

South Korea: Violent police operation mounted against Ssangyong auto occupation

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More than 4,000 South Korean riot police, backed by private security and nonunion company goons, have launched a violent assault on hundreds of auto workers at the Ssangyong factory in Pyeongtaek, south of the capital Seoul. The workers have occupied the plant since May 22 in opposition to the company's plans to slash its workforce by 36 percent, destroying more than 2,600 jobs.

Many are now in hospital, receiving treatment for head injuries and broken bones. Korean television news footage showed police surrounding individual workers and kicking, punching and batoning them, even after they were handcuffed and lying face down on the ground. According to the Korean Metal Workers' Union and Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, one worker lost consciousness after being shot at close range in the head with a rubber bullet. Two others fell from the roof of the three-storey assembly line building, with one suffering serious spinal injuries. The Korean unions reported that police arrested several men in hospital, interrupting their treatment to interrogate them at a police station.

The brutal police operation is continuing today, with between 500 and 700 workers remaining inside one of the plant's two paint shops. The area contains large concentrations of highly flammable materials. National Police Agency chief Kang Hee-rak yesterday told the media: "We have not set a deadline for our operations, and will take sufficient time in penetrating into the remaining paint shop building."

The police assault began Tuesday morning, with riot cops seizing control of the roof of a building connected to the paint shop, as well as roads adjacent to the factory. Police used forklifts to dismantle metal pallets the workers had erected as barricades on one side of the

plant. Two police helicopters fired liquid teargas at the workers, who fought back with slingshots and Molotov cocktails. Korean authorities claimed that 27 police and their nonunion worker allies were injured in the clashes.

Violence then escalated yesterday, with helicopters dropping two large metal containers containing dozens of elite SWAT police onto the roof of the assembly plant building. The heavily armed cops then attacked workers on the rooftop, inflicting the injuries described above.

At the same time, private security forces and Ssangyong goons targeted the workers' families and supporters encamped outside the plant. Tents were torn down and their occupants hit with wooden sticks and steel pipes; university students who support the factory occupation attempted to defend the workers' families and supporters. Only then did the police intervene, using water cannon to fire teargas at the students.

The Ssangyong struggle began after the company, Korea's smallest auto producer, received bankruptcy protection after designing a restructuring plan involving mass layoffs. Ssangyong is majority-owned by the Chinese Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation, although the parent company lost management control after the company entered bankruptcy protection. While about 1,600 workers accepted voluntary retirement, almost 1,000 resisted conceding any job losses. The company claims that the 10-week occupation has cost nearly 15,000 vehicles in lost production, worth US\$259 million.

Ssangyong has refused to concede to the workers' demand that the layoff announcement be rescinded. Last-ditch negotiations between the company and the trade unions broke down on Sunday due to this intransigence.

Ssangyong then threatened to liquidate the company, stripping assets and distributing the proceeds to creditors. The company's court receivership manager Park Yong-tae told a press conference, "The only alternative is to file a revival plan based on liquidating the company unless the law is carried out against the illegal strike."

On Tuesday, creditors provocatively threatened to initiate court proceedings to force a liquidation process unless the workers' occupation was ended by Wednesday 4 p.m. "Unless police kick all protesters out of the facility by that time, we will submit the request to the Seoul Central District Court," creditors' association representative Choi Myung-hoon told the *Korea Times*.

The South Korean government of President Lee Myung-bak responded by dispatching the riot police.

When news of the police operation spread, spontaneous rallies involving hundreds of students and workers from different parts of Seoul mobilised outside the Ssangyong plant. But the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)—which throughout the occupation has sought to isolate the Ssangyong workers and broker an end to the dispute on terms favourable to the company—has refused to mobilise the working class in opposition to the brutal police assault.

The KCTU has not even threatened to instigate wider strike action in defence of the occupying workers. In a public statement, the peak trade union body appealed to the International Labour Organization to issue an appeal to the Korean government. It also asked for demonstrations to be staged outside Korean embassies, and the use of "any other diplomatic channels possible" to pressure President Lee.



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