

# South Korea: Riot police sent to break Ssangyong occupation

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Thousands of heavily-armed riot police dispatched by the government of President Lee Myung-bak have laid siege to Ssangyong Motor's factory in Pyeongtaek, South Korea where around 900 workers and supporters continue to occupy the paint shop.

The occupation began on May 22 when the management announced a list of workers to be sacked as part of a restructuring operation demanded by creditors when the company filed for bankruptcy in February. The plan calls for the destruction of 2,646 jobs, around 36 percent of the company's total workforce.

Since the weekend of July 18-19, police have been preparing to break the occupation. Nearly 40 ambulances and 290 beds at 19 nearby hospitals have been placed on standby to deal with anticipated casualties. Currently there are 3,000 riot police in and around the factory grounds, backed by water cannons and helicopters. They are operating alongside an army of armed thugs hired by the company.

The company has turned off the water and gas to the occupied area but maintained electricity to ensure that paint stored there remains in a fluid state. Police are blocking families from delivering food and medical supplies, including vital medication for diabetes, blood pressure and other ailments.

Health professionals have reported receiving calls from inside the occupation confirming workers are suffering from torn ligaments, broken bones and open wounds that require stitches. Workers have been reduced to eating one or two balls of rice a day. The police have set up huge speakers to blare out continuous demands that workers leave the paint shop and to transmit loud noise at night to prevent sleep.

The police siege has already claimed its first fatality. Just after news emerged of the police action, the wife of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) Ssangyong Motors Branch policy director committed suicide. The mother of two young children was reportedly suffering stress and anxiety after receiving subpoenas and a warrant was issued for her husband's arrest.

Clashes broke out on July 20 when a large contingent of armed police and a court official approached the paint shop, attempting to serve a notice ordering workers to leave and disperse. Workers drove them off using slingshots. Police have since brought in steel containers to use as secure bases and as shields against nuts and bolts fired from slingshots.

More clashes occurred over the following days, including one that left people on both sides injured. Hundreds of police advancing in four lines toward the paint shop were repulsed by workers burning tyres and hurling nuts and bolts. The police regained control of two press shops and massed substantial forces into a warehouse only a few metres from the paint shop entrance.

On July 22, three helicopters sprayed liquid tear gas and other chemicals on workers on the paint shop roof and on others who were manning barricades. Water cannons also sprayed chemical-laced water onto the roof. Due to the lack of water, workers hit by the toxic cocktail had difficulty washing it off.

A police spokesman told the media that further chemical attacks would be used "to secure the safety of riot police when they enter the building through its roof". Protected by the police, more than 1,000 company supervisors moved into the main plant to inspect and repair machinery and equipment to prepare to restart production.

A spokesman for the occupiers declared that the workers would resist any attempt to drive them out of the plant, adding: "If police move in, then it would mean they don't care even if dozens die." The paint shop contains large amounts of paint, thinners and other highly inflammable material that could explode during an all-out assault by the police, especially if standard tear gas canisters are used.

The KMWU and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) are limiting opposition to ineffectual protest action. The KCTU called for a two-day general strike to begin on July 22 "to condemn the police operation", to protest the introduction of laws downgrading the rights of irregular workers (casual workers) and to "counteract neo-liberal policies and the Lee Myung Bak government".

The KCTU exempted workplaces from participation, ensuring a limited turnout and the least possible disruption to production. The peak union body said: “Workplaces that cannot immediately go on strike will implement struggles through other various ways including organising workers’ assemblies, leaving work early or using annual leave.”

During the two-day strike the KCTU scheduled rallies outside the National Assembly in Seoul and in Pyeongtaek, sufficiently far away from the Ssangyong plant to ensure that workers participating could not give physical support to the occupation.

The rally outside the National Assembly consisted mainly of media union members protesting against a controversial media reform bill allowing newspapers and private conglomerates to extend their activities into television broadcasting. Only a few minutes were given over to reporting and discussing the Ssangyong occupation.

On Saturday the KCTU together with several civic groups staged a rally of 7,000 people who marched to the plant to demand that representatives be allowed to take medical supplies into the occupation. The march was blocked by 9,000 riot police backed by water cannon, leading to clashes and the arrest of around 30 demonstrators.

The small turnout and ineffectual protests are no accident. The unions are working to keep the Ssangyong dispute contained as they seek some arrangement acceptable to the company that can end the occupation.

The KMWU had previously offered cost-cutting concessions, including work-sharing and short-time working and has now dropped its previous demand for the retention of all jobs. It is instead calling for the company to rehire only 800 retrenched workers.

On Friday, even as police continued to lay siege to the plant, the KMWU attended a five-hour meeting organised by lawyers belonging to the Democratic Party and the Grand National Party and attended by company and government representatives. It was agreed to hold further talks on Saturday, but the company later reneged, declaring it would not participate unless workers occupying the plant “end violent behaviour”—that is, cease all defence.

Also on Friday, the Public Office Security Office held a meeting with police and Labor Ministry officials to discuss tactics and police deployment at the Ssangyong plant. Prosecutors are threatening legal action against everyone involved in the occupation. “If they withdraw voluntarily, lenient legal actions will be applied except for union leaders,” a prosecutor said. “But if they do not all will face stern measures.”

An editorial in the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper on July 22

indicated what the government and corporate elite require the unions to deliver, not only at Ssangyong but across the auto industry and other sectors. Declaring that the KMWU and KCTU “should learn a lesson from General Motors,” the editorial praised the role played by the United Auto Workers union in the United States after the Obama administration pushed the auto giant into bankruptcy.

“GM is restructuring by cutting the number of U.S.-based employees by 20,000 and closing 14 plants,” the editorial proclaimed. “The United Auto Workers, the umbrella union of GM’s unions and also militant in the past, promised the U.S. government not to go on strike through 2015 in return for financial support.” The American union sacrificed its members’ jobs and working conditions in return for a government bailout, in which it received a substantial number of GM shares.

President Lee Myung-bak’s government is wracked by a deep-going political crisis. Its pro-business policies are provoking widespread opposition. But the KCTU and KMWU are preparing a defeat for the Ssangyong occupation in order to impose the restructuring demanded by majority shareholders, China’s Shanghai Automotive Industry Corp and the state-controlled Korea Development Bank.

This is in line with the treacherous role the Korean unions have played for the past two decades in betraying one struggle after another, thereby enabling a succession of governments to carry through pro-market agendas. Workers must break out of the straight-jacket imposed by the unions and mobilise to come to the aid of the occupation. A defeat at Ssangyong will clear the way for an assault across the auto industry and beyond.

The turn must be to the building of rank and file organisations to unite every section of workers in a counter offensive against the attacks of the government and employers. The struggle can only be based on a socialist and internationalist perspective that challenges the framework of the profit system. The fight is for a workers’ government that will reorganise all aspects of society in the interests of the majority instead of the wealthy few.



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