

# South Korean government witch-hunts Ssangyong workers

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Following the end of the 77-day occupation of Ssangyong Motor's plant in Pyeongtaek on August 6, the government of President Lee Myung-bak is carrying out a vendetta against the workers involved.

Police have issued warrants and arrested scores of workers, charging them with serious offences that carry heavy fines and jail sentences. Workers who fought with determination and courage to defend the basic right to a job are being treated like common criminals.

The occupation of the Ssangyong plant, 70 kilometres from Seoul, began on May 22 after the court-appointed management announced the axing of 2,600 jobs, or 36 percent of the company's workforce, as part of a restructuring demanded by major creditors. While 1,670 workers accepted redundancy, the remainder refused and occupied several buildings in the plant complex.

Thousands of riot police, along with hundreds of company-hired thugs, stormed the plant on August 5. The next day, representatives of Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) and Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) entered discussions with the company and formally ended the occupation, accepting the management's demand for mass layoffs.

While it mobilised riot police against the occupation, the Lee administration depended on the trade unions to keep the Ssangyong occupation isolated and prevent it from becoming a rallying point for other sections of workers also facing severe cuts to jobs, wages and working conditions.

The union settlement accepting the company's terms was a signal that the government could take reprisals against the workers with impunity. Even as workers were leaving the plant, the police detained 96, taking them off to police stations for questioning.

To date, 64 people have been arrested and charged, including Han Sang-kyun, the head of the Ssangyong Motors chapter of the KMWU, and other workers who played a central role in the occupation. Among those detained are 11 people who were not employees. Some were supporters and others were media correspondents who were inside the plant reporting on the occupation. The reporters were charged with intrusion.

The arrests are the largest number made on public security charges in 12 years and the highest in an industrial dispute since July 2006 when 58 workers were detained and charged during an occupation of steel company POSCO's headquarters.

Charges brought against those arrested over the Ssangyong occupation include using violence to obstruct business or official duties and assault and battery. Media reports last week indicated that police prosecutors were considering laying even more serious charges. These include attempted murder and arson, against workers accused of throwing Molotov cocktails or using slingshots to shoot bolts and nuts at police and non-striking workers during the siege.

The Gyeonggi Provincial Police Agency has also filed a suit against the KMWU and the KCTU seeking 548 million won (\$448,529) in compensation to cover medical costs for police injured in clashes and for damage to police property. The agency plans additional claims once its tally of damages is completed.

The financial hardship caused by unemployment, fines and damages claims will exacerbate the trauma of the occupation. As well as launching repeated violent attacks, the police prevented workers from receiving food, water and medical attention. According to Kim Myeong-ryun, a senior official at the Korea Employee Assistance Professionals Association, many workers "are suffering from typical post-traumatic stress

disorder” and experiencing insomnia and mental stress.

The severity of the crackdown is clearly designed to make an example of the Ssangyong workers to intimidate other employees entering struggles over wages and working conditions. Workers at Kia Motors are currently in dispute for a 5.5 percent pay increase but the company is demanding they accept a wage freeze.

The government is also broadening the witch-hunt. Prosecutors announcing last week they would widen the net to snare people and groups who supported the Ssangyong workers, both inside and outside the plant.

Prosecutors issued a media statement claiming to have evidence that “outsiders” who had “engaged in several different labour and management disputes in the past” had used an office in the auto plant to direct the occupation. The prosecutors alleged: “Some of them actually taught striking workers how to make Molotov cocktails and how to use slingshots.”

Another media report quoted prosecutors claiming: “We confiscated ideological documents and illegal weaponry, and uncovered an attempt to establish a military committee.”

The Ssangyong occupation represented a direct challenge to the agenda being carried out by the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) government on behalf of big business, which is demanding greater “flexibility,” including the right to fire workers at will and impose sweeping cuts to wages and working conditions.

In the wake of the occupation, President Lee declared: “Labour and business circles, as well as the government, must not let this incident pass as a one-time event, but [must] work to bring labour-management relations to international standards”. He has been joined by business leaders and spokesmen calling for greater “flexibility” in the labour market, an end to labour unrest and the marginalisation of the unions.

The KCTU has responded by insisting that it helps to resolve disputes. KCTU spokesman Lee Seung-chul told Reuters that it was “not true” that unions were blocking foreign investment. “In South Korea, the managements are too authoritarian and do not admit the union as a partner in the negotiation. That forces us to launch a strike.”

The KCTU’s conclusion from the Ssangyong

occupation is to offer a closer partnership with management and the government. Workers have to draw the opposite conclusion—that the defence of the basic rights of the working class, including to a job, necessarily involves a political struggle against the government and state apparatus based on a socialist perspective.

The Ssangyong defeat has given the green light for other companies to proceed with their own plans for slashing jobs, wages and conditions. It is essential that workers, in Korea and internationally, draw the necessary lessons of this bitter experience, as explained in the August 18 WSWs perspective, “South Korea: The political lessons of the Ssangyong occupation”.



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