

Workers battle cops at national workers rally

Thursday 15 November 2007, by [AFP](#), [AP](#), [BAE Ji-sook](#), [CINA](#) (Date first published: 11 October 2007).

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Tens of thousands (Tongil News reported 45,000, the mainstream media around 20,000/but the organizers expected between 100,000 and 200,000.. "at least") of South Korean workers, farmers, students, anti-war and civil right activists defended today their right to demonstrate on the occasion of the traditional/annually "Nat'l Workers Rally" (western media, such as Reuters and AP, misinterpreted the demonstration as just an anti-FTA protest..) and clashed - actually were forced to clash - with thousands of riot cops in downtown Seoul.

All streets leading to City Hall Plaza were complete blocked by at least 600 police buses. Almost 25,000 riot cops on the spot used water cannons, botons, shields and fire extinguishers to attack and stop the protesters.

At one location, riot cops beat male and female workers and college students with batons, forcing protesters to the ground and then kicking several of them into submission before dragging them away, one witness said..

According to KCTU at least 125 protesters were arrested. More than 100 demonstrators were injured by the riot cops' excessive violence.

For Dec. 1 the protesters vowed a new, massive demonstration: "We'll fight back! The forces of the people's power will change the world!" (whatever it means...)

* *From CINA.*

Police, Protesters Clash Causing Traffic Chaos

Bae Ji-sook, Staff Reporter

About 25,000 laborers and farmers protesting against major government policies clashed with riot police in central Seoul Sunday, causing traffic jams.

On their way to Seoul City Hall plaza, the members of the Korean Alliance of Progressive Movements and the Korean Confederation of Trade Union (KCTU) came across riot police barricading the street. The protestors were calling for the abolishment of temporary worker status, and demonstrating their

opposition to the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (FTA) and the extension of Korean soldiers' deployment in Iraq.

Buses and large vehicles carrying demonstrators from other regions to Seoul were also blocked by police, who set up checkpoints on highways from the early morning.

In the afternoon, the streets were filled with policemen attempting to control the crowd of protestors trying to make it beyond the barricades. About 25,000 protestors marched to Gwanghwamun, dodging a total of 23,000 policemen, while those who did not make it to Seoul protested in their own way.

Hundreds of demonstrators blocked a lane on the Seohaean Expressway to protest police blockade.

A farmer from Haman, South Gyeongsang Province, tried to set himself on fire in the middle of the Gyeongbu Expressway when police tried to stop him and his compatriots from going to Seoul.

The police action came after the government vowed it would take stern measures against illegal collective action. On Friday, four ministries _ justice, labor, construction and transportation, and government administration and home affairs _ warned against the rally. They said the police ordered the KCTU not to hold the rally as it would create heavy traffic jams. It later defined the event as an illegal one.

However, the laborers said the right to perform collective action was guaranteed by the constitution and they would not stop. They also said banning it was an infringement of human rights. `` We are gathering to seek for our own rights and what the government is doing is unacceptable. Is this a democracy?'' a farmer from Busan said.

Police blocked nearly all the roads to city hall causing inconvenience to pedestrians. They complained that the police action caused more noise and traffic chaos.

* *From the Korea Times*

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2007/11/113_13497.html

bjs koreatimes.co.kr

SKoreans Clash Over US Trade Deal

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Tens of thousands of South Korean farmers and workers clashed with riot police Sunday at a massive rally against a free trade agreement with the United States.

Some protesters fought with riot police wearing helmets and shields, attacking them with the sticks, throwing stones and trying to turn over police buses set up to block the protest site in central Seoul. Police fired water cannons at the protesters and sprayed fire extinguishers.

The protesters occupied a 16-lane road and chanted slogans against the free trade deal. Police said they arrested some 100 protesters and that more than 10 riot police were hurt. Organizers said some 50 demonstrators were hurt — mostly suffering head injuries.

Organizers said about 50,000 people participated in the protest, while police estimated there were 20,000 demonstrators.

“We will thwart (the passage) of the FTA as it would deepen the polarization of our society,” said Woo Moon-sook, a spokeswoman for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, one of organizers of the rally near Seoul City Hall.

Trade chiefs from the two countries signed the accord in June, concluding months of tough negotiations to lower or eliminate tariffs and other trade barriers on a wide range of industries and services.

The proposed agreement must be endorsed by legislatures in both capitals before it goes into effect. The South Korean government submitted the proposal to parliament in September for approval.

The deal is the largest for the U.S. since the North American Free Trade Agreement more than a decade ago, and the largest ever for South Korea.

Both sides said the accord will boost growth, but certain constituencies, such as farmers in South Korea and labor groups in the U.S., have opposed it.

Although the deal excluded rice — a key Korean crop — farmers are worried that other kinds of U.S. agricultural produce will pour into the country, threatening their livelihoods.

“Farmers would be the biggest victim of the free trade deal,” said Lee Young-soo, a farmer who attended the rally, adding that the agriculture industry will collapse.

SKorean police, protesters clash in rally

SEOUL (AFP) — South Korean demonstrators and riot police clashed in downtown Seoul Sunday as tens of thousands of anti-American protesters were blocked from marching to the US embassy after an unauthorised rally.

The violence erupted when 20,000 riot police confronted the same number of demonstrators rallying against a free-trade pact with the United States and South Korean troops joining US-led forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Having been blocked from marching to the US embassy, hundreds of angry protesters smashed the windows of police buses, wielded wooden sticks and hurled rocks at riot police.

Police reacted with batons, shields and water cannons to stifle the rioters.

Both sides exchanged kicks and punches, but no serious injuries were immediately reported.

Police rounded up dozens of violent protesters, a Seoul metropolitan police agency spokesman said, adding they were still compiling arrest figures.

The agency said it sent 23,000 police and 600 buses to stop the massive demonstration in the capital that had been banned by the government.

Civic and labour organisations had expected about 50,000 people to turn up for the rally, which also called for better working conditions for temporary workers, but police said the actual turnout was 20,000.

Demonstrators wanted to rally at the City Hall plaza and march a block towards the US embassy, but

police blocked them from reaching the area.

A hardcore 2,000 demonstrators occupied parts of the 16-lane main boulevard in Seoul to hold a candle-lit vigil in the evening, though most returned home in the afternoon.

The ministers of home, justice, transportation and labour issued a joint statement Saturday banning the rally, which comes at a politically sensitive time ahead of the December presidential election.

It warned that police would deal "sternly" with any illegal or violent acts.

Yonhap news agency said police had blocked farmers from being bussed to Seoul from towns and villages.

Farmers and activists have sometimes violently protested the trade deal with the US, which now must be ratified by lawmakers, but most opinion polls show a majority of South Koreans favour it.

The United States and South Korea signed the free trade pact in June following 10 months of intense negotiations, but little progress has been reported on either side to get the deal ratified.

The Democrat-led Congress has indicated it may not approve the deal amid concerns from US carmakers and stockbreeders who believe it fails to open the Korean markets fully.

South Korea is the US's seventh-largest trade partner, with bilateral commerce last year worth 78 billion dollars. Some studies show this could rise by up to 20 billion dollars in coming years under a free trade regime.

Some see the free trade pact strengthening the military alliance, which dates back to the 1950-1953 Korean War.