

SOUTH KOREA

The Tiger Strikes

by Ann Cook



CWI
committee for a workers' international

국제 노동자 위원회





PREFACE

South Korea: The Tiger Strikes was commissioned by the Committee for a Workers' International to highlight the significance for the workers' movement world-wide of the dramatic events of December 1996 and January/February 1997. The magnificent general strike exploded onto the front pages of the international press just as a new year was beginning. It rudely awoke the world to the realities of the class struggle being fought out in the land once known as the 'Hermit Kingdom'.

It shattered many long-held illusions about the Newly Industrialised Countries of South East Asia. It reminded the owners of industry how fragile their system is rendered once the working class decides to move against it in an organised and determined fashion. It reminded workers everywhere of the power they have to change the course of history once they take action and fight in the way the courageous Korean workers did this winter.

South Korea's rulers, amongst the most repressive in the world, were brought to their knees by the strike which cost up to \$4 billion in lost production. The combative Korean working class has been fashioned through mighty struggles over the three and a half decades of South Korean capitalism's meteoric growth. The general strike has shown it to have emerged as the decisive force in Korean politics.

It has become fashionable, in Korea and elsewhere, since the collapse of the Stalinist planned economies, to argue that the ideas of Marxism and socialism are no longer valid. Instead of contending classes we are supposed to have a 'civil society' in which problems can be ironed out without challenging the system of market capitalism. Undoubtedly, an enormous contribution can be made by the 'middle layers' in any society - lawyers, academics, priests, doctors. But the position of the Committee for a Workers' International is that, far from diminishing in importance, an

independent struggle of the working class, that draws behind it the middle layers in the way that the Korean general strike has demonstrated, is the only way to eliminate the evils of exploitation and poverty that are endemic in capitalism.

The tragic recent history of the Korean peninsula provides almost laboratory examples of societies in which the usual features are carried to extremes. In the South there is an extreme version of capitalism with all its polarisation, brutality and exploitation. In the North, is a complete distortion of what is called a socialist society but is in fact a bureaucratic deformation of a state-owned planned economy where the working class is deliberately excluded from control and management.

In South Korea, it is clear to all that wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a few individuals - the owners of the Chaebol conglomerates whose names are known world-wide. Clear to all also is the super-exploitation that lies behind their enormous success. Mark L. Clifford in a book called *'Troubled Tiger'* identifies the ingredients behind South Korea's transformation from a third world country: "brutally long hours, high rates of savings and investment and hierarchical authoritarian systems that rewarded those who succeeded and punished those who did not cooperate".

An additional and crucial factor was the involvement of US and Japanese imperialism. The extremely unpopular measures necessary for South Korean capitalism to receive its favourable treatment from these quarters - the normalising of relations with Japan and the sending of troops to Vietnam - were actually forced through parliament in 1965 in a very similar fashion to the manoeuvre that sparked off this winter's general strike i.e. in the absence of all opposition Assembly representatives!

The heavy involvement of the state in developing the

Chaebol economy has reached its limits. The concentration of capital and the elements of planning both within the economy and within the conglomerates themselves mean the system is rotten ripe for socialist reorganisation.

At the time of going to press, in July of 1997, the South Korean labour movement is engaged in an intense discussion on the way forward. The riot police have been used to attack both student demonstrations and the KCTU's May Day rally. In the context of a deepening crisis in the North, the Kim Young-sam regime continues to try and intimidate the movement with the threat of the 'Northern Wind' - a military invasion from the North - to intimidate the movement. But a new era has been opened by the general strike.

The Russian revolutionary, Lenin wrote about the marked change in the balance of forces in Britain after the 1912 miners' strike. He described it as, "A change that cannot be expressed in figures, but is felt by all". That must sum up the situation in South Korean society today.

The new labour laws have not been defeated. Changes have been made to allow multi-unionism at a national or industrial level but not at plant or company level until the year 2002. Before then, payment for union full-timers by the employers will be stopped and the right of strikers to claim wages and not to be replaced by other workers is being banned. But Kim Young-sam's attempt to turn the clock back in Korean society will rebound on the capitalist system he represents. Powerful organisations are being forged in the struggle that will be ranged against it. The next few years will be decisive for the future of the long-suffering people of the Korean peninsula.

This pamphlet examines the achievements of the historic general strike and some of the difficulties it has revealed about building a movement to take the

struggle forward. The Committee for a Workers' International would welcome comments and criticism from participants and observers. Through debate and discussion of the important issues that have come to the surface, enormous progress can be made. We sincerely hope to be making a contribution to that process.

The CWI firmly believes in the superiority of internationalism over a narrow nationalist approach to all the key issues confronting the workers' movement. We call on all who regard themselves as socialists to become involved with us. We in turn pledge ourselves to step up the campaigns for genuine international working class solidarity.

Enormous effort and patience has gone into the preparation and production of this pamphlet on the part of a very large number of people - in the translating, transcribing, typing, advising, amending, laying out and printing. Every one of them has contributed to producing something that will hopefully have made it all worthwhile. A special mention must, however, be made of the comrades of the CWI in Japan who gave so unstintingly the finances that made the visits to South Korea, the taping and the photographing all possible. Special thanks are also due to all the energetic and kind-hearted activists who gave of their precious time to discuss what was happening in their country. Finally, the fondest acknowledgement is for the boundless generosity of those who provided a place to stay in their own home and to whom nothing was too much trouble.

The '*Internationale*' - the anthem of the workers of the world - was sung for the first time in many long years at the May Day rally in Seoul this year. The future is looking good!



May Day - Seoul 1997.

Ann Cook, July 1997



GLOSSARY

ABBREVIATIONS

COSATU - Congress of South African Trade Unions. Main trade union federation in South Africa.

FKTU - Federation of Korean Trade Unions. Government (and US) sponsored federation of company unions. (1.2 million members at beginning of 1997).

GDP - Gross Domestic Product. Total value of national production.

GNP - Gross National Product. Total value of production and trade.

ICFTU - International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Body founded after Second World War as pro-imperialist trade union international.

ILO - International Labour Organisation (joint body of bosses, governments and unions now under auspices of United Nations).

KCIIF - Korea Congress of Independent Industrial Unions. Federation of white-collar independent union organisations before KCTU set up.

KCTU - Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. The semi-legal organisation of independent democratic unions that led the general strike. (500,000 members at beginning of 1997).

KTUC - Korean Trade Union Congress. Blue-collar federation of independent unions before KCTU established.

NCNP - National Congress for New Politics. Present party of opposition leader, Kim Dae-jung.

NCPD - National Committee for the Preservation of Democracy. Multi-organisation "Task Force" set up to fight for total repeal of rail-roaded labour laws.

NL - National Liberation. One of the two major trends of opinion in the South Korean student and labour movement. Has put national struggle against imperialism above class struggle and internationalism.

NSPA - National Security Planning Agency. The hated Korean CIA.

OECD - Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Club of the 29 richest capitalist nations in the world.

PD - People's Democracy. One of the two major trends of opinion in the South Korean student and labour movement. Sees South Korean monopoly capitalism as main enemy and predominated in leadership of strike struggle.

TUAC - Trade Union Advisory Committee (of OECD). Body for trying to ensure member countries observe the same rules of the exploitation game.

ULD - United Liberal Democrats. Opposition party led by Kim Jong-pil.

NAMES

Chun Doo-hwan - Army General and South Korean dictator-president who took power through a military coup 1980 and ruled with an iron hand until swept aside by Great Democracy Struggle of 1987. Now in jail.

Chun Tae-il - Worker-hero who in 1970 leapt burning to his death in Seoul's notorious Peace Market demanding justice for garment-workers.

Hwang Jangyop - Now defected ex-General Secretary of North Korea's 'Workers' Party'.

Kim Dae-jung - More radical of joint leaders of democratic opposition to military rule, the other being Kim Young-sam. Leader of main (capitalist) parliamentary opposition party, the NCNP.

Kim Il-sung - Head of North Korean state - the Democratic People's Republic - since its foundation in 1945 until his death in 1994.

Kim Jong-il - Son of Kim Il-sung, succeeding in a 3 year-long process to his father's position as head of state in North Korea.

Kim Jong-pil - One time functionary in regimes of military dictators in role as founder of Korean CIA. Leader of lesser parliamentary opposition party, the ULD.

Kim Young-sam - One-time joint leader with Kim Dae-jung of democratic opposition to military rule. Elected President of (Southern) Republic of Korea in 1992.

Kwon Yong-kil - President of the KCTU, the union federation that led the strike, and its main spokesperson.

Park Chung-hee - Army General and South Korean dictator-president from 1961, when introduced rapid industrialisation programme, through 1970s Yushin clamp-down until shot in 1979 by Korean CIA head.

Roh Tae-woo - succeeded Chun Doo-hwan as president of South Korea in 1987. Elected amid allegations of vote-rigging he lasted until 1992.

Syngman Rhee - Puppet head of South Korean state under post World War US military administration and president until 1960 when forced into exile by 'April (students) Revolution'.

How to find out about the KCTU and its affiliates:

Web site:
<http://kpd.sing-kr.org/kctu>
(maintained by SING)
Fax:
++822 765 2011
E-mail:
Kctuint@chollian.dacom.co.kr

CHRONOLOGY

Extracts from 'Fact File' available on the internet:

1910 Korea formally annexed by Japan.

1945 Russian and US troops entered Korea, forced surrender of Japanese, and divided the country in two. US military government took control of South Korea.

1948 Republic proclaimed.

1950-53 War with North Korea.

1960 President Syngman Rhee resigned amid unrest.

1961 Military coup by General Park Chung-Hee. Industrial growth programme.

1979 Assassination of President Park.

1980 Military takeover by General Chun Doo Hwan.

1987 Adoption of more democratic constitution after student unrest. Roh Tae Woo elected president.

1988 Former president Chun, accused of corruption, publicly apologized and agreed to hand over his financial assets to the state. Seoul hosted Summer Olympic Games.

1989 Roh reshuffled cabinet, threatened crackdown on protesters.

1990 Two minor opposition parties united with Democratic Justice Party to form ruling DLP. Diplomatic relations established with the USSR.

1991 Violent mass demonstrations against the government. New opposition grouping, the DP, formed. Entered United Nations. Nonaggression and nuclear pacts signed with North Korea.

1992 DLP lost absolute majority in general election. Diplomatic relations established with China. Kim Young Sam, DLP candidate, won presidential election.

1993 Kim Young Sam sworn in as president. Programme of gradual economic reform implemented; anti-corruption drive launched.

1994 US military presence (reduced after mass protests of 1987 (AC)) stepped up in response to perceived threat from North Korea.

1995 Ruling LDP polled poorly in first ever local elections.

Former president Roh Tae Woo charged with corruption, after publicly admitting to accepting illegal funds.

1996 Roh Tae Woo and Chun Doo Hwan charged with treason for alleged role in massacre of antigovernment demonstrators 1980. In Assembly elections, Kim Young-sam's ruling NKP fails to get clear majority. December - anti-government general strike launched.

FACT FILE

Extracts from 'Fact File' available on the internet:

Republic of Korea (Dae han Min kuk)

Capital: Seoul

Physical: southern end of a mountainous peninsula separating the Sea of Japan from the Yellow Sea

Head of state: Kim Young Sam from 1993

Environment: ... high rate of industrial accidents and of imprisonment for trade unionists

Political system: emergent democracy

Exports: steel, ships, chemicals, electronics, textiles and clothing, plywood, fish

Currency: won

Population: (1993 est) 44,200,000

Life expectancy: men 68, women 74

Religion: Shamanist, Buddhist, Confucian, Protestant, Roman Catholic

Literacy: men 99%, women 94%

Media: freedom of the press achieved 1987; large numbers of newspapers with large circulations. It is prohibited to say anything favourable about North Korea



CONTENTS

IMMEDIATE IMPACT ● 7

the explosion ● the fall-out ● hitting the headlines ● too much to bear ● special factors ● irrepressible

THE "HIGH-TECH" GENERAL STRIKE ● 14

call to arms ● support and reprisals ● second wave ● international solidarity ● on the demos ● arrests, attempted arrests and arguments ● audacity of the movement

RUNNERS IN THE MARATHON ● 20

strike scaled down but public support still mounting ● NCPD gathers strength ● grim testimony at Myong Dong ● "not a 100 metre dash" ● organising and striking ● more demos ● new friends ● stunning indictment ● demonstrators speak out ● Yoido ● fight to the finish

CONTRASTS AND CONTRADICTIONS ● 28

combined and uneven ● "Chaebol economy" ● out of nothing in no time ● unrepeatable ● "communist threat" ● Stalinism ● carve-up ● Korean war ● theories on trial ● state-dominated capitalism ● overblown ● protection racket ● problems

SOUTH KOREA'S 'SECRET' ● 36

dream or nightmare? ● women workers ● housing, education, health... ● immigrant workers ● harsh reality ● fighters and collaborators ● Kwangju ● the Great Struggle ● impetus to the workers' movement ● independent unions ● Minju Nochong and Hankook Nochong

A PRICE TO PAY ● 46

life for a poem ● democrat-dictator ● police brutality ● abuse of power to end?

CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM ● 50

general strike ● nature of KCTU ● different views ● how much further? ● socialist challenge ● working class decisive ● different leadership ● outcome

THE WAY AHEAD ● 56

political alternative ● class, party and leadership ● collapse of stalinism ● the state of the North ● reunification ● the "bogey" ● cross-class alliances ● independent working class party ● capitalism's alternative ● globalise the struggle! ● clear demands

SOUTH KOREA: **The Tiger Strikes**



IMMEDIATE IMPACT

At 6 o'clock in the morning of 26th December 1996, when it was still dark, Kim Young-sam, the president of South Korea, was sitting meekly in a church service with his wife, being photographed saying his prayers. On the other side of Seoul, the parliamentary representatives of his party were voting in secret and in a hurry - eleven times in seven minutes - to push through the infamous anti-working class labour and security laws. Parallels have inevitably been drawn with the scene in 'The Godfather' - where the Mafia boss attends mass as his henchmen go about doing his dirty work for him.

The Explosion

Within hours of the deed being done, the biggest general strike in South Korea for 50 years was under way. The leadership of the semi-legal Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) had long been prepared for some such skulduggery. They even slept in their offices over Christmas. When the news broke of the ruling party's treachery they simply activated their meticulously drawn up battle plan. The response from the union's troops was immediate, even enthusiastic. First were the heavy battalions in engineering and ship-building, followed swiftly by office-workers and other layers.



At last that pent-up anger and frustration could find expression!

The strikers knew the risks involved and the treatment they could expect from the state. They knew the leaders were breaking the law by even calling the strike and that the media would denounce them as 'playing into the hands of the enemy' (the North Korean regime). They knew they had no real friends in parliament and must rely on their own strength to crush these laws. There was too much at stake not to engage the enemy now and delay would mean ignominious defeat. The leaders and the ranks knew all of this, but the force with which the movement exploded and the impact it had, both in Korea and internationally, took participants and observers equally by surprise.

It was as if the whole population had long-outstanding scores to settle with the government, the individual bosses and the system as a whole. Memories flooded back of the "Great Struggle" of June 1987. They had not fought, with Kim Young-sam beside them, to rid themselves of military dictatorship only now to be treated by him in this way.

Within days, hundreds of thousands of people were involved in mass demonstrations up and down the country. The strikes were growing and spreading. Different divisions were mobilised at different stages - some out indefinitely, others for days or even hours. Striking hospital workers set up stalls in the streets to give free medical help to the public. Car-workers offered to do instant repair jobs for passing motorists.

The regular baton and tear-gas attacks on the demonstrations by the hated riot police were not

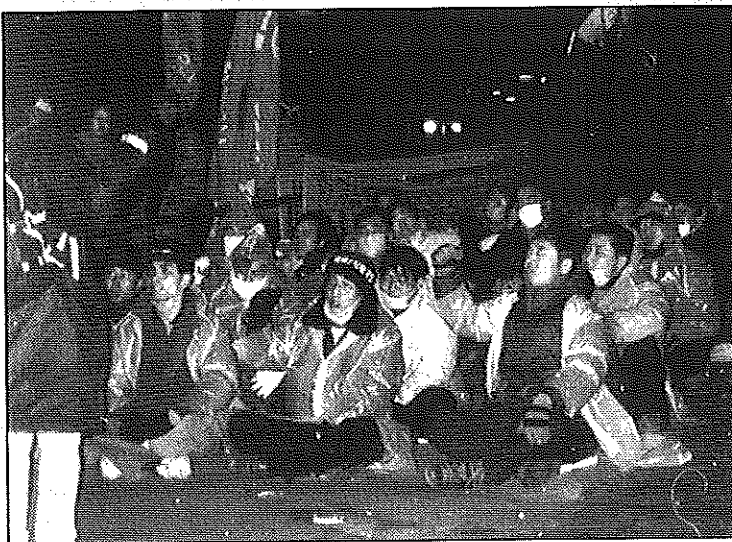
unexpected. Nor were the raids on trade union offices. They only served to harden the mood. So did the use by employers of hired thugs to intimidate strikers and hospitalise pickets. The issuing of arrest warrants for the 20 most prominent strike leaders simply prompted workers not yet involved into making combative statements - if they were touched it would be immediate all-out action until their release!

The grounds of Myong Dong cathedral, where seven of the 20 KCTU leaders took refuge and set up camp, became a Mecca for every group of strikers, well-wishers and international visitors. The hill on which it stood, in the centre of Seoul, was surrounded day and night by tens of thousands of battle-equipped riot police. Like the trade union contingents allocated to keep watch at the entrances to the camp, the police burned braziers to keep warm and tried to keep up their spirits by reciting the occasional war-chant.

For the workers' guards, singing their own battle-hymns and holding regular briefing sessions, there was no problem of morale. Each evening a demonstration of the latest sections of workers to join the strike would arrive at the foot of the cathedral hill. The riot police would shape up for action, the demonstrators would pull up their lint masks to cover their mouths and nostrils and continue to shout their demands. The tear gas canisters would fly, and maybe the batons, and another day would end like all the rest. With the trade union leaders still in safety and the government of Kim Young-sam on the run.

By the third week, the bosses' own 'kept' media had problems pumping out their anti-strike propaganda; journalists, broadcasters and TV presenters took to the streets. Groups of professors, lawyers, church leaders, herbal doctors, housewives, ecologists, dentists were all declaring their support for the strike. Polls showed 90% of the population against the 'rail-roading' of the 'evil' laws and 88% "regretting having Kim Young-sam as president".

The opposition parties, who had been barricading the Speaker of the Assembly in his house to stop him reaching the parliament, were particularly indignant that the ruling New Korea Party (NKP) had managed to outwit them. Angered by the pre-dawn manoeuvre, they could not, however, bring themselves to support a general strike that broke existing law. Nor, as parties that defend the capitalist way of doing things, could they fundamentally oppose the aims of the rail-road laws. They confined themselves to condemning them as 'illegal' for the way they were passed and launching a



Workers' guards at Myong Dong

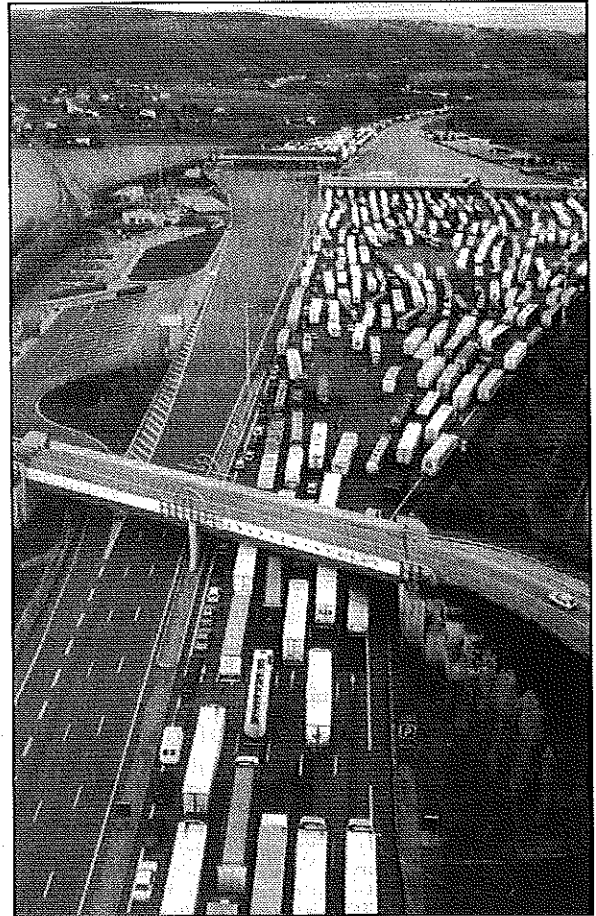
campaign to gather 10 million signatures for their amendment.

Little or nothing more was heard of this particular campaign. By contrast, a group of experienced activists on the left of the movement, heading a multi-organisation "Task Force" to fight the laws, organised teams of young volunteers to go out every day onto the streets with petitions, collecting boxes and hard-hitting propaganda leaflets. After a few hectic weeks, in which they were busy with a whole series of activities, they had accumulated a mountain of petition sheets full of signatures calling for complete abolition.

As the shouts grew louder for Kim Young-sam and his government to resign and for his party to "dissolve itself", the president and his men must have begun to sense that the manner in which they had conducted the assault on basic trade union and human rights had been a blunder. Certain 'captains of industry' were openly criticising the tactics. It had been an even more provocative frontal attack than that of Chirac and Juppé against the French working class in the autumn of 1995; and that had been enough to spark a massive strike wave which had shaken the rulers of Europe and many other countries besides. The job of 'liberalisation' and 'deregulation' had to be done - somehow or another - on behalf of a Korean capitalist class facing difficulties maintaining its spectacular growth and its spectacular profits. But the pre-dawn operation in Seoul had set off a train of events that would damage the politicians involved...probably irreparably.

The Fall-out

Within a month they were engulfed by the Hanbo bribes for loans scandal which, after ten high-ranking arrests, was inexorably closing in on the president's second son - Kim Hyun-chul. Kim Young-sam's ratings were tumbling as fast as shares on the Seoul stock exchange and confidence in the country's currency - the won. By mid-February, on the day the KCTU held its national conference, the government announced a sensational defection from the 'enemy' state of North Korea, hoping to use it as a diversion and, typically, as a propaganda weapon against the movement. South Korean governments must be unique in continuing to use the old 'Cold War' arguments about 'communist conspiracies' in their war with the working class to justify maintaining a legal ban on any talk of 'socialism', 'workers' parties' or even 'class'. It can only be a matter of time before the new situation that has opened up - within the country and beyond its borders - renders such legislation inoperable.



The victory of the 1996 French lorry drivers' strikes inspired Korean workers' struggle.

Already it was clear that neither humble apologies from the head of state nor scare-mongering from his 'kept' press could have the effect such things used to. Towards the end of February, the trade union leaders were still under pressure not to settle for any partial changes the parliamentarians might care to make to what they called the "Bastard Laws". They maintained the threat of resuming hostilities with a renewal of full, indefinite strike action.

By the middle of March, President Kim had not only seen fit to 'dispense with' another of his prime ministers (the fifth since his administration began) but a whole swathe of his cabinet was replaced. Nothing he did now, however, would be sufficient to restore his credibility. By May, the press was speculating as to whether he would be able even to serve out his remaining months of office. Manoeuvres at the top of society, corruption, intimidation are all viewed by ever wider layers of society with a growing contempt. A new atmosphere has been created by the powerful movement of December - January.

Hitting the Headlines

The world's media had flocked to South Korea to



cover the dramatic scenes. They had reported with a mixture of excitement and trepidation the atmosphere in the factories occupied by strikers and on the workers' rallies - row upon row of defiant men and women in coloured headbands, rhythmically punching the air with their fists or singing the much-loved revolutionary anthems with smiles of pride and anticipation on their faces.

Photo opportunities abounded. Captured on film was the programmed brutality of the riot police going into action against peaceful and orderly demonstrations, the tall masts of trade union banners dipping this way and that as the "pepper pot" canisters emitted white clouds of gas into the staggering, scattering crowds. The cameras could not help but convey the calm dignity of the shaven-headed trade union leaders holding their daily press conferences in the courtyard of the tall redbrick cathedral. Even the fixed smile of South Korea's president became familiar to millions in far distant lands.

But reporters come and go and the contending forces have to weigh up what has happened. Around the world, sensational headlines referring to the plight of the South Korean "Tiger" would be greeted with different emotions, depending on the class standpoint of the reader. Representatives of the employing class and all those who have tried to maintain that South Korea is a model of capitalist development began to shudder. Were their theories now in ruins? Why had the economy been slowing down and suffering record trade deficits? And now the strikes. France, with its powerful movements against austerity measures, had come to South East Asia.

Workers, on the other hand, would feel their hearts



Striking car-workers on their way to Myong Dong.

leap at the news from Seoul. Here was a ruling class that had overstepped the mark getting it where it hurts. They willed the legendary Korean working class on to victory, frustrated by moves to the right of their own labour leaders that held them back from a generalised political assault on their exploiters. A blow for one is a blow for all. Who knows what the implications might be for the bosses and their defenders throughout the world? They would surely all feel weakened and workers everywhere emboldened.

Too much to bear

The fresh example of the French lorry-drivers getting quick results by concerted action was indeed a reference point for the Korean strike. There were many workers who believed that the measures now being inflicted on Korean workers would not be tolerated in Europe and the USA. They did not know of the heavy defeats already inflicted by Reaganite, Thatcherite, "neo-liberal" governments world-wide. Others, including the KCTU leaders, were well aware that workers in many countries had lost their battles against such things as "flexible" (flat-rate) hours, deregulation, temporary contracts. But they were also very much aware that in a country ranked 122nd in the world for welfare provision, bringing South Korea "into line" on such issues, would drive the majority of their members to the edge of endurance.

There is no unemployment benefit to speak of in South Korea. All education and health care must be paid for. The basic wage is way below subsistence and workers are totally dependent on premium bonuses and overtime payment. (The minimum wage, which only a minority of the workforce can claim anyway, is less than £1 an hour.) Giving the bosses a free hand to sack workers, replace strikers and ignore the new unions would swell the army of the unemployed and crush the hopes of those organising the fight for a better deal.

Not for nothing does the hymn of the KCTU - "Workers of Iron" - swear revenge for the "blood and sweat" that has been wrung from them. This strike hardly appeared out of a clear blue sky of harmonious class relations. There had been many an earlier strike struggle - against the gruelling hours and arduous conditions, for decent pay and for national insurance cover. (In 1996 industrial disputes had already cost the employers over \$3billion). Almost without exception, strike battles have been met with heavy police action - beatings, arrests, the imprisonment and sacking of the leaders. Now there was no alternative but to make a stand; the workers' unions and their very capacity to fight back were on the line - not only because of the



The glass and metal sky-scrapers of Daewoo and Samsung - backdrop to mass workers' demonstrations at Yoido.

changes to the labour laws.

Other changes pushed through the Assembly that December morning, restored to the hated NSPA (National Security Planning Agency, previously the Korean CIA) the wide-ranging powers of surveillance and interrogation it had exercised with such cruelty under the military dictators. South Korea must have the most repressive and paranoid regime of any so-called advanced country. Hundreds of trade unionists, socialists and student activists still languish in South Korean jails. Torture in police cells continues. Leaders of the movement, at factory, campus or national level seem resigned to the fact that a spell in prison is 'par for the course'. But the international labour movement, if it is anything, must shout from the roof-tops about it.

A solidarity campaign must be taken to the activists in the unions and workers' political organisations world-wide. The tops of the international trade unions are remote in income and life-style from the workers they are supposed to represent and seem to have suddenly discovered the horrific abuse of democratic rights in Korea. Enough of their delegations flying in like dignitaries with the cameramen, staying in expensive hotels, making their speeches and flying out again! The Korean workers need genuine solidarity from their own kind, not the grandiose pledges of international 'leaders' whose track-records show them to be more interested in making peace with the employers than

in supporting strikes. It just so happens that their political counterparts in the Social Democratic, Labour or "Socialist" parties of the world have been prominent amongst the worshippers of the South Korean "miracle".

Special Factors

The phenomenal economic expansion - which took South Korea from the level of a Ghana in 1960 to 11th place in the world league of industrialised nations - has nothing to do with the free play of market forces. It has everything to do with a combination of *special factors* which cannot simply be engineered or copied by other would-be "tigers" - the huge injection of resources by world imperialism to stave off the elimination of capitalism in the region, the extraordinary involvement of the state in creating a class of monopoly owners and its unfettered use of terror tactics to try and hold back the demands of a super-exploited working class.

The enormous 'advantages' enjoyed by Korean capitalism are now turning into their opposite. What were its strengths have now become its weaknesses. Its foundations are riddled with contradictions that could prove its downfall. Far from defying the laws of capitalist development worked out by Karl Marx and others, Korean capitalism has already demonstrated their validity. It has shown itself incapable of avoiding the crises endemic in the system.



If workers in the factories of Korea, after a decade and more of struggle, now receive higher wages than those working for the same firms in Poland or in Wales - and this is far from proven hour for hour - this is not the reason for the problems they face today. They have generated enormous wealth for the owners of the giant 'Chaebol' conglomerates that dominate the economy. But these new capitalists have not been carrying out the 'traditional' role of investing to keep their machinery up to date. They have not been constantly 'revolutionising the means of production', as Marx put it.

Appearing late on the scene as a class and, again for special reasons, being given a 'helping hand' by the Japanese older brother, South Korean capitalism got used to using production techniques developed elsewhere. It made great progress for a whole period without spending much on research and development. In spite its reputation for being extremely 'modern' and 'high tech', Korean capitalism lags behind with its technology. Productivity or output per worker remains much lower than that of most of its rivals and is just *half* that of Japan. Vast sums have been spent on equipment but it is out-dated often before it goes into operation. As much as 30% lies idle as the economy runs out of steam.

Through the new legislation, the Chaebol and their political mouthpieces are simply demanding once again that workers pay with *more* of their blood and sweat for Korean products to become competitive again in the world market-place. They throw at them the arguments about 'globalisation' and the threat to their hard-earned living standards from cheaper labour elsewhere. They try to intimidate them into accepting lower wages and labour standards and hide their own hypocrisy and naked greed. The

South Korean Chaebol are themselves already up to their necks in the global economy, using all kinds of methods to undercut their competitors' market share as well as the old trick of playing one country's workers off against another.

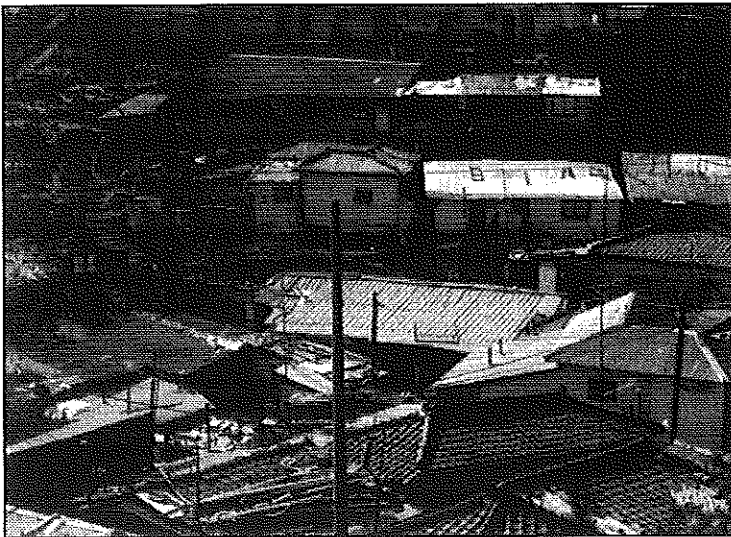
The double figure growth rates of the late 1980s (12% in 1986, 15% in 1987) were not achieved without enormous human cost. The ten-hour day, the six day week is still the norm for male and female workers alike. Longer shifts and 'Third World' working and living conditions are the lot of millions. Korean capitalism has come into the world dripping with blood. It is the worst country in the world for industrial accidents and diseases. Activists put things graphically: "At least six lorry-loads of fingers are severed each year". Every day seven workers are killed in work. Still unidentified thousands are dying from incurable afflictions contracted at work or from the barely checked poisoning of the air, the earth, the seas and the rivers.

Irrepressible

But, in a country where organising resistance is so bedevilled on all sides by repression, it seems as if every sufferer of injustice is organised. As the revolutionary leader, Lenin, remarked in relation to the Russia of 1905: "The longer the urge for association has been suppressed and persecuted, the more forcibly it asserts itself". In Korea this century there have been very few years free of either colonial rule or military dictatorship and the present 'democratic' regime in the South still uses the methods of a police state. Nevertheless, many brave formations have somehow managed to push their way to the surface.

There are the dismissed workers' organisations, the injured workers, the disabled, the working womens' associations, the families of the tortured, the foreign workers' associations. There are the long-standing unions of the teachers that defy the law and now the civil servants and the 'export zone' workers who are battling for the right to organise and strike. There are the legions of blue-collar and white-collar workplace unions, banned from linking up but forging ahead with local and national federations.

There is a multitude of workers' education groups, of 'Labour', 'Social' and 'Welfare' research institutes, student organisations, agricultural workers' organisations and there are the almost totally suppressed "revolutionary" organisations. There is the "People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy" organisation, the "Alliance of the Environmental Movement", the "University Teachers for Democracy", the "Association of Lawyers for a Democratic Society" and the "Medical



Third world living conditions at Sadang in Seoul.



Association for Humanism"....

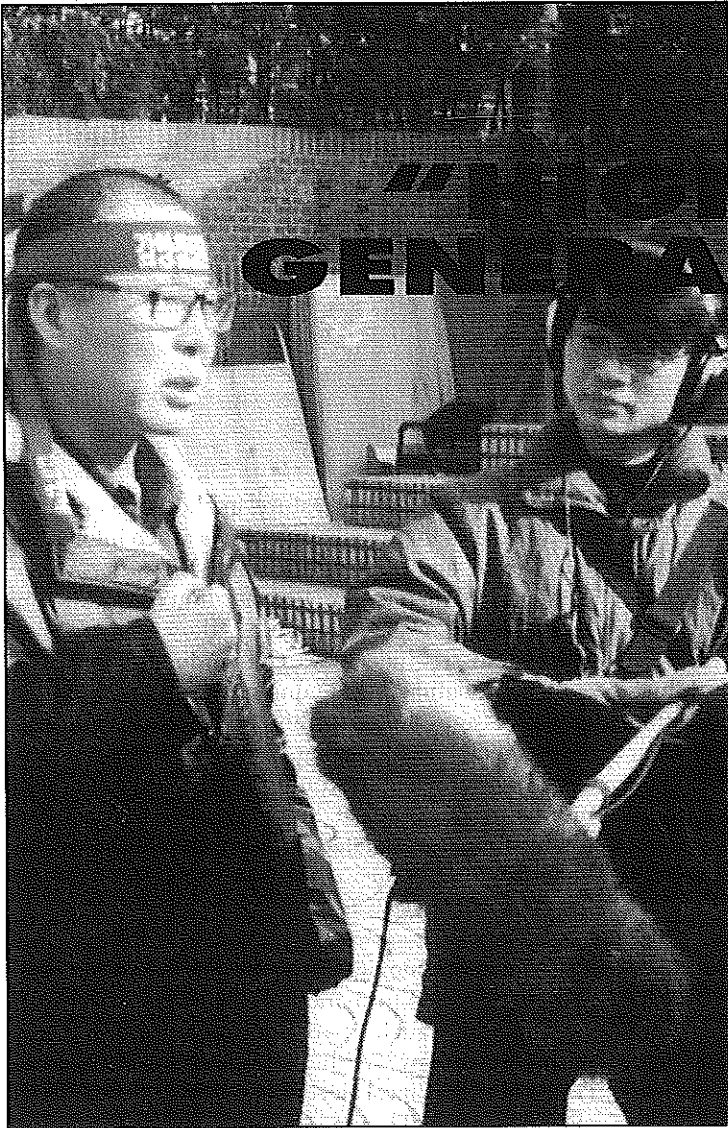
In the absence of a mass workers' party, as so often happens in the most oppressed societies, religious organisations use their particular "immunity" to channel and succour the movements of protest. In Korea they are numerous - Protestant, Buddhist, Catholic - and many of them have opposition within their own churches to contend with. Some of their members, priests included, have also found that they are not after all exempt from punishment and often brutal treatment at the hands of the state. Many have done their terms of imprisonment with the usual rations of torture and isolation.

Perhaps most important politically, are the 'umbrella' organisations like the "National Alliance for Democracy and the Reunification of Korea" that brings together many of the most defiant and left-leaning organisations, together with the KCTU and some broader community bodies. Within it there will be much talk of 'civil society' which seems to mean variously non-military, non-trade union or even the false notion of non-class society. But playing an active part in such bodies are also many convinced socialists, young and old. Similar in composition are the bodies that appear on the scene for specific purposes like the "National Committee for the Revocation of the Labour Law and National Security Planning Agency Amendment and the Preservation of Democracy" (the NCPD or campaigning "Task Force" mentioned earlier) and the committee set up to commemorate the tenth anniversary in June of the 'Great Democracy Struggle'.

Many of these bodies feature in the pages of this pamphlet but there will no doubt be much interest in the nature and role of the the KCTU or '*Minju Nochung*'. This is the organisation best known world-wide, especially since the great strike movement it has led. The independent and combative national trade union federation has truly come of age through this battle and emerged strengthened and growing. Only disastrous tactical mistakes in the future could see it broken. For the moment it looks set to eclipse its rival, the establishment-orientated and much less militant Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) or '*Hankook Nochung*'.

The question inevitably arises of what are the prospects for the formation of a workers' party in a country where such a party has not, until now, been permitted by law? With a presidential election in December 1997, local elections in 1998 and Assembly elections in 1999, the question has been hotly debated in many circles. There has been a dramatic opening up of the situation and a general political ferment has ensued. Much of the old fear - of being either crushed or humiliated - has gone. But even amongst the most seasoned of campaigners, hesitations on the best way to proceed, delays and even diversions are only to be expected before agreement can be reached.

One thing is certain: the 'Winter Offensive' against Kim Young-sam's bogus democracy has meant that Korean society will never be the same. It has created a new situation. Like all general strikes, as Engels the famous socialist insisted, it requires "a painstaking analysis".



KCTU leader Kwon Yong-kil in front of the television cameras at the Myong Dong camp.

THE "HIGH-TECH GENERAL STRIKE"

It was Engels together with Karl Marx who pointed out, way back in 1848 in their 'Communist Manifesto', how capitalism, in the pursuit of profit, will develop ever more effective and faster means of communication. But, they explain, the bosses cannot prevent the workers' movement from utilising those same inventions to enhance its own effectiveness in challenging the profit system itself. The workers of Korea have certainly borne this out, but using the devices of the end of the 20th century unimaginable 150 years ago.

The 'high-tech general strike' has been so named for the ingenious use by the workers' organisations and support groups of the very technology associated with South Korea's success story - the computers, the mobile phones, the fax machines, video cameras and not least, the cheapest and most rapid means of communicating with each other and the rest of the world - electronic mail. One of the first appeals over the internet for world-wide condemnation of the government's action was actually made by an "Alliance of Progressive Network Groups" whose members had felt very keenly the long hand of Korea's repressive laws against their own activities. No less than 60 "cyber-friends" had been arrested in the previous year and many thousands of articles wiped off the network by the government.

Daily bulletins with blow-by-blow accounts written and translated by participants, posted on the world-wide web, gave a detailed chronology and a brilliant and graphic insight into the nature of the strike as it was unfolding.

Call to Arms

The 'Campaign News' of the KCTU recounts how, by 7.30 on the morning of **26th December**, the "call to arms" was being made by the federation's president, Kwon Yong-kil. 17,000 union members at Kia Motors "kicked off" the action in response. As soon as they arrived at work, they held a mass meeting and decided on a walk-out. They made their way to Myong Dong cathedral where the KCTU leadership had set up the general strike headquarters. By 10.30 am, unions at Hyosung Heavy Industry, Daeheung Machinery, Tong-il Heavy Industry and Korea Fukkoku were all reported to be on strike.

Mass meetings of the Korean Hospital Workers' Unions and the Korean Federation of Professional and Technicians' Unions voted to strike. By 1pm, many of the unions belonging to the unofficial Federations - metal-workers, automobile workers, chemical workers - had held rallies at their own company grounds and began to converge on the various regional centres.

Hyundai Motors, Hyundai Heavy Industry, Daewoo Heavy Industry and other major manufacturing sector unions stopped work. "The 10pm tally confirmed the massive wave of the general strike that shocked not only the government and the mass media, but also the KCTU office staff", commented the Campaign News. No fewer than ninety-five unions, with a total participation of 146,233 workers, had been on strike the first day. Another 63 unions would join on the second day and a further 17 by the third. Such was the strength of feeling on the issues at stake, that the second day also saw the involvement of the FKTU - the normally docile 101% pro-government federation.

On **27th December**, inspired by the French example, members of the 12 unions affiliated to the Korean Federation of Truck Drivers held a 200-strong parade along the main expressway. The next day, 2,000 cars decorated with placards, stickers and flags and carrying over 8,000 workers from eleven different regions drove along the same Seoul expressway "at a turtle pace". Seoul and Pusan subway workers had decided to join the strike.

All six major Korean car makers (all KCTU organised) were at a standstill and occupied. It is an established tradition, given the bitter experiences of the past, for workers to maintain a presence in the factories during strikes for fear of employers starting up work without them or locking them out for good.

Rallies were taking place in all the major cities - meticulously planned and organised like the strike

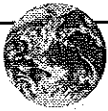
itself. Each trade union contingent had its leaders and stewards who knew exactly what they were doing and the discipline was exemplary. Nevertheless in the capital on the first Saturday, riot police attacked a perfectly orderly demonstration, firing a barrage of tear gas into the peaceful marchers. In the words of the 'Campaign News', local and foreign media, eagerly "jumped on the scene". They attempted to portray the general strike as a "rampant deluge of violence" and worse still, tried to provoke it into becoming one. They "failed miserably", the bulletin proudly reports, "as ranks of workers and supporting citizens kept the peace".

Support and Reprisals

A black ribbon campaign "to mourn the death of democracy" spread to the world-wide computer network where 6,000 messages of support had already been registered. On **30th December**, after an overnight meeting of the entire federation leadership, the KCTU president, called for a temporary suspension of the general strike for the New Year holiday period. But the same day saw the first of many "reprisals". Police issued charges against the leaders of seven workplace unions in the Incheon region, claiming that they had not got permission for their demonstration of the 26th. The management of Hyundai Heavy Industry filed legal claims against 12 union leaders for "interference with business".

On the evening of **December 31st**, following the allotted theme for the sixth day of protest - "Farewell to 1996" - thousands of trade unionists and 'citizens' held a candle-light demonstration at Myong Dong cathedral. Swaying in time to the songs of the workers' struggle, they made their way towards the Boshin-gak bell that traditionally sounds the beginning of the New Year. Predictably, police barred their way. They fired barrages of tear gas to prevent participation in the New Year's Eve ceremony, attended by thousands of people and broadcast live on television. But the demonstrators made detours in groups of three and four and reassembled to unfurl large numbers of placards and make sure their message was heard. On New Year's Day itself, more celebrations. Favourite amongst the striking workers was a new game - throwing darts at cardboard cartoons of a "typical capitalist", a politician and the president.

On **January 2nd** a new plan of action was announced at the KCTU's press conference. The contended labour laws had suddenly been 'promulgated' which meant no further delay before their implementation. Kwon Yong-kil now demanded not only the "nullification" of the labour laws and a new round of discussions but the



resignation of the entire cabinet. If the government failed to respond, the KCTU would denounce the NKP and organise protest visits to its local offices and a "concerted trade union political campaign against the ruling party in the upcoming presidential election".

In stark contrast to the obvious discomfiture of the ruling layer, workers participating in the numerous union meetings and regional rallies had been enormously encouraged by the news of solidarity action and messages of support. The KCTU now remarked, "The extraordinary international apprehension at the bulldozing of the Bills indicated by the series of protest letters and the news coverage by the international media is, to some degree, responsible for the absence of an immediate crackdown on the General Strike by the government".

"New knowledge," they wrote, "that similar kinds of battles are being fought out in various parts of the world, even in those countries which were once believed to have achieved all there was to achieve for workers' rights and welfare - countries like Australia, Germany, France, United States - has given them (the striking workers), in a rather ironic way, a sense of being *pioneers* in this world-wide struggle, giving them a greater determination".

'Second Wave'

January 3rd saw a resurgence of the general strike with 46 unions - in ship-building, heavy engineering, chemicals and, of course, the car factories participating in what was called the "First phase escalation of the second wave of the general strike" yet, the KCTU complains, the Ministry of Labour is constantly issuing press reports "radically down-sizing the strength of the strike". On January

4th important rallies took place in all the major cities and the strike was indeed escalating back to its pre-holiday level.

By January 6th the strike figures were again nearing the 200,000 mark. The continuing strike campaign began to stimulate other social organisations. The National Council of Churches in Korea called a meeting of 52 regional human rights committees to set up a pan-Christian 'task force' for the re-amendment of the labour laws. A national body of catholic priests decided to hoist placards in church compounds making them available as sanctuary to striking workers. A Buddhist monks' organisation also formed an 'emergency task force'.

The 'Association of Lawyers for a Democratic Society' made an official application for access to all the relevant records of the extraordinary session of the National Assembly which had seen the "commando-style passage of the problematic bills". The 'University Professors' Association for Democracy' began a petition campaign to collect 2,000 signatures among their colleagues. Similar efforts were being undertaken by medical practitioners, "cultural artists" and pharmacists. For the first time in this strike, the unions of insurance, stock and security companies started to participate.

But it was on the 6th January that two "well-built policemen" barged into the KCTU offices to serve summonses on its leaders. They made no arrests but, by the evening of the next day, a total of 217 trade union activists in different parts of the country had been summoned for questioning by the public prosecutors. The 8pm television news indicated that they were going to apply for arrest warrants the next day. Acting on a tip-off from a sympathetic reporter that their offices were about to be raided and searched, the KCTU leaders removed important documents and computers to 'safe houses'.

At 5 am on 7th January union members at the four major television and radio networks walked off the job. Later in the day, as the 'Campaign News' puts it, "The familiar faces who brighten the television screens were out on the streets or in the park, mingling with the technicians or uniformed workers from the factories and the white-collar workers from the Stock Exchange - all of them singing songs together. Today's demonstration, some 15,000 strong - left the Jongmyo Park quickly and dispersed in groups of tens and twenties to a hundred different local centres in Seoul for public awareness raising sessions."

The KCTU newspaper department had printed one million copies of a special strike edition. Workers





took bundles of the newspaper, together with leaflets and petitions to shopping centres, department stores, subway and railway stations to "meet the general public". Similar campaigns were repeated in 20 regional centres from the southernmost Cheju-do Island to the northernmost cities of Kangwon-do province, "with their snow-capped mountains in the back-ground". The next day in Chullabuk-do province, strikers went to rural villages hit by heavy snowfall to assist in the recovery work. Other members from the industrial estates, zones and complexes conducted a clean-up campaign in nearby "environmentally distressed" areas.

The 8th January, as the KCTU's narrative explains, "Saw the full entry of the white-collar workers into the strike". This will, it is believed, set the stage for the re-enactment of the great June democratic struggle in 1987, which "catapulted" into a massive democratic uprising led by the "neck-tie corps".

On the 9th of January, protest rallies were organised throughout the country in front of branch offices of the New Korea Party and Friday, 10th January, was designated a day of protest against the "thief government". There was much speculation as to whether the FKTU, which had "left the strike trail" for more than two weeks, would postpone yet again its resumption of industrial action. At present it was promising to bring all its members out on January 13th.

International Solidarity

The 10th January had been chosen by the KCTU as a day for international solidarity action. Pickets were held outside embassies, consulates and Korea Airline offices in up to 30 countries. The federation's leader, Kwon Yong-kil, had written an eloquent appeal sent out to international trade union

organisations and the Internet. It opened with: "Warmest greetings to melt all the snow and cold of this extraordinary winter" and finished: "With a renewed appreciation of the power of international solidarity".

Late on the 9th of January, police raids had been carried out on a number of KCTU headquarters including those of the metal-workers, hospital workers and automobile workers. Thousands of riot police raided the central KCTU offices at 12.30am the following night. Undaunted, the KCTU was calling for "the biggest strike in the nation's history" on 14th-15th January and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) had at last announced that it would rejoin the action.

On the demos

The 11th January Seoul demonstration, like many others, ended with violence. An eye-witness account was posted on the internet by someone describing herself as a "foreign traveller":-

"A crowd of people wearing the familiar red headbands was making its way to Pagoda Park. It was full of young and old alike, mothers and fathers with their children, high school students and a number of nuns and monks. The atmosphere was jubilant and energised (like a Korean company 'team building' day). The 'Ajummas' (the older married Korean women) were busy selling their lamayon (noodles) and fish while the 'Ajossi' (the elder married men) were drinking coffee or soju. It felt like a picnic.

"A group of young women were nurses from one of Seoul's largest hospitals. Their major concerns were unreasonable lay-offs, irregular schedules, extended work time and the ability of the employer to transfer them to any hospital at any time. They felt that the demonstration was powerful, cheerful, and most of all, they felt safe. A medical insurance man felt (it) was a turning point, a joint protest with labour and Seoul citizens. On a platform high above the listening and participating audience, two men representing communication workers were having their heads shaved (a traditional way of displaying dedication to a cause).

"Throughout the afternoon a large contingent of about 500 riot police stood by with shields, weapons and face guards, looking as if they were waiting for something to happen. The crowd left the park and began to emerge on the busy street. Soon the traffic had been stopped and the smell of tear gas began to filter through the air. A few rocks were thrown by the crowd, then an announcement was made by the police. They must disperse from the street as this was now an illegal demonstration. Instead, the crowd started coming towards the police. More rocks were thrown and more tear gas fired. At one time the crowd managed to surround the riot police."



A young English teacher in Chong-ju wrote in a letter to her parents:-

"Last weekend I joined a local demonstration. A Korean woman (teacher) asked me as many questions as I did her. She was inspired that a foreigner joined and supported the demonstration. They're expected to work 55 hours a week and are calling for an eight-hour day. They work six days a week, so that's still 48 hours.

"The Korean labour movement anthem is so moving - The Marching Song for You - so uplifting. I had chills down my spine and tears in my eyes. The strikers' chants are about 'Protecting democracy' and 'Killing dictators'. They don't mince their words here. And they are all wearing head-bands that read: 'Fight - Unification - Victory.'

"More workers are joining each day. Today (Wednesday 15) the suit-clad office workers have joined in. Myong Dong, the most expensive shopping area of Seoul, has been the scene of daily riots and the police and army aren't shy with the tear gas!"

On the two days of joint action the KCTU claimed 420,000 struck work and its rally in Seoul on 15th January was the biggest so far with 60,000 participating. But the KCTU members were demonstrating in Yoido Square while the FKTU members had assembled separately at Jongmyo Park. It would not be until January 26th that the leaders of both union federations would stand together before the massed ranks of a joint demonstration.

Arrests, attempted arrests and arguments

Attempts were still being made to deliver summonses and arrest trade union leaders - some of them successful. A letter circulated by the 'Han

Nuri' internet service reported to the world that three strike leaders at Han-la Heavy Industry Co. had been taken into custody on 15th January. A special 'task-force' of police had also been formed to pursue the leaders of the Hyundai Federation of Unions - each of them promised promotion by one rank for the arrest of any of them. Threats were even being made against the international trade union delegation visiting Seoul for 'supporting an illegal strike' and for 'interfering in the country's affairs'. If they did not refrain from speaking at rallies etc. they would find themselves deported.

So far, the 'wanted' KCTU Executive Committee members were still safe in their camp on the hill. Visits by law enforcement officers had been easily repulsed. They had not come in large numbers and the government had not decided whether it could run the risk of creating martyrs. Whenever a mass movement threatens the authority of the ruling class, it is torn between repression and concession.

Ruling party chairman, Li Hung-koo, had announced he was seeking the intervention of Cardinal Stephen Kim Souhwan, a well known mediator on such occasions, to come to the aid of the party and help settle the crisis peacefully. But he had insisted in the same breath that the labour laws must stay, essential as they were in "helping the nation's economic recovery". This was simply a repeat of the line taken by the president in his New Year address on 7th January which had so angered the striking workers. They had been told that the "sacrifices must be shared" and that "workers in advanced countries like France, USA, Germany don't strike".

It was clear however that the president and his men



The dome of the Parliament building is dwarfed by the joint trade union rally of 26 January.

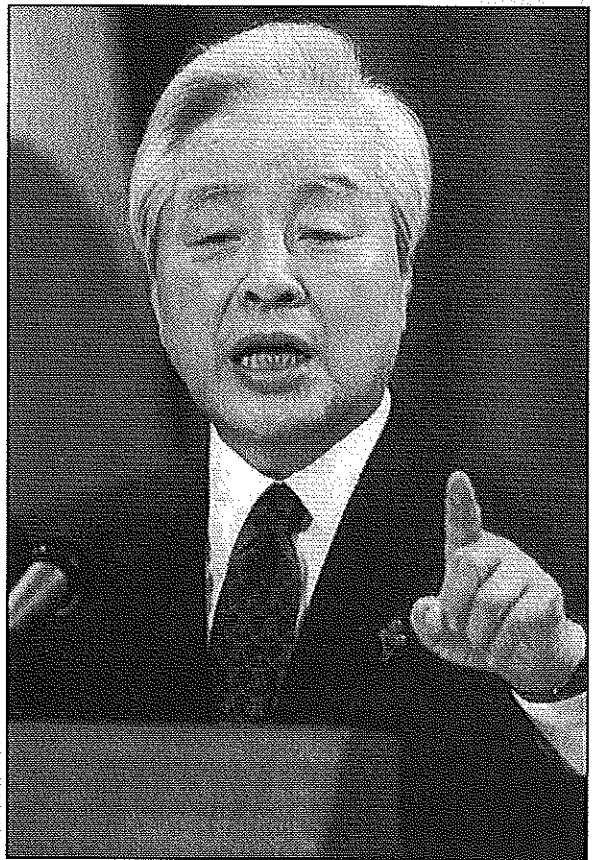
were becoming jittery. Opinion polls showed public support for the strike still increasing - from just over 50% on the first day, now in the region of 80%-85%. The previously tame and compliant Federation of Korean Trade Unions had joined in the action once more, bringing the combined total of strikers to over one million. The FKTU leadership had given no commitment to participate further in the strike but its ranks were being infected by the enthusiasm and determination expressed by the members of the rival federation.

Kim Young-sam was perfectly aware that arresting the KCTU leaders would inflame the situation; but lifting the warrants would be a sign of weakness and a humiliation. His indecision reflects the splits developing at the top of Korean society which in turn have the effect of emboldening the movement. It is now, more than three weeks into the strike, that the president considers inviting the leaders of the two main opposition parties to his residence - the Blue House - for talks. After this meeting of "The Three Kims" (Young-sam, Dae-jung and Jong-pil) he will promise to lift the arrest warrants and to contemplate amendment of the labour laws.

Audacity of the movement

There are still arrests and injuries on the demonstrations and now a second worker's life hangs in the balance after he has resorted to one of the most extreme forms of protest - self-immolation - setting himself on fire. In a number of places, company thugs have been sent in against picketing workers some of whom lie in hospital with broken noses and ribs. But each day brings news of little local victories that feed the confidence and audacity of the movement. In this 'high-tech' general strike, a video team is recording every event in the strike. Operating as they do, under the wing of the KCTU and the "Task Force" (NCPD), their material is used for keeping up the morale of the strikers and spreading the news the bosses' media hide.

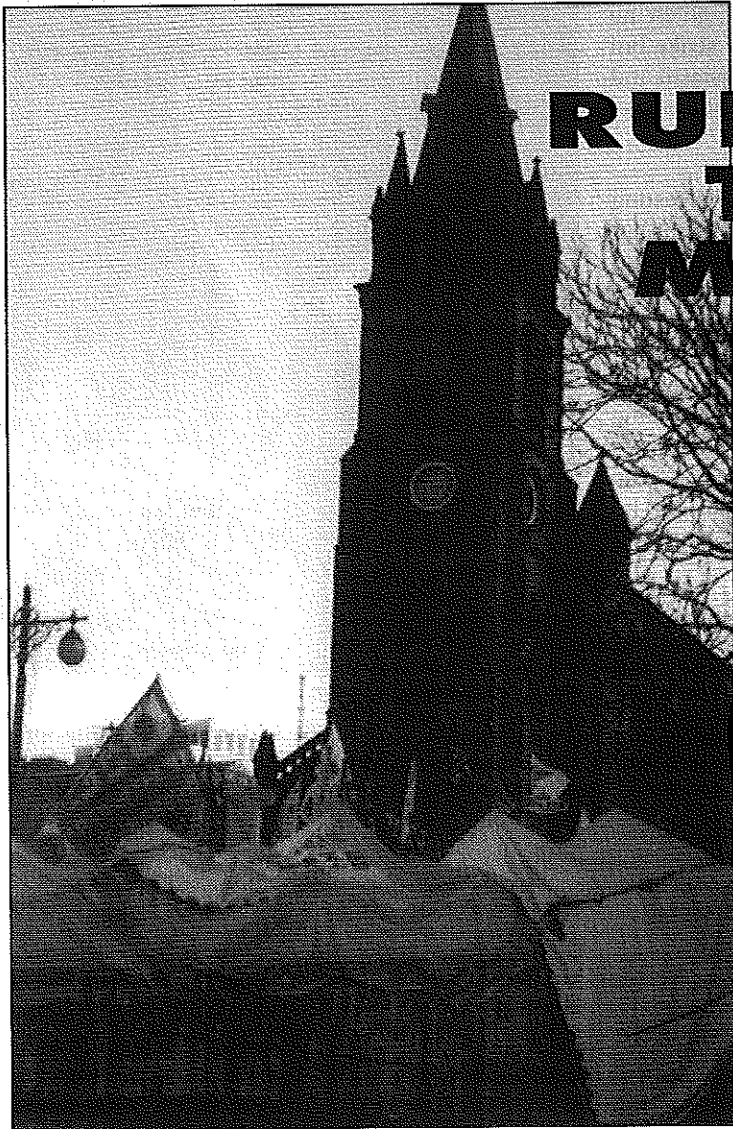
'Workers' News Productions' is a veteran but youthful team that has made no fewer than 20 tapes on the history of the democratic workers' movement since 1987. They combine intrepid filming with inventive ways of presenting the propaganda of the workers' movement. One of the tapes, for example, shows footage run backwards of the president and his men walking together somewhere. This is a metaphor, writes an explanation in English, to show that the president and the government are "not going forward but are going back". It also shows Kim Young-sam's inaugural ceremony in 1993 when he elaborated all his "hopeful remarks and rosy promises" to the people and then catalogues the disasters in which hundreds of people were killed -



President Kim Young-sam.

the collapse of the Sungsu Bridge and the Sampoong Department Store and the Taegu gas explosion - all the result, of bribery scandals involving political and economic figures and a total abuse of public authority.

The two videos about the latest movement show some of the most colourful and dramatic scenes of the strike struggle. They show the workers of the notorious Masan and Changwon export zone fighting the riot police and disarming them - putting their shields, batons and tear-gas rifles in a pile and making them sit or kneel meekly in a circle. It shows workers in Chonjoo piercing their fingers and writing with their own blood their demands for the nullification of the labour law. It shows effigies being burnt in Kyoungjoo and a traditional funeral ceremony for the New Korea Party in Kyoungkeedo. The teams of volunteer guards at the entrance to Myong Dong Cathedral grounds are shown doing their 24 hour shifts in temperatures as low as minus 15 degrees. "They don't mind their difficulties because they are protecting the KCTU leaders from the fear of arrest" runs the explanation sheet to reassure its international "customers". (The video, like numerous audio tapes of the songs of the movement, is sold and sent world-wide to raise funds as well as support for the strikers and their campaign).



Makeshift tents at the cathedral refuge.

RUNNERS IN THE MARATHON

It was beside a kerosene stove in one of the make-shift tents at the Cathedral refuge that Yoon Young-mo, the International Secretary of the KCTU, explained how things stood on 16th January as the strike went into its fourth week.

"We have been regulating the intensity and pace of our struggle. It is not a 100 metre race. It's not even a 400 metre or a mile race. It's a marathon. Certain days we go on full strike, like yesterday when we had the telecommunication workers out for the first time and subway workers for the second time.

"There were rallies in 15 different areas with a total of 200,000 on the streets. In Seoul we had permits for the march, but the size probably scared the government and the police. They turned it into a bit of chaos by blocking the marchers and forcing them to disperse by firing tear gas into the crowd.

"They use everything, sometimes even clubs with nails stuck in them. They have at least three types of tear gas - one fired from a vehicle with 64 canisters launched at the same time creating a lot of sound. Another one is fired from a gun and they usually fire it horizontally instead of into the air - aiming at people. Another is a fire extinguisher-like sprayer that sprays into people's faces causing you to vomit immediately.

"The police have a huge presence in the area all the time... it is hard to imagine just how many. They are assigned to places where it is difficult to see them, they've got bus-loads waiting to come in at any time, large rows standing everywhere.

"If they came in to arrest us people here would make as much resistance as possible. They came before just to issue the warrants - one or two people. If they come in for the real thing they will come in thousands. It could only be violent if there is resistance. But it is very much a political decision whether they come in or not. It's not a military raid decision to be made by

a field commander. It can only be made by Kim Young-sam.

"There are some signs of panicking within the government itself - different signals. Some people in the ruling party are talking about more moderate action, dialogue. But it is a government that is completely out of touch with the people.

"A question of completing the task that was begun in 1987? Yes, of course! But the problem (then) was we were not able to take what we had achieved for ourselves. This is the first time in history that we have got something that will stay with us and that is the KCTU"

Strike scaled down but public support still mounting

The independent union federation was enjoying enormous popular support and the organised working class was regarded with great respect as the force which would determine the future course of events. It was at this moment, however, that the leaders decided on a tactical 'pause' in the battle and scaled the strikes down to once a week - every Wednesday. They also announced plans for demonstrations and rallies to take place throughout the country on Saturdays, designated "Days with the People". But anger in all quarters against the government remained unabated. In some ways it was growing greater. The impact of the strike itself had given workers a sense of their own power. They were beginning to feel their organised will was invincible. Why then was the struggle now taken into a lower gear?

"Struggle Flash" - a strike bulletin produced by the NCPD ("Task Force") and posted on the internet reports a "heightened mood of tension amongst the unit unions in each firm". As of 17th January, KCTU leaders from 42 unions in eight different industries - a total of 399 have been sued or summonsed. The riot police have already arrested 300 people at legally approved rallies. 21 people have been seriously injured. For example, Cho Young-yong of Ulsan's Hyundai Motors had to have 56 stitches in a head wound. Kung Jae-koo from Asia Motors was hospitalised for surgery to his eye.

But on 18th January the bulletin's headlines were just as 'up-beat' with news of support still flooding in: "Various social groups wave their hands of support and solidarity". 849 writers had told Kim Young-sam to "stop blind-walking" and condemned the government's response to the workers as "obnoxious and nasty". 3,551 members of Seoul National University - all its lecturers, undergraduates, graduates, alumni and professors - had signed a statement protesting that "What President Kim was trying to restore was not the

economy but dictatorship."

Fifteen Catholic priests had set up a tent alongside the KCTU leaders at the cathedral and launched a campaign distributing stickers saying, "We have chosen the wrong president" and "I hate civilian dictatorship". Other priests - in Chun-gu - leaving a mass they had held for the "repentance" of the Kim Young-sam regime, had found their path blocked by the riot police. "We went through the barricades (only) when union members assembled around the procession, surrounded the police and broke down the barricades after a heavy scuffle".

Workers everywhere - on strike or not on strike - were on the march - defying bans, defeating police and carrying on with their demonstrations peacefully. In Taegu there was a rally of textile workers demanding the arrest of the boss of Sampoong - a local factory - because of his "murderous assaults". After the rally they marched to a local police station. Then they organised a "night of unity" among workers of the dyeing industry, and proceeded through the city with candles in hand. Night marches are strictly speaking illegal but that wasn't stopping them breaking out all over the country.

NCPD gathers strength

The NCPD "News Flash" also reported on its own press conference of 17th January at which it was announced that the number of local divisions set up since 26th December now totals 56. From many regions, even where there were no branches, data and news of activities were being constantly requested.

Park Seok-woon, one of the NCPD's best known organisers, was speaking later that day at an opposition "symposium" in a plush auditorium at the parliament building. "The opposition parties," he said, addressing himself to some of their leaders in the hall, "Maintain that 'the people are not ready for this fight', but 'the people' are all already involved in it. The only ones who are not are the Chaebol (bosses)". He described the work of his organisation. "No less than 200 campaign teams go out every day distributing leaflets, collecting signatures, raising funds and selling protest postcards (at ten times their cost)".

Indeed, their temporary headquarters in Hyanglin Church Hall, down a narrow, back street in Myong Dong, is like a revolutionary nerve centre - again "high-tech". A whole bank of computers is in use all the time. With these and with mobile phones, close contact is maintained with the areas and an impressive level of information and propaganda is



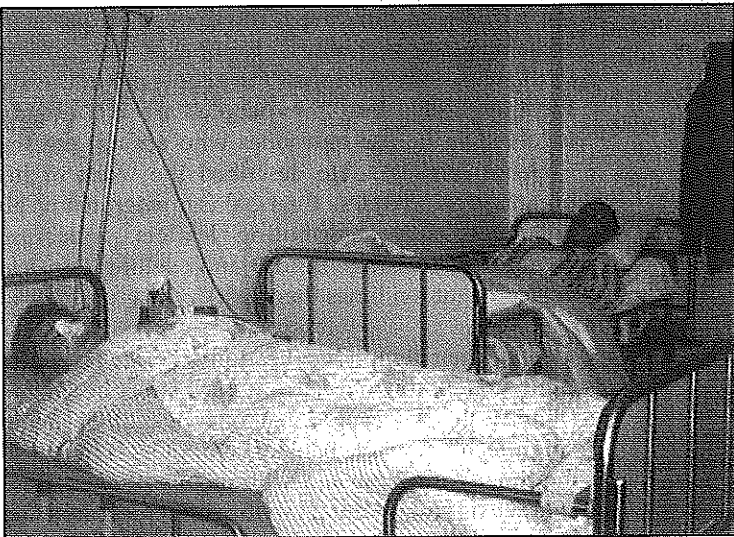
produced. Leaflets, results of opinion polls, plans for raising awareness, bulletins are e-mailed and faxed backwards and forwards. Circles of young people ("warriors" as Park calls them) earnestly discuss the day's activity and their responsibilities. Others prepare billboards or large collecting boxes and stack them up. Groups go out with their portable tables and come back hours later to warm up beside the stoves. Volunteers stay overnight, curled up in sleeping bags on a small stage. Others work on into the small hours, like those who translate and despatch the "Struggle Flash Strike News".

Grim testimony at Myong Dong

Nearly four weeks after the movement had erupted, public opinion was still preventing the state forces from going in to arrest the seven KCTU leaders at Myong Dong cathedral. But attacks on the unions at a local level continued. Hukkoku is a notoriously anti-union Japanese-owned firm. In the past six months two leaders there had been jailed, 40 workers sacked and "punished" in one way or another. Now strikers had been beaten up by the *kusadae*, a special breed of Korean mafia-type gangsters often hired by Chaebol owners to 'soften up' their work-force.

An agitated Hukkoku worker was visiting the KCTU camp looking for help:

"Newspapers who are Chaebol-owned don't print anything about our plight," he said with exasperation. "Even the 'progressive' Hankyure is frightened of losing its advertising revenue. So we collected six million won ourselves and paid for a half-page appeal in the paper on the 15th January. "On the twelfth day of the strike, we had been gathering at the factory gate to go to the central rally when the managers and 20 gangsters, Korean Mafia, employed by the company, launched a terror attack



Hukkoku strikers after being attacked by thugs.

on the workmen. Result - three persons with broken ribs and one with a broken nose. Another 40 were injured, seven hospitalised.

"And now the company wants the trade union's leader to pay 408 million won for damage in the clash. The trade union is saying to the police, the prosecutor, the city hall, the land administration to investigate and punish. But they did not have any action. We want something done about this employer, internationally if possible, especially through the unions in Japan".

Foreign journalists visiting Myong Dong were also given a rough hand-out about the self-immolation in Ulsan of 33 year-old union activist, Chung Jae-sung:

"On 10th January, after a rally at the Taewha riverside, Hyundai Motor Company trade unionists and their families marched towards the city's centre. The police shot teargas and blocked the way. Mr Chung was at the front of the march. He shouted: 'You steal the democracy; do not block the march!' But the police continued..."

"This is paint thinner," he shouted. 'If you do not retreat I will burn myself to death!' But riot police continued to block (the way). Suddenly, Mr Chung threw the paint-thinner onto his body and (set) fire (to) himself. His body became burning. He shouted 'Struggle!'

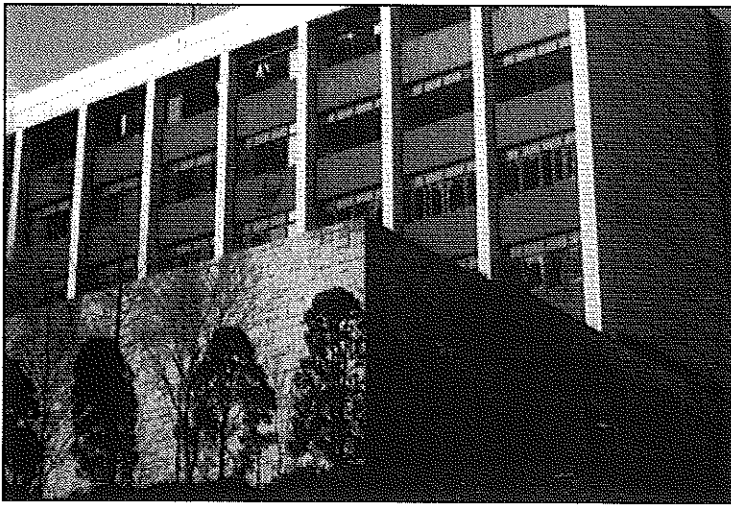
"His comrades wanted the police to hand over the fire extinguisher but they did not. They shot more teargas. They didn't call the fire emergency car. His friends called the fire station - 119 - with telephone borrowed from near shop. His body trembling, he shouts: 'Down with the anti-workers law!'

"He is brought to (the local) hospital and then moved to Seoul. 25% of his skin was burnt with 2 and 3 degrees. At the hospital he shouts: 'The bad bills must be defeated!'"

After the incident, Hyundai management shut down the factory. On 30th January there was a demonstration "In hope for Mr Chung's quick recovery". Though he will always suffer from constant, debilitating pain, Chung Jae-sung's life is no longer in danger. Nevertheless, to his chagrin, most of the hated labour laws which drove him to take such drastic action remain on the statute books.

"Not a 100 metre race"

The struggle of the Korean movement is indeed a "marathon". The 'runners' make this clear in their own words in interview after interview. There are those introduced by the energetic Kim Young-kon of the National Association of Labour Movement Organisations (NALMO) in his tent, a little down the hill from those of the KCTU leadership. There are the participants of the numerous mass demos and the organisers of the unions and the support campaigns.



The burnt-out general building at Yonsei University, left derelict since the battle of August 1996.

And there are the students - often first into the struggle and a barometer of discontent and unrest. So far, this time round, they have been noticeably absent, most of them still on their long winter holiday. They have been participating in the movement here and there as individuals, with just the occasional small demonstration of the students still on campus organised by one or another group. But a feature in one of the left papers gives a clue as to what has happened to the legendary South Korean student movement. Chung Young-ki, the president of the largest student organisation - Hanchongryon (the Korean Federation of University Student Councils) - was in hiding from the police. His organisation had over a million members but had suffered enormously at the hands of the state since last August when it organised an 'illegal' Festival in the grounds of Yonsei University to commemorate Korea's liberation from Japanese rule and discuss the sensitive issue of re-unification.

Then, under orders from Kim Young-sam, the riot police had laid siege to the university for nine days - a massive force of 21,000 plus 5,000 special officers. They bombarded the students with tear-gas from helicopters, stopped all supplies of food, medicine, water and electricity. They picked up people who just happened to be in the area near the university, beat them up and sexually assaulted young women. When, eventually, the police moved in on the students they went for anyone and everyone. Nearly 6,000 were corralled and taken to the police cells where they were interrogated and many of them badly tortured. As of January 1997, 357 students were still in jail, some with long sentences to serve out.

The authorities have refused to renovate the five-storey general building where the students had been holed up until the final battle. They are leaving it

with all its smashed windows and charred doorways fenced off as a reminder and a warning to all students not to get caught up in left-wing politics. Three women undergraduates who had watched the whole police operation in horror from their hostel windows explained how these tactics, and the mood of shock that pervaded the university afterwards, had temporarily succeeded.

"The students at Yonsei have been frightened into electing a moderate, apolitical leader as president. But let's hope it's only a temporary setback. How can we rest easy while our friends are still being held? And also, our own prospects of getting a job are narrowing by the day, even when we graduate with good results. Naturally we identify with the present struggles of workers against flexibility and increasing unemployment. We want them to win this one".

Organising and striking

At the Myong Dong camp, NALMO's Kim Young-kon was optimistic about the struggle. He explained which workers come under which trade union federations.

"Construction and hospital workers, car workers and clerical workers are with the KCTU. The bankworkers came over 'en bloc' from the FKTU. Railworkers, postal workers and some transport workers, some subway and bus workers are still in the FKTU.

"The situation with the telecom workers is complicated. The national chair of the union said 'no' to all-out strike action this winter although the KTTU became affiliated to the KCTU four years ago. It is a national union but was badly weakened after the big battles of 1995, when it took on Korea Telecom. Before then it had 87 full-timers but now has only thirty seven. The employers, who have 'traditionally' paid the wages of union full-timers, took revenge for their defeat and refused to pay any more."

Things are even more difficult in Korea's massive but shrinking garment industry. Yang Il-seok is a 25-year-old full-timer for the Chunggye Garment Workers' Union. He is responsible for finance in the union and was himself trained as a cutter.

"The average wage in our trade is around one million won (just over \$1,000) a month but can go up to around 1,300,000. For machinists on piece-work, it can reach nearer 2 million That is in the periods of intensive work - going hard at it from 9am to 9pm. But there can be six months of lay-off.

"Even on the higher wage it is difficult to live throughout the year on that money. If there is lay-off in the export side of the industry then people try to find work in the middle-sized companies who do work



for the home market and pay much less (although it used to be the other way round)... There is no new hiring at the moment; there's been a big reduction in the work force. Young people see it as '3D' work - dirty, dangerous and difficult.

"Union dues are 10,000 won a month. The full-timers get 250-300,000 - about a third of the average wage or even less. We're involved in setting up our own co-op to get more money for the union. There are three branches in Seoul but only a few hundred members these days. We cover about 30,000 in the Chunggye area out of a total of 200,000 garment workers. One of our main aims is to form a Seoul area Textile and Garmen: 'rade union but as yet that is illegal."

Organising in the small sub-contractors' sweat shops is still an uphill struggle. Things have changed since 1970 when the workers' hero Chun Tae-il threw himself as a protest from a bridge in the Chunggye 'Peace Market', burning to death and demanding justice for the young women enslaved in the industry. But ten- and 12-hour days in the dust and heat of machine rooms, stuffed to the roofs with made and half-made clothes, does no good to the health or family life of the still mainly female workforce. Thousands produce goods for the same big 'names' but are deliberately divided into units of less than five employees through a system of sub-contracting. This ensures they are not covered by any employment law and will be afraid of joining a union, let alone striking, for fear of losing their jobs.

In the hospitals, the independent unions have had more luck. Hyun Chung-hee is chair of the Seoul National University hospital workers' branch. She was calling in at the union camp.

"With two thousand workers, our medical centre is the largest in Korea... I was a nurse before I was elected to the full-time position... We took strike action for 15 days... 1,200 would attend the daily meetings - that is all except those providing the emergency cover. We will be coming out again on 18th February," she said with great pride, "along with everyone else". Her pager beeped, she apologised, made her farewells and rushed away.

More demos

On Saturday 18th January, Wednesday 22nd and again on Sunday 26th January, more of those colourful, defiant and thoroughly disciplined demonstrations took place in the centre of Seoul. The one on 22nd January - the first of the Wednesday strike days - was marked by the dramatic appearance of Kwon Yong-kil and the other seven leaders, who had left their cathedral 'lair' for the first time to test the promise of the president that the warrants for their arrest had been lifted.

Tens of thousands of people had gathered in bright winter sunshine to voice, again and in no uncertain terms, their pressing demands: 'Withdraw the two bad laws!', 'Restore democracy now!' and 'Down with Kim Young-sam!'

Here is a noisy colourful but disciplined crowd. Many sit cross-legged on the freezing ground some on little thermal squares (of cardboard covered with aluminium), distributed systematically at the beginning by their contingents' leader. Others on polystyrene or newspapers. They are in neat rows - singing, chanting their responses to a speaker's fiery words, swaying in lines to a favourite workers' song or jumping up and sitting back down in a "Mexican wave" that swings through the crowd from one end of the park to the other.

Here are the orange banners of the construction workers and the subway workers, the green banners of Kia car-workers, Daewoo with their white flags, Hyundai and hospital-workers with yellow, Munyo Electronics and metal-workers - blue and the big red banner of the disabled. The teachers are here, determined to have their say. Buddhist monks and Catholic priests and nuns have come with their placards. Even the women who drive away the evil spirits have turned up.

New friends

Here too is Bill Jordan, one-time leader of Britain's engineers, now at the head of an international delegation to Seoul, making a fiery speech. The bubbling crowd receives him with enthusiastic applause. To the assembled Korean combatants, acutely aware of the risks they run when taking on their government, support from a world-wide trade union body seems such an enormous plus for their movement. Bill Jordan himself appears a little flushed with excitement. But this solidarity mission is in stark contrast both with his own personal record and that of his organisation - the International Confederation of Trade Unions.

A 'struggle' head-band seemed inappropriate for a man who in the 1980s had failed to get solidarity action from his own powerful union or from the Trades Union Congress for the British miners in their famous year-long battle with the Thatcher government. Worse still, bearing in mind the KCTU's battle for multi-unionism, he had become unpopular even with other far from militant trade union leaders for signing single union and no-strike deals with employers. Now he had been writing indignant letters of protest, condemning the Korean Government for their "denial of workers' rights to form trade unions of their own choosing and restricting trade union solidarity action".

No doubt in a gesture intended by the rally organisers to make him feel at home, he was introduced to the crowd with the strains of the *Internationale* being played on a synthesiser. (Singing it was still illegal in South Korea but many people, even loosely connected with the movement, knew the words). "I speak on behalf of 120 million members around the world," he declared. "I salute your courage in fighting the unjust laws, stolen in without the light of day". He was obviously warming to the occasion. He threw in a few unfortunate phrases like "working for the prosperity of Korea" and, rather inaccurately, referred to the "united trade union movement" of the country. But his solemn pledge that the ICFTU "would not stay silent until all trade unionists in jail are released" was just what the strikers wanted to hear.

Stunning indictment

But would the international trade union organisation he represented live up to its promises? Has it changed dramatically since the American churchman and author wrote a 'Message for International Labor' from the *minju* (democratic) trade union movement in his devastating book, 'South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle'. George Ogle had lived and worked for more than a decade in the country before he was arrested and deported for speaking out against the torture and hanging by the Park Chung-hee dictatorship of eight innocent men.

"Where were you in the 1970s when we needed help so desperately? Where were you in 1980 when the guns of Chun Doo-hwan forced his dictatorship on us? Where were you when so many of us were being taken away to 'purification' camps? The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has had contact with the Korean labour movement for decades. The AFL-CIO (major US trade union federation) established its Asia-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) in Seoul in 1971. For the next sixteen years it cooperated actively with the KCIA-appointed leaders of the FKTU. It provided thousands of United States aid dollars to the FKTU.

"Never was it recorded, however, that the ICFTU or AAFLI stood with the workers or the unions against oppression. In the 1970s when the women workers at Dong-il Textile were being beaten and humiliated, they were silent. In the early 1980s when the male unionists were being thrown into prison or beaten by the 'kusadae'; not a word was heard from international unions. Workers in Korea know little or nothing about ICFTU, and have come to believe that AAFLI is an agent of the American government, not a legitimate union operation at all."

Perhaps indeed the ICFTU and other international

labour 'representatives', in the light of the new circumstances, have now decided to back both unions. After a little steam has been released, they will return to the task of trying to steer them along the respectable channels of class collaboration and conciliation. They will condemn attacks on workers in order to maintain their credibility. They are no doubt motivated by the fact that wages and conditions driven too low in South Korea not only threaten their members elsewhere but constitutes 'unfair' competition for its trading 'partners' in Europe and the USA.

As a new member of the top 29 capitalist nations' club, the OECD or Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, South Korea must now have its labour relations 'regulated' by the OECD Trade Union Advisory Committee. The KCTU's delegation to a special commission set up by this body, which included its International secretary Yoon Young-mo, had already arrived in Paris by the time Bill Jordan was appearing in Jongmyo Park. Around him grew the chants of "Scrap the Ruling Party!" "Kick out Kim Young-sam!" and "Punch-kill the evil labour laws!" Banks of huge loud-speakers boom out revolutionary songs. A big white placard reads: "New policy of not paying for the strike period - 'No work; no pay'. So you capitalists who don't do any work shouldn't get any pay!"

It is clear that there are two distinct trends within the labour movement internationally and both co-exist within the KCTU itself. There is that of genuine struggle against the bosses and their system and that of compromise, reform and getting along with capitalism. At the height of the South Korean movement in January, the former definitely seemed to be in the ascendancy.

Demonstrators speak out

Demonstrators were never shy of voicing their opinions and their messages to the world.

A post-graduate student in Jongmyo Park 18th January:

"We need activists a lot... If they arrest them we will not be able to crack the problems of capitalist society. Yes, I believe the social system must be changed. Even though there is internet communication with other workers, we need more international solidarity and workers in other parts of the world should be aware of what's going on in Korea."

His partner says the new labour laws should definitely be repealed but she has not been on strike. She works for Samsung, one of the Chaebol conglomerates, which does not allow any union to



organise.

At the same rally, the president of the Tong-Jak branch of the Korea Telecom Union, with a head-band that reads 'Abolish the evil labour law' explains:

"I and my colleagues are fighting for workers' rights in Korea and we would appreciate support from workers in other countries. We have participated in the demos and wanted to strike but we have had some internal difficulties with a new leadership that only started from 1st January. But, if they go for the leaders of the KCTU, we will respond by an immediate general strike in telecommunications which will paralyse the country. There is a clause that prohibits strikes by telecom and essential sector workers and imposes compulsory arbitration. We need international solidarity for its repeal. I most certainly won't be voting for Kim Young Sam's party in the presidential election this autumn. Greetings."

Kim Jong-woong, branch leader from the Industrial Chemical section of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, on the 26th January, at the joint trade union demonstration in Yoido square says with a smile:

"Today is a great day. We have released all our discontents into the air. We are hopeful that we can achieve all we want. I am really happy that my union is fighting together with the KCTU, even though I am FKTU. I think we have become more energetic than we used to be through fighting alongside the KCTU. We would like international solidarity. Please help us!"

At the same demo, a woman teacher with a yellow head band that reads 'We want the Korean Teachers' Trade Union recognised' speaks with confidence:

"I have been teaching since 1982. We are very vigorous and have a high feeling of victory. I don't think it's going to be easy to get our union legalised because our government knows that we teachers are powerful. This government is not very democratic. They are afraid of teachers' power because we teach our students things and then they teach their parents. Teachers can have a big influence. They think we are dangerous, they don't like us."

Yoido

It was here on 26th January, in front of 100,000 enthusiastic trade unionists, that KCTU leader, Kwon Yong-kil, held high the hand of the leader of the FKTU. Behind them, the dome of the parliament building - the scene of the crime that had set the whole movement off. Across the vast square, towering above the flag-waving and cheering crowd, the gleaming metal and glass headquarters of Samsung and Daewoo Finance - two of the

'culprits' - the giant conglomerates that are hand in glove with the state and its corrupt and repressive apparatus. "We'll put an end to the Chaebol economy and build a new one that can sustain the lives of all the people!" boomed the voice of the KCTU president at the microphone. "If the politicians don't replace the labour laws...we will fight until all of us perish in the struggle!" In a fiery speech, he threatened to bring forward the renewal of the general strike. Cheers and applause, shouts and whistles of approval greeted his every sentence.

This rally was indeed a show of the potential strength of the combined trade union movement but the numbers had reached nothing like the million or even half a million that many had been talking of. Already there was a feeling that it would not be possible to switch back on the full force of general strike action. The high point of the struggle was over. The 'fourth phase' of the general strike was discussed and planned, but even the Wednesday strikes were dropped, in the interests of giving the government and the opposition parties a chance to change the law sufficiently to satisfy the movement. Round table talks were held, the parliamentarians would come back to the question, but every day saw new delays. 'Hanbogate' was proving to be a big distraction but such an embarrassment to the government that some other sensation had to be engineered to draw the heat.

The much publicised defection of two families from North Korea in January had hardly caused a ripple amongst the determined strikers and supporters. A bigger "fish" was now needed. Sure enough, on 13th February, the day of the KCTU's annual congress, which might otherwise have got considerable news coverage, a dramatic announcement was hitting the headlines. The Secretary of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party, who was one of its most influential theoreticians, was in the South Korean embassy in Beijing.

Hwang Jang-yop was supposedly denouncing the regime in whose hierarchy he had been one of the most important influences. In a much-publicised letter, purportedly written by him, he demagogically ridiculed the idea that there could be socialism in a country where people were starving. The point is valid but it seemed conveniently designed to provide just the kind of ammunition the Southern regime could use if it felt strong enough to conduct a McCarthyite witch-hunt against the students' and workers' movement. But again, the participants from the front-line would not be fooled by these worn-out tactics.

Worker delegates at the KCTU Congress were in a



Pampered to the end - The disgraced Hanbo boss with his 'minders'.

sombre but determined mood. They spoke of countless sackings and victimisations for trade union activity. They spoke of wages that barely cover the necessities of life. And that's while premiums are still being paid for overtime and night-working. The much-vaunted 'flexibility' would cut off this lifeline and that accounts for the strength of opposition seen in the strikes and demonstrations. They spoke of their hatred for the bosses who squeeze every last drop out of their work force already.

Fight to the finish

Those who participated in this winter's great protest feel a huge sense of pride and achievement in making the "first-ever political general strike". They have shown their strength and tested their powers of organisation. The unions and their fighting capacity remained more or less in tact and everyone was aware of the enormous damage inflicted on the government, reeling possibly beyond redemption. But now, although Hanbo has shown up the rottenness of the system they are fighting and Hwang's defection has sparked a debate that will clarify many things in their minds, they feel deprived of a fight to the finish.

The KCTU leadership not only did not bring forward the next round of strikes, but, in the event, postponed it on the pretext of giving the parliamentarians more time. But the decision was probably based on a feeling that it was no longer possible to achieve all-out action. More forceful and fuller action earlier on would have achieved greater results, regardless of whether the National Assembly had been convened or not.

Parliament was only reopened on 17th February. A week after its congress, the KCTU was no longer demanding the complete repeal of the law but announced a list of ten "conditions" that had to be met by changes to the law. Hundreds of teachers'

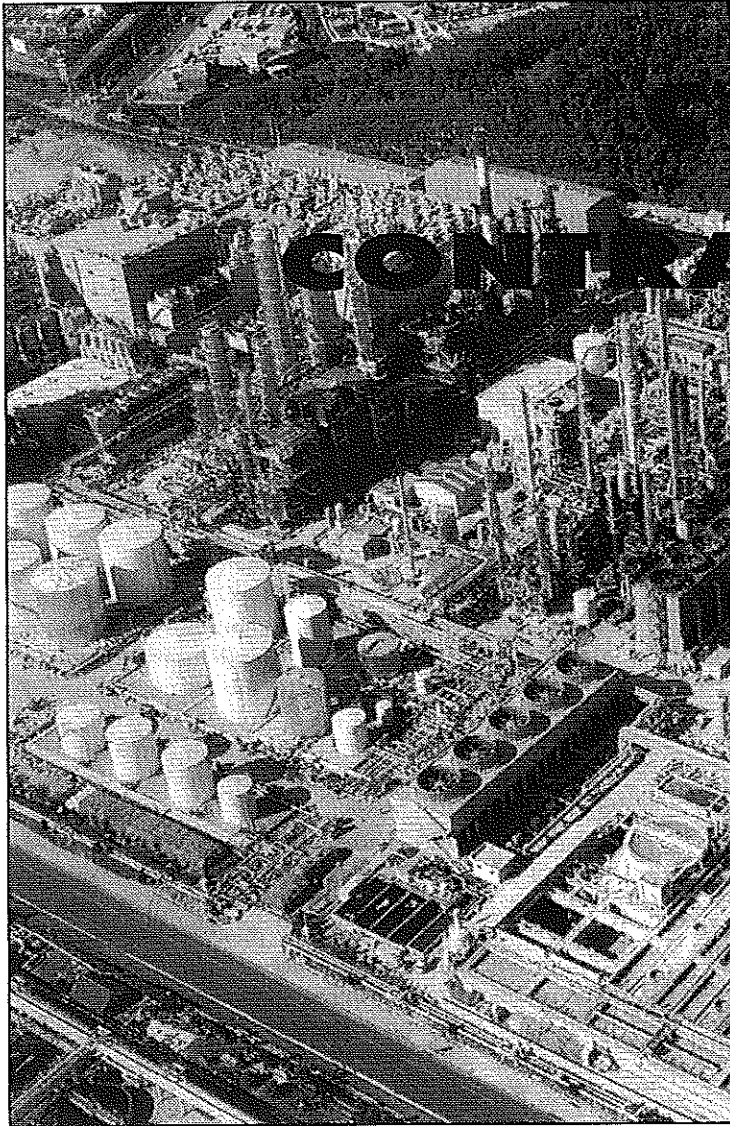
union members moved in and occupied the headquarters of opposition parties to persuade them to take up their case. (In 1989, 1,500 teachers had been sacked and permanently black-listed for organising the Teachers' Union and Kim Young-sam himself had once demonstrated for their reinstatement and the legalisation of the KTU. They are still waiting.)

Public indignation was mounting at the rapidly concluded and insufficient investigations into the \$6 billion Hanbo loan scandal. Top bankers and ruling party politicians were being arrested and sent to jail along with the Chaebol's owner. One of them seemed to be aiming his remarks at the very top when he claimed as he went down that he was "only a feather" in the affair. The question on everyone's lips (and in many a cartoonist's picture) was "Where is the body (of the bird)?" - is it the president's son or the president himself?

In the last few days of February, the KCTU organised daily sit-down protests by about 1,000 individual and federation union leaders from 2pm-6pm in front of the parliament building. When broader action was eventually called - for Friday 28th February, it amounted to half-day or four-hour strikes and city and workplace demonstrations. In some of Ulsan's giant factories, for example, the action took the form of a 'rolling' strike - each department at a time and then only for an hour. The following week, no action was planned or taken.

The strike which had broken with such explosive force had, at least temporarily, lost its momentum. Whether it could be regained - in March or in May, remained to be seen. For now, many activists felt the important thing was to concentrate on building up the unions' strength in the workplaces through the collective bargaining process and move towards setting up some kind of party that could carry the struggle on in the political arena.

In the longer run, and with a skilful leadership, these South Korean workers will show the world that no diversion will be allowed to stand in the way of an all out struggle to transform society. The mighty conflict between the classes was by no means over; it did not start only in December 1996 and too much lay behind it for half-measures to be sufficient to bring it to an end. At different times it has been and will be conducted by different means - industrial struggles, political struggles, uprisings. But why do feelings run so deep? Why have so many working people been prepared to risk so much in a trial of strength with their rulers - government and Chaebol? Can socialist ideas find an echo, develop a physical force?



CONTRASTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Combined and uneven

Its 'tiger leap' into the modern world has made South Korea a country of enormous contrasts and contradictions. It has produced some of the most graphic examples of "combined and uneven development" - a phrase used by Leon Trotsky in his "Theory of Permanent Revolution". He was describing a feature of countries like Russia at the turn of the century - 'backward' but with some of the most up-to-date factories in the world. To complete the process of developing the economy and society, he argued, it would be necessary to clear out not only feudal but capitalist and imperialist relations by 'going over' to state ownership and planning. The South Korean economy can no longer be called 'backward', but the speed of its industrialisation has meant many remnants of the old society from which it has emerged have not yet been shed.

As recently as 1960, two-thirds of South Korea's population was engaged in agriculture and just 9% in industry. By 1980, one-third worked on the land and today less than 15%. In 1960 less than one-quarter of its people lived in cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants. Today well over three-quarters live in cities of more than 500,000. Only eight countries in the world are more urbanised than South Korea.

Seoul is one of the three largest cities in Asia, alongside Shanghai and Tokyo. Crammed between mountains (which have served as a defence for

centuries against the Manchurian invader from the west and the Japanese to the east), these days it is permanently shrouded in a cloud of pollution. Big black cars clog up the "expressways" while the pedlar trundles his wares around in a hand-cart or on the back of a battered motorbike using an upright frame designed in the middle ages. In the centre of the city, ultra-modern skyscrapers tower above wooden shacks and hovels. Prestigious air-conditioned department stores display \$1,000 fur coats and French perfumes while teeming bazaars in the narrow streets nearby are full of shoddy goods and pungent smells.

The luxury apartment blocks of Akpujong and other 'new rich' districts contrast starkly with the shanty towns of the urban poor like Nangok or Shihung. Crowded into the cracks and valleys of the hill-sides are whole communities of temporary dwellings - the 'favellahs' or shanty towns that some people say no longer exist. Rows of bright blue 'portaloo's are the only amenities provided by the authorities. Water must be carried from taps nearby. Over the past three decades, millions have been forced to exchange a life of debt and misery in the countryside for some kind of squalid existence in Seoul or the other major cities.

On the coast, vast industrial complexes have almost literally risen from the sea in impressive feats of civil engineering and construction while inland the rice-farmer is endeavouring to scrape a living from his tiny parcel of land using the tools and techniques of his ancestors. Throughout the south of the Korean peninsula, a sophisticated urban middle class, which takes for granted the video and the CD player, the microwave and the mobile telephone, continues to conduct the family and religious rituals of its not-too-distant peasant past. In town or country, women will carry their children strapped to their backs in the traditional manner and can still be seen balancing huge loads on their heads.

Now, economically one of the most *advanced* countries in the world, South Korea is one of the most *backward* in terms of human rights. In fact, the brutality of the repression is one of the major contributing factors to its very economic progress! The rulers who have brought South Korea into the 20th century have used the terror methods of the emperors (with a few modern additions) to hold the population in subjection. But docility and compliance have not been the characteristics of the working people of South Korea. On the contrary, they have a proud history of revolt against the cruel impositions of Japanese and US imperialism, military dictatorship and of the giant Korean conglomerates.

This strike has conclusively demonstrated the capacity of the working class to play a leading role in changing society or, as Marx and Engels put it, that of "grave-digger" of the very system that has forced it into being. And the class it confronts seems to have been created ready-made with power and wealth ostentatiously and corruptly concentrated in the hands of a few monopoly-owning 'dynasties' - the founders of the Chaebol and their immediate family.

"Chaebol Economy"

Thirty giant conglomerates dominate the South Korean economy. Their turnover, according to research publicised in an April 1997 *Le Monde Diplomatique*, is equal to 4/5ths of the country's Gross National Product or GNP. They own more than 40% of all the country's assets in industry, agriculture, commerce and the service sector. Ten of them account for 50% of all exports.

The extent of the concentration of power in the economy is indicated by the fact that just *four* "Super Chaebol" - Daewoo, Samsung, Hyundai and Lucky Gold Star - have combined sales equal to *half* of GNP. Daewoo's turnover is now over \$52 billion a year (greater than that of other world giants - Unilever and Nestlé). Samsung has 48 principal affiliates, making anything from semi-conductors to loaves of bread and aeroplanes to shirts. It runs insurance and advertising firms and has just gone into car-making. It even has its own chain of cinemas.

Hyundai virtually 'owns' the city of Ulsan - a city with 'metropolitan' status equivalent to that of a province. The company dominates the lives of the more than 700,000 citizens from the cradle to the grave. One-third of all adults work in its ship-building, heavy- and precision-engineering or car factories. Most of what they get in their pay packets will go straight back to Hyundai. It owns the schools, colleges, shops, department stores and hospitals. It builds the apartments and runs the cultural centres and of course has a monopoly of the vehicles on the road. One of its founder's sons - Chung Mong-jun - 'represents' Ulsan in the National Assembly.

The grandiose library that overlooks the city was graciously "donated" by Hyundai. Way below, on the shore-line of the East Sea, beyond the ugly blocks of workers' flats, stands "Goliath" - the giant gantry crane, known and loved throughout Korea as a symbol of workers' resistance. In the great shipyard strike of 1989 it was occupied for more than 100 days until a full-scale military operation was mounted from land, sea and air to end the strike.



Out of nothing in no time

Thirty years ago this great industrial city was no more than a fishing village. Indeed, there was no shipbuilding industry in the whole of Korea at that time, no car factories, no micro electronics and no steel industry. Even the Chaebol hardly existed. In 1974 all of them together accounted for no more than 15% of sales. So where did they come from and how did they create their vast empires? They and their achievements were by no means a product of the unfettered working of the capitalist market system. If that were the case, how is it that countries on a par with Korea in 1960 have trailed so far behind and others in the 'Third World' have failed totally to emulate its spectacular achievements?

From building no ships in 1973, Hyundai became the world's biggest ship builder. With no knowledge of the industry in 1968, Posco Iron & Steel became the sixth largest steel maker in the world. South Korea has been the fifth largest car-producing country for some time and Daewoo is now aiming to produce two million cars a year world-wide.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, industry and manufacturing in South Korea was growing twice as fast as in comparable "middle-income oil importing economies" (World Development Report 1982). Between 1960 and 1970 exports grew at 34% a year. At the beginning of that decade fuels, minerals and metals accounted for 30% of exports; in 1979, one per cent. At the beginning of that period, no machinery or transport equipment was exported; by 1979 they constituted 20% of all exports. By then, other manufactures and clothing accounted for 69%.

Designated as a "low income" country by the World Bank in 1960, South Korea had a per capita income of \$82. By 1994 it was more than a hundred times

that figure and last year GDP per head was \$11,910. Even though the mass of the population has not received anything like an equal share of the benefits, the average male in his '20s in South Korea is now a full five inches taller than he would have been in 1962.

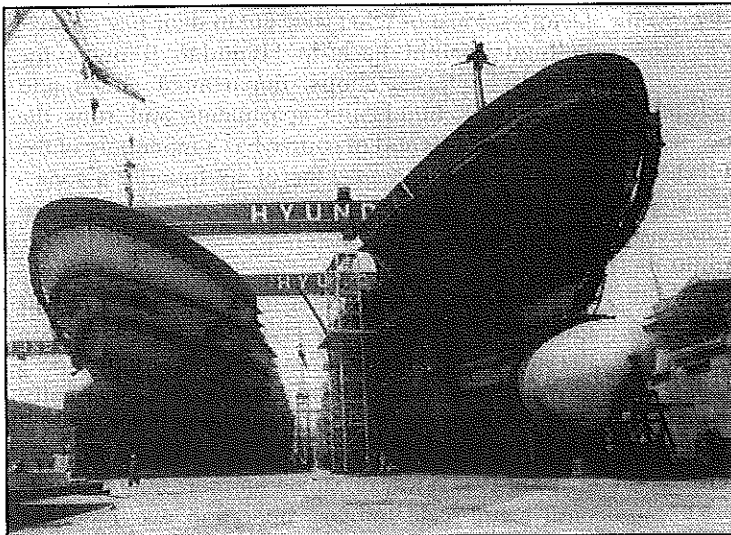
Unrepeatable

The very favourable treatment of Korean capitalism by the US and later by Japan is an important factor in its success but one which is also fast turning into its opposite. The combination of circumstances that lies behind the special status given to South Korea cannot be repeated to order in any other country. The balance of forces in world relations has dramatically changed now that nearly all the workers' states based on Stalinist distortions of socialist ideas have collapsed. Even though the 'rogue' regime in Northern Korea remains the 'odd one out' in that it does not seem, up to now, to have been taking the same capitalist road as its neighbours, it is no longer linked to a chain of regimes based on a system that is totally antagonistic to capitalism. Its economy could very rapidly simply implode and be laid open to all sorts of predators.

The regime of Kim Jong-il, son of Kim Il-sung, is reckoned to spend a huge amount of its budget on defence including its nuclear weaponry and regularly threatens military action. But in its severely weakened state it would have difficulty carrying anything out. Southern governments hold regular civil defence drills, with mock air raids etc. probably more as propaganda exercises than out of serious concern for the safety of the population. The threat of invasion is as good an excuse as any for putting patrols of armed soldiers on the streets, organising road blocks and doing identity card checks.

These days, the dire economic situation in the North makes state ownership and planning look much less attractive to workers in the South than it did in the period just after World War II. Then, it meant a rapid development of the considerable natural resources of the area while the capitalist South was floundering.

At that time things were quite different in many respects. While not socialist, Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe - one-party dictatorships resting on state ownership and planning - had been strengthened. China was 'lost' to imperialism as private ownership of land and industry had been eliminated. A whole number of countries in South East Asia, including Korea, were threatening to follow suit like 'dominoes'. It was undoubtedly in



Hyundai shipyard, Ulsan.



Stalin (centre) and other 'Communist' leaders in 1929.

the strategic interests of world capitalism to create a bulwark against the spread of 'communism' in the whole region and to hold the revolutionary working class of Korea in check.

At one stage, the US was pouring in technical and financial aid to the South at the rate of \$2.2 billion a year. It kept tens of thousands of troops in the country after the Korean War (and up to the present day). It was party to the establishment of the murderous Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan military dictatorships in 1961 and 1980 respectively - both of them notorious for crushing in blood uprisings, demonstrations and strikes.

"Communist threat"

The real reason for maintaining this 'presence', was blurted out by President Truman's special advisor, Edwin Pauley, when he warned, "Communism in Korea could get off to a better start than practically anywhere else in the world". A US commander admitted in 1945: "When we came in, we found the communists actually ruling and controlling South Korea". Russian troops had been advancing from the North for some time but a genuinely popular rising was under way. In the brief period between the collapse of the Japanese war effort and the arrival of US troops, workers had begun to take control over their workplaces, to form unions and to take responsibility for management. Peasant unions were organising land take-overs and rice collection, storage and distribution.

Korean communists had built their own party and fought throughout the 1920s and 1930s to organise trade unions in the teeth of atrocious state terror from the Japanese occupiers. Now their movement was coming into its own. But it was not only US imperialism who feared the victory of a workers' and peasants' revolution in the Korean peninsula.

The establishment of genuine socialist democracy in any country and an appeal for workers elsewhere to do the same would have sounded the death knell for the parasitic elite ruling the Soviet Union under Stalin.

Stalinism

Contrary to the much-peddled scare stories about 'reds under the bed' plotting revolutions everywhere, the bureaucracy that had usurped power in Moscow on the basis of the revolution being isolated to a backward country, worked through its domination of the "Communist Parties" internationally to *prevent* workers taking control in society. Notably in China in the 1920s, Spain and France in the 1930s, when there were heroic revolutionary movements, it insisted on treacherous tactics that tied the workers' organisations to the political representatives of its own exploiters - the owners of industry, finance, land.

State-owned, planned economies were established, in post-war Eastern Europe, China and so on, following popular revolts and the virtual 'flight' of capitalism. But, with a heavy involvement of the 'Red Army' of the Soviet Union, or in the case of China, its own peasant-based army, from the beginning they were under the tight control of a developing authoritarian bureaucratic elite. Fig-leaf 'coalition' governments were artificially cobbled together. Behind them, a ruthless policy was pursued of physically excluding from power not only what remained of the bourgeoisie but the workers too. Regimes were set up in the image of Moscow's centrally controlled society. In the Soviet Union, Stalin maintained the state terror that he had used to crush all opposition and all the elements of workers' democracy established by the Bolshevik revolution.

Carve-up

Now, in Northern Korea, Stalin was as anxious as the US imperialists to find moderate figures through whom to operate to stem the movement from below. Attempts to set up provisional compromise governments were not faring well. With indecent haste, he agreed with the US generals' proposals to carve-up the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel, even though 'communist' and insurgent forces were in control far to the South of it.

A congress in Seoul in September 1945 was attended by approximately one thousand delegates from North and South. A 'Korean People's Republic' was proclaimed. Its programme included the nationalisation of all basic heavy industries, natural resources, means of communication and transportation; the establishment of compulsory



primary education and a guarantee of basic human rights, freedom of the press, assembly and religion.

The task of the US War Department, having drawn its line across the body of the country, was to move rapidly to put an end to this uprising and to impose the Syngman Rhee government on South Korea. Moscow was forced to settle for Kim Il-sung in the North. Remaining decidedly in the anti-imperialist camp - retaining state ownership of industry and carrying through rapid collectivisation - he developed a highly personal form of 'Bonapartist' rule. The three main groupings in the 'communist' movement were systematically physically eliminated - first the Korean, then the Yenan (Chinese) returnees, and lastly even the wing most closely allied to Moscow!

Korean War

The Kim Il-sung clique was then in a position to make a push for the South with the idea of extending their own influence and not at all of encouraging genuine independent class action. Imperialism's motives were to defend landlordism and capitalism in the South and to restore it in the North. War became inevitable on the Korean peninsula and broke out in 1950. By 1953 when it ended more than three million Korean civilians had been killed and hundreds of thousands of soldiers. (One million Chinese soldiers also died).

There were many heroic struggles up to and during the Korean War. In each one of them, the leaders would demand the restoration of the people's committees, land redistribution and unification of the country. US forces were still fighting guerrillas throughout South Korea until well into 1952. Their actions were combined with wave upon wave of mass political executions carried out under the

orders of their puppet, Syngman Rhee. Over 100,000 were rounded up and slaughtered in the immediate period after the US presence had restored him to power for a second 'term' in 1950. (This campaign alone eliminated more people than the US claimed to have been murdered by 'communists' North and South during the whole war).

No organised left political forces remained in the South at the end of the Korean War. Yet, before long, as if rising from the ashes, there were once again powerful movements of workers and students for 'unification of the country and socialism'. They could only be contained by the heaviest of state repression and the American presence.

In his authoritative book, '*Rush to Development*', Martin Hart-Landsberg explains: "Rule by military dictatorship was a logical consequence of the illegitimacy of the entire US project to create a separate South Korea; it could be saved in no other way". But he goes on to show how the building of Korea's modern industries did not figure in the plans of American imperialism but was the deliberate decision of a military caste determined to grow rich on the proceeds. Quite cynically and methodically it would use its 'special (*favoured*) status' to build the basis for becoming independent of its 'sponsors'. Opting for the capitalist road, it would literally have to create a capitalist class to fill the vacuum that existed after the collapse of Japanese imperialism and the end of 40 years' foreign domination in every sphere of life.

Theories on trial

Spectacular results were achieved, effectively on the basis of the *defeat* of the Korean revolution. Do they disprove the theory that isolated, underdeveloped countries cannot "catch up" with advanced industrial economies in terms of technique and productive capacity except on the basis of a state-owned, planned economy?

Special factors obviously prompted the largest imperialist power to set aside considerable resources to build its defences in that region and, in the process, develop the country to some extent. The special trading concessions, the big expansion into Korea of Japanese capitalism and even the land reforms pushed through under US tutelage to stave off peasant uprisings went a long way towards making South Korea an exception that proves the rule. But it is now widely accepted, and confirmed again in a March 1997 '*Policy Review*' published in London by the 'Overseas Development Institute', that the single most important factor behind South Korea's 'miraculous' development (and, to some extent that of the other 'Asian Tigers') was, after all, the *state*.



Kim Il-sung.



Pusan container terminal - "Vast industrial complexes have almost literally risen from the sea".

Although located firmly in the camp of capitalist nations, with a developed and very concentrated class of owners, the 'Chaebol economy' was by no means an example of unregulated *laissez faire* capitalism. On the contrary, there was here an *exceptional* involvement of the state in every aspect of economic as well as social life. The bourgeois state was even prepared to sacrifice some of "its own" when necessary and limit the freedom of the Chaebol themselves in order to keep the whole show on the road.

Interestingly enough, when the military took over in 1961, a group of colonels is said to have looked at the parlous state of the economy - especially compared to that of the North, which was going ahead - and developed a draft plan based on state ownership and principles of self-reliance. It was shredded for fear of US disapproval! Nevertheless, the Five Year Plans adopted by the military regimes and the targeting of investment in heavy industries achieved results through using methods strongly resembling those of the bureaucratically-run, state-owned economies of the Stalinist camp. In the early 1970s, 12 of the country's 16 largest firms were actually state-owned and, ignoring Western advice and risking US ire, the Park regime used the state-owned banks to direct loans into six totally new industries - petrochemicals, electronics, iron and steel, machinery, ships, and other transport equipment.

State-dominated capitalism

But, although it was possible to subsidise whole sectors of the economy while they got started, or even when they faltered, it was always on the basis of either quite brutally penalising other sectors or by overdrawing on both domestic and foreign finances. However state-dominated, it was impossible for the Chaebol economy to escape the scourges of a system

based on private profit. The headlong drive for expansion at all costs actually aggravates the crises. It ends up with productive capacity considerably in excess of actual demand - domestic or international. Workers within the country cannot buy back the products of their labour, since the bosses hold their wages so far below the value they create. A country that depends so much on trade is highly vulnerable when those crises occur elsewhere in the capitalist world but also when unfavourable changes in the prices of raw materials and of manufactured products result, precisely from the ruinous 'free play of market forces'.

Although not suffering as seriously the periodic crises that afflicted other capitalist countries in the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea was not immune to 'cyclical' dips in growth rates. Now it faces actual recession caused by the vagaries of the market - domestic as well as international. By continuing to pay appallingly low wages and putting precious little into welfare spending, Korean capitalism has severely restricted demand at home. Wages in the newer industries with large workforces have increased dramatically in the past ten years - about 150%. This is not some automatic result of the 'globalisation' process but of bitter and persistent struggle on the part of the newly organised workers in these industries. The majority of Koreans work in low-paid service jobs. At least five million are not on any payroll and 2 million work on the land.

Producing for the foreign market, therefore, while consuming vast amounts of 'start-up' capital, has nevertheless been the quickest way for 'Korea Inc.' to make its profits. *Exports increased by 800% in 30 years.* But the heavy dependence on selling abroad to fuel the dazzling growth rates has built another fatal flaw into the foundations of the economy. It has made it particularly vulnerable to the effects of



down-turns in other parts of the capitalist world. It is also highly susceptible to fluctuations in markets and prices. South Korea controls 35% of the world memory chip market but last year the world price of a 'direct random access memory' (DRAM) semiconductor fell drastically to \$8 from \$84 a year before.

South Korean capitalism, far from enjoying a privileged status in its dealings with the USA and Japan, now suffers from aggressive protectionist measures on the part of its trading 'partners'. They retaliate against cheap goods with anti-'dumping' rules. It suffers adverse effects when the Japanese yen falls against the dollar, increasing the competitive edge of Japanese products - including cars and ships - in the USA and elsewhere. Also, as the second biggest recipient of exports from Australia, South Korea pays heavily when the government in Canberra moves to strengthen its currency.

Even the features in the South Korean economy that bear an outward resemblance to those of a Stalinist state have turned from being advantages to disadvantages. As there, the emphasis on quantity rather than quality has led to an inability to adapt to, and develop, new technology. This problem is compounded in Korea by the fact that much of its "miracle" growth was due to the use of Japanese technology borrowed under contract. Now that Japan sees South Korea as a rival rather than an offshore production base for its own firms, these contracts are not being renewed. The big firms are now either having to drive into the 'lower quality' markets of South and Central America, Eastern Europe, China and Asia or invest vast sums to develop their own technology... or both.



Overblown

All the strengths of the 'special' breed of capitalism that developed so rapidly in this South East Asian peninsular are now turning into its weaknesses and the giant conglomerates are themselves spreading into the global economy. Pressures are being exerted from foreign capital to lift the thousands of obstructive regulations and the blatantly protectionist measures operated by the state. The fact that the Chaebol's rapid expansion has been based on loans rather than investment has also been a double-edged sword. Most firms have borrowed at least three times more than their asset value and some to a far greater extent. In the case of Hanbo, the 14th largest Chaebol that collapsed in January, it was 20 times. Sammi Steel has also collapsed under its debt burden and other conglomerates are said to be dangerously overblown.

The state itself has the second biggest national debt after the US of \$104 billion. The lack of resources put into research and development and the absence of a 'home-grown' machine tool industry has meant Korean capitalism has had to pay for its *spectacular* export record with a *spectacular* level of imports of energy (40%), capital goods and components. In 1995 imports increased by 32% in one year to a total of \$144 billion.

It is a myth that the special status of South Korea meant massive investment from abroad in capital goods development. Most of the money put into Korea in the post-war period was in the form of 'aid' (including military) and loans. In addition, there were special foreign exchange and trade terms which gave South Korean goods disproportionate access particularly to US and Japanese markets. Now that world relations have changed, following the collapse of the state-owned planned economies, US and Japanese governments no longer need to bolster the South Korean economy.

In fact, for some years now, they have come to regard South Korea as a dangerous competitor on the world market. As well as the removal of the strategic reasons for propping up Korean capitalism, the slow-down in world trade and the difficulties experienced by most capitalist economies has intensified competition.

The US has for a long time been engineering more and more trade disputes, even before general hostilities in the 'Cold War' ceased. Japan has stepped up the withdrawal of its technical 'know-how'. The Frankenstein's monster they had helped to nurture had developed too many of the attributes of its creators - an appetite for profits, an ability to compete and an awkward propensity to try and

defend its own interests. Tight monetary policies aimed at cooling the over-heating economies of China, Malaysia and Thailand also hit trade with South Korea.

Protection racket

The state's protection of the Chaebol conglomerates is another double-edged sword. When they are in favour with the ruling party, they can expand and prosper far beyond their 'natural' limits. But when they fall out of favour, they can be broken or, at best, severely weakened for a whole period.

In 1984 the founder/owner of the Kukje-ICC group made the mistake of *only* donating \$400,000 to the 'New Village' movement of dictator Chun Doo-hwan, when the other large Chaebol-owners had been persuaded to give over \$1 million. The empire was brought crashing down and its component parts redistributed to all the better-behaved conglomerates. Only later (after the General was murdered by the CIA and a new dictator came to power), did the owning family's fortunes revive. The company reassembled and regained at least some of its former position.

Hanbo, on the other hand, even after its collapse, continues to receive vast handouts. A government that wants to see the completion of its prestigious new Tonjin steel mill is busily constructing feeder road and rail links to the 'green field' site. All the pieces of this broken conglomerate are being picked up by other Chaebol predators in the field (and even some not yet in that particular field). The government bailed out the now private banks affected to the tune of \$7.1 billion, thus dramatically inflating its already massive budget deficit.

While formally freeing trade and opening up to foreign goods, the South Korean government is desperately trying to hold the lid on imports. The latest moral crusade against "luxury" goods has angered the US Trade Department which suspects it is aimed at protecting domestic producers. But now that more of Korea's exports go to Asian countries than to the United States, the slowing down in the economies of all these countries is heightening tensions between them - including with China which was on its way to taking more South Korean exports than the US. (In the period 1987-94 exports to Asia increased by four and a half times to \$25.8 billion, to the US 12% to \$20.5 billion and to China 38 times to \$8 billion. In 1996, exports to the United States fell to just over \$10 billion).

Problems

In 1995 exports to developed countries were still

growing - at a rate of 28%. A year later they were down by more than 8%. Semi-conductors account for 20% of South Korea's exports. Last year sales of them abroad fell a dramatic 44%. There was also a substantial decrease in sales of chemicals and steel and a poor performance in most other fields. Domestic demand for electrical home appliances was also down and, according to 'Economic Report', heavy industry and chemicals were "anaemic" and over-capacity was now afflicting whole swathes of the economy. All this spells disaster for "Korea Inc." The country's trading deficit has doubled in the past year. At \$23.7 billion it is the second highest in the world.

The National Debt has gone over the \$100 billion which, as 'Business Korea' noted, was double what it was at the time of Kim Young-sam's inauguration in 1993. Now, according to the government's own estimates, it could reach \$144 billion by the end of 1997. Interest and repayments on it cost \$10.1 billion per annum - interest alone amounting to nearly 13% of the national budget. Offshore borrowing costs \$7 billion in interest. Foreign direct investment, which has always been a small proportion of total investment, is actually declining from a high point of no more than \$1.5 billion. South Korea ranks second only to India for discrimination against foreign investment according to the Hong Kong based 'Political and Economic Risk Consultancy'.

Investment by the top 200 Korean companies was expected to *fall* in absolute terms this year when only two years ago it was increasing at a rate of 47%. Meanwhile, these same firms have been doubling their own overseas direct investment and in the case of 'information and communications' and 'machinery', trebling and quadrupling it.

In the field of labour-intensive production like clothes and shoes, some South Korean firms (and some famous American and Japanese 'names' previously operating in South Korea) have moved to lower wage economies in the region and elsewhere. Capital-intensive industries regard easier access to markets as a more important consideration. Although cars form a substantial share of South Korea's exports, they still represent only 1.9% of total sales in Europe. Companies like Daewoo are looking for ways of getting into that market. If they set up factories in Europe itself, they not only get round the EU external trade barriers but brings down the cost of transporting the final product to its destination. Even where wages are higher than in Korea, these other considerations can be more important in the investment decisions of the Chaebol.



Teachers' banners at Jongmyo.

The world's press has made great play of the massive rise in wages in South Korea over the past ten years, particularly in the metal-working and engineering industries - 15% per annum on average. The unions began to take advantage of the late 1980s boom and organised to pull themselves out of their 'Third World' conditions.

SOUTH KOREA'S 'SECRET'

The world's press has made great play of the massive rise in wages in South Korea over the past ten years, particularly in the metal-working and engineering industries - 15% per annum on average. The unions began to take advantage of the late 1980s boom and organised to pull themselves out of their 'Third World' conditions.

But a Daewoo workers' leader at the KCTU's February conference indicated what has been perhaps the biggest *secret* of Korea's "miracle". Even after ten years of struggle and improvements, it is still South Korea's workers who pay the biggest price to keep it going.

He spoke of the 12-hour shifts, six days a week. He pointed to every part of his body to indicate the muscles and limbs that have "gone" by the age of 40. He spoke of the super-profits and the arrogance of the bosses that made his blood boil. This is what lies behind the Korean workers' anger that reached breaking point at the end of last year. At this delegate's factory in Bupyong, 92% had voted for strike action and every one of the more than 10,000 workers had been out solid.

If South Korean capitalism came near to the highest levels of growth in history, it still depends more on the intensive exploitation of its workers than on the latest developments in equipment for helping them do their job. The average South Korean works with only two-fifths the amount of capital available to his American counterpart and even in the modern car factories, has much less equipment at his elbow.

The well-named 'evil' laws pushed through

parliament, show that the South Korean bosses intend to keep things that way. The whole burden of the government's propaganda has been that the economy demands sacrifices as the growth rate falls yet further. In 1995 it was 9% per annum, in 1996 it was 6.8% and in 1997 heading for 5% or less. (One journal makes out that 4% would actually mean entering a period of nil or "negative" growth, i.e. an actual decline.)

Dream or nightmare?

For the majority of workers, the "dream" is easily explained; for them it has been a nightmare. In terms of the way South Korean capitalism treats its workers it is a long way from 'catching up' with the far-from-adequate standards of its fellow OECD member-states. In fact, figures indicate the opposite. The 1995 International Labour Organisation (ILO) in its Year Book, for example, shows that workers in South Korea work longer hours than in 61 out of the 68 countries it reviewed. Only countries like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan have a worse record.

A leader of Seoul's subway workers, at a KCTU demonstration on 2nd February beside the Central Station explained why his members are in the "vanguard of the movement" as he puts it:

"Day shifts are ten hours; nights 14 with some of the most gruelling shift patterns imaginable - two days, two nights, two days, one night, rotation day, holiday and back to the beginning again..."

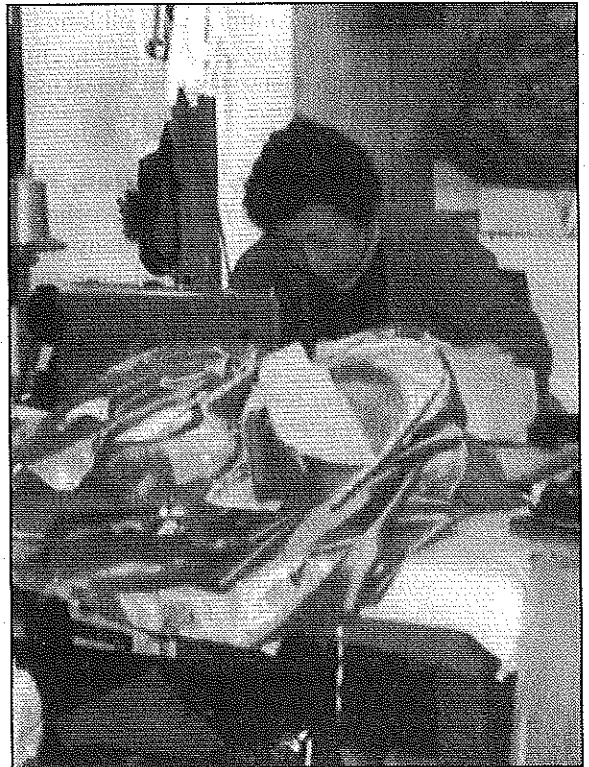
"In 1994 we led a struggle against the government's wage freeze and suffered police action worse than under the military."

"It is still illegal for us in the public sector to strike. Forty six of the activists were arrested and 16 'did time'. Nearly 3000 were victimised in some way by management and over 100 were sacked. Leaders of the union staged a week-long hunger strike at Myong Dong."

"Some of the (subway) lines are organised by the FKTU and that complicates our struggle. But we will not see our union crushed. We aim to stay in the front ranks."

Women workers

Women workers, who were to the fore in establishing the democratic unions in the 1970s, now find themselves thrown out of industries with large workforces (some of which, such as textiles, have declined drastically). Two-thirds now work where there are fewer than five employees and are thus not covered even by the inadequate protection afforded by law. Many toil long hours in the sprawling jungle of the service sector (twice the size of manufacturing) - in the markets or hotels, in hairdressing or secretarial jobs. Over one million are said to work in the "sex industry", forced there by



A garment worker at the 'Peace Market' complex.

poverty and the lack of real job opportunities. Most companies violate the equal employment laws (even 38% of the larger enterprises - over 300 employees). Discrimination is particularly fierce against married women. In manufacturing, they are mostly confined to unskilled, unhealthy and grossly underpaid assembly work. Hundreds of thousands will bend to a sewing machine all day either in the 'seclusion' of their own homes or in vast death-trap rabbit warrens like the 'Peace Market' with each room run by a sub-contractor in hock to the big monopolies.

In the "industrialised" world, only in Japan do women get paid a smaller proportion of men's income than in South Korea. There it is a mere 44%; in South Korea 52% on average. The old peasant attitude persists of regarding females as literally worth less than males. (This is the reason behind the practice continued to the present day of aborting fetuses 'diagnosed' as female - in the past by the village soothsayer, today by an electronic scan). They are discriminated against at school, at work and in society.

Gains previously fought for are being undermined, including one day a month menstruation leave. Creches are compulsory only at workplaces with more than 500 employees i.e. very few. Women face higher unemployment levels, almost minimal job security plus sexual harassment at work and even on the picket line. Apart from making undue super-profits for the rich, Korea's working women are



expected to continue with all kinds of "traditional" domestic drudgery and suffer untold levels of domestic violence (against which no legal protection yet exists).

Housing, Education, Health...

Housing for ordinary workers' families is appallingly inadequate. Many have 'graduated' from the shanty towns to little more than garage extensions on someone else's property. Workers' flats often consist of one room for a whole family.

Though far fewer than in the '70s, tens of thousands still live a 'cat and mouse' existence in shacks they build for themselves on the outskirts of the cities. The bull-dozers can move in at any moment to clear the way for 'developers'. On many occasions they have been accompanied by armed thugs and sometimes whole divisions of riot police to break up the mass protests of the dispossessed. Promises of new homes in the blocks that mushroom out of the wasteland are never fulfilled. A 'Korea Herald' editorial in January characterised the government's attempts to control speculation as like "applying insecticide after the locusts have already devoured the crops - the real estate agents and investors move with such agility."

Rents can take half a worker's wages. There is no such thing as the welfare state in South Korea. Much of children's schooling and a large proportion of

medical care must be paid for. The cost of education for one child of secondary age is put at around 300,000 won per month. This is more than the statutory minimum wage and about the same amount as unemployment benefit which, is only available for ex-employees of large firms -1.6 % of the total.

Although the general level of unemployment is around 2%, one in ten 15-19 year-olds is unemployed (and without benefit) and 9% of 20-24 year-olds. A larger proportion of South Korea's young people go on to further education than in the US - 24% - but at the cost of great sacrifice made by their parents. A poor farmer will struggle for years to invest in a cow that he can sell for two million won the day his child gets accepted for university.

Medical insurance and health and safety provisions at work are totally inadequate. A number of doctors, dedicated to transform the situation, have played an important part in the workers' and democracy movement. One of them, Yang Kil-seung, indicated why:

"When you see the situation in the factories, it's just like what's described in the old books of Engels. You know it shouldn't be that way. You ask workers to join the union and make some kind of action together to change it... That's what we did in the 1980s. Our group's name was 'Action for Workers' Health and Safety'.

"We would report occupational disease cases and develop organisations amongst victims or people who had been injured in industrial accidents but not compensated or properly treated. There are plenty of them. They lose their fingers, hands, arms and legs.

"There are factory inspectors... about 300 in all of the country. So one guy has to look into more than 500 workplaces in a year. In this area, there are masses of small workshops. We often see bad cuts, lacerations, penetrations from the drilling machines and presses. 75% of press machines are operated illegally, so how can you punish them? It's 75%, not 5%! In big industries the situation is changing a bit - because of the unions - but without unions there is no protection.

"You only get 70% of the basic wage, which is less than half of the normal salary, for accidents and then only if the company doesn't wriggle out of it, cover it up. But if someone is off work ill they get either very little or nothing, depending on the size of the firm. They have to pay a large part of their treatment, even if they are covered by insurance. In small firms, there is no cover.

"I was called in to inspect the incidence of occupational disease in a large shipyard. The year before - the worst year - medical reports showed 20 victims. The very next year, when I was invited to check if the medical exam was done correctly or not,



Shanty towns are destroyed to make way for luxury apartment blocks.



Wonjin Rayon workers.

they reported 220. And then I added 65 more after reviewing the documents. They were nearly all pneumoconiosis and hearing loss problems. I think this year we can go even further - on organic solvent poisoning."

The day Yang Kil-seung recorded these comments he received a fax at his surgery asking about liver cancer occurring among people working with PVC (polyvinyl chloride).

"This is already well known in European countries and America but this seems to be the first found case in Korea. It's at a chemical plant in the Kunjan area in the South West, owned by Hang Hwa - a recently emerged Chaebol. 30 of the 60 workers have to boil the PVC materials in a tank and go inside it to clean it every time it is emptied. The government (which runs the workers' compensation insurance) has said they cannot pay for the cost of the medical treatment since the disease is not recognised. So they are being treated by the general health insurance, which they pay themselves. Such cases are only just coming to light in these 'developing' countries."

Another highly respected 'democratic' medical practitioner is Kim Rokho, taken to court for "interference with business" when he took his place each day on the picket line at Wonjin Rayon. Workers there had been stricken with a lethal industrial disease caused by carbon disulphide poisoning and were demanding compensation. Getting no response from the heartless management, they took the desperate step of keeping the coffin of one of their fellow sufferers with them at the gates of the factory for nearly 20 weeks. They were victorious in 1993



Shattered dreams - an immigrant worker has no recourse to justice.

and the company was forced to close but the work of the campaigners continues as does the court case. This doctor is also known throughout the movement for the clinic/hospital he set up to help workers who cannot afford treatment and to care for victims of police torture.

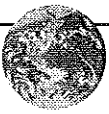
Immigrant workers

Other activists have taken up the desperate plight of 'migrant workers'. In the long years of growth with very little unemployment, the South Korean government has made periodic appeals for foreign workers to come to South Korea. The most recent was for 60,000 and there are an estimated 150,000 in the country. They came from Nepal, the Philippines, Pakistan and Indonesia - many in the hope of remitting at least a creditable amount home to their families. In the majority of cases, they have found themselves totally without rights and even without the most basic provision of shelter. Some have been 'housed' in container lorries. Many regularly do not receive even the meagre wages due to them.

Harsh Reality

All this and much more constitutes the harsh reality of South Korean capitalism's fairy-tale success. Now that it faces a dramatic slow-down, the country's working class knows what is in store. The struggles of the late 1980s took place in the *fattest* years of South Korea's development; the *lean* years promise a long, hard struggle.

But struggle is a way of life for the Korean working class and especially for its activists. The 1996-97 great strike, the first since the second half of the 1940s, may have taken the world by surprise, but it had been a long time in the making. The first truly 'general' strike, it had been preceded not only by a vigorous and lengthy campaign against the changes to the Labour law, but by *decades* of struggle to establish



independent and fighting trade unions.

Fighters and collaborators

The origins of both the KCTU and the FKTU can be traced back at least to the revolutionary period at the end of the second world war when capitalism in Korea was fighting for survival.

According to the KCTU's own account, when the independent 'Korea National Council of Trade Unions' was formed in November 1945, it "supported revolutionary socialists" and put forward the demand to the American military administration that "complete control be allowed by the workers' factory committees over enterprises formerly owned by the Japanese and pro-Japanese Koreans". It played an important role in the great September strike of 1946, followed by the March strike of 1947, and the one-day general strikes of February and May 1948.

The Korean Labour Federation for Independence, on the other hand, a forerunner of the FKTU was set up in 1946 with the aim not of liberating but of controlling the working class - a tool of the bosses. It loudly declared its total hostility to socialism and actively promoted co-operation between labour and management. In this it had the full backing of the government, the bosses and the American military up to and during the Korean war of 1950-53. Everything was done in this period to stem the tide of popular uprising and a take-over of society by the Korean working class.

Such was the force of the movement from below that this devastating war would never have been inflicted on the people of Korea if they had been left to decide their own fate. Bruce Cummings and Jon Halliday in their book *Korea: The Unknown War* maintain that



Park Chung-hee - Military dictator from 1961 until his assassination at the hands of the Korean CIA in 1979.

without US intervention, there would have been a "revolutionary transformation of society". Large elements of workers' direct democracy had no doubt been established throughout the South, often before the Northern army arrived. Whether the "communists" of North Korea, the USSR or China would have succeeded in imposing their bureaucratic model is another question. But the intervention of US imperialism and, during the Korean War, soldiers from 16 other capitalist countries under the flag of the United Nations, caused the atrocious carnage that has left a legacy of hatred against imperialism.

During the Korean War, there were heroic strikes by textile workers, miners and dock-workers. The latter attempted to boycott the transport of military supplies. The struggle for free and democratic trade unions continued unabated throughout the long harsh years of the Syngman Rhee regime. In 1956, two million votes were given to a candidate standing for socialist democracy and a planned economy - Cho Pong-am. Two years later, Rhee had him executed for "collaboration with North Korea". Then, on the pretext of imminent invasion, he moved to push 22 bills through parliament including revision of the National Security law. He had all opposition parliamentarians removed from the Assembly by police trained in the martial arts. When in 1960 he was seen to use ballot rigging and sheer terror tactics to prevent the re-election of an opposition vice-president Chang Myon, students poured onto the streets in protest. The police turned on them with live ammunition, killing over 100. This only drove them to more protest action and brought others into the movement. When martial law was declared, the Korean army refused to fire on the students, many of whom demonstrated under the slogan "Democracy in Politics and Equality in the Economy".

The "April (students') Revolution" of 1960 gave enormous impetus to the struggle for fighting workplace organisations. In the ten months after Rhee was forced into exile there were around 2,000 street demonstrations involving a million people. Cho Pong-am's Progressive Party became the Socialist Mass Party and joined forces with student, trade union and other organisations to demand the establishment of ties with the North and elections to re-unify the country. Early in 1961, the students again took the lead and mobilised support for a conference of delegates from North and South. Just four days before it was due to take place, a group of army officers under Major General Park Chung-hee, with the blessing of Washington, carried through a *coup d'etat*, and the labour movement was once again crushed.



Reprisals in the wake of the Kwangju massacre, May 1980.

The Korea Labour and Society Institute (KLSI) in a history of the trade union movement explains how, after being disbanded along with all political parties and socialist groups, the unions went through a process of "dissolution, reorganisation and expansion" in the 1960s and 1970s. They were re-established from the top only by orders of the military in 1961 through its Union Reorganisation Committee. The FKTU was the result and was paid for by the American CIA.

Thus formed, in the words of the KLSI, it "fell down completely" in its obligations to the working class of Korea. It openly collaborated with the repression carried out by Park and the military. It has never been forgiven. Bitter feelings towards what was known in the movement as this "yellow dog" union federation persist today and have been sustained by the 'lesser' crimes of the more recent period. In 1987, its leaders swore a loyalty oath to the military dictatorship. It regularly receives financial assistance from the government of Kim Young-sam (of up to \$7 billion per annum). When South Korea was accepted into the OECD, it participated in a government delegation to the ILO, white-washing the state's use of the military against (KCTU) strikers.

The whole period of the 1960s, '70s and '80s was characterised by an unending round of struggle and repression - more struggle meant more repression, more repression meant more struggle. Compressed

into three decades were processes which had developed over three centuries in the world's first industrialised nation - Britain. As in all countries in the early days of capitalism, industrialisation was producing an ever-growing army of wage-slaves. Their cruel treatment at the hands of the factory-owners would push them into 'combining' together for protection. Every attempt would be persecuted, driven underground into 'secret societies' and labelled as 'conspiracies' against the state itself.

The first unions would have difficulty getting beyond the factory level before they were crushed. But the harshness of conditions would send workers again and again down the path of organising until, at last, powerful regional and national bodies could be formed. As soon as the pace of industrialisation quickened, the labour disputes multiplied. There were just 95 in 1959 and by the very next year, 227. In October of 1961, 100,000 workers were organised into trade unions. Ten years later, half a million and by 1979, the year of Park's assassination, more than one million.

Kwangju

In 1980 came the most horrific event of recent South Korean history - the drowning in blood of a popular uprising in Cholla Province. In revolt against the imposition of yet another dictatorship - that of General Chun Doo-hwan - and its brutal treatment of protesting students, the people of Kwangju rose up and took control of their city. They were disciplined, peaceful but armed. Local miners supplied dynamite from the pits as an extra defence against the paratroopers who had gone in and run amok. For days the "Commune" held out against the forces of the state. Then, on May 27th, with the total collusion of US 'advisers', acting in consultation with Washington, Chun Doo-hwan ordered in the 20th Division of the army that proceeded to inflict the most horrible terror and carnage. In total, well over 2,000 men, women and children were slaughtered in the crushing of the 'Commune' and 15,000 more maimed - some mutilated in the most barbarous fashion.

The atrocity would never be forgotten or forgiven. In its aftermath, the military moved in a pre-emptive strike against the labour movement. The leaders of both trade union federations were removed by edict from their posts. Thousands of local union branches were dissolved and union officers sacked, arrested and sent to military-run "education camps". From then on no federations or industrial unions were permitted by law; only workplace or company unions were allowed and then only one on any site.

Once more, however, the workers of South Korea



showed they would not be cowed. Within a matter of years - by 1984 - an economic slow-down had given way to a new upturn in the economy. There was a corresponding upturn in the workers' movement. New struggles arose - for wage increases, improvements in working conditions, the establishment of independent unions and for the democratisation of the government/company unions. But, constantly harassed and persecuted by the state, it would still be more than ten years before the founding of the present-day KCTU.

The Korean workers have fought, been crushed, regrouped and fought again. They have demonstrated with particular courage and tenacity that iron law of capitalist society - that workers will not cease their struggle to throw off the yoke of capitalist exploitation. They have their pioneers and martyrs like the worker-hero Chun Tae-il and the women of Dong-il Textiles who fought long and hard against a ruthless employer, the forces of the state and the leaders of their own FKTU union. The movement will have its ebbs and flows. There will be defeats, pauses and victories all contributing to the emergence of powerful workers' organisations.

The students, too, had their pioneers and martyrs: Kim Sang-jin in the 1970s and Cho Sung-man, Park Jong-chol and Lee Han-yol in the 1980s - all of whom paid with their lives in a struggle to rid society of dictators and imperialist domination. Coming from the more privileged sections of society, students

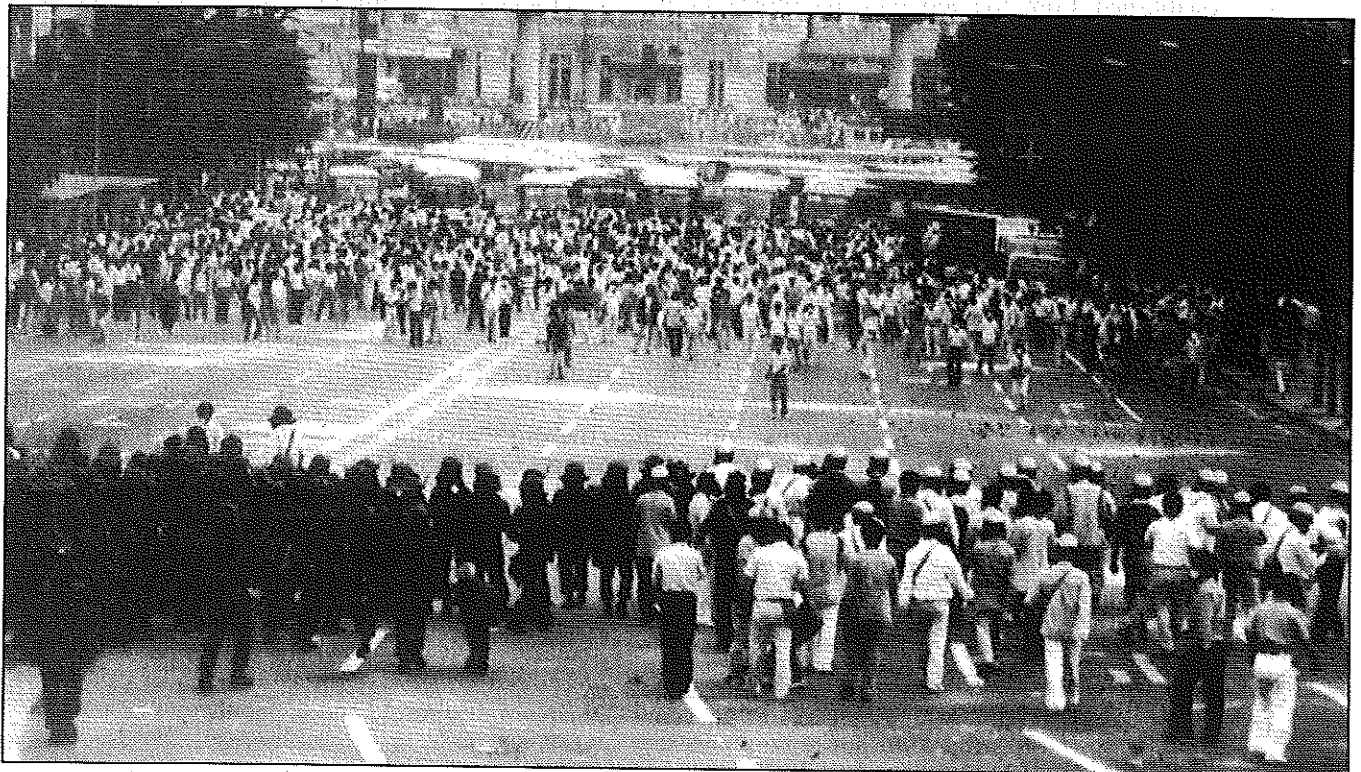
were nevertheless deeply affected by what they saw around them. That and their own experiences at the hands of the state machine convinced them of the ideas of class struggle and socialism. They would go to the countryside or into the workshops to share the life of the factory worker or the village labourer in the manner of the Narodniks in Russia at the end of the last century. They would agitate, educate, and organise and end up in jail. There, their understanding of Marxism was deepened. As so often happens, the prisons of the dictators become the universities of socialism.

Some of the most poignant and best-loved 'struggle songs' were written by the widely known composer Kim Ho-chul. He had first hand experience of how the regime treated its 'dissident elements' in the 1980s:

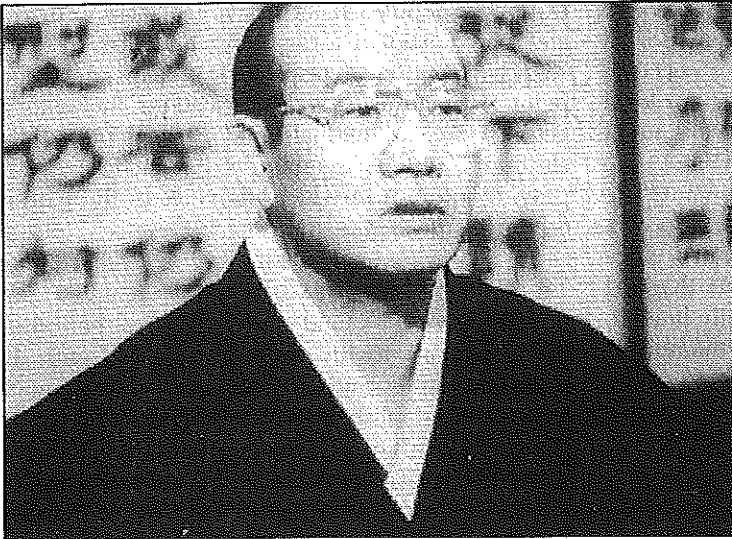
"We were constantly being arrested and kept for months without anyone being informed of where we were. And always the torture. It comes back to you. At night you remember.

"One time I was tied up like a chicken with leather belts and suspended from the ceiling. They would pour hot peppery sauce down your nose. You could only retch. You thought it would never stop and you would not survive...

"When you came out you looked for your friends. Some turned up, some have still not turned up and some will never turn up".



Confrontation in Seoul - the Great Struggle of 1987.



General Chun Doo-hwan.

The Great Struggle

But then came 1987 and "The Great Struggle" that welled up from below. It started first among the students, angered by the death of yet another of their comrades at the hands of the hated secret police. It spread like wildfire. Every layer of society thronged onto the demonstrations in their millions, demanding democracy and an end to dictatorship. South Korea's fabulous economic growth had not only been produced on the backs of the working class. The middle layers in society had felt little of the gains and resented the lack of basic freedoms. Even the stock-brokers joined the demonstrations.

For weeks the whole nation seemed to be on the streets. There were battles and injuries, mass arrests and even another death at the hands of the 'Security' police, but the regime was now fighting for its life. In some instances young soldiers came over to the side of the movement, sick of the way they were treated in Chun's army. After 40 years of military rule, with hardly a moment's respite, it seemed as if a whole era was coming to an end.

Day after day, the students were on the demonstrations, often joined by workers and sometimes actually over-powering the hated riot police. The movement was essentially aimed at ending dictatorship and establishing the basic democratic rights that all bourgeois revolutions have inscribed on their banner - freedom of speech, assembly, press and organisation. Not only were the days of the dictators numbered but the longer the battle continued, the more attractive became the idea of doing away with the very system they protected. It was clear that in the hot-house conditions of the Great Struggle the ideas of socialism were coming to the fore.

General Chun Doo-hwan was forced to accept

standing down in favour of civilian rule. From the point of view of the bourgeois, democracy is anyway preferable and cheaper. Chun's successor, Roh Tae Woo - unlike the joint leaders of the opposition party, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae Jung - had no democratic 'credentials'. He had in fact been an accomplice of Chun Doo-hwan's in the bloody suppression of the "Kwangju Commune". Nevertheless, circumstances obliged him to come out with elaborate promises to change the old order - direct elections, freedom of the press, the release of all political prisoners, the restoration of civil liberties, an attack on corruption and the reform of education and local government. As before, *faced with revolution, the ruling class preferred reform.*

Impetus to workers' movement

The forces of the state had been humiliated but the rule of capital survived. Without its complete eradication, these basic rights could not be guaranteed. Illusions would persist in the power of democracy to solve the myriad problems in society but many would now see socialism as the only alternative. The Marxists of the Committee for a Workers' International predicted in the summer of 1987, in the *Militant International Review*, that the Korean workers would rapidly 'enter the fray' and make use of this period, striving once again to create powerful weapons for their own battles - democratic fighting unions and parties to represent their class interests.

The enormous access of confidence is reflected in the figures. The number of company level unions increased by three times from 1987 to 1993 reaching a total of 7,147 with a membership of nearly two million. The number of organised workers rose in the first half of 1987 by 2.5% but by December was up by 49.6% and again in 1988 by 50.2%. The number of strikes rose from 276 in 1986 to 3,749 in 1987. In the two years after the Great Struggle they were at the level of 1,878 and 1,616. Nominal wages grew by 25% in 1989.

The success of the struggles on pay, hours, holidays etc, in the context of a still booming South Korean economy, helped forge a broader movement. Disregarding the strictures of the labour law, worker-militants formed regional, industrial and national trade union bodies. These developments were matched on the political plane with intense activity in the underground - much of it based on socialist teachings - and in attempts to overcome the numerous obstacles to standing candidates of the working class in elections and building a workers' party.

In the presidential elections of 1988 and again in



1992, a revered veteran of the Labour movement, Paek Ki-wan, stood as the candidate of a "Progressive Party". He was known as a socialist, but did not use the term in his campaigns for legal reasons. (After the collapse of the planned economies in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, like many other activists in the movement, he questioned the viability of socialism). Perhaps as a reaction against dogmatism, Paek Ki-wan's party was a broad coalition of diverse elements that put forward a 100 point programme. Politically limited, excluded from the media and generally hampered by the state, it failed to gather even the 3% of the popular vote needed by law to stay in existence after the elections and was dissolved.

In Assembly elections last year, the KCTU found ways of ensuring there were some independent candidates standing although they had no right by law to be involved in politics. They faced the very real obstacles of blatant official discrimination, lack of resources and outright fear on the part of the electorate of the consequences of voting 'left'. The 1996-97 strike has dispelled much of this fear and cut across the deeply ingrained regionalism that has bedevilled Korean politics. The new situation could give quite different results. But a great deal depends on programme and on being seen as the best fighters and as those who have an answer for every problem confronted by workers at home as well as at the workplace.

The programme of a workers' candidate should obviously take up the demands for an 8-hour working day, a living wage and jobs for all. It would link them to the need to take over the Chaebol and run industry and the banks according to the wishes of the population expressed through elected representatives at all levels. Elections in other countries show that candidates pledging to live on a workers' wage and to have all their expenses controlled by representatives of the movement are

extremely popular. If they have led mass struggles and scored major victories, they stand an even better chance of getting a respectable vote. There is no point in standing candidates just for the sake of getting some individuals into parliament but the elections and the assembly debates themselves can provide a forum in which the voice of the worker can be heard.

Independent unions

In the late 1980's and early 1990s, a period of turbulent battles with the employers and with the state, the independent democratic trade union movement established itself as a powerful force for change. 1988 saw the formation of a 'National Headquarters for Labour Law Reform' and 1989 the 'National Council of Regional and Industrial Trade Unions'. That year, it held a nationwide May Day rally - the first one since 1945 when liberation from Japanese rule was celebrated by the Korean working class in its own stylish manner.

After 1987, unionisation had proceeded rapidly in previously unorganised sectors such as the press, hospitals, construction, research institutes, schools, business associations, servicing and retailing. The newly established unions in the giant factories of Daewoo, Hyundai, Kia etc. increased their strength by coming together on a company level. Rejecting the FKTU as a totally undemocratic and collaborationist federation, they formed their own regional councils and then a 'National Council' which reorganised to become the mainly blue-collar KTUC (Korean Trade Union Council). Encouraged by the success of long-running strike battles at Hyundai, KBS and other workplaces, it flexed its muscles by calling national action of all its members.

In May of 1990, a federation of the (non-FKTU) white-collar unions was established - the KCIIF. Technicians, clerical and financial workers, college employees had set up their own independent federations. Industrial Councils were set up by printing workers, foreign company workers, building maintenance workers and university lecturers. A slightly earlier attempt in 1990 to set up a Solidarity Council of large enterprise trade unions had met with vicious government repression. In 1991 anger erupted at the death in prison of a trade union leader from Hanjin Heavy Industry and the killing by riot police of a student activist with two months of strikes and protests in May and June.

But one initiative stubbornly followed another to bring the white-collar and blue-collar federations together to build an organisation to rival the yellow FKTU. In 1992, a year of struggle against the wage system, the KCIIF and the KTUC came together in a



KCTU May Day Rally, 1997.



An historic event as leaders of the FKTU and the KCTU are brought together by the power of the General Strike, January 1997.

"Joint Committee for Ratification of ILO Basic Conventions and Labour Law Reform". In all of the five years that Roh Tae-woo had been in power, promise after promise on trade union, democratic and human rights had been broken. Even the direct elections conceded in the 1987 struggle failed to produce results which would change things radically in favour of Korea's working people.

The hopes of many were pinned on the election to the presidency in 1992 of one-time democracy movement leader Kim Young-sam. He even took a number of 'left-wingers' from the student movement into his administration. But, in spite of some popular moves against the most hated enemies of the workers, he would soon dash their hopes of any real improvement in their lives. Many of the old methods of holding them down would survive.

Under the new president, the army was, to some extent, purged. The secret police had their wings clipped a little. A number of Chaebol bosses were 'punished'. The founder of Hyundai, Chung Ju-young, was convicted of illegal spending on his attempt to beat Kim Young-sam in the 1992 election. Later, the founders of Samsung and Daewoo were amongst those put on trial and found guilty of corrupt dealings with the two previous heads of state - Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. The latter were also charged with treason for their part in the Kwangju massacre and put behind bars.

But, in general, the old 'rules of the game' still applied. A ruthless persecution of all opposition continued and hundreds of trade union and political prisoners remained in jail. Most importantly for the hundreds of thousands of workers joining the ranks of the emerging independent trade union federations, the labour laws remained firmly geared to 'single-unionism' and to maintaining, even

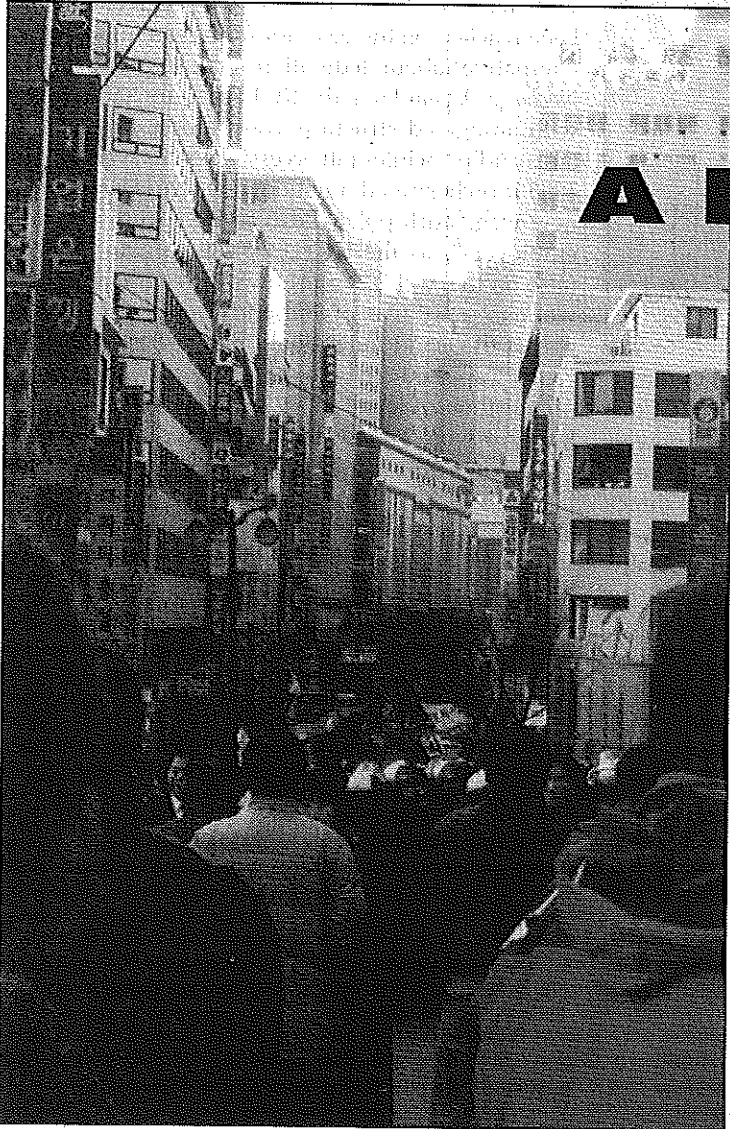
intensifying, the unfettered rule of the Korean capitalist class.

Minju Nochong and Hankook Nochong

The mass strikes of that period - Korea Telecom, Seoul Subway, Kumho Tyres - were still being met with mass reprisals. By late 1994, agreement had been reached on the basis for forming a fully fledged alternative labour federation - the KCTU or *Minju Nochong*. A year later, the KCTU was up and running with an agreed structure, constitution, programme, aims and principles (all accessible on its web-site). In 1995 it orchestrated a nationwide struggle against a new wage curb policy "driven by government and employers", as the KCTU puts it in 'Our History' (also on the 'web'). As a show of strength, a national workers' rally was organised by representatives of over a thousand individual unions. On the day the KCTU applied to the Ministry of Labour for "acquisition of legality" - 23rd November 1995 - its leader Kwon Yong-kil was arrested and kept in prison until 13th March the following year.

With the economy already running into difficulties in 1995 and 1996, it was clear that the government, acting on behalf of the Chaebol and hiding behind arguments about '*Segyehwa*' (globalisation) and world competition, would move onto the offensive in an attempt to take back the newly won advances in wages and conditions. The familiar tune about workers putting the economy at risk and 'pricing themselves out of the market' was not well received. Even the FKTU or *Hankook Nochong* came under pressure from its members to organise resistance but, as the KLSI puts it, "continued with its Labour-management co-operative revisionism". It supported the ban on 'multi-unionism' which excluded the KCTU from any workplace where either the FKTU or the company already had a union organisation and it did nothing to fight the prohibition of unions in the public sector. (It had also secretly signed wage accords with the employers in 1993 and 1994).

Nevertheless, the KCTU managed to build up a membership of over half a million, organising in the 'newer' industries. It has a monopoly of all of the six Korean car-making firms for example and all of ship-building. The FKTU has traditionally organised in medium-sized firms. It claims well over one million members but its rivals say the real dues-paying membership is half that. The average membership of unions affiliated to the KCTU is 3,746 while the average for both federations is only 230. The rate of trade union membership - whether as a proportion of the total workforce of 20 million or of the 12 million employed workers - stands at no more than 14%. But this small 'active' can have a powerful effect; persecution creates formidable enemies.



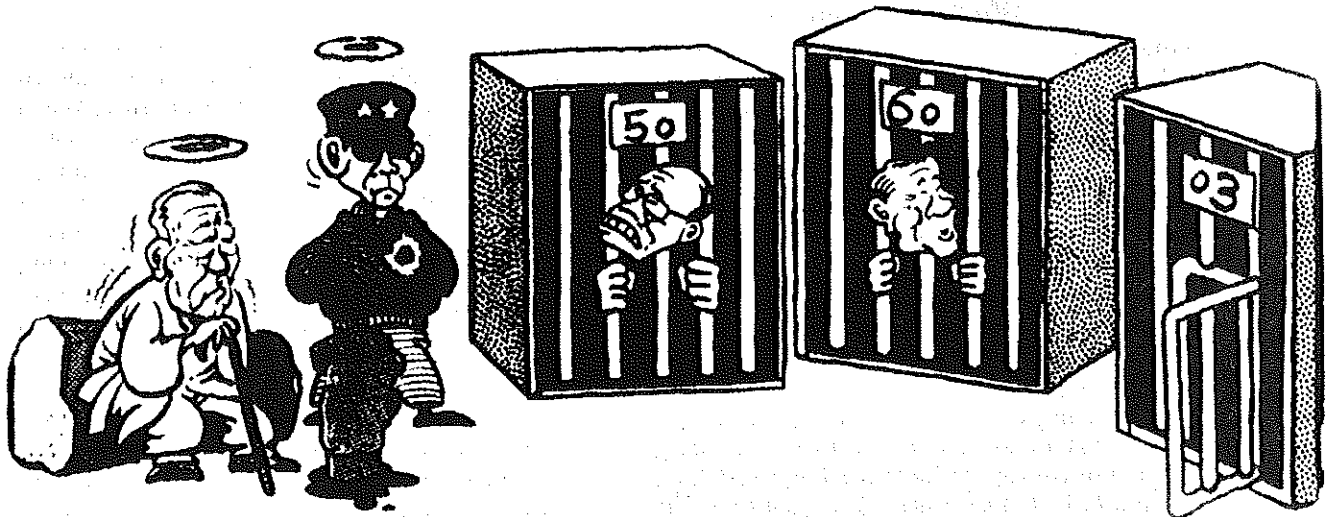
Strikers from KBS television advance towards the police lines at Myong Dong, January 1997.

A PRICE TO PAY

The thousands of dismissed workers in practically every profession are testament to the vicious anti-union policies of South Korea's bosses but they are also witness to the tenacity of Korean workers in their fight to establish their basic rights. A leader of a strike can expect that by the end of the struggle he will be outside the factory gates forever (unless he becomes a full-timer for the union). It is also pretty certain that he will have to do at least a short period in prison as punishment for his efforts.

Ryu Pang-san is Chair of the Seoul branch of the Korea Telecom union (KTTU) and a leader of the KPSU (Korean Public Service Unions) that brings together unions affiliated to both the national federations and some that are in neither. It links up 150,000 workers on the subway, in broadcasting, at the airport, the Mint etc. with the telecom workers. In 1996, the KPSU conducted a victorious struggle against the government-imposed 3% wage ceiling and won reinstatement of a number of dismissed workers. On 10th January 1997, well into the general strike, Ryu Pang-sang was released from three months' detention.

"The main reason for arresting me was because I am a representative of militant unions - to weaken the KTTU and also the KPSU. The government's suppression has focused on the KTTU because telecommunications are very important for the maintenance of Korean industry. Our union is well known for being a radical union. It has 50,000 members and is the largest single union to date. In 1994 I was elected union president by the direct voting of grassroots members. Last 4th October the



All South Korea's previous presidents - dead or in jail. An empty cell awaits '03' - Young-sam !

KPSU formed an organisation to fight the labour laws and I was appointed by the executive of the KTTU to chair the campaign. I was arrested on 19th October, two weeks after being elected to this body. This was my second time in prison.

"I immediately got organising in the detention centre. I was able to communicate with other 'prisoners of conscience'. Every day we had 'meetings' or 'rallies' - twice a day shouting to each other. I was threatened with having family visits withdrawn if I did not take off a protest ribbon I had made with a biro and paper. I went on hunger strike twice and was kept in solitary confinement. The cell was so small I couldn't lie down straight." (He indicated the breadth and width with bent arms.)

"There was no actual torture but this was the hardest time for me. It was very cold - minus 15 and no heat allowed. All ten of my toes were frozen. They were swollen and black. After my release they improved but are not yet (two weeks later) perfect. I have to put ointment on every day.

"It was so cold in prison that I was not able to read. I had no gloves...books but no gloves! I wore socks as gloves. The food in prison is terrible, for example, 'tuna soup' but no tuna. I lost two kilos this time.

"One of our Telecom leaders is in prison at the moment. On 12th December the new leadership was elected and on the 13th he was arrested... I was in prison over Christmas. We were given chocolate - a third of a bar this size". He indicates two bent thumbs by one and a half bent thumbs". Generosity at Christmas time!"

number of arrests of trade unionists 'peaks' between April and July - the season of wage bargaining and industrial action. Their appeal for help, sent out on the internet last spring headed "Send Back Our Colleagues!", explains that recently, because of international criticism of its repressive labour laws, the government has tended to use other laws. The National Security law was mostly reserved to deal with "those who possess and read publications that criticise Korean society or support the view-point of authority for socialism".

At the time of the 1996 National Assembly elections - also from April to July - there was a noticeable increase in arrests for "participation in anti-state organisations". That same summer, a sanctioned demonstration was blockaded by police because one of the protesters was "wearing a mask resembling the president". Students are constantly harassed by the police and arrested on the slightest infringement of the law - "publishing a phrase from the 'Communist Manifesto' of Marx and Engels in a student year planner or wearing a T-shirt bearing the name of a North Korean university.

The human rights organisation, Min Ka Hyop, is heavily involved in campaigning for an end to political arrests as well as torture. One of its reports gives details of the vicious application of the Military Service Law. Young men who are not willing to do three years in the army or the (military) riot police are bound into uninterrupted 'service' for

In 'normal' times, according to the KCTU, the



a company for five years. If, even after four years and eleven months, they are involved in union activity and dismissed, they must immediately enrol in the army or go to jail.

Life for a poem

Perhaps the most renowned political prisoner is Park No-hae, the poet whose work is loved and recited throughout the movement. He wrote a poem that was deemed to have praised Kim Il-sung - the self-titled 'Great Leader' in North Korea. After its publication, Park and his wife, Kim Chin-ju were forced to go underground. A detailed appeal for his release explains that while in hiding they met members of the workers' organisation, Sa No Maeng and took part in protests and labour organising.

"Kim Chin-ju was arrested on the 5th March 1991 while waiting to meet her mother in a department store. Park was arrested five days later while riding in a lorry with other Sa No Maeng members. He was charged with leading an 'anti-state' organisation - a crime punishable by death - and with 'disseminating socialist propaganda', 'establishing a political party representing the working class' and 'setting up revolutionary cells on major industrial sites'...

"While in prison he was tortured and deprived of sleep for several days at a time. His books were banned and he attempted suicide. Although the prosecution was pushing for the 'maximum penalty', it was decided that it would not look good on Korea's human rights record if someone as famous as Park

No-hae was executed. Instead, he was sentenced to life in prison - the stiffest sentence given to someone not charged with espionage since Roh Tae-woo took office."

Democrat-dictator

Park No-hae's is the best known case - nationally and internationally - but many hundreds less known are locked up or constantly in fear of arrest. When the KCTU gives details of trade unionists on police wanted lists they indicate the "date of hunting". And all this under the 'democrat' Kim Young-sam who was himself sought by the police on many occasions. That was when he and Kim Dae-jung (now leader of the main opposition party) were involved in the struggle against dictators who trample on basic human rights.

Kim Dae-jung faced the death sentence in 1980 for his part in the Kwangju uprising and was only saved by US 'intervention'. This - the man who could win the presidential elections on 18th December 1997 as a direct result of the general strike - now seems to be more at home in the company of Kim Jong-pil, leader of the United Liberal Democrats (ULD), than with workers or former comrades of the democracy movement. Kim Jong-pil is none other than the founder of the Korean CIA, at the beginning of Park Chung-hee's reign of terror. (He built it up from a force of 3,000 'employees' in 1961 to no fewer than 370,000 in 1964).



The leaders of the two main opposition parties shake hands - Kim Jong-pil (left) and Kim Dae-jung (right).

Police brutality

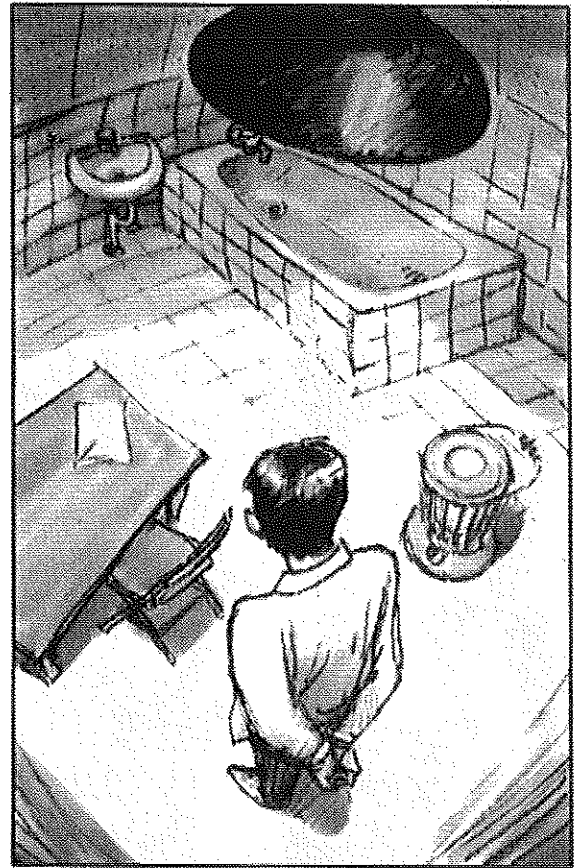
In the South Korea of today, there is hair-raising evidence that people totally unconnected with the labour movement can find themselves becoming the victims of sometimes lethal police brutality. On 15th February this year newspapers reported on the deaths of two "poor people" at the hands of local police. Min Byong-il, a street-seller from the village of Kugali, had been 'questioned' about his trading licence. When his barrow was confiscated and he demanded it back from the police he was beaten so badly that his skull was broken and two operations could not save him. Lee Jong-ho, a citizen of Bupyong, simply complained about the police making a noise in his neighbourhood at night and keeping him awake. He, too, was beaten senseless and left brain-dead. Both had made the mistake of answering back, in effect challenging the 'infallibility' of the local police.

The same day that these reports appeared, the "Kim Hyung-chan Support Group" was to be seen at the KCTU's Saturday demo at Seoul Station. On their stall were gruesome pictures of a body and limbs covered in the most horrific burns and blisters. Pursuing their vigorous campaign, these young people were demanding that police and NSPA officers be brought to justice for the nightmare experience of a young student. Never himself involved in any kind of illegal organisation, he had come within a hair's breadth of losing his life after being mercilessly beaten to reveal things he knew nothing about. Once the police realised they had the wrong man, far from releasing and compensating him, they set about trying to ensure their 'mistake' would never come to light.

Bound and gagged, he was transferred to the dreaded cells of the National Security Planning Agency. The sight of the bath and the taps used in the infamous cases of students being tortured to death made him realise what fate his persecutors had in mind for him. The only way he could now see of getting out alive was to set himself alight from the kerosene stove and scream to be taken to hospital. He did survive to tell the tale, severely scarred and scathed by the ordeal. But his torturers and their protectors remain unpunished.

Abuse of power to end?

How long will this situation last? The unnerving thing about a police state is the arbitrary abuse of power and the brutal way in which revenge is sought for even the slightest humiliation. If this applies to the forces of the state, it applies also to the bosses. The government and the president too would try and get their own back on the working class, if they can recover from the devastating blows



Kim Hyung-chan sees the dreaded bath and taps - an illustration from campaign material.

they have been dealt in the recent period.

How long will the 'Mothers of the Tortured' have to make their regular Thursday pilgrimage to Pagoda Park, to face the taunts and jeers of the riot police who resemble so much their own sons who have died or disappeared in police custody? How long before Lee So-sun, the mother of Chun Tae-il - indeed, the "Mother of the movement", as she is known - can walk at the head of a demonstration without fear of state vengeance for her audacity? (Now aged 70, she has had six spells in jail - ten years in total since 1970. Her neck is bent permanently in the shape of an 'S' as the result of torture).

Hopefully, this great strike and the emergence onto the scene of history of an organised, united, combative South Korean working class that has demonstrated its decisive weight in society will have changed the balance of forces irrevocably in the direction of lasting reforms. Basic democratic rights could now be partially restored as a result of the movement and the pressure of 'world opinion' but at issue has also been the fundamental way in which society is organised.



CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM

How far did the general strike go in challenging the powers-that-be - this "first political general strike" that so many were proud to have participated in?

General strikes

The demonstrations of December 1996 and January '97 did not reach the scale of the 'Great Struggle' in 1987. The strike itself involved less than 10% of Korea's workforce and did not bring the country to a standstill. Nevertheless, it was the most *general* strike of recent years in that it involved various unions from different sectors of the economy and, since it was against the law-makers and the power brokers behind them, it was clearly a *political* general strike - the first in half a century.

Marxists have explained how there can be general strikes in which the working class challenges the rulers for power and which, given a bold, far-sighted leadership, can lead on to revolution. There are others which can start and finish *without* posing the question of power. When it takes place in the context of a working class going forward and developing its level of organisation, even if not all the demands of a strike movement are met, it marks a positive step forward. Speaking of a general strike in Belgium, Lenin wrote: "The achievement of the strike is not so much the fragment of a victory over the government as the success of the organisation, discipline, fighting spirit and enthusiasm for the struggle displayed by the mass of the Belgian working class".

There can be strikes which end in defeat, like that in 1926 in Britain, when the movement is considerably thrown back. Each strike must be examined in all its particularities. As Lenin also explained, "In any

strike which arises out of the very nature of capitalist society, the workers, by stating their demands jointly and refusing to submit to the 'money-bags', cease to be slaves, become human beings and put forward the demand to become masters... not to work and live as the landlords and capitalists want them to... They begin to undermine their supremacy".

The political nature of the South Korean strike movement was universally recognised, but many questions remain. What exactly was achieved by this huge exertion of energy against the rule of the Chaebol? When the Korean workers shouted "Down with Kim Young-sam!" "Dissolve the New Korea Party!" and "End the Chaebol economy!" did they have an idea of what to put in their place?

Lenin pointed out: "Strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary police government... Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker's mind". But if in South Korea those thoughts were not articulated - not expressed in so many words - is it because those words are banned by law or is it because the worm of doubt has eaten away at the leaders' confidence in the theory and practice of socialism?

Nature of KCTU

In the absence of any legal mass party of the workers, it is a trade union federation - the KCTU - that has taken on some of the tasks and attributes of a party. The leaders of the KCTU have been steeled in struggle and imprisonment. They are trusted by the members and humble in their approach. The leaders take no more than the average wage of a worker. Many have been victimised and some take far less than they earned on the tools. It is not a *bureaucratized* leadership during the strike the Central Committee would meet regularly to decide on the plans for the next phase of struggle. At the national conference in February there was admittedly little discussion (the tradition is to argue before and after but agree at the conference itself). But there was no junketing and banquets, only rousing speeches and stirring songs to fire the spirits for the next round of battle.

The constitution of the KCTU, its aims, platform and programme (all available on the internet) show that an organisation "forged" as it says "through struggle and sacrifice", goes a long way in challenging the system. It fights for a whole series of basic democratic rights like free speech, the freedom to organise, freedom of assembly and the press plus a 40-hour week, full employment, equal pay, decent

wages, a full welfare system and much more. History, however, has shown that even if capitalism is forced by the workers' movement to grant such demands, it cannot guarantee all of them and the 'lust' for profit will constantly drive it to undermine each one of them.

Some of the KCTU material hints that an alternative to the 'Chaebol economy' could be one of a 'regulated' market economy. It talks of "protecting the small and medium-sized businesses" and seems to envisage the conglomerates being broken up and the smaller private owners being somehow persuaded to honour a code of moral conduct in favour of their employees. The KCTU's own statistics and experience show that at present it is precisely the medium and small companies who are the most vicious in denying workers their fundamental rights.

The alternative would be to argue for taking at least the 30 biggest conglomerates and the banks into democratic public ownership, and doing away with the pernicious system of sub-contracting. Then their employees and other workers could be involved in deciding, through regularly elected representatives, what happens within these 'empires' and in the economy as a whole. If small employers say they cannot pay decent wages and honour labour codes without help, this should be examined by workers' representatives. If they are found to be working for the big firms, those firms should be made to pay up. If not, and they are performing a useful service, they should be able to claim some kind of assistance and encouraged to look for efficient, cooperative ways of carrying on their business.

Different views

At the head of the KCTU are leaders with quite varying views. There are those for a socialist transformation as the only solution to workers' problems and those who are, by their own admission, 'reformists'. The latter stop far short of launching a struggle to take the giant Chaebol out of private hands and seem content to aim towards 'the German model'. By this they mean strong trade unions accepting and operating in a capitalist environment, *participating* in management. Unfortunately, this also means taking responsibility for unpopular profit-motivated decisions about redundancies, wages etc.

The KCTU is keen to learn from workers' experiences in other countries. It is highly conscious of the importance of international solidarity and anxious to make direct links with workers throughout the world. But on issues like the 'Social Clause' in international trade agreements, there are



also different points of view. There is a big danger entailed in trusting the direct and indirect representatives of the bosses to improve the lot of workers in any country. Issues like child labour, bonded labour and poverty wages must be fought head-on by the labour movement - nationally and internationally. Apparently magnanimous stipulations in trade agreements can be used as forms of protectionism for firms based in the richer nations.

The complete opening up of South Korea to what would amount to 'economic invasion' by US or any other imperialism would cause considerable further hardship for working people and must be opposed. But the KCTU must insist that decisions about controls and subsidies are not made in the interests of protecting inefficient Korean capitalists who can push up prices at workers' expense. Solutions put forward in the labour movement must be based on the need to fight for control in the economy to be taken into the hands of the working people - the majority in society.

On international links, there is an urgent need to forge direct contacts between organised workers in different countries - working in the same industries or for the same multinational companies. Exchange of information and experience internationally together with solidarity action are essential for the success of the workers' movement. But the KCTU and other Korean labour movement bodies and projects should harbour no illusions about the aims

of organisations like the ICFTU, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation or others who profess a touching concern for their plight. There is a saying, "If you sup with the devil, use a long spoon!" Accept the offers of help in terms of finance and resources by all means but be sure there are no strings attached. Workers must guard against rich benefactors posing as friends of the movement trying to dictate the direction in which the emerging trade union movement of South Korea should go. Trade Union leaders and European Social Democrats are notorious for their devious ways of acting, in reality, as defenders of the exploiting classes.

It was such gentlemen as these who wine and dined the leaders of many a political general strike - against the Franco dictatorship in the Spain of the 1970s, against the South African apartheid regime. They beguiled them with sweet talk about the advantages of the 'social' market and the wisdom of co-operating with the bosses - those very bosses who were the power behind the regimes they had been fighting for decades.

Members of the Committee for a Workers' International also discussed with some of these brave fighters at the height of their struggles, including leaders of the South African mine-workers and COSATU. But rather than fight things to a finish, these once-courageous leaders took the line of least resistance. They not only swallowed the arguments about capitalism, but turned their backs on the struggle for socialism. They betrayed the



COSATU rally. The South African revolution was derailed by the leaders' acceptance of capitalism.

aspirations of their members. Some of them crossed the class divide completely, giving up the movement to become owners of businesses themselves and line their own pockets as employers of other people's labour.

This must serve as a warning that even the best-intentioned leaders, like those of the KCTU, if they fail to adopt a programme and method of struggle that challenges capitalism, they will inevitably move to the right. Inherent in reformism is betrayal.

How much further?

But the KCTU, some of its leaders will object, is only a union federation and not a party. It cannot lead a bid to change society. Others will disagree. Theoretically, as Trotsky explained, in the inter-war period, there is no laid-down prescription for what kind of body could be the instrument for workers taking power. In Russia it was the workers' and peasants' soviets, in Germany it could be factory committees, in Britain at one point the trade unions and, in the last century, even parliament. The main precondition for success is that workers are on the move, the ruling class is in crisis, the middle class firmly on the side of the proletariat and a far-sighted leadership, known and trusted because of its past record, is rooted in the working class.

As things stood in South Korea even at the end of January 1997, was it possible for the movement to have been taken further? The 'heavy battalions' cannot be kept constantly on a war footing without the perspective of a fairly swift victory. As workers' leaders in Hyundai Precision Instruments explained a month later:

"We couldn't have carried on indefinitely. We had already lost a month's wages. Other sections like telecom workers were not being called into the strike. We had to shoulder the main burden... And then 'Hanbogate' broke and the Hwang defection and the killing in strange circumstances in Seoul of a prominent defector from the North. All that detracted from our struggle".

And these distractions were no accident. It is a tried and tested method of South Korean regimes. When in difficulty, engineer a defection and start up a scare campaign. 'Hanbogate' itself was probably also "engineered". The company had already been in trouble for more than a year and could surely have been kept going at least for another few months. There is widespread speculation about how this hare was released - some say by members of Kim Young-sam's own *Minju* faction to save him from the wrath of the striking working class. Others say by members of the right-wing faction within his party

who wanted to see him thoroughly discredited and unable to put the man of his choice in to run for president in the December elections. (This could be particularly important if he wants to avoid the fate of the last two heads of state - imprisonment.)

Either way you could say (and some did) that a skilful leadership of the movement could have used both issues to its advantage and gone onto the offensive. The scare stories about the economy being in danger and about a "communist conspiracy" should not have been able to shake the confidence of the working class in action. There *were* those amongst the seasoned South Korean activists who felt the strike should not have been scaled down when it was. The government had been weakened possibly irrecoverably and then it was let off the hook.

Socialist Challenge

If a party had been in position - a genuine socialist party with deep roots in the working class and a leadership prepared to push things to a conclusion - how would it have fared? In attacking the Chaebol as the culprits for ruining the economy, the leaders of the KCTU and the campaigning groups around them are pushing at an open door in South Korean society. The official ideology is that no classes exist but the gap between rich and poor is ever widening. It is no exaggeration to say that everyone knows that the Chaebol, the state and the government are in league together to squeeze the maximum they can get out of a hard-working and long-suffering proletariat. An American newspaper quoted Hu Insuk, "a 44 year-old housewife, looking on at a rally in Seoul", as saying: "*The labour law only reflects what big business wants... I support the strikers all the way.*"

Had the president's ratings not rocketed when he jailed his predecessors for their part in the bloody Kwangju massacre and put on trial some of the richest, most corrupt and powerful heads of the Chaebol? People had grown angry over the failure to investigate and punish notoriously anti-union companies. There was the Korea Automobile Insurance Corporation. It was discovered that Assembly members on the Labour Commission looking into the firm's activities had been given bribes hidden in fruit baskets. And now, in the Hanbo case, the chairman of the fourteenth largest conglomerate had been caught sending gifts of \$460,000 to the chairmen of two of Korea's largest banks stuffed into instant noodle boxes.

Enough was surely enough! Wasn't this the time to get rid of the lot of them? Wasn't this just final proof that the system was rotten to the core and didn't



deserve to survive? A party could have demanded that, instead of the superficial investigations by parliamentarians and lawyers into the scandal, there should be a tribunal of workers' representatives. There were a quarter of a million jobs at risk at Hanbo and its sub-contractors. The \$7 billion of public money that went to bail out the banks would come from workers' pockets, one way or another. Attempts to use the crisis to bully workers into dropping their action - the need to save the stricken economy from collapse and so on - could have been pre-empted by propaganda that immediately put the blame squarely on the Chaebol for everything that was happening.

A party could have articulated the feelings of millions, and put them like this: *"We are tired of labouring to line the pockets of these infamous fraudsters. It is these same Chaebol that are demanding that we pay for their survival. We say 'no', we can run society without these parasites. They have created these giant conglomerates and run them like mini-kingdoms. We will fight for them to become public property run on principles of workers' control and workers' management. We will set up those people's committees again and show that we can create a workers' government. We will organise a plan to be implemented not through terror and coercion by generals and their bankers but drawn up and operated on thoroughly democratic and co-operative principles by elected representatives of all the working people"*.

Working class decisive

There are those who say such ideas are 'old-fashioned' - what the socialist theoreticians had to say is no longer valid and the industrial working class counts for nothing anymore. Let them look at this strike and what this strike has proved! Every



Demonstrators lampoon corruption at the top.

participant and observer comments, as if with one voice, that, as distinct from the movement of '87, the industrial working class was the driving force. Those who work in the giant factories of the top Chaebol may be a minority in the workforce, but the power they can wield has been proven for all who have eyes to see.

It is the actions of these layers of workers that have emboldened the many individuals and groups well versed in Marxism, forced until now to operate in conditions of clandestinity and speak only half the truth. Protesters and campaigners have gone further than ever before in lampooning the government, in condemning the Chaebol economy and in demanding the president's resignation. So what stayed the hands of the strike leaders?

Scaling the strike down towards the end of January to give the government and the Assembly a chance to rescind the laws may in itself not have been a bad tactic especially given that only certain sections were involved in all-out action. They were already beginning to resent having to bear the brunt of the bosses' revenge and the loss of wages while other sections were still at work. But even though the strike had moved into another gear with the Wednesday and Saturday action, sections of the government and the police were feeling humiliated by the lifting of the arrest warrants and the possibility of a climb-down. *Indecision gripped the government.*

A 'classical' revolutionary situation had not developed but all the elements were there in embryo. It was, to use a racing analogy, the 'first time out' for the KCTU in terms of a political general strike. The country had not been paralysed. Big factories were occupied but transport was rarely stopped. (If the leaders had wanted all-out action, they probably would have found, as was the case in the French general strike of 1995, that 'the public' would have been overwhelmingly on the side of the workers in spite of inconvenience to their lives). The movement had been strong enough to draw the middle layers of society to its side but not to split the forces of the state. Things did not reach that stage.

While the workers held the moral high-ground in society, there was not a situation of dual power with representative bodies thrown up by workers that vie with existing state organs for control in society. Though badly debilitated, the government was not totally suspended in mid-air. The ruling class had been severely shaken but still held the reins of power. But at least the outlines of a pre-revolutionary situation were taking shape and a powerful desire was developing in the hearts of



Chief theoretician, Hwang Jang-yop, defects from North Korea.

working people for finishing with the government and throwing the Chaebol giants off their backs.

Different leadership

It is difficult to say whether a different leadership of the movement could have fulfilled these aspirations. Before launching a challenge for power it would have had to probe and test the ground through its own agitation, carefully selecting the slogans of the hour and conducting a dialogue with every section of the working class. The middle class, once it sensed a fight to the finish would overwhelmingly have sided with the workers. The forces of the state, even the hated riot police, could have been neutralised or even persuaded to go into revolt as sections of the Korean army have done more than once before in history.

On the other hand, it might have turned out that even a leadership using such methods and standing openly for socialist change, on weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, could have judged it necessary to limit the strike to the single aim of annulling the new laws and regard it as a dress rehearsal for future battles. But it is clear that even to guarantee the abolition of these anti-trade union and anti-working class measures, much more was and will be needed.

If there *had* been a moment when a different leadership, in place before things got to this stage, could possibly have made a bolder challenge, the opportunity was fast slipping away. Once the scale of the bribes-for-loans scandal was being revealed and leading members of the ruling party were being

arrested, the headlines had been captured and the desired diversionary effect had been achieved. The leaders of the KCTU made threats about renewing the strike if the Labour law was not annulled but it is doubtful whether they were still in a position to re-mobilise the movement. Industrial action is not like a tap that can be turned off and on at will.

And, as if to make assurance doubly sure, there was the Hwang Jang-yop defection from the North. The announcement was undoubtedly premature - given that he was not yet out of China, let alone in the safety of South Korea - and rushed into, not only to distract attention from the KCTU Congress. It just so happened that the students were due to return to the universities after their long winter break and the much-quoted letter, supposedly written by Hwang, appealed to the students not to be beguiled into joining the protest against the government.

The vast publicity around his statement was no doubt aimed at trying to intimidate the working class with scare stories about 40,000 agents of the North being at work in South Korean society. This figure is exactly the same as that given in a report drawn up for the Public Prosecutor's Office last October. (It had talked of "10,000 core leftists and 30,000 more lukewarm 'pinkos'" who had either sent letters to the North or accessed North Korea's home-page on the internet).

Outcome

But this first attempt at a *generalised* strike showed that workers and leaders alike lacked experience. The KCTU admitted as much. Having threatened to renew the strike action on a number of occasions before the labour laws were finally agreed, the KCTU leadership decided to concentrate on firming up its position in the factories during the period of wage negotiations and to launch a general offensive from 1st May. The law as amended by no means satisfied their demands. While it made some concessions on the right of the KCTU to negotiate and to call strikes it insisted on the 'no work, no pay' principle being applied to strikers and trade union officials alike and gave employers the right to take-on substitute labour during a dispute from among "other non-striking workers in the same business".

In the event, the KCTU's May offensive was also dropped and energy was invested in preparing to stand a candidate in the presidential elections. Whether it will be a totally independent trade union candidate or a joint candidate with the present opposition parties is not, at the time of going to print, decided. The outcome of this inevitably heated discussion will say a great deal about the leadership of the movement.



THE WAY AHEAD

Given the state of the economy and with the bosses trying to hold wage rises at the same level as last year, struggles are inevitable. The trade unions are intact but the organised workers did not finish the job. They will want to strengthen their forces at factory level and consolidate industrial unions and federations. Genuine workers' organisations internationally will follow each struggle with keen interest and with the aim of giving the maximum solidarity. They will back the teachers and the civil servants in their fight for legality. They will loudly condemn all the anti-trade union activities of the bosses and the state and energetically campaign for the release of all political prisoners.

Undoubtedly, Korean workers will build on their confidence in the manner of 1987 - more strikes, more victories, more union organisation. But today their struggles will take place against the background of a fall in growth rates as compared with the dazzling expansion of the late 1980s. Union membership figures show that in the slow-down of 1992 and the concomitant closures and redundancies, the unions suffered a considerable set-back. But today, with the winter general strike under their belt, they would be less prepared to accept arguments about the need to pull together in the interests of the economy. The next general strike will be different; the question will be posed for the most active layers of fighting against the system.

But they need an alternative to fight for. That of the KCTU - protection of medium and small businesses

and a campaign against monopolies - is not sufficient. In small and medium workplaces the accident rate is the highest and the wages the lowest. The KCTU will enter into struggle after struggle but they will stop short of an all-out offensive if they accept the capitalist way of doing things and don't adopt a socialist alternative. That is what the international bourgeois want, including their Social Democratic friends around the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the ICFTU etc.

These people will assist in setting up strong trade unions to operate within the system - negotiate, participate etc. They will put money into human rights organisations, foreign workers' organisations and even a party. Their aim is to *ride the tiger* of the combative Korean workers' movement that is in the process of throwing off organisations like the FKU and the so-called democratic parties with whom they have done business in the past. They want to tame the movement to stop it setting a bad example to others.

Political Alternative

The January strikes not only posed the question of a political alternative, they actually prepared the ground for its formation. The leaders may hesitate in setting up a party, citing the experiences of 1988, of 1992, even of 1996, when candidates of the left or of the trade union movement had been put forward and received very small electoral support. But *all* parties start with a small turn-out.

First time round, the British Labour Party in 1906 received no more than 5% of the vote. But in the context of a big strike struggle and a social movement, a workers' party can develop very rapidly. The Party of Workers (PT) in Brazil was born out of the massive metalworkers' strikes of 1978. Properly founded in 1980, it received a modest percent of the vote in elections the first time it fielded any candidates - a total of 650,000. Three years later in '89, its candidate for president, Lula, was not far short of victory with 31 million votes in the second round run-off with the traditional right wing candidate who got 35 million. The Greek Socialist Party - PASOK - first stood in elections in 1974 and was in power by 1981 with a 48% share of the vote.

The KCTU is committed in its programme to building "a party which fights for the interests of the working class" and along with many other organisations is in discussion as to how it should be built. The setting up of a workers' party would be a huge step forward. But it is not a question of creating yet another party just to put people into parliament or local government or even the president's position

just for them to get in and forget all about the people who put them there. How many participants of the 1987 Democracy Struggle have ended up in the present ruling party to continue to hold the working class in chains? The only way to ensure that the "people's representatives" stay faithful to the people would be through the democratic election within the party of all candidates and their commitment to take no privileges - no wage higher than the average skilled worker and expenses vetted by the movement, plus mechanisms for removing them if they fail to carry out the party's policies.

Class, party and programme

But if, as one of the KCTU's documents explains, the working class is the majority in society and has played the *leading* role in the recent movements against the government, then it requires a party which is prepared to be unashamedly based on the working class. A party is needed which will champion every demand of the trade unions and the movement - all the basic democratic rights, trade union and human rights - and go further. South Korea's own experiences demonstrate that, for all the professions of the democratic politicians, without a challenge to the rule of capital, these rights remain dispensable.

Only when the rule of capital is ended, only when the assets of the Chaebol and the banks become the property of the majority, can the majority decide how best to use them. With planning based not on bribery, power politics and the enrichment of a few but on control by democratically elected workers' representatives, both at the factory and the state level, it would be possible to put an end to the abuse and humiliation of centuries. Insisting on the eight-hour day and fully participating in decision-making, working people in Korea would decide how best to organise relations with each other and with the outside world. This is not a dream but a necessity.

Collapse of Stalinism

As everywhere in the world, the doubters and detractors will say "but look at your planned economies, they have collapsed!" In South Korea there were not a few activists who looked in the past to the Soviet Union as a model to which they aspired. They were told it was 'socialism' both by those who attacked it and those who unconditionally defended it. Now apparently capitalism had shown itself superior and this was disorientating. They did not have access to all the facts and arguments that give a clear explanation of the objective reasons for the rise as well as the collapse of the Stalinist system and leave the ideas of socialism basically intact.

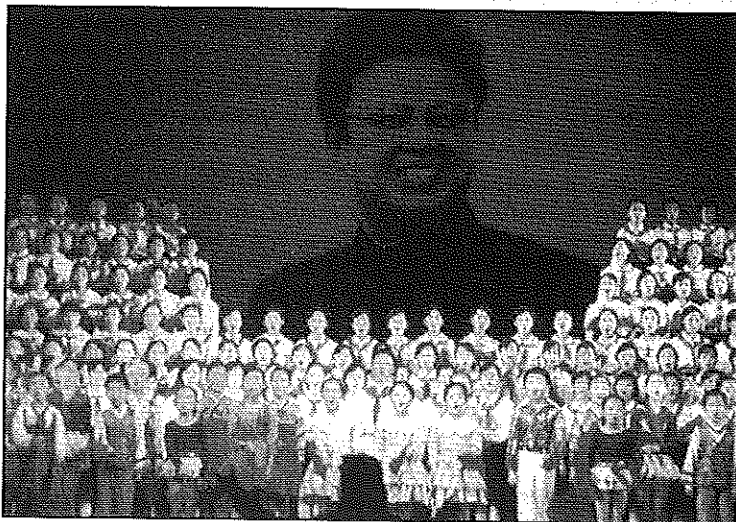


The bureaucratically-controlled 'workers' states' came about because of the degeneration of the Russian revolution - the isolation, the backwardness, the inexperience of the working class and the usurpation of power by a privileged caste. A planned economy without the oxygen of workers' democracy, explained Trotsky, will eventually suffocate under the weight of the central bureaucracy that cannot adapt to new techniques or allow individual initiative to be expressed. To save their privileges and their dominance in society, which the planned economies could no longer guarantee, and to fend off a revolt from below, the communist parties of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and, in reality, of China - the parties of the bureaucracies - took the road of the market. The vast majority of the bureaucrats preferred to turn themselves into capitalists than to be thrown off like an old coat by a movement of workers in the direction of socialism.

The state in the North

Millions of ordinary people in the South yearn for their country to be reunited but genuinely fear the so-called communism of the North. Based on a philosophy which in itself is a total distortion of Marxism ("Juche" or "self-reliance"), it has taken the cult of the personality to extremes. The leader of the nation for 40 years, Kim Il-sung, was credited with the infallibility and special powers of a demi-god while the mass of the people saw their country fall into the depths of poverty and total isolation.

There are those activists in the South who, willing things to be otherwise, argue that descriptions of life in North Korea are merely propaganda churned out by the paranoically anti-Communist government and its imperialist backers. They adopt the attitude of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" and envy



Kim Jong-il, son and heir to North Korea's "Great Leader", Kim Il-sung

what they see as a simple, moral and Chaebol-free land. But that is not sufficient.

It is true that the economy of the North grew faster than that of the South in the period after the war, demonstrating the advantage of state-ownership and planning. But the attempt to build a planned economy on the basis of autarchic rule and isolated in one small country proved to be a failure even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now the country is literally a disaster area with eight to nine million of a 25 million population already on the danger list and dying through starvation. The *'Far Eastern Economic Review'* talks of women cooking wild grass and tree bark for food. People are keeping the bodies of their dead for a few days before burial in order not to risk them being dug up and used as food by the desperately hungry people around them!

North Korea has an army one million strong and the defector Hwang Jang-yop says his mission in leaving the country (where he was general secretary of the ruling Workers' Party) was to prevent a frightened and desperate North Korea from going to war with the South. But soldiers must not only be fed (and there are stories that rice aid from abroad is going only to them) they must have a will to fight. Who can help? Even China, going over to capitalism, now has fewer links with the North than it has with the Chaebol-dominated economy. South Korea is one of Beijing's biggest trading partners and the fourth largest investor in China. Two-way trade has rocketed from nothing to nearly \$20 billion. That between China and North Korea is dwindling - last year \$566 million. The Chinese president meets South Korea's president Kim Young-sam every year but has never met North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il.

As more and more harrowing stories about life in the North reach Seoul, used as always by the regime as "proof" of the evils of "communism", there is a widespread urge amongst ordinary people to give physical assistance. But, having fostered the idea itself in mid-April, the Kim Young-sam government tried to stop street collections. The organisers - the church and various 'left' groups - were overwhelmed with the response and were blamed for fomenting criticism of the government's policy towards the North. Kim Young-sam cannot be too confident on this score as he has changed his unification minister five times.

Reunification

All South Korean regimes, from the dictators to the pseudo-democrats, have claimed to be in favour of reunification but unquestionably entirely on terms dictated by imperialism as a whole and South



The North - how long can this special strain of Stalinism survive?

Korean capitalism itself. Many hold that the quibbling over aid to the North is in order to bully Kim Jong-il's regime into submission. Kim Young-sam claims to be reluctant to give succour to an enemy which has so recently (last year) "sent marine commandos to invade". The North's leaders must come to the negotiating table first and make a peace agreement. (Technically for them the Korean war has not yet ended).

If the North Korean regime, facing famine at home and cold shoulders all around it, virtually collapses into South Korea it will cost the economy of the Chaebol far more than the reunification of Germany cost capitalist West Germany. The United States would be forced to put in large sums of money to shore up a united capitalist Korea. The population of the North is half that of the South, compared with East Germany's being one-quarter that of West Germany. It has a per capita income of at most one-tenth that of South Korea. Most of the population is now receiving less than 200 grammes of food a day, far less than the United Nations prescribes for refugees in Africa. 90% of the country's livestock has gone - traded or slaughtered. While South Korea is the eleventh largest economy in the world, North Korea "would not make it into the top 500 centrally managed economic units in the world" (*Economist* - "The World in 1997").

No socialist could be against Korean reunification if it is carried out in the interests of the people. Many hundreds of thousands of families are still cruelly separated by the line that cuts the body of their country in two. World imperialism with the collusion of the Soviet bureaucracy, imposed this artificial arrangement solely in the interest of maintaining their own sphere of influence in the region - literally dividing a nation and ruling as much of it as possible.

No socialist, however critical of the bureaucracy and the elite in the North, would welcome a delayed victory of imperialism in the form of a 'surrender' of state ownership and planning. While the people of the North are desperately in need of food and working people in the South are prepared to make sacrifices to help, aid programmes organised by the United Nations or other organisations of capitalism are bound to have strings attached. Socialists vigorously oppose the privatisation of industry and land.

They would argue for full democratic rights and give full backing for workers to establish control in their workplaces and manage the economy and society through genuinely elected representatives. While thus pressing for the overthrow of the ruling elite, they would have to argue for North Korea, at least initially, to maintain its own identity, probably in a federation of the two states with the freedom of all Koreans to travel. The right of self-determination must be upheld and a united movement of the Korean working class built with the aim of organising the voluntary re-unification of Korea on a socialist basis. The decision must be that of the people of North and South, arrived at in a totally democratic manner.

The "Bogey"

Some 'nationalist' activists in the South paint foreign imperialism as the main enemy, implying that Koreans of all classes can struggle together to eliminate it. Later can come the struggle for socialism. Indeed, the Korean nation has endured enormous suffering under decades of direct and indirect colonial rule. The movement will never forgive or forget. It has to demand that US troops be completely withdrawn, that all the assets of American and Japanese imperialism be taken into public ownership and that the country be re-unified. But the now fully-fledged Korean capitalist class is integrally bound up with foreign capital. It will use the very same methods of economic exploitation and state repression, with or without that 'special relationship' with Washington and Tokyo. The struggle against imperialism means a struggle against Korean capitalism.

The present Southern regime wants unification on its own terms, that is with the imposition of capitalist market relations. Socialists must oppose this. They must fight for democratic rights in the North and the South and for unification without the rule of the Chaebol. The fight for re-unification must be linked precisely to the fight for socialism - the elimination of rule by a handful of capitalist families in the South and by a small bureaucratic 'dynasty' in the North.



It sometimes seems as if the bourgeois South prefers to keep things as they are. A separate capitalist North Korea is unlikely to develop, but if it did, in itself it would not represent a powerful rival to the South. It is most likely to be 'absorbed'. But not only would this cause big problems for the South Korean economy. If the planned economy was dismantled, the rather useful "bogey" over the border would be gone. What conspiracy theories could be used then against the workers' and students' movements to try and deter them from the ideas of socialism and communism?

Although this excuse for intimidation has allowed regimes in the South literally to get away with murder, in some cases, the fact that the South Korean regime so ruthlessly punishes "pro-North activities", tends to attract some of the most rebellious youth towards those very activities. There is also a well grounded and deep-seated hostility to imperialism amongst wide layers of the population. But some activists feel that the lives of many valiant young fighters have been wrecked unnecessarily as a result of incorrect tactics that have laid the movement open to state provocation.

National Liberation (NL), the organisation behind last summer's confrontation at Yonsei University, has been against linking up the struggle of the students and the fight for the expulsion of imperialism from the peninsula with the workers' movement for an end to the Chaebol economy in the South. The NL leadership, in its blind drive for unification on Pyongyang's terms and following its false Juché doctrine, abandons the class struggle and, in effect, also excuses the monstrous rule of the ruling clique in the North. It argues for a struggle of all Koreans, in the North and South and abroad - i.e. Koreans of all classes - against foreign domination.

This is the Stalinist theory of two stages - first the



60 ● South Korea: The Tiger Strikes

national liberation struggle against imperialism, then the class struggle against the bosses and for socialism. It was this treacherous policy that delivered the leaders of the Chinese working class into the murderous hands of the Chiang Kai Shek nationalists in 1927 and was responsible for the slaughter of up to two million members of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965.

The other tendency in student politics was PD or 'People's Democracy' which, while arguing for "broad coalitions" of forces, recognises the main enemy as the Chaebol and the main force for change as the proletariat. These, the two best known trends in student politics, have long fed the debates in every corner of the movement - particularly in the underground and semi-legal organisations that abound in the conditions of political persecution.

Cross-class alliances

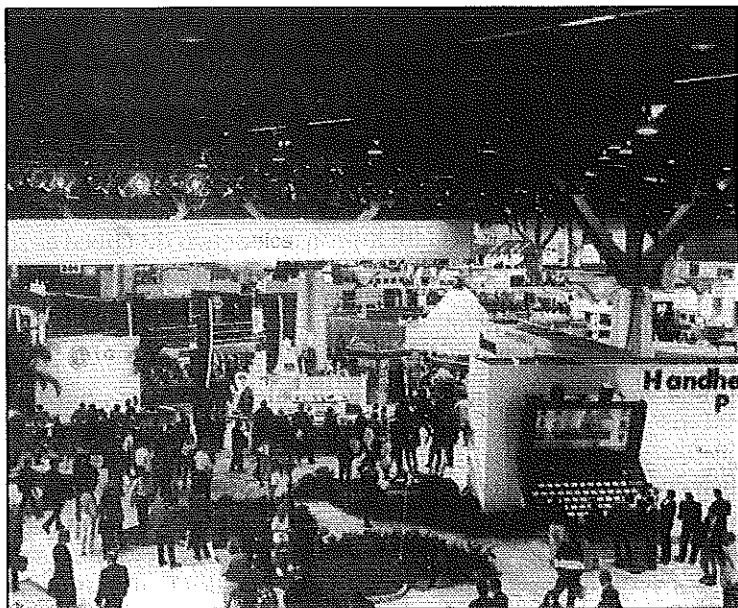
When the question of a new party is under discussion, there are those, including in the KCTU, who also argue for a cross-class coalition involving members of Kim Dae-jung's NCNP (National Congress for New Politics) party. While Kim Dae-jung may have slightly more "radical" credentials than Kim Young-sam, he has failed to live up to the most modest expectations of his party's supporters even in the course of this great strike. He said at the parliamentary symposium on 17th January that democracy must be fully developed in order to crush communism. As soon as "Hanbogate" broke he was forced to admit receiving \$292,000 to use his influence in favour of this now fallen pillar of Chaebol capitalism.

When, as happens quite frequently, he is accused in the yellow press of association with the regime in the North he does not use the opportunity to condemn his accusers. He says nothing of the right to free speech, free association, let alone the right to advocate an alternative system. He is well known for singing the praises not of North Korea but of capitalist Germany.

The Korean people can no longer put their trust in any of the "Kims". Kim Jong-pil, leader of the smaller ULD, is no "friend of the people" either. Few will forget his role in the police butchery under the Chun Doo-whan regime as founder of the Korean CIA.

Independent Working Class Party

A new independent party must be forged to champion the interests of the class that has created "Korea Inc." and borne it on its back. Of course, in the absence of such a party the church has also become a channel for the expression of discontent in



The Global Market-place - Korean Chaebol at a Los Angeles trade fair.

the population. It has provided a protective cover against state repression for many of the labour movement's activists. Its bravest representatives are themselves no strangers to police brutality and prison walls.

Professors, lawyers, doctors have all played an important role in giving valuable moral and practical support. But, if, by the unanimous opinion of all the participants, in the recent movement it is the organised workers who now call the shots with their strikes and demonstrations, surely it is they who should call the shots in any party that is the very product and natural expression of that movement. Its leaders should not be squeamish about the facts of life.

Two great classes are ranged against each other. Intermediary classes and friends of the movement will align themselves with the strongest force. If they see the workers moving to transform society along lines which give them the truest freedom of action and best opportunity to develop their own talents, they will back them. Small farmers and shopkeepers would find life under the rule of democratically elected workers' representatives far preferable to today's struggle for existence, when debts are always going up and incomes going down.

A government that had taken over the giant Chaebol and the banks would be in a position to extend cheap credit to these layers. Its "envoys" would agitate amongst them for the most co-operative, safe and efficient use of equipment, of land and of buildings for the production, storing and distribution of food and other essential consumer goods. Decisions would be made according to what

ordinary people needed in order to live a comfortable existence and not for the profit of a few in order for them to live in luxury.

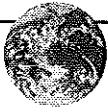
Capitalism's Alternative

Surely these ideas have not lost their validity. Look at the horrible prospects if capitalism, large-scale or small-scale, is left to run things its own way! World capitalism will exert relentless pressure to open up the Korean economy to the icy winds of globalisation, to loosen state control over trade, banking, investment and over wages policy. These measures will be accepted by the South Korean industrialists and financiers. If they can drive ahead with deregulation and "liberalisation" at the expense of the living and working conditions of the mass of the population.

The much-demanded reform of the banking system has been predicted to be about to put a third of all bank workers out of a job through mergers and acquisitions (*Economic Report*). Some economists predict a leap in the general level of unemployment from 2-6% within a very short space of time. The Korean bourgeoisie have already participated in the globalisation process themselves. An explosion of overseas direct investment is taking place. Hyundai is responsible for the building in Oregon of the largest memory chip factory in the world. Daewoo is



Struggle brings hope.



spending \$6 billion to establish production outside Korea over the three years until the end of the century. Six South Korean firms are now among the 200 largest in the world.

According to the *Samsung Economic Research Institute*, at least 200,000 jobs producing for the home market, have been lost to areas of cheaper labour in South East Asia. A shoe factory employing 20,000 workers in Pusan, the largest in the world in the 1980s, is now closed and the work transferred. Multinationals like Nike and Reebok have moved on to places like the Philippines, Vietnam, China and Indonesia.

Even here they have found resistance to their super-exploitation strategies. Towards the end of April this year, half the 10,000 workers employed by a Nike sub-contractor in Tangerang, Indonesia were involved in mass protests at the factory - burning cars, smashing windows, doors and furniture at the firm's refusal to pay even the agreed \$2.50 a day minimum wage.

'Reform' of the South Korean financial system - increasing the cost of borrowing in an attempt to reduce the over-indebtedness of Korean firms - it is feared would itself lead to recession. At present, direct foreign investment in Korea is still low. The entry of foreign capital would mean further problems for the Korean bourgeois. Lifting subsidies and protection would lead to many more collapses. Continuing them would leave Korean capitalism inefficient. Without the state protection of the past - in the form of tax wavers, over-generous credit arrangements and other more dubious methods - many more jobs would go.

If capitalist commentators now say that the state is an

encumbrance pointing to 11,000 different bureaucratic regulations, they at least recognise its dominant role. They admit the absence of their beloved "free play of market forces". The state involvement was all right when it was fuelling growth but now, with the dramatic collapse of exports, it is the *over-involvement* of the state that is to blame. The South Korean economy is described as so top-heavy that it resembles "Schwarzenegger's body on the legs of Woody Allen"!

Globalise the Struggle!

As long as capitalism survives it will try to solve its problems at the workers' expense. Globalisation - the "centrepiece of the presidency", as the KCTU puts it - means "sharing the suffering". Workers will not be fobbed off by any anti-luxury campaign aimed at protecting Korea's domestic market. They know (and figures from the National Statistics Office in Seoul bear them out) that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. The more contact they have with workers elsewhere, the more they see this as a world-wide phenomenon. A greater awareness of what is happening in the world feeds conclusions about the need for the "globalisation" of the struggle.

As the general strike, with all its phases subsided, attention was turned to the annual wage battles and, particularly amongst the activists and trade union leaders, to the question of taking political initiatives. The 'great strike' was followed by the 'great debate' over putting forward a candidate for the presidential elections on 18th December and over the creation of a party. Illusions still persist that the best chance of workers interests being pursued would be through joining forces with the existing opposition parties. But the KCTU's own press statements during the strike movement condemned the parliamentary opposition for dragging its feet and for "looking over their shoulders for the wishes of the big business".

An independent class position would be much more consistent with all the KCTU propaganda that puts the blame for workers' problems squarely at the feet of the Chaebol. If, for example, the known and respected leader of the strike, Kwon Yong-kil was put forward as a presidential candidate, he could get a big response. A bold campaign could be taken into every working class area and industrial estate, championing the demands of the movement and explaining the 'dictatorship' of big business.

Clear demands

A party could be rapidly put together around the demands for an end to repression and corruption, for a living wage and shorter hours, for jobs and homes for all. It could link them with the need to take the 30 biggest Chaebol out of the hands of their



super-rich founding families. It could convince workers not to trust any of the parties who defend them and to organise themselves for the democratic control and running of society.

Any party arising from the winter strike movement and created by its participants will represent a giant step forward. Whether it is based on clearly socialist principles depends on how far its founders can be persuaded to go. But it would seem that, in the context of a struggle that has embraced many diverse groupings within its sweep, convinced socialists would have a place in such a party. Provided they prove their worth in any and every struggle of the working class, they will find great scope for arguing the position of genuine Marxism.

There are some similarities to the situation in Russia as the 20th century began; but there are huge differences. On the verge of a new millenium, the Korean working class starts from a far higher industrial and cultural plane. Its weight in society and experience at organisation is far greater. The literacy rate is higher now than that of the USA.

What *could* be done if all of Korea's modern technology was harnessed to need and not to profit?

The Korean working class has a proud history. In the 'Great Political General Strike' they have once again proved their mettle. The workers of Korea have brought to the attention of the world how far there is to go before their country becomes the paradise that many made it out to be. Only through transforming society along socialist lines as argued in this pamphlet can the long years of sacrifice be rewarded.

Not a moment should be lost in struggling to create a leadership that is capable and worthy of that task. Only the programme of socialism embodies the aspirations of the movement and safeguards its traditions. In the spirit of its message to the KCTU in January, the CWI pledges its fullest support to all engaged in this endeavour and applauds the courage and tenacity of Korea's class fighters. They remain an inspiration to all those who struggle against injustice and oppression and towards the final goal of a socialist world. Solidarity!

UPRISING in ALBANIA

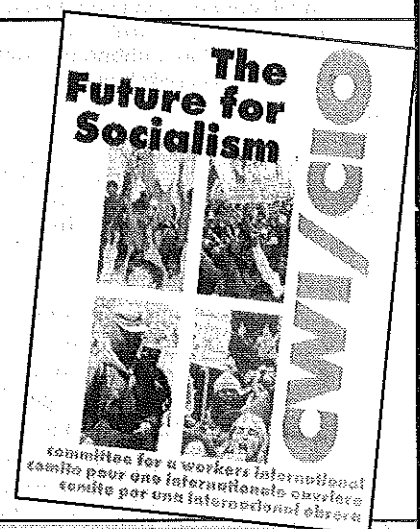
by Lynn Walsh

A Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) pamphlet analysing the events in Albania. £2.00 + 40p (postage & packing)

The Future for Socialism a CWI pamphlet

Now in its second print, this document brings together the main political discussions, held at the 1996 European school of the CWI. Contents include: The Challenge of Globalisation; Europe: the Working Class fights back; Latin America: Neo-liberal Robbery and Mass Struggle; SE Asia & China: A New Capitalist Miracle?; Russia & Eastern Europe: the Bitter Fruits of Capitalist Restoration; The Middle East: the Second Intifada Beckons

£1.50 + 40p (postage & packing)



Both these pamphlets and much more are available from **Socialist Books**, 3/13 Hepscoot Road, London, E9 5HB, Britain. Telephone: ++44 0181 533 3311. Fax: ++44 0181 985 2932.



JOIN US / FIND OUT MORE ABOUT US:

The **Committee for a Workers' International** has affiliated parties and organisations in more than 30 countries on all continents. The way to contact our comrades differs from country to country. Some you can contact directly. For others, it is easier to do it via the CWI offices in London.

... e-mail to the International Office of the CWI (inter@dircon.co.uk) or contact us at
PO Box 3688, London E9 5QX, Britain. Telephone: ++44-181 533-0201
Fax: ++44-181 985-0757. Our website is on: <http://www.dojo.ie/cwi/cwi/en>

committee for a workers international

- **ARGENTINA:** Casilla de Correos 53, CP 1617, Los Polvorinos, Buenos Aires, Argentina
- **AUSTRALIA:** Militant, PO Box 196, Richmond 3121, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. phone/fax: (00 61) 29 897 3558. e-mail: mil@pa.ausom.net.au
- **AUSTRIA:** SOV, Kaiserstrasse 14/11, 1070 Wien, Austria. phone: (00 43) 1 524 6310, fax: (00 43) 1 524 6311.
- **BELGIUM:** PB 2, 9000 Gent 21, Belgium. phone/fax: (00 32) 9 232 1394. e-mail: geert.cool@rug.ac.be
- **BRAZIL:** CP 7503, CEP 010 64, Sao Paulo S.P., Brazil. emailsocialismo.revolucionario@mandic.com.br
- **BRITAIN:** Socialist Party, 3-13 Hepscott Road, London E9 5HB, Britain. phone: (00 44) 181 533 3311, fax: (00 44) 181 986 9445. e-mail: campaigns@socialistparty.org.uk
- **CHILE:** Celso C Campos, Casilla 50310, Correo Central, Santiago, Chile. phone: (00 56) 2 622 9004.
- **FRANCE:** ECIJ, 17 rue Armand Carrel, 3100 Montreuil, France. phone: (00 33) 1 4851 9705, fax: (00 33) 1 4857 6862. e-mail: colinch@worldnet.fr
- **GERMANY:** SAV, Hansaring 4, 50670 Köln, Germany. phone: (00 49) 221 13 4504, fax: (00 49) 221137280. e-mail: savbund@aol.com
- **GREECE:** Xekinima, Odos Maisonos 1, 104 38 Athens, Greece. phone/fax: (00 30) 15245292. e-mail: rolandos@spark.net.gr
- **INDIA:** Dudiyora Horaata, PO Box 1828, Bangalore 560018, India.
- **IRELAND (North):** MIM Publications, 36 Victoria Square, Belfast BT1, Britain. phone: (00 44) 1232 232 962, fax: (00 44) 1232 311 778. e-mail: gatesc@whall.dnet.co.uk
- **IRELAND (South):** Socialist Party, PO Box 3434, Dublin 8, Ireland. phone/fax: (00 353) 1 677 2686. e-mail: dublinsp@clubi.ie
- **ITALY:** e-mail: dond001@it.net
- **JAPAN:** e-mail: ni&sc@gaia-net.or.jp
- **MEXICO:** e-mail: rendonp@servidor.unam.mx
- **PAKISTAN:** The Struggle Publications, 40 Abbot Road, Lahore, Pakistan. phone: (00 92) 42 631 5162. e-mail: edu@found.edunet.sdnpk.undp.org
- **PORTUGAL:** e-mail: cwi_portugal@hotmail.com
- **RUSSIA:** 125167 Moscow a\Ya 37, Moscow, Russia. e-mail: pabgem@glas.apc.org
- **SOUTH AFRICA:** Congress Militant, PO Box 596, Newtown, Johannesburg 2113, South Africa. e-mail: mnoor@lcon.co.za
- **SPAIN:** e-mail: ricardo.marquez@cs.us.es
- **SWEDEN:** Offensiv, Box 374, 123 03 Farsta, Sweden. phone/fax: (00 46) 8 605 9402. e-mail: offensiv@stockholm.mail.telia.com
- **UNITED STATES:** New York: e-mail: Fightback@netaxs.com. New York: Labor Militant, PO Box 5447, LIC, NY 11105. Telephone: 1 (800) 655-9277. California: Culture Concrete Inc., 3311 Mission Street, suite 135, San Francisco, California 94110

If you want to know more about us in
● CANADA, ● CYPRUS, ● CZECH REPUBLIC,
● HUNGARY, ● ISRAEL/PALESTINE, ● ITALY,
● JAPAN, ● MEXICO, ● NIGERIA,
● NETHERLANDS, ● NORWAY,
● POLAND, ● PORTUGAL,
● SPAIN, ● SRI LANKA, ...then contact the CWI international offices as indicated above.

in solidarity

Letter from Committee for a Workers' International
to Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, January 7th 1997

Dear comrades,

We are following with great interest the wave of strikes in protest at the Kim Young Sam Government's high-handed attempt to break the power of the working class in South Korea. We salute the audacity and determination expressed by the hundreds of thousands of workers who are taking action in defiance of the authorities to defend basic trade union rights.

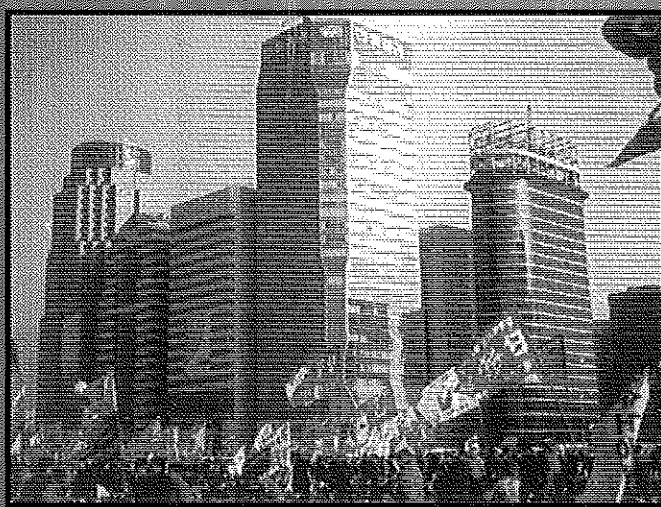
We also congratulate the leadership of your union federation for standing firm in the face of threats to arrest all those who call for strike action. Workers throughout the world are watching and listening eagerly for news of your struggle. Mass action forcing your government to back down would set a marvellous example to all. Telling big Chaebol bosses you will not be used as cannon fodder in their war for profits will inspire others to follow suit.

We wish to convey the support and solidarity of our International organisation that has sections and members in more than 40 countries. Everywhere we are actively involved in battling for basic trade union and democratic rights as part of a struggle for the establishment of genuine socialism on an international basis.

We will, of course, publicise your cause as widely as possible but please let us know if you have concrete requests for other kinds of assistance.

cwi pamphlet
committee for a workers' international

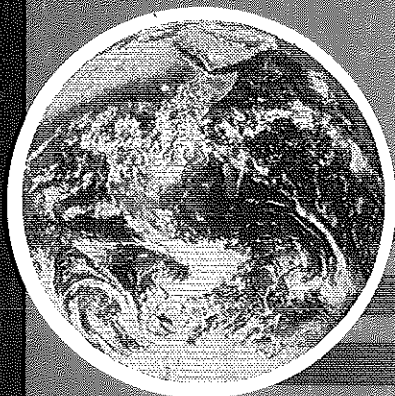
SOUTH KOREA: The Tiger Strikes



In the winter of 1996 - 1997, the model 'Tiger' economy of South Korea, dominated by 30 giant conglomerates, was engulfed by a huge political general

strike. The workers' revolt against the Kim Young-sam regime, in the teeth of vicious state repression, had a powerful impact. It captured the imagination of the world's working people and delivered a severe blow to the confidence of its ruling classes.

This pamphlet, commissioned by the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), draws on first-hand material - interviews, comments and eye witness accounts from the participants and observers of the struggle. It also draws on the rich and tragic history of this divided nation with its never ending conflict of the classes. In its pages many myths are shattered and the grim secrets behind South Korea's dazzling 'success' are revealed.



price: £ 1.50

ISBN 0-905882-51-2



0 0 1 5 0