

Striking auto workers, police clash in Korea

Jerry White
19 August 1998

Striking Hyundai auto workers and their families fought off South Korean riot police with lead pipes Tuesday morning and are continuing to occupy the country's largest auto factory to fight mass layoffs. The workers are bracing for another attack as 15,000 police, armed with water cannon, tear gas, helicopters and bulldozers, surround the plant in Ulsan, 175 miles southeast of Seoul.

The Prosecutor-General's Office has threatened to send forces in to arrest key union leaders and disband the demonstrators. 5,000 workers have barricaded themselves in the plant and have said they would set fire to dozens of cars, piles of tires and welding gear at the plant's entrances if police tried to move in. Police have also stepped up identification checks on roads leading to the city to prevent students and other supporters from joining the strike.

In their first attempt to evict the strikers, the police were forced to retreat when confronted by militant workers and their families. The security forces had warned family members to move out before the planned raid, but women, carrying small children on their backs, stayed in the front ranks. Scuffles also broke out when police tried to prevent supporters from bringing food to the striking workers and their families.

Under torrential rains, the strikers and their families chanted, 'Save our jobs,' 'We say no to layoffs' and 'We will fight to the end.' The occupation began July 20, at the same time the 26,000-member union went on strike to protest spreading layoffs at the nation's largest automaker.

Labor Ministry officials met with Hyundai's managers and union leaders until early Tuesday morning, but declared that they saw little prospect of 'bringing a negotiated end to this dispute.' A union official dismissed the government effort as 'a face-saving gesture to justify a police intervention.'

The government of President Kim Dae Jung has

declared the strike illegal on the grounds that the union did not seek mandatory government mediation. The government is seeking the arrests of 64 Hyundai union leaders. 'Our principle stands firm, that we will never tolerate illegal activities at work sites,' said presidential spokesman Park Ji-won, who demanded the unions accept the layoffs.

Last week Hyundai offered to cut the number of workers to be laid off to 615 from an earlier 1,569 after many workers had applied for a voluntary retirement package. This would bring the total number of jobs wiped out this year to 10,166. A representative of the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF) said the union would not accept any further cutbacks. Instead, the union has offered to assist management in cutting workers' wages through reduced work hours, to avoid the layoffs.

This confrontation is key for President Kim Dae Jung who is seeking to carry through economic restructuring as part of a \$58 billion bailout program from the International Monetary Fund. Hyundai Motor is a subsidiary of Hyundai Group, the nation's largest conglomerate or *chaebol*, and is the first company to press ahead with mass layoffs since the National Assembly passed a law in February ending lifetime job security. Other conglomerates, including Samsung and LG, reportedly plan to wipe out up to 30,000 jobs by the end of the year.

The number of workers officially jobless has doubled to 1.5 million and is expected to reach 2 million by year's end. Despite the growing attack on jobs and government repression against the labor movement, however, the Korean Federation of Trade Unions has continued to participate in the tripartite body of labor, management and government officials set up to implement the IMF bailout program. In July, the KCTU at the last minute aborted a general strike called to fight the layoff of auto, bank and public sector workers,

setting the stage for the Hyundai workers to wage their present struggle in isolation.

See Also:

Hyundai workers continue to fight lay-offs

Korean unions trade-off wages and conditions

[12 August 1998]

Hyundai workers sacked in South Korea

[1 August 1998]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact