

GM's job destruction and the South Korean pseudo-left

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25 February 2014

General Motors Korea announced in late January the elimination of 1,100 auto jobs—an entire shift—at its Gunsan factory. The Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) immediately stepped in to lend its services. “Job cuts are inevitable because of reduced production. We will settle the situation through negotiations,” one union official told *Business Korea*.

Amid mounting anger and frustration among workers over a series of union betrayals, the umbrella body the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) has called a one-day “people’s strike” for today to protest against the oppression of workers and the privatisation plans of the right-wing government of President Park Geun-hye.

The strike is a charade designed to block an independent political struggle of the working class against the government, and to cover-up recent union sell-outs, including of a protracted rail strike in December. The token character of the strike only opens the door for President Park to carry out further repressive measures against workers.

Not surprisingly, the KMWU has seized on the strike as a means of obscuring its own refusal to wage any struggle to defend jobs at the Gusan plant. The union issued a statement declaring the general strike to be part of a “fearless struggle” against the Park government and big business—even as it prepares to sit down and negotiate the destruction of jobs with GM.

In conditions of growing distrust and anger among workers, the South Korean pseudo-left organisation known as Workers Solidarity All Together, or simply All Together, is playing a filthy role as apologist and defender of the KCTU, KMWU and other unions. The organisation is affiliated to the International Socialist Tendency that takes its political line from the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party in Britain.

On February 10, All Together wrote on its website *Left21.com*: “The KCTU is making an appeal for a February 25 general strike. This means that it is the start of the resistance to the various attacks on workers that are being pushed by the Park Geun-hye government this year following the attack on KCTU headquarters at the end of last year.”

What a fraud! Today’s “general strike” to mark one year of the Park government is no more the start of “resistance” than the one-day “general strikes” on January 9 and 16 that were designed to cover up the sell-out of the rail strike on December 30 and the KCTU’s capitulation in the face of a police raid on its headquarters on December 22.

All Together is giving its backing to a one-day protest designed to let off steam and to politically subordinate workers to the opposition Democrat Party—a capitalist party, which in office was responsible for far-reaching attacks on the living standards of workers. Today’s “people’s strike” is taking place in conjunction with various civil society organisations and, in Seoul, will conclude with a candlelight vigil in the city centre.

As well as backing the KCTU, All Together is also giving credibility to the KMWU’s lie that today’s strike will be the start of a “fearless struggle” that will help GM workers defend their jobs. In its February 10 article, they wrote: “GM Korea’s restructuring has become a primary topic at the KMWU’s February 25 strike. As such, this strike is also a good opportunity to start a struggle by GM Korea workers.”

All Together’s support for the unions takes place amid a deepening crisis of South Korean capitalism since the 2008–09 global financial meltdown. The economy grew by just 2.8 percent in 2013. Exports have been hit by growing competition from Japan as a result of Tokyo’s policy of weakening the yen.

Social tensions in South are rising amid a deepening gulf between rich and poor. Among OECD countries last year, the country had the third highest rate of income inequality, behind Mexico and Chile. The official, grossly understated, unemployment rate has hit 3.5 percent, with many young people unable to find a job.

Over the past five years, the KMWU and KCTU have played a vital role for big business in suppressing the struggles of the working class. The union body effectively gave the government the green light for a violent attack by police and company thugs that ended the 77-day strike and factory occupation by Ssangyong workers in 2009 to defend their jobs.

All Together's role as apologist for the trade unions was particularly evident in the recent 22-day rail strike, which the Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) shut down on the government's terms. Rather than a sell-out by the union, All Together insisted in an article on December 31 that "of course this is not a victory for Park Geun-hye", but rather just one more step in the overall struggle.

All Together is not oriented to the working class, but to a layer of the upper-middle class that includes the trade union bureaucracy. Its "socialist" and "anti-capitalist" rhetoric is directed above all against the South Korean conglomerates, or chaebol, such as Hyundai and Samsung. This political orientation meets up with interests of sections of the South Korea bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, represented by the Democrats, frustrated by the chaebols' economic preponderance.

In December 1999, nine years after All Together was formed, the group joined the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), the forerunner of today's Unified Progressive Party (UPP). The DLP served as the KCTU's political wing and functioned to subordinate workers to the election of Democrat President Kim Dae-jung.

All Together, along with the DLP and the KCTU, bear political responsibility for Kim Dae-jung's implementation of the IMF's sweeping economic restructuring demands following the 1997–98 Asian crisis. Then as now, the KCTU used a series of one-day general strikes to defuse the immense anger among workers over the dismantling of South Korea's lifetime employment system and block any political struggle against the Kim Dae-jung administration.

The result has been a mushrooming of low-paid casual employment and deep inroads into the living standards of the working class. In recognition for services rendered, Kim formally legalised the KCTU which had previously led a semi-underground existence. Over the past 15 years, the KCTU has more and more closely integrated with the political establishment and state apparatus. And All Together has done the same.

All Together since left the UPP, but continues to support the party, falsely claiming that it has "put forth radical positions and genuine working class agendas." The political orientation remains the same. At the 2012 presidential election, All Together gave its "critical support" to Democrat candidate Moon Jae-in on the pretext that this would "build solidarity and connect with millions of working people" who wished Park's defeat.

GM Korea workers, and the working class in South Korea more broadly, cannot defend their jobs or any of their basic rights through the All-Together-UPP-KCTU-Democrat line-up that is dedicated to preserving South Korean capitalism at the expense of working people. What is required is a fight for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie, based on the political lessons of the strategic experiences of the twentieth century. That, above all, requires the building of a section in South Korea of the International Committee of the Fourth International—the world Trotskyist movement.



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