US congressional ratification of the trade deal is still uncertain.

"No American beef. No to FTA!" the workers shouted, waving banners and chanting slogans.

They also called for an end to discrimination against so-called temporary workers, who do not receive the same benefits as full-time employees.

Many companies hire workers on this basis to get around strict labour legislation which makes redundancies difficult.

The KCTU, which has 670,000 members nationwide, demands that millions of temporary workers be given job security and higher wages.

"The Lee Myung-Bak administration must immediately stop policies favouring the rich and the chaebol (conglomerates)," one banner read.

Lee has said labour militancy is discouraging foreign investment and plans to ease some restrictions on the activities of the chaebol.

The protesters also urged Lee to improve relations with North Korea.

The North boycotted a planned joint May Day celebration with South Korea, scheduled for Pyongyang, in protest at the Lee government's new tougher stance on cross-border relations.

Lee wants to link major economic aid to progress in the North's denuclearisation and says he will raise its human rights record.