

Ssangyong occupation supporters speak to the WSWS

“If these workers fail, restructuring will become normal”

A correspondent
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A World Socialist Web Site correspondent travelled to Pyeongtaek, South Korea where workers have occupied the Ssangyong Motor assembly plant since May 22, fighting mass layoffs (see main story). Our correspondent witnessed preparations by President Lee Myung-bak's government and the company to storm the plant and disperse the workers.

Only a small group of people were outside the factory, mainly family members of the workers occupying the plant, together with some students and other supporters. Notably absent were any contingents organised by the unions, despite the increasing police presence.

The families and supporters were staring with worried looks at the entrance, inside which many riot police and the management people were already stationed. Occupying workers and red flags could be seen on the rooftop of the plant. Police buses, fire trucks and even ambulances were busy coming and going and two helicopters were flying around overhead. Supporters avoided even chanting slogans for fear of provoking immediate arrests.

Despite an extremely tense situation, in which police had been continuously taking photographs, a number of people spoke to the WSWS, but did not wish to be identified because of possible reprisals.

One woman said her husband—a Ssangyong worker—was inside the plant. As she worked during the week herself and cared for the children, she could only

come to the plant on weekends. The last time she and her children had seen her husband, they could only speak to him through the wire fence because police prevented them from entering the plant.

She supported the occupation because the way that the company had dealt with the workers “was wrong and this had to be corrected”. She added: “The company’s policies are not for working people and I can only conceive that the employers’ logic is that the poor and the weak can go off and die.”

The union had offered the company compromises “that could benefit the company and workers alike but the management and the government only insist on sacking the workers and substituting them with irregular (casual) workers”. She warned: “This policy will lead to every worker being made into an irregular worker in the future.”

If her husband lost his job, “no matter how hard we would try to reduce our expenses, we would face a very difficult situation. In short it would break our family life.”

Another woman whose husband is inside the plant had just come back from a day-long protest in Seoul by families, students and other people in support of the occupation. She said workers at the plant had “worked hard, only to get a unilateral dismissal notice,” adding: “They are now fighting because they feel victimised and they are fighting to restore their rights.”

She said families “cannot hand any food to them (the

occupiers) because the police just stop us. Children are also scared of the police and cry when they see their fathers through the plant's surrounding fence. Last night I could not sleep a minute because there was a rumour that the police were going to launch an attack."

Her family had faced hardship even before the layoffs because of poor pay at the plant. "We had been living a difficult life since my husband's salary was not paid regularly," she said. "From last December we were getting only 500,000 or 700,000 won [\$US380-550] a month and even this was not for every month."

She warned that if the occupation was defeated the company would be free to lay off more workers in the future, "because they don't have any guarantee for secure jobs. I feel very sorry about this".

A worker from Hyundai Motors, a 40-minute car drive away, said he and a few co-workers had hurried to the Ssangyong plant in the morning, having heard rumours of an imminent police attack. He condemned the media and the police for accusing Ssangyong workers of preparing violence and "even murder" because they would use sling shots to fight back if attacked by heavily armed police and company thugs. Whatever measures the workers took to defend themselves were "legitimate because they are striking and fighting to protect their livelihoods".

The Hyundai worker added: "If the Ssangyong workers fail, it will have a devastating affect on the struggle of workers in other industrial sectors." Commenting on the failure of the KCTU and KMWU to mobilise broad and active support for the occupation, he said that he was "speechless thinking that this struggle has come so far and now faces an all-out crackdown" without a major response. He confirmed that the Hyundai Motors union branch had ruled out participating in a strike and protest after company goons and police attacked the occupation toward the end of June. He believed that the union leadership "did not act from what is right but only in their own interests".

An elderly couple whose son was inside the plant said they were worried and angry because of the activity of riot police and management personnel around the plant.

They condemned those workers supporting the management for "adopting a highhanded attitude because they were not sacked this time around," saying: "This is quite vicious behaviour when workers desperately needed to be united."

An elderly man who had come to hand a donation to the workers' families said he felt sorry for them because they had been deprived of any means to live and there was no welfare system in South Korea for support. Referring to the global crisis, he said: "How can the weak and the poor cope with this financial crisis when the government blames them for the situation? It [the government] does not consider any discussion with Ssangyong workers who have been struggling for over 50 days. They are not to blame for the crisis of the company; it was the government who sold this company to the SAIC [Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation] and let them exploit the workers."

A student, a member of the National Student Parade, had participated in the one-day protest in Seoul. He said the economic crisis was not the fault of working people but financial speculators. He believed that SAIC had bought into Ssangyong Motor for immediate returns and caused the company's bankruptcy by refusing to make any new investment.

The student warned: "If the Ssangyong workers fail in this struggle, restructuring will become a normal procedure for every other company. We cannot let this happen." He criticised the "first conciliatory proposals of union to the company" as "not appropriate".

Students had been told that the occupation was of no interest to them. Nevertheless, "many students are beginning to think about what is happening and asking what is the cause of it".



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