

South Korean government prepares new assault on Ssangyong occupation

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Around 1,000 workers are now in the eighth week of their occupation of Ssangyong Motor's only assembly plant at Pyeongtaek, fighting mass sackings amid signs that President Lee Myung-bak's government and the company are preparing another violent operation to storm the plant.

Workers occupied the plant on May 22 after management announced a list of 1,056 workers to be sacked as part of its restructuring plans to satisfy the demands of creditors. On June 26-27, thousands of hired goons and strike-breakers stormed into the plant, followed by around 500 riot police, but failed to break the occupation.

In total, Ssangyong plans to axe 2,646 jobs, or about 36 percent of its workforce, under a bankruptcy application filed in February. The company is 51 percent-owned by China's Shanghai Automotive Industry Corp, and the state-controlled Korea Development Bank is another major shareholder.

Since the unsuccessful storming of the plant, the government and company have been preparing measures to intimidate the workers and break their will. This week, management announced it would sue 190 members of the Ssangyong branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) for damages worth more than five billion won (\$US3.9 million). A company spokesman said the amount would increase if the occupation continued because "creditors have suffered a loss". He claimed the action had caused lost production of 7,900 vehicles and 172.4 billion won (\$135.8 million) in lost sales by June 25.

The company has obtained a court injunction prohibiting union members from "entering the plant and impeding business". Law enforcement officers and creditors went to the plant to deliver the notification, but workers refused to leave. The court order makes their presence illegal, clearing the way for the company to demand that the government use

force to ensure compliance with the law.

To date, the government's intervention has been limited because President Lee is concerned that an all-out police assault could provoke a backlash among sections of workers under conditions where his pro-market agenda is already provoking widespread hostility. A recent presidential office survey found about 70 percent of those polled thought that Lee's policies only benefitted the chaebols (big corporations) and high-income earners.

Lee, however, is under pressure to act. Big business backed his 2007 election campaign because he promised to drive economic growth and crack down on "excessive labour disputes" to make the country safe for investment. The Ssangyong occupation, the first such action by workers since the global crisis hit last year, has become a major challenge to the restructuring being demanded by the corporate elite.

The *JoongAng Daily* reported on July 2 that management was planning a second assault on the plant, using a small army of hired security thugs, supervisors and non-strikers backed by the police. This week, Pyeongtaek police said they had secured a month-long seizure and search warrant, allowing them to enter the premises at any time.

Police have flown surveillance helicopters over the plant to spy on the occupation. A National Police Agency (NPA) spokesman told the media: "We could not see inside the factories, but we could see what the striking workers were doing on the plant rooftop and around the buildings."

As part of the government's plans to beef up its forces to deal with social unrest, the NPA recently outfitted its helicopters with cameras and other spy equipment "to better control demonstrations or sit-ins and to detect illegal actions". Police are constantly stationed outside the factory, blocking people from entering, and cutting off contact

between the occupying workers and their families, friends and supporters. On July 2, police arrested scores of people who went to the plant to show support for the workers' stand.

On July 7, Ssangyong's court-appointed managers threatened to file for insolvency, thereby posing the total closure of the plant and the destruction of another 4,000 jobs. They said a court had ordered accounting firm Samil PricewaterhouseCoopers to reassess Ssangyong's viability. "If the new investigation finds the liquidating value exceeds the saving benefit, the company will have to face going through a liquidation process," manager Lee Yoo-il said.

These threats are designed to apply greater pressure on the KMWU to further isolate and end the occupation. For the past seven weeks, the union has been working to prevent the Ssangyong workers' struggle from becoming the focus of a broader movement of the working class against the government.

During the June 26-27 assault no substantial support was organised to back the occupation. Then, having promised to mobilise tens of thousands of workers to rally outside the plant after the attack had been repulsed, the KMWU organised only 3,000, even though it has tens of thousands of members in auto plants and across other key industries also facing attacks on jobs, working conditions and basic rights. Workers at the nearby Kia Motor plant, for example, are involved in strikes to defend wages while workers at the giant Hyundai Motors are confronting management attempts to impose a two-shift system to permit around-the-clock working.

The deepening economic crisis will see increasing demands by auto employers on their workforces for concessions. The Korean Automobile Manufacturers Association recently reported that 1.55 million units were sold in the first half of the financial year, a 23.9 percent decline from a year earlier. Exports have fallen 34.3 percent year-on-year to 938,726 vehicles.

If the company and government are allowed to smash the occupation and defeat the Ssangyong workers it will have far-reaching consequences for the entire working class, emboldening employers across all sectors to slash jobs and tear up working conditions. The Ssangyong workers must be warned: their struggle will be isolated and betrayed if it is left in the hands of the KMWU and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Over the past two decades the KCTU and its affiliates have played the key role in enabling successive governments to impose savage pro-

market measures.

From the 1980s, the KCTU allied itself with business-backed politicians such as Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung against remnants of the old military-backed regime. In 1996-97 the KCTU stifled growing opposition in the working class to Kim Young Sam's policies, creating the conditions for mass sackings, the gutting of working conditions and severe restrictions on industrial action.

After 1998 the peak union body collaborated with the administration of Kim Dae Jung to impose IMF demands for the ripping up of long-standing working conditions and protective labour laws, including those guaranteeing lifetime employment.

In 1999, the KCTU and KMWU closed down a month-long occupation by Hyundai workers of the company's Ulsan plant to oppose mass sackings. The defeat of this key dispute, together with a series of betrayals that followed, allowed the government to push through a fundamental restructuring of working conditions and a wholesale axing of jobs, which the KCTU told its members was "painful but inevitable".

These past struggles were not defeated because of a lack of militancy on the part of workers, but because they lacked an alternative perspective to the nationalist, pro-capitalist agenda of the unions. Now the Ssangyong workers are fighting the same sweeping attacks as their fellow auto workers in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world. They must begin to organise independently of the unions and turn out to the working class in South Korea and internationally for support, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. This requires the building of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class, aimed at reorganising society as a whole on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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