

Report from South Korea

A Class War in midst of the Economic Crisis: Ssangyong Motors Workers Occupying the Plant against Redundancy

Final Agreement at Ssangyong Motors

Thursday 6 August 2009, by [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2009).

Dear Friends and comrades,

Today the strike is over, and a possible catastrophe was evaded. I'm adding a short piece and attaching the polished version of my previous August 5 article.

The Struggle Is Not Over!

WON Youngsu

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Report from South Korea: August 6th, 2009

The Final Agreement at Ssangyong Motors

Today, August 6th, after harsh and inhamane assault on striking workers of the last couple of days, the union and the management held the final negotiation, reaching the agreement: the union accepted part of the redundancy proposal, saving about half the jobs striker. The rest will apply for voluntary retirement or unpaid long-term leave, or accept another job from the spin-off company.

Han Sang-gyun, union leaders, apologized the striking comrades for not being able to block the whole redundancy plan of the company. He solemnly said the scar of the struggle will not be easily forgotten, adding that he fought with full strength in order to stop workers from being co-opted by the capital.

This evening, the strikers, including the union leaders, were arrested by the police. More than 100 workers are expected to put to a trial. On the way to police stations, the workers felt the drops of rain that they worker had waited for so long.

However, The Ssangyong workers have done their best during the 77-day occupation. Though a full-scale victory has not been achieved, these heroic working class warriors deserve the homage of the workers on the capitalist globe.

Thank you, comrades! Our struggle is not over!

A Class War in midst of the Economic Crisis Ssangyong Motors Workers Occupying the Plant against Redundancy

Report from South Korea: August 5th, 2009 (polished version)

As of today, August 5th, the battle of Ssangyong is drawing to its final stage. This morning, thousands of riot police, along with fully-equipped police special forces, as well as pro-company workers and hired thugs, began a wholesale attack on striking workers at Ssangyong Motors plant in Pyongtaek. By air, three police helicopters are dropping tear-gas balloons, and on the ground, riot police squads encircled every plant that the workers had occupied, attacking workers with water cannons laced with tear gas.

A full scale war has been unleashed on the strikers. It's been 76 days since the start of the full strike, and eighteen days since the riot police began its full scale attacks, with a truce during the final negotiation between July 30th and 31st. In this period, the management and hired goons blocked the supply of water and gas for more than two weeks, and after the breakdown of dialogue, the electricity was cut off. Thus, strikers are driven toward an extreme existence with suffering from hunger, thirsty, and a lack of power supply.

[Photo (not reproduced here): Massive police attack on the plant roof on August 5th]

Background - From Mistaken Takeover to Bankruptcy

When the impact of the global financial crisis heavily hit the South Korean economy, the immediate victims were workers. All over the country a harsh wave of redundancy swept the plants and factories, driving many workers out of their jobs. In response, workers began their resistance for their jobs and livelihood.

In Pyongtaek, 50 kilometers to the south of Seoul, Ssangyong Motors went bankrupt again, after the previous bankruptcies in 1998 and 2004. Eventually, after the bankruptcy of Daewoo Motors that took over Ssangyong Motors, the automaker was taken over by Shanghai Motors in 2004. However,

early January, after years of mismanagement, the company yet again filed for bankruptcy.

Workers were furious with the management, especially at Shanghai Motors because workers had opposed the take over by the auto firm that was both smaller and more backward in its technology. The Shanghai management never kept its promise of large investments, but rather, transferred the more advanced technology to its headquarters in China. Workers were also livid with the Korean government in that it knew the dynamics of farcical situation and did nothing but to stand by and watch the crisis unfold.

However, all the burdens created by mismanagement's poor policies were transferred to workers. The so-called "solution" held up by the management was the further restructuring of the company including mass redundancies. The management proposed the redundancy of 2,656 workers, out of 7,500 workforce.

The trade union under the new militant leadership

Ssangyong workers' union rejected the management's proposal, especially under the new union leadership, which was elected on December 5, 2008. On launching, the new leadership began its sit-in struggle by setting up makeshift tents at the plant site.

Historically, the Ssangyong Motors Branch, affiliated with Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), was one of the weakest branches, compared with other militant unions in other auto companies, such as Hyundai or Kia. Though the union belonged to the militant KCTU's metal workers' union, the Ssangyong workers' union had been dominated by corrupt pro-management leaderships that preferred the "dialogues" to strikes and struggles.

However, as the crisis approached, the rank and file united to save their jobs, beyond their past ridden with division and internal strife. Considering the magnitude of the impact of the crisis and its subsequent struggles, workers felt the need of a strong leadership that can fight the hostile management and the government. This was an important turning point of the workers struggle.

[Photo: Ssangyong Motors Branch leader, Hahn Sang-gyun]

From Partial Strike to Occupation

In early April, when the management proposed the redundancy plan to dismiss 2,646 workers, the trade union rebutted the proposal, initiating a lengthy struggle. On May 8, the company reported its plan of dismissal to the local Labor Ministry office. Thus, in protest, the union struck the company headquarters. In this period, the union went on partial strikes several occasions.

In the meantime, the management proposed the voluntary retirement program to divide workers. Under duress stress, as many as 1,700 workers, out of 5,000 production line workers, applied for the early retirement. Amongst them were pro-management foremen and pro-company union delegates. However, the management insisted on the redundancy dismissal of remaining 960 employees.

[Photo: Workers' Rally on May 7th, Shaving hair of the union leaders]

On May 9, three of the union leaders began the infinite sit-in struggle on the top of the high-rise chimney, in the middle of the plant. These leaders blended the entrance of the chimney, publicizing their determination to win the struggle. And they have maintained the sit-in struggle for more than

two months.

Finally, on May 21st, the union declared the occupation of the plant and an indefinite all-plant strike. Thousands of the unionists joined the strike and occupied the whole plant in Pyongtaek. In face of the sudden take-over the plant, the managers were blocked from the plant. And much support from political groups, other unions, social movements and community groups joined the struggle, staying in the plant with workers until the police blockade on began June 26th.

[Photo: Three union leaders' sit-in struggle at the high-rise chimney]

Family Support Committee

On early May 13, the wives of striking workers began to organize themselves in support of workers' strike. At first, wives and children were shocked at the company's attack on workers, and were at a loss as what to do. Many of families were hit hard by the bankruptcy as less than half of the monthly wage was earned as a result of the strikes.

Soon, as workers were ready to strike, some of wives decided to join the struggle. They distributed leaflets, and joined union rallies, not as individuals, but as an organized group. They joined the protests with unionists, especially mobilizing the community support.

Since the beginning of the occupation, the wives and children joined evening rallies, in support of workers struggle. In the course of the activities of the Family Support Committee, these women played key role of spreading the strikers' message in public.

[Photo: Protest of Family Support Committee, wives in green shirts.]

Trade Unions: KMWU and KCTU

Most of the national trade union leaders have visited the plant, expressing their support for the occupation of the Ssangyong Motors Plant. And on the 19th and 20th of June, the metal workers' union KMWU mobilized unionists for a Seoul demonstration, in protest of the government policies against workers.

However, the labor movement has been quite demobilized and fragmented in recent years. Thus, while the KCTU interim leadership rhetorically emphasized the solidarity with Ssangyong workers, in reality, the KCTU's actual capacity to lead the nation struggle is greatly weakened. The present leadership replaced the former leadership that was forced to resign as a result of a sexual harassment scandal by a KCTU official. The crisis escalated with further efforts by some KCTU leaders to cover up the scandal.

Thus, the striking workers have a very low expectation for the KCTU's organizational and systematic support, such as an industry-wide or regional strike, not to even mention a national general strike.

[Photo: KCTU rally in Seoul, on July 4th]

everyday routine of the occupation

The workers are organized as an army. As the government and management regard the occupation as illegal, at any moment, the police attack is highly probable. Under a seemingly peaceful, but internally tense situation, striking workers, organized in defense squads, live together, eat together, have rallies together.

Furthermore, in preparation of a possible attack, workers train themselves in morning and afternoon sessions in rotation. At the same time, the workers have democratic discussion meetings in order to share the information on the situation and the process of negotiation, and the union's plan for struggles, and so on.

And in everyday evening rallies, labor singers, dancers, and entertainers have performance to show the solidarity with strikers. Diverse songs and dances encourage workers and their families, who also join rallies and have a chance to read letters and their own statements.

[Photo: Strike Rally on June 6th]

Finally War Begins

As the occupation went on, the management began to implement the plan of taking over the plant by force. They hired so-called security thugs and mobilized workers who were not on the redundancy list with threats. First they encircled the plant as such and blocked the entrance of the plant gates, with the help of thousands of riot police. Thus, from early July, the occupation was isolated.

On July 22nd, the riot police and management thugs invaded various sectors of the plants in face of strikers' resistance. As the management took back some buildings including the headquarter office, the plant was divided by the company blocks and occupation blocks. Though the riot police and hired goons attacked the strikers, the occupation of painting blocks full of inflammable materials was a strategic advantage for strikers.

[Photo: Hired goons, ready for the plant invasion]

Thus, during late July days, battle continued day by day, inside and around the plants. Though the workers were armed with steel pipes, Molotov cocktails, and sling shots, they were overwhelmed by the enormous physical force of the police and the company thugs. Every day, over the plants, the police helicopters were hovering in order to pour tear-gas-laced liquids on the workers on the roofs of the plants. The toxic chemicals injured many workers. And the company goons indiscriminately used slingshots with large bolts toward strikers.

Under such unfavorable conditions with no gas and water, the workers survived with rice balls. In face of brutal attacks, workers were disciplined and well-organized for daily combats.

[Photo: Rice balls, strikers' main food under the blockade]

Workers Fight Back and Solidarity Struggle

As the full scale attack was unleashed, the KCTU mobilized support, and political groups and social movement rallied in front of the plant. They tried to deliver water and medicine, but the management blocked any kind of assistance, with the police standing by.

On July 25th and 29th, the KCTU held national workers rallies in support of Ssangyong workers. But the solidarity marches to Ssangyong Motors plant were blocked by riot police, and in the course of confrontation, an air assault helicopters combined with a ground attack with water cannons, scores of workers were arrested and injured.

However, the encampment by the Family Support Committee and other movement groups kept on attempts to deliver water and medicine, holding rallies, press conferences, and candle-light vigils. Also hundreds of workers and activists spent their yearly holidays at sit-in-camps in front of the plant.

But today the company thugs forcefully cleared the sit-in tents, wielding violence on workers families, other workers, and activists.

[Photo: Police water cannon vehicle attacks rally participants on July 25th]

Final Offensive after a Deceptive Dialogue

In face of growing pressure from the community and public opinion, the management began a dialogue on July 30th and 31st. However, the management had just a single option in mind: the union's unconditional surrender and acceptance of the redundancy. It was unacceptable for the union and the final dialogue was broken.

As soon as the dialogue was stopped, the company cut off the power supply for the plants on August 2nd, which declared a final ultimatum. And from the 3rd of August, the company began the final offensive in cooperation with riot police on their full gear up. In the course of battles, hired goons used sling shots under the protection of riot police shields.

[Photo: police attack squads surround the coating division block and union office]

On 3rd and 4th, the combined attack strengthened even further, and today's massive attack took back most of blocks of the plant, except the coating division building. In the course of attack, three workers fell from the roof and were injured seriously and a dozen of workers were arrested. The police special force used extreme violence, including Taser (electric shock) guns, and rubber bullets shot guns fired upon workers.

At this moment, the remaining strikers are isolated at the coating division building, but keep on struggle in spite of all the hardships. In an interview, the union leader Hahn Sang-gyun proclaimed: If the management and the government have no intention to have a dialogue, attack us. But we will never surrender.

[Photo: It's a War:Massive attack to workers on the plant roof]

Ssangyong Motors Workers Have Won the Struggle!

Under the dark cloud of the economic crisis, all the burdens of the managerial failure are shouldered on workers. Without resistance, workers, especially casual workers, female and migrant workers, are easy targets and easily victimized. However, Ssangyong workers rose up to fight back against redundancy.

For more than two months, they occupied the whole plant, combating against the combined force of

the police, management, and hired goons. The broad solidarity emanating from their families, other workers, social movement activists and religious communities demonstrated the legitimacy of their struggle. The battles in Ssangyong Motors are a proxy war between labor and capital.

[Photo: Workers at barricades confronting hired goons and pro-company workers]

Though the Ssangyong workers might be defeated under the bombardment of sheer brute force, they've already won the battle. The management, refusing to recognize workers as human, wants to attribute the failure to workers' struggle, but the Ssangyong workers exposed the naked truth through their heroic struggles so that the working class and people could witness the truth. This time, we may lose a battle, but, ultimately, the working class will win the war!

Ssangyong Motors workers in occupation of the plant are still shouting with trenched fists:
DISMISSAL IS A DEATH SENTENCE! SMASH REDUNDANCY!!!

[Photo: Dialogue or Kill Us All! Stop Murderous Repression! Strikers shouting slogans on a roof]

P.S.

* Written by WON Youngsu, a member of Preparing Group for a Socialist Workers' Party in South Korea. All the pictures [not reproduced here] are copy-left, provided by a radical local media, Media Chungchung. For more pictures and news in Korea, visit Media Chungchung www.cmedia.or.kr.