

Correspondence on the South Korean strikes

18 May 1999

To the Editor,

I'm currently an English teacher in Seoul, South Korea. I arrived in the country on July 31, 1997, before what is known in this country as the IMF Era.

I'd like to disagree with your assessment of the recent subway strike here in Korea. You seem to be under the mistaken impression that there is a seething revolutionary desire among the workers that's being deflected by the union leadership. This is far from the truth. In fact all that the unionists desire is to return to the pre-IMF days when layoffs were prohibited and employment guaranteed for life. It's true that the subway workers union offered pay cuts and reduced hours but this was offered under the mistaken belief that is very prevalent in Korea that the current economic turmoil is only temporary and sometime in the near future everything will return to the way it was. The workers only offered a temporary, not a permanent solution.

The current economic restructuring in Korea is permanent and irreversible. The good old days will never return again.

The true story of what is happening in Korea is not the strikes—which are a dramatic sideshow—but what is happening within the Korean class structure. The type of capitalism practiced by Korea and Japan was much more equitable than that in western countries. There was of course a large income gap between the rich and poor, the managers and the workers, but that gap was much smaller than that in western countries, especially the United States which has one of the largest and grossest income gaps in the world. As we know, the wage gap within the industrialized countries has grown since the mid-seventies, accelerating in the wake of the "Conservative Revolution" of the 1980's. The signs of the growing inequality are stagnating and falling wages on the one hand and dizzy growth in the capital markets on the other hand. Any quick glance into any economic newspaper in the west will confirm those two trends.

The gap between the rich and poor is growing in Korea. Many of my students are businessmen who work in the fashion industry. They're baffled by the market trends they see. They expected that the demand for expensive brand-name fashion goods would dry up in the wake of the IMF. However, the demand for high-end goods remained strong. In fact the clothing market in Korea has been polarized: on one hand high-end goods and on the other very cheap, low-end goods. Since the start of the IMF, the demand for middle-priced goods has disappeared. This indicates that the Korean middle class, like that in America, is disappearing. In fact all the workers threatening to strike, telecommunication, technical and transportation workers, are middle class workers who are now being shoved back into the lower classes.

The strikes were not progressive but conservative. The strikers were demanding an end to reform and a return to the pre-IMF status quo. Of course this is not an option—and is really not even desirable. In fact the strikers and their workers should not have been demanding an end to reform, but more reform, greater reform and different kind of reform than that offered by the IMF.

There is no going back.

AB

Dear AB,

Thank you for your email to the *World Socialist Web Site* concerning the recent strikes in Korea.

It is not clear why you conclude from our article that we believe there is at present "a seething revolutionary desire among workers" in South Korea. What we point to is the deepgoing concerns among workers in South Korea over the rapid rise of unemployment, the scrapping of the system of lifelong employment, and the further layoffs, which will take place under the latest round of "big deals". Quite simply workers do not want to lose their jobs and have their families thrown into crisis, and are prepared to engage in militant

struggles to defend their livelihoods.

It is true, as you say that: "The current economic restructuring in Korea is permanent and irreversible. The good old days will never return again." The global integration of production processes over the last two decades is driving economic restructuring not only in South Korea but around the world. At the same time, the growing gulf between rich and poor and the disintegration of the middle classes is an international phenomenon. And as you remark, there is no going back.

But is precisely this "no going back" that imparts to the situation in Korea its revolutionary potential. The capitalist class has to press ahead with the IMF's program of economic restructuring regardless of the social consequences for the working class and sections of the middle class. Objectively working people are being thrown into conflict with the profit system itself.

What you say about the sentiments of South Korean workers at present is probably true. Their first reaction has been to try to preserve their jobs and living standards within the framework of what existed before. But as it becomes increasingly clear that the economic crisis is not temporary and that a return to the previous policies is impossible, the more far-sighted elements will begin to look for an alternative and question more critically not only government policies and the complicity of the union leaders in carrying them out, but the nature of the social system itself.

At the end of your email, after drawing attention to the growing social polarisation in Korea, you insist that workers should have been demanding "more reform, greater reform and [a] different kind of reform than that offered by the IMF". But what type of reforms are you proposing exactly? Within the framework of capitalism, what alternative policies are going to lead to any long-term improvement in living standards in South Korea or anywhere else?

The globalisation of production has undermined policies of national economic regulation. In the name of "international competitiveness," jobs, working conditions, safety standards, social services, public education and health have all been sacrificed in country after country. As a number of commentators have noted, the process is never-ending. "Success" is gauged in terms of profits, share prices, investment figures and is at the expense of the social position of the vast

majority of the world's population.

It is precisely because the working class internationally faces the stark alternative—a worsening social disaster under capitalism, or the socialist reorganisation of society—that impels working people to consider revolutionary action.

We have no illusions about the considerable confusion which exists in the working class in South Korea and elsewhere. One of the main sources of confusion has been the false identification of socialism with the various Stalinist bureaucracies in the former Soviet Union, China, Indochina, North Korea and Eastern Europe. We are confident that the collapse of these regimes, as well as the manifest failure of the capitalist market to open up a new period of peace and prosperity, will foster a renewed interest in genuine socialism and the building of an international socialist movement in the working class.

You have expressed concern over the growth of social inequality and the impact of the economic crisis on the lives of working people. I would encourage you to follow the articles and analysis on the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is aimed at fostering a more critical and thoughtful attitude to world events and other issues.

Yours sincerely,
Peter Symonds,
World Socialist Web Site



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