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Globalisation

Seoul: a new stage in the struggle against neo-liberal globalisation

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The mobilisations at the 3rd Asia-Europe Summit (ASEM) [1] which met on October 20 and 21, 2000 in Seoul (South Korea), represented a new stage in the struggle against neo-liberal globalisation.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/samsung_workers.jpg]
Samsung workers demonstrate

Attending the summit were the heads of state and government of 10 Asiatic countries [2] and the 15 members of the European Union. Prodi, Chirac, Schroeder, Blair and Aznar had made the trip to meet their Asian equivalents so as to finalise trade agreements dominated by the logic of deregulation, the opening up of the markets of the economies of the so called developing countries to the commodities and capital of the more industrialised countries, the flexibility of labour and complete liberty for all holders of capital.

To oppose this logic, trade unions, student movements and NGOs were also meeting in the Korean capital.

The crisis of 1997-98 which shook the whole of Southeast Asia has had particularly harsh effects in Korea. [3] According to official figures, 1.8 million jobs have been lost (the trade union organisations speak of 2.6 million jobs lost). In the last three years, the movements of workers and students have reacted to the offensive of the Korean government relaying the demands of the IMF. The enormous debt of the private enterprises (more than \$100 billion) has been largely taken on by the state. The big industrial conglomerates have been profoundly restructured with some of their activities having been sold to foreign multinationals. Collective contracts as well as the labour code have been modified, henceforth authorising collective dismissals.

In contrast to the mobilisation in Prague (September 2000) where the trade union organisations were largely absent, the participation of one of the two main Korean trade union confederations set the tone. The KCTU, [4] with 600,000 members of whom 250,000 are metalworkers, participated in the three alternative forums which took place during the summit and constituted the main force in a demonstration which attracted 12-15,000 people (20,000 according to the local press!), on October 20. This trade union was created under the dictatorship in the 1980s by a political generation of several hundred (indeed thousand) students who went to the big factories to link up with industrial workers and fight the monopoly of representation held by a trade union close to the regime. The leaders of the KCTU are relatively young, between 35 and 50, and place a great emphasis on developing unitary activities between workers' organisations, students and other social movements. The KCTU was central to the demonstrations in Seoul on October 18-20th.

On October 18 and 19, the ASEM 2000 Forum of the Peoples took place under the rubric "Solidarity and action of the peoples defying globalisation", organised jointly by the trade unions, the NGOs and the European and Asian citizens' movements. The 25 countries concerned were represented by delegates from the popular and trade union movements. The Koreans had themselves selected the themes and campaigns that they considered as central, like the campaign against the policies of the IMF and the World Bank, for the cancellation of the debt, in favour of the Tobin tax, for the improvement of working conditions in the multinationals, those in the clothing and toy-making sector in particular, for peace and against rearmament. To represent these campaigns, they had invited from Europe TNI, Attac, the CADTM, the campaign "Clean clothes", and others. The struggle for the emancipation of women as well as the question of youth occupied a central place. The Confederation International of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU, 120 million affiliates world-wide) was also present.

Dozens of representatives of popular movements from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and elsewhere

showed the wealth of resistance to neo-liberal globalisation.

The evening of the 19th constituted the pivot of the mobilisation. At the beginning of the evening, several coalitions (PSSP, KOPA ...) and the Democratic Party of Labour (15,000 members, 7,500 of them workers according to their sources) had invited Roselyne Vachetta (a member of the European parliament for the LCR), Pierre Rousset (Attac), Mamadou Diouck (Mouvement des sans papiers - France) and Eric Toussaint (CADTM) to speak to a highly charged assembly of 350 students. The struggles in Seattle and Prague were analysed and after a debate a resolution was adopted in favour of the struggle against neo-liberal globalisation and structural adjustment. This meeting was followed by an open-air rally in one of the public universities which attracted several thousand students and a delegation of 500 trade union militants from the KCTU as well as 150 foreign guests. The tonality of this rally recalled the best moments of the struggles of the period 1968 - 1976 in Europe: revolutionary songs (the Internationale was sung four times), affirmation of internationalism and opposition to capital, red flags, fists raised... Knowing that any rally of more than three people was forbidden from the moment of the official opening of the ASEM, 2,500 students and workers stayed up all night in the university to try to demonstrate together with the objective of preventing the arrival of the official delegations. The relationship of forces was not favourable because the authorities had mobilised 29,000 riot police. After having demonstrated some hundreds of meters away the demonstration of students and workers had to face police violence and broke up into small groups.

On Saturday afternoon there was another rally of 12-15,000 people (called by the same coalitions and the KCTU) which was followed by a march of several kilometres to the place where the ASEM summit was being held.

[1] The ASEM summit takes place every two years. The first took place in Bangkok in 1996, the second in London in 1998. The next will take place in Copenhagen in 2002.

[2] The ten Asian countries are Brunei, China, Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam. In terms of population, these countries represent nearly a third of humanity. Among these countries figure all the economic and military heavyweights of South east Asia and the Far East.

[3] On this see the chapter " Corée du Sud : Les syndicats face à la mondialisation financière " in the book Les peuples entrent en résistance which has just been published jointly by Attac-France, the CADTM, the CETIM and Syllepse (October 2000).

[4] Korean Confederation of Trade Unions: <http://kctu.org>.