

Korea's New Revolutionaries

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AGAINST THE BACKGROUND of a rising militant working-class movement, revolutionary socialists in South Korea are undergoing a process of regroupment. An important force in this development are comrades of the Power of the Working Class (PWC) organization, formed in August of last year.

At a conference of various Asian Pacific Marxist groups from differing backgrounds held in Sydney, Australia called Marxism 2000, I was able to speak with Won Young-su, the International Coordinator of the PWC. The Marxism 2000 conference was initiated by the Australian Democratic Socialist Party.

Some weeks later, I met with Won again at the Open World Conference for Independence of Trade Unions and Democratic Rights, held in San Francisco, hosted by the (Organizing) International Liaison Committee for Workers International.

Won explained that revolutionary socialists in South Korea were coming out of a period of international isolation, and the PWC was interested in meeting with revolutionists of various international tendencies. They plan to send representatives to any such gatherings.

Partition and Occupation

Some background would be useful in appreciating the development of the PWC. The end of the Korean War in 1953 resulted in a stalemate, the first war the United States wasn't able to win outright. The Korean nation remained divided.

In the South, a series of military dictatorships set up by Washington under U.S. military occupation crushed all opposition. Revolutionary activists were annihilated or fled to the North. Travel to other countries by South Korean citizens was tightly controlled until recently.

Below the surface, however, mass discontent developed. In 1979, the country was thrown into turmoil by the assassination of dictator Park Chung-hee. Emboldened, the citizens of the city of Kwangju, historically a center of radical anti-imperialism, rose and liberated the city.

A broad people's movement seized arms from local armories, formed broad democratic citizens committees and successfully held off the army for ten days. The stalemate was broken when a U.S.-backed coup installed General Chun Doo-hwan as the new dictator. With the U.S. occupation force promising that it would crush any wider upsurge, Chun sent tanks into Kwangju to suppress the uprising in blood.

The uprising and its suppression, however, had the opposite result from the desires of the ruling military and their U.S. backers. A mass radicalization developed among students and youth. A vigorous debate erupted on the lessons of the defeat, fueled by an influx of socialist literature smuggled in from abroad.

Former student activists turned to the working class and began to work in industrial plants. They suffered widespread repression, with thousands of activists imprisoned in “reeducation” camps. Yet the student radicalization deepened, and in June 1987, there was a mass student uprising with wide public support that forced the military regime to retreat and achieved widespread political reforms.

Rising Workers’ Movement

This democratic opening inspired a hitherto repressed working class, resulting in a wave of strikes, plant occupations and street demonstrations. In 1987, over 3,000 new unions were formed. By then South Korea had become one of the most industrialized of the “Third World” countries, with the majority of its citizens well-educated workers residing in urban areas.

In the following years, big workers struggles took place. In the absence of an entrenched union bureaucracy, shop floor militancy and democracy marked the workers’ fight to organize unions and mass direct action. Victories were won. White collar workers inspired by the movement of the industrial workers formed their own unions as well.

This process culminated in 1995 with the formation of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which brought together the new unions organized since 1987. The KCTU also provided the organizational framework for the most advanced militants, including many trained in Marxism during their student days.

In the winter of 1996-97 the KCTU, still illegal, called a political general strike that targeted the regime’s anti-democratic practices and attempts to weaken labor laws workers had won since 1987. But the situation of the organized revolutionary left had deteriorated under the impact of the collapse of the Soviet bloc which, as in many countries throughout the world, generated demoralization and confusion among those who considered themselves socialists.

The activists didn’t disappear, however. They were able to survive by participating in the workers’ movement, which was on the upsurge. A longer-term result of the Soviet collapse has been the removal of the obstacle of Stalinism. Perhaps the emergence of the PWC is a sign of such renewal.

Impact of Reform

The Asian economic crisis at the end of 1997 and into 1998 had a disorienting effect on the KCTU leadership. The newly elected president, Kim Dae-jung, had been an opponent of the terms demanded by the IMF before his election, but made an about face once in office.

President Kim became a spokesman for neoliberalism, and sought to form a Tripartite Commission between the government, the KCTU, and a more conservative union federation that was recognized (legal) to get the workers’ acquiescence.

The KCTU leaders did not have a clear anti-capitalist political strategy or program, and agreed to join the commission in February 1998. A big uproar in the ranks of the KCTU forced the resignation of the leaders, and an emergency leadership committee was formed to fight the attacks.

Unfortunately, this committee similarly wavered and called off a planned general strike. Struggles arose against anti-worker restructuring proposed by the government, but the KCTU leadership congealed into a reformist bloc. This development led to the formation of the social-democratic Democratic Labor Party by the leadership in September of last year. In November, the government legalized the KCTU.

A Militant Alternative

Marxist militants had argued against the KCTU's course. Through this struggle a nucleus of them came to see the need for a "revolutionary political party that could provide clarity and leadership" Won said. "At the moment we are thinking of uniting all the leftists, revolutionary currents in the labor movement, that is, those who are against social democracy."

While projecting a new party, the PWC members remain fighters in the KCTU. "Most of our members work in the KCTU. I myself work in the Labor Institute, which has joint projects with the KCTU," Won said.

The PWC militants also came from a current, originally in the student movement, that rejected following the line of the North Korean leadership. "While there are some who totally follow that line, there are others who look to North Korea but are not totally subordinated to it. Anyone thought to be pro-North Korea can be subjected to long prison terms. We are of course for the democratic rights of all and condemn the laws which allow such persecution," Won said.

"Until the 1960s, the North Korean leadership made certain correct points," Won said. But then it increasingly adopted a personality cult around Kim Il-sung. The regime is among the worst Stalinists in terms of opposition to workers' democracy and political strategy.

"They don't understand that South Korea is capitalist, for example. They don't think that the main battle in the South is against capitalism and the capitalist class as a whole, but orient toward a mythical struggle against feudalism, claiming that South Korea is semi-feudal.

"We would like to have contact with North Korean workers, but there is no dissident group of revolutionary workers. What dissidents there are have no base in the working class. Workers so far are absolutely controlled by the party."

A major orientation of the PWC is the fight against the South Korean national security law. "This is an anticommunist law used against all dissidents," Won explained. "They don't want to allow any opposition to the government."

"There was a big struggle in 1998-99 against this law, with over a million signatures collected, demonstrations, rallies, etc. but the law is still on the books. The government has allowed some democratic space in the face of the mass movement, but this space can be closed at any time."

Won said the PWC is really an organizing committee of "about 200 militants," Won said. "But we think we will grow. We are at the first, preparatory stage. We are projecting launching a biweekly newspaper soon, of eight pages, and we plan to have a web page in English, so people in the U.S. and around the world will be able to follow our development."

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P.S.

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