

South Korean government faces backlash over police violence against Daewoo workers

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21 April 2001

The South Korean government of President Kim Dae-jung has been significantly shaken over the last week by protests and other expressions of outrage over a brutal police attack on 350 laid-off Daewoo autoworkers outside the main Pupyong assembly plant in Incheon city on April 10.

The workers had assembled at the plant to assert their rights under an April 6 court directive that ordered Daewoo to allow the Daewoo Motors Workers Union and its members access to the union offices inside the complex. Two hundred metres from the gates, 1,500 riot police blocked the delegation headed by union lawyer Park Hoon.

The Association of Lawyers for a Democratic Society maintain that when Park read out the court order and advised the police that they were breaking the law, the commanding police officer at Pupyong responded with the declaration, “the government is above the law”.

After several hours of jostling, the police charged. Police spokesmen claim that workers had cut off a group of about a dozen police from the main body of 1,500 and were threatening them. Video footage of the attack, which has been widely disseminated by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), shows that the majority of workers were sitting or lying on the ground, stripped to their waists in preparation for a protracted standoff.

The footage shows police beating defenceless workers with batons, kicks and the edges of riot shields, even after they were covered in blood and attempting to protect their faces with their hands. Those trying to run from police were knocked down and bashed relentlessly. One Daewoo worker may lose his eyesight. Two others have been temporarily paralysed below the waist. A broken rib punctured one worker's lung. Virtually all workers present suffered some degree of injury, with 43 requiring hospitalisation. Park Hoon was kicked in the face and suffered a fractured pelvis.

The vicious character of the police attack provoked widespread public outrage. The South Korean press has criticised the government's handling of the incident and called for those responsible to be dealt with. In parliament, the opposition Grand National Party (GNP), the political instrument of the military-backed regimes of the 1980s, seized on the issue to posture as a defender of workers' rights.

In one of the more cynical speeches, GNP legislator Lee Byung-suk declared: “The government of the people has begun to attack the public... This case harks back to the cruel acts of violence on blue-collar workers in the 1970s and 1980s.” The GNP is demanding that Kim's prime minister, administration minister and police head all resign over the Pupyong incident.

According to the KCTU, its website received tens of thousands of visitors from April 11 to April 13—1.5 million hits on April 13 alone—along with calls for action from around the country. Such was the feeling among workers that the KCTU leadership has been compelled to adopt a more critical stance towards the government. At a rally of 4,000 workers on April 14 in Pupyong, KCTU leader Dan Byong-ho declared: “We will mobilise all efforts to drive the Kim Dae-jung administration out of power.”

In an effort to contain the growing hostility, the government sacked the Incheon police chief and the national head of police issued a formal apology. On April 17, however, the KCTU rejected the apology and launched a lawsuit calling for charges of attempted murder to be laid against five leading police officials.

Despite an unprecedented “expression of regret” on the same day from Kim Dae-jung, the backlash has continued. Today trade unions are staging demonstrations in 20 major cities to demand that all police be withdrawn from the Pupyong plant, that the government block a take-over of Daewoo by General Motors and that it “find ways” to reinstate the laid-off workers.

The Pupyong incident follows months of violent clashes between police and Daewoo workers, as the government of Kim Dae-jung has sought to use state repression to break the resistance of the workforce to the company's restructuring and sale to the US auto transnational General Motors.

Daewoo Motors, Korea's third largest auto producer, was taken over by receivers last November 8 with debts exceeding \$US13 billion. In international financial circles, the restructure and liquidation of Daewoo's assets is viewed as a test case of the government's resolve to purge the Korean economy of dozens of companies that plunged into bankruptcy during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

On February 17, Daewoo's receivers, headed by the state-owned Korea Development Bank, announced the sacking of

1,750 employees. A total of 6,884 layoffs were slated—one third of the Korean workforce—in order to satisfy the terms demanded by GM for the purchase of the company's Korean operations.

After 700 laid-off Pupyong workers occupied the plant in protest, the government sent 4,000 riot police to smash their way into the factory on February 19. Pupyong was reopened on March 7 with a police garrison of 2,000 based inside its walls to intimidate the remaining workforce and prevent union activity. Workers' rallies outside the plant on February 24 and March 7 were viciously broken up with tear gas and police baton charges.

By April 10, the unrest over the restructuring at Daewoo appeared to be over as far as the government was concerned. The KCTU and Daewoo Motors Workers Union had agreed in November that 3,500 layoffs were necessary to restore the company's competitive position and had entered a joint management committee to negotiate a restructuring. The unions had tacitly accepted the February layoff announcement by calling off threatened solidarity strikes and allowing protests to dwindle. While the unions made impotent appeals for “pain-sharing” by the management, at least 5,500 layoffs had been carried out by early April.

The fact that the issue has flared up again and the KCTU has been compelled to adopt an openly anti-government stand has created a political crisis for the Kim Dae-jung government which over the last three years has relied heavily on the trade unions, particularly the KCTU, to contain the growing anger of workers to its policies.

The KCTU backed Kim Dae-jung when he won the 1997 presidential election, promoting illusions in him as a “reformer” and “democrat” due to his history of opposition to South Korea's military dictatorships in the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

Since his inauguration in February 1998, Kim Dae-jung has implemented a series of measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for emergency loans to South Korea during the Asian financial crisis. Life-time employment guarantees have been repealed, corporate bankruptcies facilitated and steps taken to open the economy to greater foreign competition and ownership. The consequences have been mass layoffs and sweeping cutbacks to working conditions.

Wages have barely recovered from the sharp falls inflicted by employers during 1998. Official unemployment stands at over one million, or 4.8 percent, and is set to rise. The slowdown in the US will see thousands of jobs shed by Korean export companies, particularly in the hi-tech sector. Core companies like Hyundai Electronics and Hyundai Engineering are restructuring and have announced 10,000 layoffs between them.

The government has only been able to carry through its economic agenda with the assistance of the unions. At every point when Korean workers have come forward to resist the restructuring, the unions have isolated or called off strikes on

the grounds that negotiations could win compromises from the government or that further action would disrupt the economy. Only last December, the KCTU called off a threatened national strike over the Daewoo sackings.

Where the unions have not been able to prevent protests and strikes, the government has broken them with riot police and mass arrests, confident that the union federations would block any organised retaliation from the working class.

Concerns are now being expressed in ruling circles that, with the attack on Daewoo workers, Kim Dae-jung may have gone too far and provoked a situation which the unions will have difficulty controlling. Members of the Korean Federation of Industries, a key employer group, warned on April 17 that “labour peace” was an “essential part of attracting foreign investment and expediting the restructuring process”.

Already there are signs of growing tensions. The number of official labour disputes rose from 129 in 1998 to 250 last year. Both the major union organisations, the KCTU and the Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KFTU), are warning that they are under intense pressure to launch a national general strike at the end of May if demands for a 12 percent wage increase are not granted. Employers have offered 3.5 percent.

In an editorial on April 18, the *Korean Times* commented: “The violent crackdown on the defiant Daewoo Motor unionists in Incheon is developing into a grave socio-political bone of contention, with the possibility of having a far-reaching impact on the political, economic and labor sectors... The government may have to come up with rather prompt actions to address the violent case in order to neutralise the worsening confrontation between the government and the labour sector.”

But this only points to the central problem that the government confronts: how to contain the growing anger of workers while continuing to implement policies of restructuring, privatisation and downsizing—and under conditions where its support is rapidly being exhausted.



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