

The capitulation of the South Korean unions

Peter Symonds
25 February 1998

Over the past decade the emergence of a mass, semi-legal, militant trade union movement in South Korea has been cited by various radical and “left” tendencies around the world as evidence that trade unionism is a viable perspective in today’s global economy.

These assertions were based on the record of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The KCTU led large strikes for higher wages and trade union rights in the 1980s and early 1990s, often in violent confrontations with the military and US-backed regimes of Generals Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo.

Workers in any country who were influenced by this perspective, however, should take a hard look at recent events in South Korea. In the space of a few weeks, the outlook of the petty bourgeois radicals and ex-radicals was put to the test.

Late last year, as a key element of its \$US55 billion package to restructure the crisis-ridden South Korean economy, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) insisted that Kim Dae Jung’s incoming government scrap the country’s system of life-long employment and open the door for mass layoffs throughout industry.

Kim, elected last year as a dissident and a “democrat,” immediately sought to implement the IMF’s dictates by convening tripartite talks with big business and representatives of the KCTU and the state-run Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU).

After initially opposing any negotiations, the KCTU leadership last month joined the talks. By early February, after threats of strike action had failed to alter Kim Dae Jung’s stance, the KCTU leaders caved in and agreed to a package of legislative changes which allow mass retrenchments on a scale not seen in South Korea for decades.

Behind this abject capitulation lay the failure and collapse of a political perspective. Only months before, the KCTU had supported Kim during the presidential

election campaign. Recognising that any serious struggle against the changes to the labour laws would inevitably involve an industrial and political confrontation with both the new government and the IMF, the KCTU leadership signed on the dotted line.

The reaction in the working class was very different. As news of the deal filtered onto the shop floor, a revolt erupted. Even the capitalist daily, the *Korean Times*, reported that KCTU offices were flooded by angry phone calls demanding the agreement be repudiated. Workers understood that the legislation would pave the way for mass unemployment. Only twelve months earlier, the KCTU and FKTU leaders had felt compelled to organise national strikes against the attempt by the previous government of Kim Young Sam to bring in similar legislation.

On February 9 a specially convened meeting of KCTU delegates overwhelmingly rejected the deal, forced the entire union leadership to resign and elected an emergency committee to organise indefinite national strike action starting on February 13. A major showdown loomed as Kim Dae Jung rejected any compromise, mobilised thousands of riot police and threatened to use “whatever means necessary” to crush any strikes.

The opportunist “left” in every country maintains that the trade unions are essentially healthy workers’ organisations and that their basic problem is the existence of treacherous individual union leaders. They insist that replacement of such leaders can convert the unions into progressive, and perhaps even socialist, organisations.

As events were to quickly demonstrate, however, the workers’ situation in South Korea was not resolved or even markedly improved by replacing “bad” individual leaders or even an entire union leadership. The political perspective of the new emergency committee was no different from that of the leadership that had been

tossed out.

As soon as it became apparent that Kim Dae Jung was not going to negotiate, despite the threat of an indefinite strike, the KCTU again gave in. Only days after being installed, on the eve of the strikes, the new leadership unconditionally called off all industrial action. In the words of KCTU leader Dan Byong Ho, the strike was called off because it “would cause serious problems to the economy.”

This phrase reveals a great deal. The limited gains made by Korean workers in the recent past were achieved within the framework of a highly regulated national economy. But as has become apparent in South Korea in the last six months, the globalisation of production has undermined the basis for all forms of national economic regulation. The IMF is demanding the dismantling of all barriers to the free flow of international capital and the exploitation of the South Korean working class.

A struggle against the government and the IMF could only be sustained on the basis of an alternative political and economic perspective, directly challenging the requirements of the capitalist market and the private profit system. Fundamental political issues were raised, directly out of the immediate struggle at hand. If the administration of Kim Dae Jung was defeated and brought down, then what would replace it? How would any other capitalist government confront the acute economic crisis? Could the working class instead take charge of society?

The trade unions, even the most militant, have proven organically incapable of answering such questions or challenging the constraints set by the capitalist economy. By their very nature they have sought to confine workers to pressuring employers, individually and collectively, for a better price for the sale of workers’ labour power.

Now, in order to protect the “economy,” the KCTU will enforce legislation that will pave the way for the official jobless total, which stood at 660,000 at the end of January, to grow to an estimated 1.5 million by the end of 1998.

The KCTU’s capitulation underscores the necessity for not only the South Korean workers, but working people worldwide, to adopt a new, anti-capitalist perspective and turn to the building of new forms of organisation—above all, mass socialist parties which

have as their aim the taking of power by the working class and the restructuring of society on the basis of social need, not profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact