

Social movements fight free trade agreement in South Korea

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Twelve-thousand people marched on April 16 when the National Movement Against the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement held its first mobilisation. The coalition brings together around 270 different organisations, including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the Korean Peasant Federation, student unions, the Korean Democratic Labour Party and groups from a wide array of other sectors, such as the Korean film industry, the media and the arts, and scholars and academics. It demands an end to the ongoing FTA negotiations with the US.

For FTA negotiations to even begin, the South Korean government had to implement a neoliberal agenda to show its “seriousness” about an agreement. This included agreeing to four preliminary steps:

- Reducing barriers to the importation of US beef (which was banned for public safety reasons in December 2003 after the confirmation of the existence of mad cow disease in the US).
- Reducing the compulsory Korean film quota for cinemas from 146 days per year to 73 days; this quota has been instrumental in the development of the Korean film industry.
- Eliminating government regulation of pharmaceutical products’ prices, which will dramatically increase profits for US pharmaceutical multinationals while simultaneously undermining the South Korean public health system.
- Easing government regulation of gas emissions in imported US cars.

The FTA will also eliminate protection for South Korean farmers producing rice, the country’s most important agricultural product. There is consensus among Korean farmers and peasants that the FTA will destroy their livelihood and that deregulation of the rice market must be blocked.

The director of the ministry of finance and economics, Kim Young-mo, has promised that “Given the sensitivity of the full liberalisation of the rice market and the significant impact the rice market has on Korea, as it is directly linked to the nation’s food security and livelihood of Korea’s farming community, we will endeavour to protect the local rice market to the end”. However, Richard Crowder, head of agricultural negotiations at the office of the US Trade Representative, stated bluntly that the FTA must be comprehensive. “For example, rice in Korea would be included in the FTA with Korea ... our policy and philosophy is, no exclusions”, an April 13 Korea Times report quoted him as saying.

Thus, while Lee Baek-man, senior presidential secretary on public policy, argued on the presidential website that the FTA “would bring about epoch impacts for our country in terms of improving the growth rate, job creation and attraction of foreign capital” and eventually “pull the nation into the ranks of advanced countries”, there have been divisions inside the ruling party and state institutions.

Jung Tae-In, a former presidential secretary for economic policies, has come out against the FTA, arguing President Roh Moo-hyun is being too “hasty”, pushing through the FTA in order to show a concrete accomplishment by his regime. He has argued that the president is committing a “grave blunder”, which could not only hurt the entire Korean economy but could cause a crisis “even 10 times severer than the financial crisis it experienced from 1997 to 1998”.

The state-run Korea Institute for International Economic Policy has released a report that concluded that nations such as Mexico that an signed FTA with the United States did not necessarily improve their market share in the US - undermining a key argument for Korea signing the FTA. It has also been revealed that some state research institutions deliberately manipulated data to improve projections of the likely effects on the South Korean economy.

Despite some government figures, intellectuals and media sources expressing caution or opposition to the FTA, there is still a relatively high consensus within the Korean ruling class and mainstream media to push forward with the project.

For example, the only criticism that the very conservative newspaper Chosun Ilbo had of Roh on this issue is that "the government has not been so positive in its efforts to make people understand the inevitability of the deal. It is hardly understandable why the government has had such a low-profile attitude on the matter". It complained that "Public opinion here is rapidly dividing between those supporting and those opposing an FTA ... [and] agreeing or disagreeing with the deal serves as an ideological yardstick to test if people are conservatives or progressives".

Since the FTA is merely the intensification of the same types of neoliberal policies that have been enforced since 1998, it is proving difficult for the government to convince the population to accept the measures. For example, a 2004 Korean Broadcasting System poll found that "more than half of Koreans feel that the current economic situation is worse than it was in late 1997 when the financial crisis shook the nation".

It has been up to the coalition of social and cultural movements, trade unions and farmers to convince people that the FTA is neither "inevitable" nor desirable. However, inside the coalition there is debate on the nature of the coalition and the trajectory of struggle it should take. There are currents that view this struggle primarily as an anti-US struggle of national liberation, while other currents believe that this movement is, and should continue to be, part of the worldwide movement against neoliberal globalisation.

These divisions are not purely ideological; they also have a real bearing on the mobilising capacity of the movement. For example, the wing of the movement that views it as primarily a national liberation struggle will subordinate class struggle to the strategic goal of national unity with North Korea.

Since Roh has recently made moves to improve relations with North Korea (primarily to improve his nationalist credentials), this has had the effect of partially neutralising the willingness of the "national liberation" wing to fully mobilise to oppose Roh's neoliberal agenda.

For the radical wing of the movement, the struggle against the neoliberal agenda of Roh outside of the US-Korea FTA agreement must be a central dynamic of the movement if it is to succeed.

Another point of friction inside the movement is the strategy of the Democratic Labour Party, which has decided to prioritise organising and mobilising for the upcoming municipal elections at the end of May over the struggle against the FTA. The radical wing of the movement believes that this struggle against the FTA must be the priority for all left-wing forces.

The coalition will target the negotiations between the two countries over the terms of the agreement. The first round of negotiations will take place in Washington DC in early June, and again in South Korea in July, and will be a crucial point of struggle.

The radical wing of the movement not only wants to protest the FTA but to also turn it into another "Battle of Seattle" (the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organisation) and integrate this battle into the general worldwide struggle against neoliberal globalisation, as well as to bring down the

neoliberal agenda of Roh and big capital in South Korea.

P.S.

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