

South Korea: The political lessons of the Ssangyong occupation

James Cogan
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On August 5, thousands of South Korean riot police backed by company thugs stormed the Ssangyong factory in Pyeongtaek and violently broke up a 77-day occupation by hundreds of auto workers fighting to defend their jobs. The following day, the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) accepted the company's demands for massive job cuts.

The consequences of the Ssangyong defeat have already been devastating. As the company resumes production, some 2,600 workers have been or will soon be sacked. The government is carrying out a vendetta against workers involved in the occupation, with 64 facing charges for resisting police attacks. The smashing of the occupation has given the green light for other companies to proceed with their own plans for slashing jobs, wages and conditions.

The lessons of this bitter experience must be drawn by workers in South Korea and internationally. The state crackdown on the Ssangyong occupation demonstrates that the defence of the basic right to a job is a revolutionary question. Amid the deepening crisis of capitalism, the most elementary rights of the working class are incompatible with the demands of big business. Any fight for jobs necessarily involves a political struggle, not just against the individual company, but against the government, the corporate elite and its trade union accomplices.

The Ssangyong occupation began on May 22 after the company's creditor-appointed management announced its intention to eliminate 36 percent of the workforce to stave off liquidation. Workers responded by seizing control of the Pyeongtaek plant and demanding no layoffs, job security for all employees, and no outsourcing of Ssangyong production to other firms.

The occupation represented a direct challenge to the

agenda of the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) government of President Lee Myung-bak. Lee has pushed for greater labour market "flexibility"—the right to fire workers at will—and insisted on wage freezes to ensure that Korean companies remain competitive, particularly against the growing challenge from Chinese-based manufacturers.

Yet for more than a month, the Lee government hesitated to deploy police against the occupation, fearful that a crackdown would provoke a broader rebellion amid rising unemployment and a deepening social crisis. Far from being in a strong position, Lee is widely despised. Within months of coming to office last year, his administration was brought to the brink of collapse by the eruption of mass protests over US beef imports.

Lee was completely dependent upon the Korean trade unions to contain the Ssangyong occupation and prevent it from becoming a pole of attraction for other workers facing job losses and cuts to wages and conditions. The KMWU and KCTU had no disagreement with the demands of management for job cuts to restore profitability. The sole aim of their negotiations was to reach a compromise whereby a minority of the workers slated for sacking would be given other positions in the company or put on indefinite unpaid leave.

The unions never had the slightest intention of launching a broad offensive to defend jobs and conditions. Over the past three months, they have struck a series of wretched deals to restructure companies at the expense of workers. In May, the unions agreed to a 20 percent wage cut at auto parts company Shinchang Electrics. In July, a deal was struck with the bankrupt General Motors-Daewoo group to freeze the wages of the entire workforce. Kia Motors is now seeking a similar arrangement.

The KCTU and its affiliates like the KMWU made a name for themselves in the late 1980s, expanding rapidly

as illegal organisations amid the militant struggles of workers for higher wages and better conditions. However, their political perspective never went beyond the ending of the military dictatorship and piecemeal reforms—in other words, the program of Democrats like Kim Dae Jung.

The limitations of this program became all too apparent in the midst of the 1997-98 economic crisis that hit all of the so-called Asian Tigers. Now legal, the KCTU played the key role in enabling President Kim Dae Jung to ram through the IMF's demands for economic restructuring, including the effective elimination of lifelong employment.

Over the past decade, first under Kim then President Roh Moo-hyun, the unions have sabotaged every major struggle by workers. Some 33 percent of the workforce has been moved onto casual or temporary contracts, earning on average just 60 percent of the wages of a full-time worker and often as little as \$3 an hour. Now, as the South Korean economy is devastated by the global recession, the unions are collaborating with corporations and the Lee administration in a savage new round of restructuring.

The transformation of the South Korean unions is part of an international process. The global integration of production processes over the past three decades, of which South Korea is an integral part, has undermined the national reformist perspective of trade unionism. These organisations no longer defend even the elementary rights of workers, but instead impose the demands of big business for greater productivity in the name of maintaining international competitiveness--in this case, of South Korean capitalism.

During the course of the occupation, Ssangyong workers demonstrated great courage and tenacity. They elected their own rank-and-file delegates and battled company thugs who tried to break their occupation. Against the attempts of the unions to broker a deal, they insisted on the retention of all jobs.

But this was not enough. The great weakness of the occupation was its lack of an alternative political perspective. Given the past treachery of the unions, the workers were suspicious, if not completely hostile, to their union leaders, but still clung to the conception that the company and the government could be pressured to grant their demands. As a result, the union leadership was able to keep the occupation largely isolated, allowing the government and the company to marshal their forces for the final crackdown.

What are the political lessons?

First, securing even the most basic needs of the working class poses the need to oppose the existing capitalist system. A serious struggle to defend jobs rapidly becomes a political struggle against the government and the capitalist state.

However, a battle to bring down the Lee administration would pose the necessity of turning, not to the Democrats, who have carried out an identical program, but to other sections of working people who face the same economic and social crisis. The fight against Lee must be based on a revolutionary perspective of a workers' and farmers' government to implement socialist policies, including the nationalisation of the car companies.

Second, the struggle for socialism is necessarily international in character. The global recession has led to a deep crisis in the international auto industry, fuelled sharpening competition between the major manufacturers, and triggered a new round of mergers and restructuring. South Korean workers need to reject the nationalist and protectionist perspective of the KCTU, which pits workers in South Korea against their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Third, workers have to build new organisations and, above all, a new party. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, by virtue of its history and program is equipped to unify workers around the world in the struggle for socialist internationalism. We urge socialist-minded workers, youth and intellectuals to turn to the task of building a section of the ICFI in South Korea.

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