

Unprecedented violence used against Korean workers

Keith Morgan
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Further evidence has emerged of the ferocity of the attacks launched by paramilitary police on September 3 against workers and their families who were occupying seven plants owned by Korea's largest auto parts manufacturer, Mando Machinery.

The attack by 10,000 paramilitary police, launched at 6am simultaneously at each plant, continued past 4pm that day.

Included in the police arsenal were a form of tear gas known as pepper-fog, fired from automated tear gas machines; helicopters armed with a special teargas essence, usually reserved for use in warfare; water cannon; and steel pipes for beating the strikers and their supporters.

For over 10 hours police swept through the factory grounds, beating and dragging people off, filling jails and hospitals with the injured.

At the Kyongju plant in Kyungsang-buk-do, the police beat a woman, seven months pregnant, who now faces the possible loss of her child.

At the Assan plant in Choongnam, striking families fled to the roof of the factory building, where helicopters dumped tear gas canisters on them. Trapped under this barrage, workers sustained many serious injuries. Skulls were cracked and strikers suffered broken limbs. One worker, Son Sung-Gyoon, 34, fell from the fourth floor of the building as police rushed up the stairwells.

At the Moonmak Plant in Kangwon-do, riot police bashed women and children with steel pipes, injuring expectant mothers and infants.

At the Pyong tack plant in Kyonggi-do, the sounds of screaming workers, mixed with the cries of the injured, could be heard around the grounds of the factory as the police swept through.

By 3.45pm the police had jailed 2,400 strikers.

Although many were released after questioning, police are reportedly seeking legal action against some 200 workers alleged to have led the strike.

These methods were once the trademark of the previous military dictatorships. In fact, the regime of Kim Dae Jung, the former dissident, has proven more ruthless. 'Not even past military dictatorship presidencies used this grade of teargas to resolve domestic affairs,' the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF) stated.

Yet the trade union leaders bear the political responsibility for the government's assault on working people. They supported Kim's election and have for months worked to isolate sections of workers facing redundancies, from Daewoo to Hyundai and now Mando. Time and again they have called off threatened general strike action and resumed talks with the government and the major companies over how to restructure the economy to satisfy the financial markets.

In response to the Mando attack, the unions have called for protest rallies, with the perspective of making the government apologise for its actions. 'The use of police force, the first under the Kim regime, is a happenstance that can't be overlooked and warrants strong anti-government opposition,' said the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

The KMWF called for workers to write protest letters, 'It is necessary for the Kim Dae Jung government to know that such use of violence is not legitimate, under whatever economic slump, and that it is absolutely unacceptable in international society. KMWF urges supporters to make their voice heard in protest letters to the Blue House [the presidential residence].'

Yet the Mando assault was no chance happening. It was meant to intimidate the entire working class, and particularly the Hyundai Motors workers. They had just

the day before voted by more than two to one to reject a sellout agreement signed by their union, one of the KCTU's main affiliates, to accept hundreds of job losses.

Having broken the Mando and Hyundai sit-ins, government and business circles have moved swiftly into the second stage of structural reforms demanded by international finance.

The government's Financial Supervisory Committee (FSC) chairman Lee Hun-jai announced that the restructuring drive had only begun. Apart from the big five chaebols already undergoing restructure, companies ranked sixth to sixty-fourth will be urged to merge, he said. In the steel industry, Hyundai and four mid-ranking chaebols will be pressured to agree on restructuring.

The government has announced the pending merger of the two remaining guarantee insurance companies, Korea Guarantee Insurance Co and Hankuk Fidelity Surety Co, by December. The insurers are said to be near agreement on the terms of the merger, but differ on the extent of layoffs and pay cuts. The FSC has demanded that the two companies slash staff and outlets by more than half.

See Also:

Thousands of riot police attack Korean workers

[4 September 1998]

South Korean Hyundai workers rebuff union leaders,
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[3 September 1998]



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