

Working Class Flexes Muscle South Korea to the Brink

Just before dawn on 26 December 1996, four chartered buses carrying 154 legislators from South Korea's ruling New Korea Party (NKP) stopped in front of the country's National Assembly. The deputies disembarked, snuck into the legislative building, took their seats in the plenary hall, and, in just seven minutes, passed a barrage of legislation, which tightened the country's repressive labor laws, and restored the powers of the dreaded secret police. They then scurried back onto the buses and sped off in the early morning light.

This display of democracy in action produced a "historic" new labor law, which President Kim Young Sam assured citizens was necessary to "save the nation." But things worked out a little differently than the government had planned. The regime's cowardly maneuver set off a tidal wave of protest. Opposition legislators denounced the ruling party's move as a "coup d'état," and the country's legal experts and academics all agreed that it was blatantly unconstitutional.

More important, the "illegal" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU or *minjunochong*) declared the legislation "null and void," and, within hours of the laws' passage, launched a general strike. By the end of the first day, 150,000 workers were involved. The auto plants in Ulsan, heart of the Hyundai empire, fell silent, as did those of Kia Motors, Ssangyong Motors and Asia Motors. South Korea's three largest shipyards shut down. The country's export-driven economy began to grind to a halt.

Popular outrage was so intense that even the traditionally pro-government Federation of Korea Trade Unions (FKTU or *nochong*) was forced to participate. By the second day of the strike, some 150,000 FKTU workers from 486 worksites (10 percent of its total membership) were mobilized. This is highly significant because the FKTU's predecessor was created in the late 1940s by the Syngman Rhee dictatorship to compete with the militant, communist-influenced *Chonpyong* (National Korean Labor Council).

'Illegal and Unpatriotic'

The government's initial response was to try to crush the protests with brute force. In Seoul, on 28 December, riot police attacked a peaceful march of 20,000 workers and students, calling for the dissolution of the NKP government and nullification of the reactionary legislation. But police violence could not derail the strike movement, and by the end of the "first wave," the mobilizations included both public and private-sector workers, and participation was growing even among white-collar employees.

After a lull during the New Year holidays, a "second wave" of the general strike erupted that was even broader than the first. Workers from some of the tradi-

tionally conservative sectors began to join the strike; hospitals, radio and television stations, research institutes and even financial institutions were affected. There were also some instances where workers began to administer public services—for example, dispatching brigades to towns in the South Cholla province to assist people hit hard by a winter storm.

However, participation in the "second wave" was uneven. The FKTU's involvement was limited. The scope of the strike was also restricted by the KCTU leadership's decision to leave key departments in many companies on the job, and not to pull out public employees except for limited periods. The strike was therefore strongest in the export-oriented manufacturing sector.

Polls reported a solid majority in support of the general strike, despite the inconvenience it caused. Doctors', lawyers' and professors' associations, peasant organizations, Catholic priests and Buddhist monks all proclaimed the strike to be a legitimate exercise of democratic rights, and announced their refusal to accept the validity of the new laws. There was even a "Housewives' Proclamation" endorsing the strike.

The two main bourgeois opposition parties, the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP) and the United Liberal Democrats (ULD), initially spurned offers to appear at union-organized rallies. But, as popular support grew, they eventually decided that it was safe to participate. With an eye on the upcoming presidential elections, they sloughed off NKP accusations that they were inciting "illegal and unpatriotic" behavior, and declared that they considered the strike entirely legal.

'Degenerating into Class Struggle'

Every day, in every city, crowds of sympathetic spectators joined uniformed workers in an open-ended, nationally coordinated protest. In Seoul, where the regime concentrated its forces, the police occasionally attacked demonstrators, but were often driven back by volleys of rocks and fire-bombs. In the rest of the country, the massive protests were peaceful, as the badly outnumbered police did not dare provoke the workers.

In the past, the government has been able to dispatch police from around the country to suppress strikes or demonstrations. Frequently the target has been in Ulsan, where the metalworkers have a reputation for being extremely combative. On occasion, the regime has employed military units to reinforce the police in massive field operations against these workers. But this time, the mobilizations were so large, and so widespread, that, for the most part, the police did not even try to suppress them. In some instances, where local police did attack the protests, they were overpowered by organized "workers' battle squads" composed of units from different workplaces.

As the strikes continued, the government feared that it was losing control of the situation. Prime Minister Lee Soo Sung warned striking public-sector workers that those who did not return to work would face harsh retribution. The Prosecutor General's office began issuing dozens of arrest warrants for union leaders. Lee Hong Goo, who is expected to be the ruling party's next presidential candidate, visited Cardinal Soo Hwan Kim, to get his approval for an assault on Myongdong Cathedral, where the KCTU leadership was headquartered. But the cardinal refused permission, and told Lee that the NKP had been wrong to circumvent the legislature.

After the police seized the KCTU headquarters and threatened to invade Myongdong Cathedral, the two union federations announced plans to escalate the strike. On 15 January, the "third wave" began. Huge rallies were held in every major center. Seventy percent of KCTU members walked off the job, along with 400,000 FKTU workers.

At this point the government began to panic. "The general strikes are degenerating into class struggle," squealed Choi Byong Kuk, head of the Public Security Department of the Prosecutor General's office, who announced that he possessed:

"evidence that North Korean propaganda broadcasts are instigating the working class to destroy the government' and that 'communist' propaganda had been found on the scene of the labor rallies. In reference to the subversive materials, the NKP said that the prosecution, police, and the NSPA [National Security Planning Agency, formerly known as the South Korean CIA] must ferret out impure factors."

—Korea Labor and Society Institute, 16 January

The police did not yet dare attack the KCTU's central leadership, but they began arresting second-tier leaders. In Seoul, 150 union militants were detained and interrogated. However, in some regions, the courts refused to co-operate with the regime. Both the Changwon district court in South Kyongsang province and the Taejon district court in South Chungchong province reportedly refused to execute arrest warrants for regional union leaders on the grounds that the new labor laws had not been shown to be constitutional. They said they would not act until there was a Supreme Court ruling on the matter.

KCTU Leaders Scuttle Strike

The regime's shrill denunciations of the strikers as pawns of North Korea had no effect, nor did repeated threats of the "imminent" and "inevitable" arrest of the KCTU leadership. Recognizing that his position had become untenable, President Kim Young Sam decided to change tack. On 21 January, he met with the leaders of the two main opposition parties, Kim Dae Jung of the NCNP and Kim Jong Pil of the ULD. While refusing to repeal the laws outright, he did suggest that he might revise them. Suddenly, the Prosecutor General's office announced it was dropping charges against 20 major trade-union leaders (although over 400 rank-and-file militants still face charges stemming from their strike activity).

In response to these "concessions," the KCTU leader-

ship called off the general strike, and announced it would restrict its protests to Wednesday work stoppages and Saturday rallies. These semi-weekly events were supposed to continue until the law was repealed, but in fact lasted only a single week. At the same time, the KCTU leaders threatened to resume the strike on 18 February, if by then the law had still not been revoked.

The union leadership dressed up its retreat as a new "fourth wave" of the struggle, and claimed that, "the nationwide strike will be more aggressive and will work towards the acceleration of labor's cause" (*Strike Urgent Report No. 20*, 31 January). To prepare this "aggressive" action, the union leaders proposed a petition campaign, and "promoted mandatory attendance [at work] and reserved [i.e., cancelled] the Wednesday demonstrations."

The weekly one-day work stoppages would have been meaningless anyway, because the unions had agreed to work overtime to make up for lost production. When 10,000 Hyundai employees worked an *extra 10 hours* after the end of their regular shift on 25 January, a union representative explained:

"The company's production losses from the strike amounted to substantial sums, and in view of the fact the company management has decided not to seek legal retributions against the union over the strike, we at the union have decided to do our share in making up for the losses by extending our work hours."

—Korea Herald, 28 January

Economic Restructuring & 'Flexible' Labor Laws

The Western media portrayed the strike as a relatively minor struggle over the issue of job security. While acknowledging that the labor legislation had been passed in an irregular manner, they described South Korea as a land where lifetime-guaranteed jobs had once been the norm, but which would now be forced to bring its labor policies into line with the "new realities" of the global marketplace. The revision of the labor code goes hand in hand with the dismantling of much of the state regulation and protectionism that have formed the basis of South Korea's economic policy for the past 30 years. These changes are a precondition for South Korea's acceptance by the OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development).

The KCTU was forged in the "Great Workers' Struggle"—a massive wave of strikes and popular protests that swept the country in 1987 and loosened the grip of the brutal military dictatorship. While the KCTU has remained officially illegal, it is an important factor in South Korean politics. Kim Young Sam's labor "reforms" were intended to give Korean capitalists more "flexibility" in exploiting workers while also weakening the unions.

The other part of the government's legislative package, the "reform" of the laws governing the political police, marks a sinister return to the days of the military dictatorship. Even the *New York Times* (25 February) acknowledged as much:

"When President Kim Young Sam, who had opposed the military-led governments that ruled South Korea for

nearly 30 years, came into office in 1993, he weakened the security agency by subjecting it to parliamentary oversight and transferring enforcement of the key clause of the National Security Law to the police. Critics of the law welcomed those changes.

“But arrests under the law, which dropped after Mr. Kim took office, have been rising. In 1996 there were 464 cases, compared with 305 in 1992, the year before Mr. Kim came into office. A new law passed in December restores enforcement powers of the National Security Law to the intelligence agency.”

PCIR Fails to Co-opt KCTU

The NKP resorted to its parliamentary coup only after previous attempts to get KCTU acquiescence to the regime’s proposed labor law “reforms” had failed. In 1996 the supposedly illegal union was invited to nominate two of the five union representatives on the Presidential Commission on Industrial Relations (PCIR). The KCTU initially agreed to participate in the commission with the understanding that it would be granted legal recognition in return. The declared purpose of the PCIR was to promote “cooperation between employers and employees,” and the KCTU’s involvement undoubtedly reflected hopes that diplomacy would prove more effective than direct industrial action.

In June 1996, a wave of public-sector strikes, involving telephone, television and subway workers, demanded that fired union leaders be reinstated, and that the proposed labor code be scrapped. In July the powerful auto workers also went on strike, posing the possibility of a broad union offensive to smash the anti-labor laws. But the KCTU leadership, hoping to win significant gains through the government’s commission, was unwilling to act. Once the government agreed to rehire the fired militants, the KCTU pressured its unions to settle quickly, so as not to alienate public opinion.

After prolonged, but ultimately fruitless, negotiations, the KCTU leaders eventually denounced the PCIR as no more than a front for the *chaebol* (industrial conglomerates), and withdrew. The commission’s failure to co-opt the KCTU meant that it was of no further use to Kim Young Sam. When the PCIR finally submitted its report, the government ignored its recommendations, and wrote its own, more draconian, package of labor law “reforms” which, among other things, delayed recognition of the KCTU for three more years. The ruling party’s laws also made it easier for bosses to victimize striking workers, and to use scabs, while prohibiting workers fired during a strike, or those laid off or unemployed, from continuing to hold union membership. Penalties for “illegal” actions, like plant occupations, wildcats, or even slowdowns, were also sharply increased—in some cases by 2500 percent.

The new legislation also gave companies the right to lengthen the workweek from an average of 49 hours to 56 hours, before having to pay overtime. The law also attacked the rights of public-sector workers, particularly teachers, who are permitted “consultative” associations, but whose union, the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (NTU or *Chonkyojo*) remained banned. The new teachers’ “associations” were prohibited from

calling themselves trade unions.

KCTU: the Limits of Trade-Union Reformism

While willing to defy the government, the KCTU leadership’s reformist trade-union perspective severely limited the political potential of the struggle. When Kim Young Sam flinched and offered a few minor concessions, such as dropping charges against the top union leaders and promising unspecified “revisions” to the labor law, the KCTU pulled the plug on the strike, arguing that to continue would lead to “isolation.” During the strike, this same reformist impulse led the KCTU leadership to capitulate politically to the government’s red-baiting campaign. They publicly denied any leftist involvement, appealed to left groups to refrain from distributing their literature at workers’ rallies, and, on some occasions, reportedly used union security squads to suppress leftists distributing leaflets.

The KCTU leadership’s political limitations were graphically illustrated by its response to the financial collapse of the Hanbo *chaebol*, under the weight of \$6 billion in bad debts. This is the latest, and most serious, in a series of bribery and corruption scandals that have plagued Kim Young Sam’s government, and it has created a major political/economic crisis. Initial attempts to lay the blame on a few bad business moves and the rigidities of the labor market were blown apart when it was revealed that, even as Hanbo’s financial crisis deepened, government officials had pressured the banks into extending billions of dollars in new loans.

So far, the chiefs of two major banks, legislators from both the ruling party and the opposition, the government’s Home Affairs minister and one of Kim Young Sam’s own sons have been implicated in the growing scandal. South Korean taxpayers are outraged that they are going to be stuck with the tab, and Kim Young Sam’s approval rating has plummeted to 14 percent. On 25 February, the president appeared on national television to take responsibility for the debacle, and to apologize for the “agony and sorrow” it had caused. The next day, a newspaper poll reported that:

“79.9 percent of the respondents do not believe Kim will make good on his promise to get to the bottom of the Hanbo case and punish all those implicated...”

—*Korea Herald*, 27 February

Yet, when the Hanbo scandal first broke, the KCTU did no more than verbally condemn the government and demand the punishment of those responsible. Instead of pressing home the attack on the weakened government, the KCTU leadership abruptly called off its weekly Wednesday protest strikes. While they did not explicitly link this to the crisis of the government, the connection was clear enough:

“Behind the militant KCTU’s decision to suspend the strike, according to labor experts, was the Hanbo financial scandal, which drew public attention away from the strike. Union leaders, they added, may have concluded that lengthy strikes would not prove helpful to labor groups as the strike is certain to draw less public attention. “KCTU leaders also seemed concerned about possible public antipathy resulting from a prolonged strike, since most citizens are now anxious about the prospect of an

economic crisis linked to the Hanbo bankruptcy.”

—*Korea Herald*, 30 January

The KCTU leaders invited Kim Young Sam's bourgeois opponents to participate in its forums, and refrained from criticizing them. Kim Dae Jung of the NCNP (who has lately been pushing his “conservative” credentials), and Kim Jong Pil of the ULD (who was a central figure in the Park Chung Hee military dictatorship), used the opportunity to make political capital out of their criticisms of the government's legislation. But their real grievance was that Kim Young Sam had not consulted them.

The opposition parties have shown their true colors now that they have been allowed to help draft a “revised” labor law. The ULD has ruled out any legalization of the underground teachers' union, the NTU. The more liberal NCNP is willing to consider legalization of the teachers' union, while withholding the right to strike. This prompted the NTU to occupy the offices of both opposition parties, and the KCTU has threatened renewed strikes to win union rights for them.

The KCTU leadership may hope that its association with the capitalist politicians will help it “legitimize” itself, but its failure to expose the anti-working-class character of the bourgeois opposition can only confuse union members and undermine the capacity of the workers' movement to advance its own independent class interests.

South Korean Left & the Strikes

Despite the regime's hysterical anti-communist propaganda, the organized left does not appear to have played a significant role in recent events. This is a consequence of a combination of intense police repression, and profound ideological disorientation. The 1991 collapse of the USSR shattered the once substantial “Marxist-Leninist” Stalinist formations, and has propelled their cadres in every conceivable political direction. The various groups clinging to the discredited *Juche* ideology of the ruling Stalinist regime in North Korea also played no role in the strike.

Many South Korean leftists and union militants have recently begun a serious discussion about the possibility of forming a workers' party. This sentiment is reflected in vague suggestions emanating from the KCTU leadership about perhaps running an independent candidate for president, or standing in the next National Assembly elections, scheduled for 2000.

While the KCTU leadership has limited itself to calling for a populist “Citizens' Party,” labor party advocacy groups, like the *Nojinchu* and the *Nojunnyon*, provide a forum for a variety of different views, ranging from social-democratic to subjectively revolutionary. But even the most moderate leftists suffer state repression in South Korea: in the last year alone, the police arrested 27 *Nojinchu* supporters. This outrage underscores the brutal fact that, under present political conditions, the only way to advance any kind of independent working-class politics is through underground activity. Naturally, this tends to undercut the appeal of social-democratic notions.

The International Socialists of South Korea (ISSK) presents itself as a revolutionary socialist alternative. Yet, its political record belies this claim. While abstractly advising workers to maintain complete political independence from the bourgeoisie, at election time, the ISSK regularly advocates a vote to one or another capitalist candidate. In the last presidential election, in 1992, the ISSK called for a vote to Kim Dae Jung. This proved too much for some ISSK members, prompting a section of the leading cadre to walk out.

In the 1995 Seoul mayoralty race the ISSK called for a vote to Cho Soon, who ran on the NCNP ticket. Since his election, Cho Soon has repeatedly ordered the riot police to attack striking workers and leftist demonstrators. He has also deployed scabs on numerous occasions, particularly against Seoul's militant subway workers.

Cho Soon is acting just like any other capitalist politician, which is why Marxists have always refused *on principle* to vote for bourgeois candidates. For the “revolutionary” ISSK, however, the principle of working-class independence is just so much sectarian baggage. The ISSK rationalizes its political support for capitalist politicians on the grounds that workers have illusions in them, and that, if socialists refuse their support, they risk isolation. Instead of struggling to break the proletariat from its present backwardness, the ISSK capitulates to it.

This same opportunist impulse was evident in the ISSK's intervention in the recent general strike, when it absurdly called for a “presidential veto” of the labor law: “A concrete gain that we can get from the struggle is a presidential veto. In other words, we'll force them to give us a labor version of 6.29 declaration.”

—*[Korean] Socialist Worker*, 29 December 1996

With hundreds of thousands of workers on strike to *scrap* the labor law and get rid of the government that introduced it, the ISSK could do no better than to call for...a veto by Kim Young Sam! (The “6.29 declaration” refers to former president Chun Doo Hwan's 1987 deal with the bourgeois opposition, granting direct presidential elections in order to demobilize the mass protests against the military dictatorship.)

Which Way Forward?

While the details of the final deal have yet to be worked out, the outline seems clear enough. The only union federation granted immediate legal recognition under the new law is the FKTU, but the KCTU seems almost certain to be legalized soon. The new labor bill is likely to make it a bit harder for bosses to lay off workers. But other demands, including repeal of the state “security” package, are not being addressed. The fact that the KCTU leadership is apparently willing to settle for such a meager return is hardly surprising, given that their objectives never went far beyond winning legal status for their federation.

The absence of any organized left-wing formation in the unions capable of challenging the leadership makes it likely that KCTU president, Kwon Young Gil, will be able to wear down rank-and-file resistance to a settle-

ment tailored to the requirements of the bourgeois opposition. While the failure of the union leaders to wrest any significant concessions has to be seen as a political defeat, it is also clear that the government seriously underestimated the strength of the unions. If Kim Young Sam could do it all over again, he would no doubt have cancelled plans for the secret legislative session, and instead proceeded through the regular channels.

The government's breach of earlier promises to grant legal status for the KCTU left the union leadership no option but to resist. Yet, throughout the strike, one of the KCTU's main concerns was to limit the scope of the struggle. Strikes in the public sector were actively discouraged, as was the distribution of leftist literature. The union leadership's conservative role was also demonstrated by their efforts to replace production loss through strike action, as well as their patriotic decision to call off the protests in light of the Hanbo scandal.

While it has acted as a brake on the struggle, the leadership thrown up by the South Korean workers' movement is not a hardened bureaucratic layer of the sort that run unions in the West. These are people who have undertaken, at considerable personal risk, to lead the struggle to assert the elementary democratic rights of working people. Yet, despite the contributions of its individual members, the KCTU leadership, operating within the parameters of militant trade unionism, lacks the political capacity to defeat the capitalists.

The widespread popular disgust with the cynicism and corruption of the government presents an opportunity for the unions to campaign for "opening the financial books" of the *chaebol* to representatives of the labor movement. A good place to start laying bare the roots of the sleaze endemic to South Korean capitalism would be with Hanbo.

Two of the key issues in the strike were the government's attempt to lengthen the workweek and to make it simpler for workers to be thrown onto the scrap heap. The unions should have countered with a campaign to *lower* the number of hours worked, and thereby expand employment. A serious struggle to reduce the average

workweek from, for example, 49 to 35 hours, *at no loss in pay*, could be an effective way for the unions to reach out to the unemployed and unorganized workers, and bring them into the movement. In order to step forward as a contender for power, the working class must place itself at the head of the struggles of all the oppressed. A class-struggle leadership in the unions would therefore champion the interests of women, small farmers and "guest" workers from South Asia and Africa.

Many of the KCTU's official platform speakers at the January demonstrations raised the call to "Dissolve the *Chaebol!*" The *chaebol* are indeed the enemy, but it is not enough merely to "dissolve" them, i.e., to break them up into a welter of smaller capitalist concerns. The workers' movement must set itself the task of *nationalizing* these giant monopolies, *without compensation*, under workers' control.

During the general strike, tens of thousands of workers defied the state and the bosses. In many factories they organized effective "battle squads." This assertion of workers' power posed an implicit challenge to the capitalists' property rights and their monopoly of force. In future struggles, the next step for the workers would be to set up factory committees in order to assert their authority on the shop floor. The emergence of such committees would in turn lay the basis for the creation of delegated workers' councils at both local and regional levels. The creation of such organs would provide the organizational framework for workers' political power.

The struggle for power requires the creation of a revolutionary organization that unites the most advanced and committed militants on the basis of a program drawn from the best traditions of the Korean and international workers' movement. Only through forging a revolutionary Marxist party can the powerful Korean working class break the chains of capitalism in the South, dislodge the crumbling bureaucratic dictatorship in the North, and move forward through the revolutionary reunification of the Korean nation into the socialist future. ■