

Growing death toll among former Ssangyong workers in South Korea

Joshua Newsham
2 June 2011

On May 14, a 45-year-old former auto worker was found dead in a Pyeongtaek factory where he was a temporary employee. The plant is not far from his previous workplace—Ssangyong Motors—and the site of a militant 77-day occupation from May to August 2009 to defend over 2,600 jobs.

According to his work colleagues, the worker, identified only as Kang, had gone to lie down at 9 a.m., after complaining of dizziness. He did not return and was eventually found dead on the floor. Kang is one of 15 former Ssangyong workers and members of their immediate families who have tragically died from suicide or stress-related health issues since the betrayal of the 2009 occupation by the Korean trade unions.

The occupation ended when more than 4,000 riot police and police commandos, mobilised by the Grand National Party government of President Lee Myung-bak, stormed the plant, together with an army of company thugs. The auto workers were brutally beaten with batons and had liquid tear gas and chemicals sprayed on them from helicopters.

The defeat of the Ssangyong workers was a direct product of the betrayal carried out by the Korean Metal Workers Union and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, which isolated the struggle and then imposed a settlement accepting the job cuts (See: “South Korea: The political lessons of the Ssangyong occupation”).

Under the company-union deal, the majority of targeted workers were sacked outright and others were forced into “voluntary” retirement or unpaid leave, under the pretext that they would be rehired when the company’s financial situation improved.

The resultant hardship suffered by the sacked workers and their families has taken a deadly toll. According to a recent survey of 193 former Ssangyong workers by South Korea’s Green Hospital, 52.3 percent were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and 80 percent showed signs of severe depression, which required psychological counselling, higher than the 71.1 percent recorded soon after the occupation was broken up.

Almost all of those surveyed (95.9 percent) reported that their marriages had deteriorated. Their average monthly income was 822,800 won (\$US760) a month, a 74 percent reduction from their previous salaries.

Four of the 15 deaths since August 2009 were suicides, with others stress-related and attributed to, or at least exacerbated by, the dire economic circumstances created by the sackings.

In February this year, 44-year-old Lim died of a heart attack in his room. His wife, dismayed by her husband’s dismissal from Ssangyong and the consequent difficulties, had taken her own life in April 2010. Lim had battled depression made worse by his wife’s death and was struggling to support his two children. At the time of his death he had just 40,000 won or about \$37 in the bank and was 1.5 million won in debt.

Two days later, 37-year-old Chou was found dead in his locked car in Busan. He asphyxiated after burning a charcoal briquette in the enclosed space. Chou, who left Ssangyong in March 2009, after accepting so-called “voluntary” retirement, was one of the hundreds forced out prior to the occupation. A casual shipyard worker since June 2010, he was experiencing severe financial stress according to colleagues. He was survived by his wife, his three-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son.

Commenting on the tragic death, Ssangyong union director Kim Cheon-wook told the media: “Voluntary retirement is a different name for murder.” That depiction is accurate. Hundreds of former Ssangyong workers have been attempting to survive as casual or low-paid day workers or they remain unemployed, blacklisted for their militant stand.

If the resultant deaths amount to “murder”, however, as claimed by Kim Cheon-wook, then the unions, which collaborated with the company and the government at every point to strangle and defeat the occupation, are accomplices.

One of the victims, Lim, for example, was one of about 460 workers forced onto unpaid leave under the union-brokered deal that stipulated they would be rehired within a year once sales had recovered. Sales more than doubled

from 35,000 vehicles in 2009 to over 80,000 in 2010. More than 10,000 vehicles were sold in March and April this year. Nonetheless, the India-based Mahindra group, which purchased Ssangyong last year, still refuses to reinstate them.

This has gone unchallenged by the unions, which have held a limited sit-down protest outside the factory gates and made various pathetic appeals to the government, even as the Lee Myung-bak regime pursues legal action, together with Ssangyong and its insurer, for damages against the auto workers and the unions. The government is suing them for 2.2 billion won, the company 10 billion and its insurer 11 billion.

The Ssangyong occupation was the first major struggle by a section of the Korean working class since the global financial crisis erupted in 2008. It erupted as auto producers internationally carried through major downsizings and restructurings to slash costs.

Crushing the occupation was viewed by South Korea's corporate elite and international investors as a test case for President Lee's government to urgently make good its promise to crack down on labour disputes, suppress wages and deliver greater labour market "flexibility"—the right to sack at will. The Ssangyong defeat opened the way for a new round of attacks on the jobs and living standards of Korean workers and auto workers globally.

The unions have policed this assault. At Ssangyong the union accepted a two-year wage freeze in 2009 and oversaw massive increases in productivity. As Ssangyong CEO Lee Yoo-il told a recent conference: "Management and the labour union have become one, focusing only on how to revive the company."

A company statement to the media this month boasted that the "first assembly line of the plant that manufactures Ssangyong's flagship sports utility vehicle, the Korando C, is operating at full speed." It noted that workers, clearly under pressure to maintain production, did not even take scheduled rest breaks.

In 2010, unions at four of the country's largest auto makers—Kia, Hyundai, Renault Samsung and GM Daewoo—agreed to accept any pay offer made by management. In January, the Hyundai Oilbank union signed a no-strike agreement, abandoned annual wage negotiations and gave management the full right to decide salaries.

Employers have launched massive legal claims against workers taking industrial action. Under Korea's Penal Code 314, companies can file criminal charges and lawsuits for "obstruction of business." Last November, a 25-day occupation by contract workers demanding permanency at Hyundai Motor in Ulsan ended after it was attacked by

heavily armed police and company goons. Scores of workers were arrested and the company filed multi-billion won criminal and civil lawsuits against the strikers.

The *Hankyoreh* newspaper reported in April that more than 900 workers and union officials were currently being sued in South Korea over "illegal" industrial action. The damages claims total 75 billion won or about \$69 million. The corporations include Kumho Tyre and Hanjin Heavy Industries, where workers walked out in protest this year over the destruction of hundreds of jobs. Hanjin Heavy Industries worker, Kim Jin-suk, is currently being sued for 100 million won for occupying a crane.

Even more violent attacks on jobs, working conditions and basic rights are in the pipeline, as companies globally continue to drive up productivity and cut costs. On Monday, President Lee announced in a national radio address that his government would crack down even harder on labour unrest, after dispatching 2,500 riot police last week to break up a strike at auto parts maker Yoosung that had threatened to cut supplies of piston rings to Hyundai and Kia.

Inevitably workers in Korea will resist the government and company offensive, leading to further confrontations. As the bitter experience of Ssangyong demonstrates, however, these struggles, no matter how militant, will be defeated if they remain under the control of the unions, which function as nothing but agents of the employers and the government.

The turn must be to the construction of new independent organisations to unite all sections of the working class in the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including the nationalisation of the auto industry under the democratic control of the working class, as part of the struggle for world socialism. Such a struggle requires, above all, the building of a new revolutionary leadership in South Korea—a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact