

Thousands of riot police attack Korean workers

Mike Head
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Acting directly at the behest of Korean and international investors, the Kim Dae Jung government in South Korea yesterday sent in more than 10,000 riot police to smash a 17-day strike. Police attacked hundreds of workers and their families occupying six factories of the country's largest auto parts maker, Mando Machinery, at 6 am.

Helicopters sprayed workers and their wives and children with tear gas, while armoured personnel carriers crashed through their metal and human barricades. Riot police armed with gas canisters, water canons and heavy equipment were shown on national television beating and kicking workers. Strikers and their supporters were forced to lie flat on the ground before being hauled away for interrogation. At least 1,600 workers were detained.

The Mando workers had been sitting in the six factories since August 17, fighting the company's plans to terminate 1,090 workers out of a total of 4,500. Riot police also stormed a workers' occupation at Halla Electronics, owned by Mando's parent company the Halla Group.

Mando supplies auto parts to domestic car makers and also international giants such as GM and Ford. It posted a turnover of 1.4 trillion won last year, but went bankrupt in December in the wake of the country's currency and share market crash.

In a bid to restore Mando's profitability, the management and the unions agreed in February to pressure workers into accepting the loss of 400 jobs via voluntary retirements. Office workers' salaries were also reduced by 5 percent. Yet within months the management ripped up this agreement, driven on by the slumping local car market. The company's sales fell 32 percent in the first six months of the year, compared to last year.

Management took advantage of new labour laws to announce its retrenchments. Mass sackings are now legal, and workers are prohibited from calling strikes to fight against them, under the revised laws, which were passed earlier this year after the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions called off general strike action.

Yesterday's violent operation is the first time that the government headed by Kim, a former pro-democracy dissident, has used the country's para-military police forces to attack workers en masse and break a strike. The regime had come under intense criticism from financial markets and media editorials for retreating from using the same methods against striking Hyundai workers last month.

The police raids were also calculated to intimidate Hyundai workers, who voted a day earlier to reject the agreement that their union had struck with Hyundai to end a protracted occupation against mass sackings. A Labour Ministry spokesman said the Mando operation could be taken as a warning to the Hyundai workers not to resume their struggle.

The KCFTU has threatened to call a national stoppage over the Mando raids. It is also considering pulling out of a tripartite committee of unions, big business and the government that is helping to implement the economic restructuring demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

Such threats have been made repeatedly this year, only to be abandoned. In fact, the KCFTU and its affiliated Hyundai unions opened the way for the Mando attack by selling out the Hyundai struggle last month. The KCFTU called off general strike action to back the month-long Hyundai occupation at Ulsan, isolated the Hyundai workers, and then agreed to the forced destruction of nearly 1,500 jobs.

The Mando assault is a sharp indicator of the new

conditions confronting workers in Asia and worldwide amid the financial collapses shaking global capitalism. The response of the trade unions in seeking to stifle the outraged and determined fight of workers is equally a demonstration that the working class needs new organisations that are not committed to upholding the national economies and meeting the profit requirements of the capitalist market.

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