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South Korea

Power of the working class

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The South Korean workers' movement played a very important role in the resistance to the military dictatorship, a stance for which it paid a heavy price. The dynamism of the KCTU trade union federation is partly attributable to this heritage. However, unlike in the Philippines for example, no militant political party was able to establish itself on a nationwide basis before the 1990s. The violence of the anti-Communist repression is not the only cause of this. The geopolitical situation of the peninsula (near to the USSR, China and Japan), the terrible war of 1950-1953, the partition of the country, the installation in the South of US troops have obviously had lasting consequences. Seoul became a key player in the cordon sanitaire Washington threw around China.

The problem is more general and does not only concern the revolutionary movement: the military régime had built a vacuum around itself. In emerging from dictatorship, there was no live tradition of political pluralism, even in the bourgeois or classically reformist sense. New parties had to be established, but in a very particular conjuncture: the accession to democracy, symbolized by the election as president of the moderate former dissident Kim Daejung, took place under US control and as capitalist globalisation began to impose its law. How then to build a traditional social democracy at a time when this latter is transforming itself, even in Europe, into social liberalism? A part of the old democratic opposition to the military régime is moreover now tempted by the constitution of a 'modern' bourgeois liberal party, and resigned to finding itself in the company of the heirs of the dictatorship and in frontal opposition to the workers' movement.

A wing of the KCTU is now trying to respond to the political challenge by supporting the constitution of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), a fairly broad organization but hardly capable of imposing itself at the electoral level despite its trade union support.

Some far left forces are also regrouping. Power of the Working Class (PWC) groups together dispersed militants nuclei from the era of the military régime, with programmatically Marxist reference points which are diverse but non-Stalinist and which bases itself on the class struggle tradition forged from the bloody crushing of the Kwangju uprising in 1980. This tradition is distinct from the National Front current, dominant at the time of the dictatorship and quite close to the conceptions (alliance with Kim Daejung in the context of a movement of liberation...) of the North Korean Communist Party.

Although it has grown, PWC remains a numerically modest group, but with a real trade union implantation and an active role in the movement of resistance to neo-liberal globalisation (in particular the fight against South Korea's signing a regional free trade agreement with the USA). It does not at this stage contest elections. Its strength comes first and foremost from its roots: PWC represents one of the most militant traditions inherited from the founding experience of the years of struggle against the dictatorship and for the workers' movement's right to exist.