

South Korean government tries to stem protests against US beef imports

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The South Korean administration of President Lee Myung-bak has announced significant concessions in order to placate mass opposition to the lifting of a ban on beef imports from the United States and broader discontent over falling living standards.

US beef was banned from South Korea in 2003 following the discovery of a case of Mad Cow disease in American cattle. Lee, from the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) and a former chairman of the Hyundai conglomerate, announced an end to the embargo in April in order to advance negotiations toward a US-South Korea free trade agreement, which is desperately wanted by Korean auto companies and other major corporations.

Lee's decision on beef imports coincided with sharply rising prices for fuel, food and other essentials, as well as a slowing economy and rising unemployment. The ending of the ban was widely viewed as symptomatic of Lee's preoccupation with pleasing the Bush administration and the Korean corporate elite, and his indifference to the concerns of ordinary people. Protests against US beef sales rapidly escalated into a social movement against the new government's entire agenda, including its hard-line stance toward North Korea and its plans to weaken the regulation of big business, privatise state-owned companies and construct a controversial canal from Seoul to Busan.

Despite an offer by Lee's cabinet to resign, over one million South Koreans demonstrated in 80 cities and towns on June 10, demanding that the president go as well. He has only been in office since February, after winning elections last December that were marked by popular disaffection from the entire political establishment and a low voter turnout.

Since the June 10 protests, Lee has embarked on a desperate campaign to end the protests. Negotiators were dispatched to Washington for crisis talks with US trade

representatives, aimed at amending the terms on which US beef could be sold in South Korea. While declaring his government could not re-impose a ban, Lee promised that no beef from cattle older than 30 months would enter the Korean market. Though no American cattle have been diagnosed with BSE since 2003, older stock is considered more susceptible to the disease.

Lee also announced the suspension of privatisation plans and the scrapping of the canal project. On June 19, he gave a nationally televised press conference in which he issued a grovelling public apology. "I and my government should have looked at what people want regarding food safety more carefully, but we failed to do so," he declared.

On Saturday, the government announced that it had secured a "voluntary" agreement from the US that no beef from animals older than 30 months would be exported to Korea. South Korean inspectors will also have the right to inspect American slaughterhouses.

A strike by thousands of unionised truck drivers over fuel prices was brought to an end on the Sunday after freight companies agreed—under pressure from the government—to increase hauling rates by 19 percent.

Lee is expected to unveil a major cabinet reshuffle this week and has dismissed a number of his aides and advisors. Finance minister Kang Man Soo announced last Friday that the government's "utmost priority" would be "stabilising prices and looking after the lives of the people".

The corporate media has played its part in seeking to restore political stability. Editorials and opinion pieces have declared that the protestors have succeeded in moderating the government's policies and that further demonstrations are therefore pointless and damaging to the economy.

The protests since June 10 have been small by comparison. Police estimated that some 10,000 people

took part in a demonstration on Saturday in Seoul, though the organisers claimed that as many as 60,000 attended.

The lack of a political perspective, however, is as much a factor in the ebb of the demonstrations as the government's concessions and the media's lectures for protestors go home. The June 10 rally called for the bringing down of Lee's government. That posed the question of what was to replace it. Millions of people at present do not have an answer. While they oppose Lee's policies, they have no confidence in the parliamentary opposition—the United New Democratic Party (UNDP). Recent polls showed that the UNDP had barely 20 percent support, while Lee's popularity stood at 17 percent.

The Democrats held power from 1998 until February under former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moon-hyan. Kim Dae-jung's administration was ruthlessly pro-big business, imposing wage cuts, unemployment and high inflation on the population in order to salvage the fortunes of corporations following the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. Moreover, it offered little resistance to the bellicose US policy toward North Korea unveiled by the Bush administration in 2001 that shattered initial steps towards a rapprochement on the Korean peninsula and posed a real threat of war.

Roh Moon-hyun narrowly won the December 2002 elections by making nationalist appeals to anti-US sentiment, which had been aggravated by the killing of two schoolgirls by an American military vehicle earlier in the year. Upon taking office, however, he fell into line with the Bush administration, going as far as to agree to send more than 3,000 Korean troops to assist in the occupation of Iraq. Roh's administration suppressed workers' demands for wage rises to compensate for the cuts suffered under Kim Dae-jung and assisted Korean companies to further erode working conditions, particularly through the extension of casual contracts.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)—whose militant strikes against the dictatorship in the 1980s were hailed by some as evidence that trade unionism could achieve enduring political and social change—has demonstrated its utter uselessness. It repeatedly capitulated to the corporate agenda of the Kim and Roh governments, while promoting the myth that they represented a “lesser evil” to the GNP, the party of the old dictatorial regime. The KCTU covers less than 10 percent of the workforce and its membership has been in decline since 2002. After a decade of widening social inequality, its one-day general strikes are widely viewed by workers as unserious.

The disillusionment with the KCTU was sharply revealed in the vote taken on June 13 on whether the federation should stage a one-day general strike over US beef imports. Only 271,000 of the 511,000 members voted, with 169,000—or just one third of the total membership—endorsing a strike. The token industrial action is scheduled to take place on July 2.

The movement against Lee was not initiated by the Democrats or the unions, but by young people networking on popular web portals. *International Herald Tribune* correspondent Choe Sang-hun reported on June 16: “There, people suggested that they stop just talking and take to the streets. When a high school student began a petition on Agora [a web forum] calling for Lee's impeachment, it gathered 1.3 million signatures within a week. The police were caught off-guard on May 2 when thousands of teenagers networking through Agora and coordinating via text messages poured into central Seoul, holding candles and chanting ‘No to mad cow!’”

Beef imports were the trigger for the expression of pent-up social tensions and the tremendous alienation felt by young people. After a decade of economic hardship, million of people now have to endure the consequences of rapidly rising inflation. In South Korea, food prices rose 4.7 percent in May, transport costs by 10.6 percent, household costs such as electricity by 5.1 percent and furniture by 4.7 percent. Overall inflation hit 4.9 percent—a seven-year high.

Even if the current protests dissipate, the underlying discontent will not. Its ultimate source is opposition to the inequality, injustice and militarism of the capitalist profit system. The crucial question in South Korea is the development of a genuine socialist movement that can give conscious expression to the aspirations of the working class and youth for political and social change.



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