

Struggle at the SJM factory in Ansan (South Korea)

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The Violence Commercialized: Capital's Private Army - Contactus

At 5 a.m. on July 27, 2012, the opening day of the London Olympics, 200 armed men raided the SJM factory in Ansan where members of the Korean Metal Workers' Union SJM Chapter were staging a sit-in protest. A female union member called the police for help 4 times before they finally arrived. When they finally got to the factory, the police did nothing to stop the armed gang as it meted out violence against the union members. In all 35 union members were injured, 10 seriously. Following the incident images and video footage of the scene circulated widely through social media.

The strikebreakers who descended on the SJM workers that day were employed by Contactus, a security contractor specializing in quelling protests. Contactus owns not only 1,000 sets of riot police equipment, but also German-made water cannons. According to its website, the company can dispatch up to 3,000 individuals at one time and prefers offensive - as opposed to defensive - suppression tactics. It has been revealed that the chairman of Contactus is a staff member of the ruling New Frontier Party and that the company has a record of bribing police officers to win their cooperation. The fact that Contactus has been known to have its employees hired by its clients so as to disguise them as union members has caused a particular stir. Contactus even had plans to launch two media channels.

Hiring security contractors is becoming a common method for quelling strikes and bursting unions in South Korea. In the past, capital organized managers and non-union members into company strikebreaking squads. Now, however, the violence - like everything else - is being outsourced. Capital now seeks to exclude even state power from its domain by contracting private armies. In other words, capital is replacing state authority with its economic power, doing so with the consent of the police and conservative politicians. This collusion is making Korean workers into 21st century slaves.

Due to the public attention to this particular case, Contactus lost its business license, while 4 Contactus managers and the SJM director who orchestrated the raid are being prosecuted. Dozens of similar security contractors, however, are still in operation and vigorously expanding their businesses. Private violence is now a prosperous industry in South Korea.

Workers' View of Korea (RIAWM)

The Struggle of SJM and Mando Workers against Capital's Attack

During the last week of July, the day before the summer holiday began, contracted private security squads were sent in to crush workers' struggles at the Hyundai Motor suppliers SJM and Mando. The attacks happened within 10 hours of one another, with management locking workers out at both factories.

Since the advent of the Myung-bak Lee administration capital has executed careful plans to break unions at important worksites in each region across the country: Valeo-Mando in Gyeongju, Sangsin Brake in Daegu, KEC in Gumi and Yoosung Enterprise in Chungcheong. Now this effort to weaken the democratic labor movement has been brought to the metropolitan area with the attack on SJM (Gyeonggi Province) and reached the a national scale with the attack on Mando, a company with worksites around the country. Each time, the method for breaking the union has been similar. As soon as workers begin a strike, a private security squad or hired thugs are brought in. Workers are forced out of factories, the doors of which are then locked. Following management proceeds to allow only those who leave the KCTU-affiliated democratic union or join a yellow union to return to work.

SJM is a central worksite among the affiliates of Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) Gyeonggi Branch, while Mando is the largest auto parts supplier in the country and the one structured most similarly to parent auto manufactures. Given that the SJM and Mando have no relationship to one another other than both being Hyundai Motor suppliers, it is widely believed that Hyundai Motor is behind the closely timed attacks. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Hyundai Motor has sought to minimize stock through the introduced "Just In Sequence" (JIS), an extreme version of "Just in Time" production (JIT). JIS involves not only strict planning of the assembly process at Hyundai plants, but also tight control over the timing and sequence of subcontractors' production and supply of parts to bring them into sync with operations at the parent company. Given Hyundai's use of JIS, the blow to production caused by a work stoppage by a strong union at a subcontractor can be severe. For this reason Hyundai has sought to weaken unions at its first tier subcontractors. Against the backdrop of the Lee administration's anti-labor policies, Hyundai's intervention in labor relations at the KMWU's main worksites has grown to new extremes.

3 days into the lock out at Mando, a yellow union was established. During the summer vacation, management carried out individual education for KMWU union members, seeking to convince them to join the new union. Only a week after the yellow union was formed, 1936 out of 2264 KMWU members had joined. When the number of workers who joined the yellow union reached 85% after two weeks the company ceased its lock out. At the same time, it notified the KMWU Mando Chapter of the cancellation of its collective bargaining agreement, saying that it would being procedures to unify bargaining channels now that there was a new bargaining representative.

On September 4, the company fired the president of the KMWU Mando Chapter and other union officers for 'disciplinary reasons'. Having become a minority union (without representative status) in a matter of days, the KMWU Mando Chapter is now trying to rebuild, but the road ahead is a rocky one.

The situation at SJM has been more hopeful. Workers there fought against the company's lock out for over a month. Of 260 KMWU members, only 10 disaffiliated. The remaining 250 gather in front of the factory every morning to protest and take turns maintaining a protest encampment at the factory

gates. Having predicted forceful repression, the union officers and members prepared well for their struggle in advance. They are also receiving considerable support from other workers in the Gyeonggi area. KMWU members from other worksites join the SJM Chapter members to maintain the protest encampment each night. At an emergency KMWU Gyeonggi Branch, delegates assembly held on September 5, delegates voted to hold a 6-hour general strike on September 13 in solidarity with the SJM struggle. They also agreed that all KMWU Gyeonggi Branch members would contribute 20,000 won (roughly 18\$) a month for six months to a strike fund for the SJM workers.

In recent years, unions at important worksites around the country have collapsed or been greatly weakened due to capital's offensive, carried out under the protection of the government. Given Mando's scale, and the fact that Mando workers have had a democratic union for many years, the quick defeat of the KMWU Mando Chapter was a great shock to the South Korean labor movement. The persistent struggle of the SJM Chapter, however, has kept hope alive. After the use of private security squads at Mando and SJM, other companies, including Doowon in Gyeonggi Province and Sensata in Northern Chungcheong Province, abandoned similar plans. Capital has become nervous, and workers empowered, due to the determination of the SJM workers. Hopefully, their resistance to capital's attack marks the beginning of a true workers' counterattack.

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P.S.

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