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South Korea

# Workers' struggle erupts again

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**November 9, 2003, downtown Seoul. In the square in front of city hall, 100,000 workers join the KCTU-led national workers rally. Since the great struggles of 1987 this has been a traditional workers' event, together with May Day. The rally commemorates the late Jeon Tae-il, who, on November 13, 1970, immolated himself in protest against the inhumane working conditions and brutal capitalism under the military dictatorship.**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3562502.jpg>]

*This symbolic martyrdom gave birth to the first generation of the democratic union movement in the 1970s. Later, after the hot summer of 1987, the second generation of the democratic union movement came into being, which represented the full rebirth of the working class movement as such.*

*This year, workers witnessed a series of suicides and self-immolation of union leaders and activists. One union leader cried, "The testimony is the same as Jon Tae-il's of thirty years ago! This is where we are." The Korean working class is still living in the same era as when Jeon Tae-il sacrificed himself, despite president Roh's deceptive demagoguery that in a "democratized" society suicides cannot be a means to achieve the demands.*

*His speech enraged the huge numbers of workers, so that tens of thousands rallied in Seoul. In the course of the march that followed the rally there was a major physical confrontation with the police. Hundreds of protesters were arrested by the riot police in the course of this street battle, and more than 50 workers were imprisoned.*

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3562501.jpg>]

Korea was liberated from Japanese imperial rule in 1945 after its defeat in the Second World War, but the nation divided according to the agreement made between the US and USSR in Yalta earlier that year. Thus, in the course of a de facto civil war that led to the Korean War in 1950-53, the fiercest class struggle resulted in two different courses of national development - the path towards a distorted "socialism" in the north, and the neo-colonial path of dependent capitalism in the south.

## The Korean peninsular and workers' movement

In this historical context, in the southern part of the peninsula, extreme right-wing regimes dominated for more than forty years, eliminating all embryonic resistance fighting for democracy and social transformation in the face of moribund capitalist, military regimes. It is within this socio-political context that the workers movement developed in its full-fledged form in the 1980s.

Even the harshest repression by the anti-Communist regimes could not stop popular resistances - there was the April Revolution in 1960, the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, and the June Uprising and Workers' Rebellion in 1987.

In spite of systematic anti-Communist hysteria, a variety of mass movements developed, such as the student movement, the democratic union movement, the peasant movement, and the movement of the urban poor. Finally with the radicalization after the Kwangju massacre in 1980, the revolutionary movement came into being.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the students led the struggles against the dictatorship struggles, but in the 1990s, aftermath of the 1987 rebellions, workers took their turn, playing the leading role of mass movements.

In the summer of 1987, after the nationwide mobilization of the June uprising, against the military regime's attempt to maintain its grip on power, workers rose up all over the country. The newly formed working class was forced to accept military-style rule over the workplace by the capitalists, who imposed extremely low wages, poor and terrible working conditions, inhumane and unfair treatment by the management and brutal suppression on any move to protest. Furthermore, the secret police and security agencies made every effort to spy on any moves to protest or resist, and the conservative parties and media were only the vehicles of the state and capital. The massive workers' rebellion burst out against these conditions. Their demands were modest - humane treatment, decent wages, better working conditions, and the right to build workers' unions.

Over that summer, spontaneous waves of over 3,000 strikes were organized, and more than 1,000 trade unions were formed. Pro-business union bureaucrats were the targets of working class anger. Workers wanted independent and democratic unions. And they pursued broader unity and solidarity beyond the factory walls, which symbolized the company union system devised to prevent workers' unity and to put workers under the control of management. The former student activists and new worker militants organized new coalitions on regional and occupational bases. Also, the white-collar workers who had taken part in the June uprising as individual citizens joined the trade union movement, turning union-free offices into the site of labour conflicts.

Thus, in the early 1990s, unionizing drives swept over all industries, highlighted by labor militancy. In this course of working class struggle, in the large plants, most of the privileged labour aristocrats were replaced by new militant labour leaders and the democratic unions became dominant in the existing FKTU framework.

## KCTU - the new stage of Labour movement

In the first half of the 1990s, the democratic union movement was composed of three currents:

1. a militant union federation of medium and small-sized factory workers, the Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU1);
2. a coalition of large unions of chaebol companies, [1] which was close to the KCTU, but maintained a separate identity; and
3. the federation of white collar workers' unions. However, all these unions were still within the organizational framework of the moribund FKTU.

Finally, in 1995, these currents of democratic unionism united, forming the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU2) as an umbrella organization. The process of building the KCTU was, on the one hand, that of forging working class unity, and, on the other, that of internal compromise, reflecting the internal differentiation of democratic unionism's orientation. In the face of the continuous attacks on union movement by the state apparatus and capitalists, some elements within the democratic unions began to prefer partnership with the state and capital.

Thus, the first leadership of the KCTU represented the right-wing shift of democratic unionism, causing harsh criticism from below and by leftist currents. Prioritizing bargaining over the struggle, alliance with NGOs over popular movement, and a social democratic orientation - these are basic characteristics of these right wing currents within the democratic labour movement. However, this current is a very odd mixture of pro-North nationalism and reformist formation. Also, there emerged another current, mostly ex-militants and top union officials, favouring industrial unionism over political unionism, and prioritizing the institutionalized bargaining structure and practice. And finally,

the militants were united into the left-wing current of the KCTU, mostly rank and file activists and leftist union leaders.

In this internal constellation, the General Strike from December 1996 to January 1997 was a serious test for the democratic union movement. Prepared for the coming attack by the neoliberal government, the KCTU could mobilize the whole capacity of the democratic labour movement, forcing the government to retreat and revise the labour law. However, at the final moment, the right-wing leadership retreated to occasional strikes, attracting harsh criticism from the strikers and rank and file workers.

And at the end of 1997, under the enormous pressure of economic crisis, the right-wing leadership opted for compromise with the government, accepting management's right to dismiss workers. This was a betrayal of the gains won by the workers' struggle for the past decade. Thus, there arose a harsh debate on the orientation and perspective of trade unions, and the resolute militancy of rank and file workers drove the irresponsible leadership out of office. Under this militant leadership, the KCTU fought back the neo-liberal attack by the state and capital.

## **DLP - a path forward, or a trap for working class politics**

In the 1997 presidential election, Kwon Young-gil, a former KCTU top leader, ran for the presidency, winning a small number of votes. After the election, Kwon and his colleagues formed a new party called the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), with the official support of the KCTU. Kwon was a journalist, and leader of the federation of journalists and press workers' union, representing the right-wing reformist, social democratic tendency, with a perspective of legalism and electoralism. Thus, in spite of the strong support by KCTU top officials, its working class base is rather narrow, reflecting both the low level of working class consciousness and the political distrust of the bureaucracy from rank and file workers.

At the first stage of its launch, the DLP lacked wide support in spite of the top-down pressure of KCTU right-wingers. However, in September 2001, the nationalist wing of the movement decided to join the DLP en mass, in an attempt to take hold of the party leadership. This nationalist tendency, as majority of the movement, had refused to build an independent political party, because of its pro-North position, claiming that, as the leadership of the movement belongs to North Korea, the South Korean movement should build a united front, not a party. As this move went on, the DLP showed some growth in membership, but it was exposed to incessant internal factional fighting. Though there are some leftist currents inside the DLP, their influence is negligible. In municipal elections in 2002, the party won about 8 percent, but at the presidential election, the candidate Kwon won less than a million votes, less than 3 percent, out of 28 million votes.

Amongst the diverse left currents, the DLP seems to monopolize the KCTU's support. But despite KCTU-DLP links, the DLP failed to take control of the KCTU, not to say of the whole movement. The reason is its overemphasis on electoralism, opportunism in mass struggle, poor practice of internal democracy, and growing bureaucratization, reformist and social-democratic orientation, in short, premature bourgeoisification and institutionalization. Pending the general election next year, all kinds of ambitious opportunists flock to run a candidacy.

The DLP imitated some ideal type of the Brazilian PT, the British Labour Party, and the German or Swedish Social Democratic Party, in a totally different situation that lacks any material condition for social democracy. Thus, the DLP is following the bankrupt path of social-liberalism still under the banner of social democracy. In this way, electoralism and sensationalism will ceaselessly distort working class politics.

# New government and working class struggle

Last December, Roh Moo-hyun won the presidential election. His supporters hailed it as an electoral revolution. As he was one of the weakest performers in the party primary and during the campaign, his mistakes drove his ratings down, and his party was divided with growing support for the third bourgeois candidate, Jung Mong-joon. However, he had fought a strong rival, Lee Hoi-chang, the former candidate and supreme court judge, and won the election, which signified the continuation of Kim Dae-jung's government and the victory of liberalism over conservatism. That could have been interpreted as a favourable situation for democracy and social progress.

But the regime's fundamental weakness was its poor organizational base. President Roh enjoyed personal popularity, especially among his ardent youthful supporters. But as president, he was surrounded by reform-minded but inexperienced advisors, and his team and himself were constantly attacked by the conservative media and the opposition party, even by his own party.

In contrast to his seemingly progressive attitude, his basic orientation was toward neoliberal reform, and he felt he had to complete the tasks assigned by the former government and the pressure from businesses and international capital. In this context, he consolidated his pro-US and anti-labour position.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3562701.jpg>]

Last April, he visited the US, and contrary to concern about his anti-Americanism, he pleased George Bush greatly, making friends with the worst warmonger and thereby surprising both his supporters and antagonists. He supported all the measures of the US and became another Blair, Bush's poodle in East Asia. And this fall, when the Bush regime was under grave political danger with the US occupation in Iraq, he gave his hand to Bush by deciding to send Korean combatants to Iraq, without any consultation with popular opinion. Thus, his abrupt decision to follow Bush's footsteps brought about massive opposition to the Roh government and US imperialism.

As for his labour policy, the same story goes. At first, he expressed his sympathy for workers. And some union leaders joined his government on a personal basis with high expectation for his progressive position toward labour. However, as he was faced with growing pressure from capital, he started to change his position.

## November offensive - workers' struggle erupts

Since the economic crisis and subsequent attacks on workers' livelihood and union rights, workers were exposed to a helpless situation with no other options but the struggle for survival. More than 60% of the workforce is exposed to part time jobs, casual labour, and contingent work, and even regular workers are exposed to job insecurity, labour flexibility, threats of plant relocation, continuous harassment and violations of labour laws and regulation by management.

Especially in the plants where strong unions defend workers' rights, the offensive of the management is so severe as to make use of all means available, legal and illegal, under the indifference and inaction of the labour ministry. And recently, more and more capitalists resort to legal means for provisional seizure of workers' salary and union properties, and legal suits for individual compensation by union activists and leaders, thereby destroying the lives of their families as well.

A series of suicides happened in this context. It is the situation that basic subsistence is not guaranteed for militant

workers and union activists. On October 17, Kim Ju-ik, leader of a union local, hanged himself from a high-rise crane, above 35 meters from the ground, where he had kept on sit-in struggle for 129 days. The Hanjin Heavy Industry, a Chaebol subsidiary, refused a meagre pay rise, maintaining a brutal offensive of union busting.

Another union local leader, Lee Hae-nam, burned himself in protest at incessant management harassment of workers and their union. The auto part company, Sewon Tech Inc., made use of all possible means to destroy the union, even by hiring goons and thugs. Lots of workers were wounded by the indiscriminate violence of the hired thugs. On October 26, Lee Yong-seok, union leader of casual workers in Labour Welfare Corporation, burned himself at a labour rally in Seoul, just before the pending strike.

As the act of suicide itself is a very personal determination, it is out of control, though all the activists are against it. One police chief, who was in charge of the KCTU office, expressed his own theory of conspiracy, saying that the series of suicides were "a planned project". And naturally, he was faced with harsh criticisms from all sides, and dismissed from his position. But the president was not dismissed, though he said that in a democratized society suicide cannot be a means to resolve conflict. This shows that the former labour advocate totally fails to see the harsh reality that millions of workers are faced with.

In protest at the anti-labour stance of the government and rampant bourgeoisie, workers organized the 4-hour strike on November 6, and National Workers' Rally on November 9, and the general strike on November 12, which was joined by more than 150,000 workers around the country. However, the government maintained its anti-labour position, arresting more than 50 workers for violence and summoning the KCTU top leaders. Furthermore, the government is attempting to revise the law on rallies and demonstrations, in order to block democratic rights. But there is no doubt that this kind of measure cannot stop the workers' struggle.

## Migrant workers struggle for workers' rights

At the same time, thousands of migrant workers started sit-in hunger strikes against the government measure to deport undocumented migrant workers, under the new regulations. Migrant workers are employed at the 3D jobs, that is, dirty, dangerous, and demeaning jobs that Korean workers refuse because of low pay and poor working conditions. In these terrible conditions, migrant workers, male and female, were easy victims of capitalist exploitation, and racist discrimination.

After long years of inhumane treatment, physical violence and harassment, the migrant workers began to unite against Korean capitalists and the government, also against the charity groups and religious groups who regard them simply as victims and dissuade them from struggle. The migrant militants, however, learned from the living experiences of the Korean labour movement and finally succeeded in building their own independent union, MB-ETU (Migrant Branch, Equality Trade Union, which is a general union affiliated to the KCTU) - a new stage of the migrant workers' movement in Korea.

At the moment, this migrant workers' union is the leading force in the struggle against discrimination against and super-exploitation of migrant workers. As a couple of migrants, in despair, committed suicide faced with deportation, the present struggle targets the deportation policy of the Korean government, and the deceptive Employment Permit System, another version of slavery. All over the country, at several spots, hundreds of migrant workers are maintaining sit-in struggles in spite of the cold weather.

## Farmers' struggle against globalization

On November 12, 2003 more than 100,000 farmers got together to protest against the government mis-policies that destroyed the basic substance of farmers' livelihood. In particular, the market opening and trade liberalization, under the pressure of imperialist globalization, already threatened the livelihoods of farmers.

Most farm households are under the burden of huge debts, only to fail to find a way for mere survival. In this context, the peasants and their organizations are the leading force in the struggle against the neoliberal globalization. In Cancun, Mexico, Lee Kyung-hae took his life in protest at the WTO, shouting "WTO kills farmers!" Though many disagree with his method of suicide, they understand him from the bottom of the hearts.

An impoverished countryside, aging population, even harsher competition, a series of natural disasters, mis-policies of governments, and the rampant drive of globalization - all these pushed the peasants into an unwanted choice between desperate struggle and mere slavish disappearance.

On November 12 at the National Farmers' Rally, 100,000 farmers from all over the country took to the downtown streets of Seoul, paralyzing the traffic against the brutalities of the riot police. Some of them organized sit-ins in protest at the arrests at the central subway stations. And they plan to organize another mobilization.

## Anti-nuclear riot in Bu-an

Another hot spot is a localized struggle against nuclear waste facilities. The government publicized its plan to build a nuclear waste processing facility at an island called Wi-do, near Bu-an, a west-coast county with a small population of 70,000.

The struggle began about 5 months ago, when the government, after failing to locate the site, decided to build a facility at Wi-do. To implement this plan, it manoeuvred among the local people, spreading its intention to bribe the inhabitants, while ignoring the strong opposition of the local population and attributing the opposition to the ignorance and disbelief of local people.

A series of false promises and manoeuvres enraged people so much so that they began to organize protests everyday, starting candlelight vigils every evening, following the example of protest against the US GIs whose armoured vehicle trampled two school girls last year. Thus, this anti-nuclear struggle became a symbol of popular rebellion. Furthermore, the Roh government insisted on enforcing the mis-development of the Saemangum sea wall that will destroy the huge natural sea-field, in spite of nationwide protests.

By and by, the local inhabitants lost any iota of trust in the government, and they occupied the downtown, organizing numerous street battles against the deployed riot police. And the situation was worsened by repeated police brutalities. Finally, after the huge crash on November 13th, more than 14,000 riot police occupied the county of Bu-an, like the US army in Iraq.

Thus, so far, score of protesters, mostly old people, were arrested, and hundreds were wounded by police violence. Civil society and human rights groups, social and popular movements repeatedly recommended a local referendum to resolve the issue, but the government rejected the proposal, attributing the cause of the present situation to the violence of local inhabitants.

## Anti-war movement and anti-globalization movement

The anti-globalization movement in Korea was initiated by the KoPA, Korean People's Action against WTO and FTAs, which was built by unionists, peasants, and other left and social movement groups, as a coalition against neoliberal globalization. Since its formation in 1998, it took part in most important international mobilizations, from Seattle to Cancun, as well as the WSF's in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Especially after the economic crisis, the struggle against globalization became an important part of mass movements, especially the peasant movement which played the leading role in mobilizing and struggling. And with the efforts of KoPA, the trade unions show more and more commitment to the anti-globalization movement.

On the other hand, the anti-war movement was rather a new phenomenon, despite strong opposition against the war based on the people's experience of war in 1950-53. That is, as a movement, the mobilization on February 15 was a fresh experience for the Korean left and popular movements. However, as the Korean government decided to send the army to Iraq, the anti-war struggle erupted and became a national political struggle.

And on September 28 and October 25 mobilizations were organized in conjunction with the international anti-war movements. The government's decision to send combat troops to Iraq, under pressure from the Bush administration in political crisis, gave another impetus to the new anti-war movement in Korea.

In general, as was the case with the November labour offensive, the priority of the immediate struggles is usually given to the national issues, but the slow process of politicizing from the international perspective is on the agenda. Thus, the dialectical combinational of national and international struggle will be more important tasks for the labour movement and radical left.

## Working class politics in South Korea

With the launch of the KCTU, the labour movement set itself two strategic goals - to build a workers' party and to turn enterprise unions into industrial unions. That is, these tasks were to organize a political wing of the working class movement, and to build a more efficient organization to extend class unity. So, at the moment, the building of industrial unions is underway, rather at the final stage, and they have a political party called the DLP.

However, this process underwent a grave distortion. In the first instance, the drive for industrial unionism was pushed mainly by union bureaucrats, who are politically centrists in the KCTU. Basically there exists a tension between the union leadership and the rank and file workers, and it's a sort of power struggle. The real struggle is between the federation level leadership and the local or plant level union leadership, as some big unions, mainly big unions in automakers and shipbuilders, have strong power, capacity for mobilization, and larger financial resources. On the other hand, the federation or confederation level leadership, tainted with growing bureaucratism, favoured a centralized structure. But the rank and file level activists were against this bureaucratic procedure, claiming that this version of industrial unionism distorts the class implications of industrial unionism. Thus, in this sense, the opposition between the bureaucrats and rank and file activists produced internal dispute and debates, while at the same time it keeps the dynamics of working class struggle.

And though the DLP succeeded in securing the official support of the KCTU, its support base is rather weak, considering the bigger size of the KCTU unions. At the moment, it claims 40,000 party members, but the class base

is rather weak. In the KCTU unions, DLP membership was imposed from above, while the nationalist wing of popular movements decided to join the DLP en masse, after an abrupt turn. In the past, traditionally, these pro-North Korea forces were against independent working class politics, on the ground that "we" have leadership in the North and, therefore, no need for a political party, and instead, we have to strive for building a united front.

However, with the growth of the DLP, they decided to take control of it by massive entry into it, in order to avoid isolation. Thus, the internal relationship inside the DLP has changed, increasing the possibility of further distortion of its social-democratic orientation into nationalistic-reformist mixtures.

Outside of the DLP, there exist a certain number of radical lefts, of which the Power of the Working Class and the Socialist Party are important, and also there are some leftist tendencies inside the DLP that have differences over orientation. The Socialist Party is now undergoing a crisis of identity as a result of a series of failures at elections. It hoped to make use of the right-wing shift of the DLP.

The PWC's standpoint is to be independent from electoralism and a social democratic orientation, and to pursue class struggle trade unionism. Critical of dogmatism and sectarianism, it also favours left unity, or regroupment, as the first step to building a genuine working class party.

The PWC also plays an important role in working class struggles at a local, national, and international level. Furthermore it has also done important work in the anti-globalization movement and the anti-war movement, despite the difficulty that most of its members are based in the workplace and unions. In spite of rather moderate size, it has an extensive network of activists and a clear political position, playing a leading role as a left opposition within the framework of the labour movement.

## Epilogue: waiting for the next class battle

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3562901.jpg>]

The Korean working class developed its class consciousness and its movement through harsh repression by the capitalists and the bourgeois state, both military and civilian, especially against neoliberal globalization offensives. In spite of serious distortion of political and industrial orientation, it is leading the struggle of the popular masses.

In contrast to the development of the labour movement, the radical left forces are still in disarray, recovering bit by bit for the construction of a political alternative. However, the working class struggle against the neoliberal offensive, the workplace dynamics against bureaucratic distortion, and the growing anti-capitalist orientation and internationalist perspective among the social and popular movements - these are the political assets for left regroupment and the development of a new type of anti-capitalist movement and working class movement for emancipation.

This perspective and its consolidation is linked with the global development of working class struggles - the piqueteros and plant occupation movements in Argentina and the uprising in December 2001, workers' strike waves in Italy, Spain, Greece and the UK in 2002, the Bolivian uprising in February and September-October 2003, the French pension strike in May-June 2003, the international anti-war movement on February 15, 2003 and the series of anti-globalization mobilizations from Seattle, Prague, Genoa, Barcelona, to Cancun and Miami.

This dynamic dialectic of national and international struggles directs a new path forward for the revolutionary movements in the 21st century, as well as a new perspective for "the new politics" of international working class movements. The struggles of Korean workers and the development of other mass movements in Korea are part of

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these new waves of global struggles and movements.

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[1] "Chaebol" is the word used for the huge conglomerates, privately owned and run but strictly controlled by the government, which have characterized the South Korean economy from the time of the Japanese occupation in the 1920s and 1930s. Examples include Hyundai, Lucky Goldstar, Samsung and Daewoo.