

South Korean government deploys police against shipyard protest

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South Korea's Grand National Party government of President Lee Myung-bak is continuing its violent crackdown on protests supporting 400 workers sacked last December from a shipyard in the southern port city of Busan. The Hanjin Heavy Industries & Construction's (HHIC) Yeongdo shipyard, once among the 10th largest in the world, employed 1,400 workers with another 1,500 on temporary contracts before the most recent round of sackings.

The latest police operation, on July 30, occurred against an estimated 15,000 supporters mobilised by sacked workers and various civic and labour groups under the banner of "a world without layoffs and temporary work." Production at the shipyard remains halted because 55-year-old Kim Jin-suk, a former HHIC employee and union representative, is occupying a 35-metre crane, declaring that her protest will continue until all workers are reinstated.

Three weeks earlier, riot police attacked about 10,000 protesters with water cannons containing a toxic solution of water, isopropyl alcohol and the tear-gas additive PAVA—a new and particularly dangerous form of pepper spray. Organisers of the July 30 protest, hoping to avoid a similar confrontation, advised demonstrators to make their way to the Yeongdo shipyard in small groups after participating in various cultural events around the district during the day.

Heavy contingents of police, however, blocked bridges leading to the shipyard, and military personnel were deployed to ensure only Yeongdo residents could enter the area. Police then watched as around 300 thugs organised by various employer groups and the right-wing Korean Parents League chanted "the commies

must be knocked down" and beat up groups of demonstrators. About 4,000 protesters eventually rallied outside the shipyard.

The government has been able to carry out this repression only because of the political role of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which has systematically isolated shipyard workers who walked out on strike in December and picketed for 190 days to defend their jobs.

The KCTU shut down strike action on June 27 and brokered a sellout agreement with the company and the courts. Under the deal, 170 terminated workers received redundancy payouts, and the company agreed to "minimise" legal claims for damages during the walkout and drop all other charges against the strikers. There was no withdrawal of the layoffs, however.

When terms of the deal became known, workers seized several union officials and around 100 staged a sit-in at the yard before being hauled off by security guards.

The KCTU, fearing that any forced removal of Kim Jin-suk from the shipyard crane would provoke an angry response from other workers, is trying to persuade her to end the occupation. Meanwhile, the KCTU has called a demonstration over the sackings for August 20 in Seoul—over 400 kilometres from Busan. The protest is to let off steam while undermining calls for more demonstrations at the Yeongdo shipyard.

The KCTU's role in the HHIC dispute is further proof of its deepening collaboration with the right-wing Lee government following the peak union body's

betrayal of the 2009 Ssangyong Motor workers' occupation against job cuts.

Widespread support for the Ssangyong workers was dissipated by the KCTU and the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), which opposed joint industrial action by other auto workers. This opened the way for the Lee government to mobilise thousands of riot police to forcibly end the Ssangyong industrial action.

Defeating the Ssangyong occupation—the first major struggle by a section of the Korean working class since the 2008 global financial crisis—was viewed by international investors as a test case for the Lee administration. Lee had promised big business that he would crack down hard on labour disputes, suppress wages and deliver greater labour market “flexibility.”

The Ssangyong defeat was followed by a wave of attacks on jobs and conditions. Last November, heavily-armed police broke up a 25-day occupation by Hyundai Motor contract workers demanding permanency in Ulsan. In June, over 2,500 police were used to smash strike action by Yoosung Enterprise auto parts workers.

Government attempts to drive down wages and conditions have been accompanied by increasing numbers of Korean corporations moving offshore to exploit cheaper labour. HHIC, for example, established a shipyard in the northern Philippines port of Subic Bay in 2006. The recent sackings at Yeongdo are widely believed to be in line with company plans to move more of its shipbuilding operations there.

The Subic shipyard, which can produce large and high value-added vessels, has state-of-the-art facilities, including one of the world's largest docks, four ultra-large cranes and automated assembly lines. Philippine labour costs are less than a tenth of those in South Korea and its labour and health and safety laws are even less restrictive.

Since HHIC began shipbuilding at Subic Bay, 36 workers have been killed in industrial accidents and on average, five serious injuries occur each month. According to the HHIC-PI Workers Union, 60 workers were dismissed when they attempted to establish a

union at the shipyard. Another 60 were suspended for resisting physical assaults by Korean foremen. Eight others were sacked outright and then jailed.

In 2009, the Philippines Senate investigated health and safety abuses at the HHIC shipyard following a series of fatalities. The South Korean government responded by warning that any punitive action against the company would have “negative investment” repercussions. While the Senate inquiry concluded that there had been serious safety breaches, no sanctions were imposed on HHIC.

HHIC workers in South Korea and the Philippines confront a common enemy—a corporation determined to drive up profits at the expense of jobs, working conditions and basic safety, with the backing of governments and the assistance of the trade unions. Any struggle to defend basic rights necessarily involves a joint political and industrial campaign, independent of the unions, uniting workers in both countries on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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