

South Korean Hyundai workers rebuff union leaders

Shannon Jones
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By a decisive margin South Korean Hyundai workers rejected an agreement negotiated by leaders of the Korean Metal Workers Federation that would sanction mass layoffs by the country's largest auto company. The vote to reject the pact was 17,123 to 9,360, a nearly two-to-one majority. In the wake of the vote there were calls by militant workers for the resignation of the union leadership and the resumption of the month-long strike.

The agreement marked the first time a major South Korean union had agreed to layoffs. Since the passage of legislation last February permitting layoffs numerous strikes have erupted in opposition to job cutting. South Korea agreed to the elimination of the policy of lifetime employment as part of a package of austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a \$58 billion financial bailout.

The unions have agreed to cooperate with the Dae-jung government in implementing the IMF terms. Since the beginning of the year the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the metal workers union have already helped Hyundai eliminate 5,336 jobs through so-called voluntary layoff or retrenchment. Since February the KCTF has aborted three general strikes called to protest government austerity measures and arrests of union officials.

Like its counterparts in other countries, the trade union bureaucracy in South Korea declares that workers have no alternative but to sacrifice in the name of corporate profits. This perspective is driving the bureaucracy into increasing conflict with the working class, which is determined to defend its jobs and living standards.

The vote rejecting the Hyundai pact, announced September 2, evoked immediate outrage from corporate management. 'There is no room for further negotiation

on the pact. We believe [it] is final,' declared a spokesman for the company.

At a press conference Yoo Jong-keun, an advisor to President Kim Dae-jung, insisted the rejection vote had no legal standing. 'The union rank and file does not have the right to reject it. I think it's just more of venting their frustrations. It will pass,' he said.

The agreement followed a month-long occupation by workers of Hyundai's Ulsan plant. The union leadership called off the occupation and accepted virtually all of management's demands, including the immediate termination of 277 workers, while another 1,261 were forced to take 18-month unpaid leaves.

When 26,000 Hyundai workers struck July 20 the Korean Metal Workers union asserted that it would never accept layoffs. Militant workers took over the Ulsan plant in defiance of Kim Dae-jung, who declared their strike illegal. The government mobilized 15,000 riot police--with helicopters, bulldozers, water cannon and tear gas--in an attempt to evict the strikers. After an initial attempt to clear the plant was beaten back by workers, the government turned to negotiations.

On August 25 the leadership of the Korean Metal Workers ended the occupation. It announced that it had accepted a proposal sanctioning unprecedented job cuts at Hyundai. The agreement, called a 'industrial harmony and non-dispute contract,' called for increased worker productivity. At a joint press conference the president of Hyundai and the president of the Hyundai union predicted a 'new era' of labor-management relations.

Workers reacted angrily to the pact. About 200 marched on the Hyundai Motors main building, where union officials and management were meeting, shouting 'dismissals must be recalled.'

The attempt to impose job cuts at Hyundai is seen as

a major test for the Dae-jung government and South Korean business. Hyundai has been a focal point of worker militancy and has seen repeated strikes and clashes with police and troops.

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