

Finding an alternative

SIGTUR congress

We are sounding the death knell of the whole neoliberal drive,' Yoon Youngmo, international secretary of the Korean Congress of Trade Unions (KCTU).

'Union movements that haven't adjusted to the dictates of globalisation have died, whilst those that have adjusted have grown,' Alec Erwin, South African Minister of Trade and Industry.

Contrary to Erwin's assertion, workplace restructuring driven by neoliberal globalisation challenges the right of organised labour to exist. Yoon Youngmo is right - unions must find an alternative to globalisation.

The effects of restructuring

The restructuring of production, which is central to globalisation, undermines job security and increases labour-intensity. Permanent, full-time workers are reduced in number, and 19th century-style casual work grows. Privatisation has the same effect in the public sector. These changes undermine the power of labour organisation, which has traditionally been based on the full-time workforce.

In an age of globalisation, no country is immune from restructuring. Changes in one country are common to all nations. In Korea, workers face two challenges. Firstly, there is ongoing restructuring at enterprise level, which takes the form of company sales, acquisitions and mergers.

Rob Lambert reports on the upcoming sixth regional congress of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR).

This is accompanied by severe job cuts and attacks on unions. Workers in irregular, casualised employment replace workers in regular, full-time employment.

Secondly, these changes happen in the context of a broader political shift. The 'democratic' government of Korea has reacted to an economic crisis by promoting a restructuring strategy imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Central to this is an attack on lifetime employment, described as labour market rigidity.

Repression in Korea

The KCTU has suffered vicious state repression, including vigilante violence and the widespread imprisonment of union leaders. The crackdown followed KCTU resistance to restructuring through enterprise-level strikes linked to mass protests.

The Korean government's aim is to increase foreign investment by means of the systematic privatisation of all organisations in which the state is

involved. The first round of restructuring involved the financial sector. The second centred on large companies in the shipbuilding, telecommunications, steel, heavy machinery and automotive sectors. The third focused on the public sector itself. Every entity was told to cut its workforce by 30%, with displaced workers often being rehired on contract. This was an attack on the concept of lifetime employment.

State assets are being corporatised in preparation for listing on capital markets. In effect, the state is slowly withdrawing from economic activity.

In the telecommunications sector, there is a new strategy to recruit only contract workers. Unions have been unable to prevent this from happening. Three thousand contract workers are now employed, and another 1 000 workers are being converted into contract employees.

Unions did not respond early enough to this assault. The government is now targeting other public services, including the power industry and the railways. Korea is engaged in a massive privatisation exercise in these areas. Government is committed to selling the assets to foreign corporations, arguing that such a strategy brings money into the country, relieves the debts of Korean banks and generates international confidence. Financial interests are given precedence over social concerns.

The changes have had a huge impact on the lives of workers and the capacity of union organisation.

The role of KCTU

As the federation puts it: 'KCTU is the only stumbling block to the government realising its plans. We are making this a political battle. The government is losing its grip on governance. Daewoo is a good example. The government brought in hired

goons to forcibly break up the strike.'

KCTU is now focusing on a campaign to bring neoliberal restructuring in Korea to an end. KCTU is demanding the resignation of the government. The battle lines have been clearly drawn. We have cut through the details and got to the core.

'We are sounding the death knell of the whole neoliberal drive. If we succeed, we will have forced the government to step back. They want and they need legitimisation, but we are going to undermine that. At the moment, employers are on a joy ride. They are hiding behind the violence that the government is using against workers. KCTU is seeking an end to the snowballing effect of the neoliberal push.'

The battle lines have indeed been drawn. After a general strike in June this year, 69 KCTU leaders have been imprisoned and 50 are on the wanted list. The federation's president is in prison, and all three vice-presidents have been summoned for questioning, accused of violating the law on assembly and demonstrations.

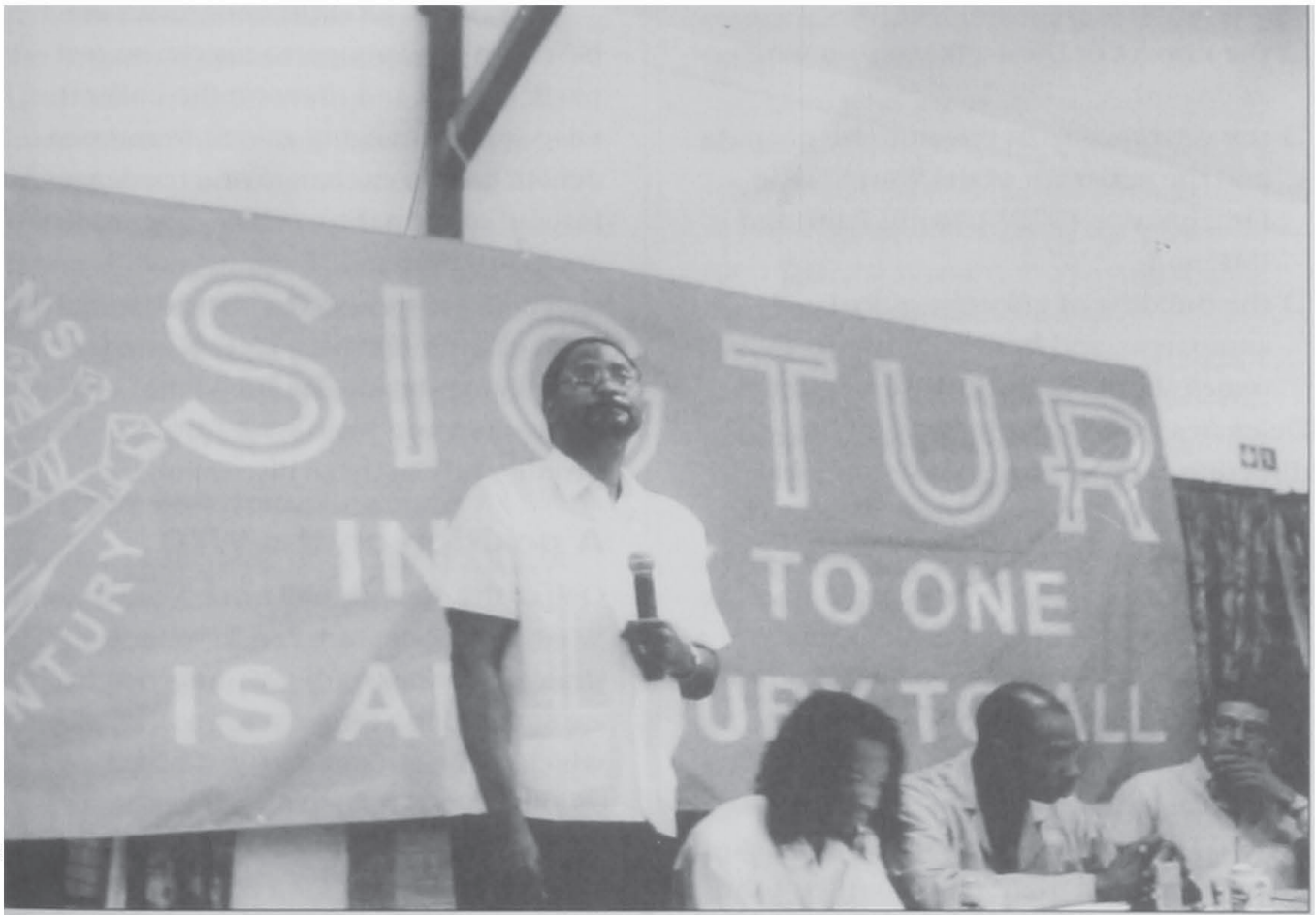
About 30 000 Koreans marched on 22 June in protest against the government's actions. The aim of the resistance is to 'put up a dam' to halt the government's attack on workers, and to create space for a full debate on the changes being imposed on Korea. The sheer pace of the onslaught leaves little scope for a leisurely debate.

SIGTUR's congress

This is the dramatic context of the sixth regional congress of SIGTUR.

From 5 to 12 November, 20 delegates from democratic union movements in the South will join an equal number of KCTU members in Seoul to consider how to build union capacity for resistance through coordinated international action.

The timing is poignant. It coincides



SIGTUR finds ways to strengthen the unity of labour movements in the South.

with the annual mass rally organised by the KCTU to commemorate the death of Chun Te Il, a young worker who burned himself to death in protest against the appalling conditions in the clothing industry.

The SIGTUR congress will be a visible expression of the unity and solidarity of democratic unionism that cuts across national borders, cultures and interests.

The gathering will be a statement that the KCTU is not isolated in its resistance to restructuring; that it is part of a wider movement comprising organisations equally determined to resist and construct an alternative future for working people.

In August, COSATU organised mass protests against privatisation in South Africa. Similar protests against the privatisation of electricity have been staged in India.

A clear Southern identity is being

forged through this mass resistance. Southern unions are not prepared to accept an imposed restructuring of work and labour markets. This may set a new model for unions of the industrialised North.

SIGTUR's regional coordinating committee met in Seoul in November 2000, and again in Perth in July this year, to develop an effective, action-orientated agenda for the November 2001 congress.

'Unity, capacity and power'

The predicament of the labour movement was debated at length. The meeting identified as priorities for labour:

- corporate restructuring involving the downsizing of the permanent workforce, a heavier workload for the remaining workers, longer working hours, and increased casualisation;
- the privatisation of state utilities, with

- sweeping implications for jobs;
- the impact of these changes on women and youth;
- the relationship between these changes and the activities of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank and IMF; and
- the building of effective global campaigns, and how each of the above issues should be tackled strategically.

Delegates searched for a new strategic direction, a positive response to global restructuring. The aim was to rebuild and strengthen democratic trade unionism in the South, as a vital component of a more general strengthening of civil society's response to globalisation.

From the debate emerged the theme of 'unity, capacity and power'. It was decided that in each of the areas to be covered at the SIGTUR congress, ways should be pursued of strengthening the unity of the working class and labour movements in the South; build capacity to resist globalisation; build the capacity of women and of youth to shape their lives to a greater degree; build capacity to reshape global governance institutions in the longer term; and empower unions as leading agents in the struggle against global restructuring.

Democracy and participation

The SIGTUR congress itself is a democratic and participative affair that is markedly different from many international trade union meetings. These tend to be formal and bureaucratic, as well as being marked by endless speeches with little participation by delegates. A COSATU delegate to a recent international union meeting noted that 'any meaningful policy discussion was crowded out. More than two thirds of congress time was spent on fraternal greetings. Not a single policy resolution was adopted.'

In contrast, SIGTUR congresses are based on workshops, to maximise real participation and draw on the collective wisdom and insights gained from open debate and an exchange of experiences. Instead of formal speeches, case studies are being prepared. Examples of successful resistance to restructuring have been chosen for the congress as a way of stimulating debate. The impact of change on women and youth will feature prominently in these discussions.

A position on the WTO

One of the sessions will be devoted to the WTO. Participants are considering six strategic options to the WTO agenda. Unions are submitting a formal response, identifying which of the options they will adopt, enabling SIGTUR to map out Southern union positions on the WTO and paving the way for a common strategy.

An issue of fundamental importance is the link between workplace struggle and the broader anti-globalisation struggle that has emerged since Seattle. By clarifying common ground, SIGTUR hopes to generate a more coordinated Southern response.

WTO decisions have a profound impact on work. Proposed resolutions on state services to be put to the organisation have important implications for public sector workers. The problem is that the union movement has failed to produce a common response based on campaigns.

The SIGTUR congress coincides with the next round of the WTO in Qatar. SIGTUR has, therefore, decided to organise a protest march in Seoul when the Qatar meeting opens. KCTU members will join congress delegates in the protest.

Two days will be devoted to building skills for global campaigning. The breakthroughs achieved and the lessons learned in the Rio Tinto campaign will be

reviewed. There will also be inputs from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) leaders involved in implementing the multinational corporations code of conduct. Greenpeace and the International Union of Foodworkers will outline their global framework agreements.

The congress aims to draw up a plan of action for all these areas, rather than merely passing resolutions.

'Adjust to globalisation'

At a recent meeting of Southern African unions, Alec Erwin presented the perspective of the ANC government. He argued that trade unions had to adjust to the dictates of globalisation.

Erwin argued that all national economies were being 'compelled to make structural changes, and unions need to respond positively to these reforms. Unions need to recognise that they have to sacrifice now in order to achieve something tomorrow. The primary role of unions is looking after the immediate needs of their members, rather than promoting some longer-range political role. This is the sphere proper to a political rather than trade union movement.'

The evidence contradicts Erwin. During the 1980s and 1990s, Australian unions tried to adjust to the demands of global restructuring. Union membership fell from 50 to 30%, in part because of structural adjustment itself. Economic deregulation gutted the manufacturing industry, slashing membership. As significant was the anger and frustration directed at unions for failing to resist restructuring. The question was: why belong to a union that collaborates in a restructuring that destroys or casualises our jobs?

In contrast, unions can follow the lead of KCTU, COSATU and other progressive unions by resisting the changes through a

combination of company-level strikes and mass protests.

Those who argue that unions should adjust to the new reality scoff at resistance, contending that the chances of success are minimal given the power of international finance, the new global institutions and multinational corporations. Such arguments were not accepted by the unionists, students and communities who fought apartheid. Through its mass actions against globalisation, the democratic union movement in the South has shown that it has no intention of 'adjusting'.

Roll back the attack

It is appropriate that the unions of the South are meeting in Korea at a time when the KCTU is resisting restructuring with such vigour. The spirit of resistance needs to be consolidated across the South. Labour needs to coordinate its actions and formulate an alternative to the neoliberal agenda, asserting social goals and the interests of the majority.

The Korean meeting will be a landmark moment in the fight against the lean, mean agenda of corporations and the conservative political powers that serve them. The struggle will also create a future for the labour movement as a vital defender of working class interests.

As the jailed president of KCTU, Dan Byung-Ho observed at the SIGTUR meeting: 'If we fail to resist globalisation's attacks that are not only directed against workers - all citizens are affected - all will be affected by our failure. If we fail to roll back these attacks, it will be a sheer catastrophe for all of us. We have to build a solidarity capable of rolling back this present attack.' ★

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