

South Korean car workers defend jobs with militant occupation

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A heroic struggle by South Korean car workers has been viciously attacked by armed police and bosses' thugs. But it has also ignited a wave of solidarity action, writes Simon Hardy

A two-month long occupation of a car plant in South Korea has seen pitched battles between strikers and the police, backed up by company thugs. Between 600 and 1,000 people moved into occupation with supporters camped outside the Ssangyong Motor plant, a small Korean car manufacturer in Pyeongtaek. The strikers occupied the factory for over a month before riot police stormed the building in early July, forcing the remaining strikers onto the roof. Once there, the strikers armed themselves with powerful slingshots, and, taking advantage of the numerous nuts and bolts in the building, fired on the police, scabs and gangsters hired by the company (known as kkangpae).

Desperate to defend their livelihoods they defended themselves against the bosses attempt to break their strike. The police placed the company under a state of siege on 20 July and carried out numerous raids on the building.

In response the Korean Council of Trade Unions called a two-day general strike and a day of labour rallies and protests across the country in solidarity with the occupying workers, who have acted as a detonator for other struggles in the country.

There were also fractious scenes in the South Korean parliament as lawmakers resorted to fist fights over controversial new media laws, which would allow conglomerates unprecedented control over media access. Opposition party members launched themselves at the podium to try and prevent the law being signed. Outside of the parliament, more importantly, media workers took part in a strike against the law, pledging resistance to its implementation. This strike was also in solidarity with the Ssangyong workers. The police are determined to defeat the Ssangyong strike. They smashed up the tent city set up by the supporters and families of the strikers. The company has also hired special goons, armed with slingshots and telescopic batons, to harass the strikers from behind barricades.

The company has been waging a war of terror on the family members of the strikers. One union leader's wife committed suicide after being told that her home would be confiscated to pay for the company's losses.

A rally of company men and thugs outside the factory, which threatened to use force against the strikers, was prevented by a solidarity protest of workers from the other nearby factories who turned up to defend their comrades in Ssangyong.

The company then turned off the water and gas. The police flew in low with a helicopter and dropped liquid

tear gas on the workers. The police also tasered one worker in the face during an assault on the building. At night the police use sound trucks to blast noise as an act of psychological warfare against the occupiers. This is a lesson in how the state responds to workers when they fight for their right to work. The could be a real turning point in the South Korean political situation. It shows how a militant minority of workers can galvanise wider layers into struggle and even force conservative union leaders into taking solidarity action.

There two key tasks now for the movement. First, the company should be nationalised under the control of the workers with no compensation for the bosses who have resorted to violence and terror against the workers, whose only 'crime' was to defend their jobs.

Second, co-ordinations should be built to take the movement forward after the two day general strike. Other sections of workers facing the same attacks can use these forums to bring forward their own demands.

A united and generalised resistance could force major retreats from the capitalist class. It could shatter their attempts to make workers pay for the crisis and could lay the basis for a real offensive against capital. At Ssangyong the workers are fighting back - their struggle is an inspiration to us all.

Victory to the Ssangyong workers!

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