



The Korean Working Class:

From Mass Strike to Casualization
and Retreat 1987-2008

Loren Goldner

and

The Description of Bankruptcy

For Full Unemployment Cinema Screening

JUNE 27th 2010 at 5pm

Description of A Bankruptcy (Lee Kang Hyun)

+ South Korean labour shorts

+ Speaker (Heeyoung Song)

www.unemployedcinema.blogspot.com/

The Korean Working Class:

From Mass Strike to Casualization
and Retreat 1987-2008

Loren Goldner



and

The Description of Bankruptcy

The following is an excerpt from The Korean Working Class: From Mass Strike to Casualization and Retreat 1987-2008

By Loren Goldner
Introduction

Since the mid-1970's, the Korean working class in the late 1980's destroyed the foundations of a decades-old military dictatorship with remarkable mass strikes in the years 1987-1990. The strikes resulted in the creation, briefly (1990-1994) of radical democratic unions and in high wage increases across the board. But, as in other cases, the working class was relegated to the role of battering ram for a "democratic" political agenda that quickly embraced globalization and the neo-liberal mantra of free markets. In fact, even before the strike wave but particularly thereafter, Korean capital was already investing abroad and pushing neo-liberal austerity at home. In 1997-98, the Asian financial crisis forced Korea under the tutelage of the IMF and greatly accelerated the casualization of the Korean working class which had been the main capitalist riposte to the breakthroughs of the late 1980's. Today, at least 60% of the work force is casualized in the most brutal way, subject to instantaneous layoffs and half or less the wages and benefits of the 10% of the work force classified as "regular workers". The bureaucratic remnants of the radical democratic unions of the early 1990's are today reviled corporative organizations of that working-class elite, and as many struggles take place between regular and casualized workers as against capital itself.

National Politics and The Great Workers Struggle, 1987-1990

Beginning in the 1980's, worker struggles for democratic unions shifted (along with the Korean economy itself) from light to heavy industry. The Chun Doo Hwan military dictatorship that succeeded Park Chung-hee was forced to relax controls in the mid-1980's, under mounting pressure from the broader democratic opposition in the run-up to the Pan-Asian Olympics (1986) and the Seoul Olympics (1988). In particular, the "democratization declaration" of June 1987, made in response to the threat that the working class would join in the pro-democracy protests, was the immediate trigger for the Great Workers Struggle of that summer. For the first time, the movement shifted from the Seoul-Inchon region to the new southern industrial zones of Ulsan, Masan and Changwon. All told, there were more than 3,000 strikes in 1987, winning unionization, 25-30% wage increases, and abolition of the hated military

Video camera footage of an apartment shows a woman searching through a set of belongings. The camera date is October 17th, 2003. We see a dead body lying under a red rug. Beside the body a person weeps, otherwise there is no sound.

'Under this warm ceremony of life, a day as cold as ice, and a face hardened as a rock.' A piano dirge plays. A seated worker; on his back a message reads in Hangeul: 'If you ask for my life, I will stab you in the heart'. Now the masked workers prepare. Holding trade union banners and black and red flags, they snap the ends off, transforming these poles into sharpened, bamboo staves. In kanji the subtitle reads 'Kougeki kaishi': 'Begin the attack'.

Screeners of "The Description of Bankruptcy" are available at http://www.indiastory.com/English/html/indie_filmcontent.asp?filmIdx=712, the film is still touring documentary film festivals. Anonymous individuals have also released the film onto file sharing networks. For an excellent article on Korean working class history, please read Loren Goldner's "The Korean Working Class: From Mass Strike to Casualization and Retreat, 1987-2008" at <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/korea.html>

Notes

1. ICC 'The "Asian Dragons" run out of steam', <http://en.internationalism.org/ir/89/dragons>
2. Korean capital feared another event like December 7th- 9th, 1997, in which the stock market fell 18.2% and 43 billion dollars were withdrawn in a single day.
3. Joe Jeong Hwan, "Class Composition in South Korea since the Neoliberal Economic Crisis" <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/spip.php?article1256>
4. <http://www.theoriecommuniste.org/Theorie-Communiste>
5. <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inst/papers/1999/dp107/#3.3>
6. They were in such a state of insolvency that major accountability reform was threatened by the state itself. The boom years expansion had not been able to escape the sagging rate of profit (from 49% in 1986 to a low of 18.6% in 1997), leaving Korean capital more and more unprofitable on a national scale, and in flight towards relatively lucrative waters. Between 1997 and 1999, 11 of the 30 largest chaebols declared bankruptcy, and their political role in Korea has been somewhat reduced.

From: <http://datacide.c8.com/on-%E2%80%9Cthe-description-of-bankruptcy%E2%80%9D/>

es. It is not a question of a dissatisfaction with a “recuperated” autonomy, but with autonomy itself in the sense that it is no longer anything other than “re-cuperated” by its very nature. This nature, consisting of the liberation of the class following from its autonomous affirmation (having “broken” its capitalist social moorings), was the definition of the revolution in the previous cycle; it is now that through which self-organisation and autonomy exist and are consciously experienced as the limit of all current struggles. Everywhere, as soon as self-organisation is established (and currently you can hardly escape it), people are fed up with it; it weighs heavily on the movement. As soon as it is initiated, it “winds us up”, because it reminds us bluntly what we are and what we no longer want to be. It is here, within self-organisation, against it, that the struggle of the proletariat as a class produces its own existence as a class as a limit to be surpassed.”(4)

Just as the chaebol form found itself in crisis, (5) deeper contradictions in the workers themselves are suggested: that perhaps the long cycle of class struggle, which began from the late 1970s, is in conclusion, or at least deserves to be. All of its popular causes: democratic unionism, the grandeur of massive public works projects, the discipline of a national working class, ‘victories’ of the student movement, the policing of the shop floor, the abstract pressure of capitalist debt, the ‘responsibility’ felt for that debt as well as the anonymous, polluted, concrete city, are laid bare. By allowing these phenomenon to speak for themselves, the film succeeds in describing true social misery and true anxiety, opening the question of whether a new transformation has taken place or if we simply have new scars.

In the final scenes, we return to the election celebration at the public park; but the camera is trained on the crowd, not the performers. Men and women cheer and clap, clad in the slogans of the old democracy movements, singing the old student songs. A man pumps his fist as a voice croons: ‘you are my love, Korean Association of Trade union workers’. Another young man smiles: ‘these days we don’t need extremism or conflict, but rational dialogue.’ Still, we have already seen the contradictions, the demolitions, the evictions, the outpouring of despair, the desperate man in the subway. Our narrator describes the celebration: ‘for anybody who entered this mortgaged ceremony, the more his eyes are filled with goodness, the more his memory becomes the symbol of complicity.’

The scene has shifted and the music is done. Workers masked in red and black gather under a cloudy sky; they are preparing, even as the rally leaders intone: ‘All citizens, let’s make a big shout of democracy again, OK?’ A cry goes up from the crowd.

discipline (enforced hair length, mandatory morning exercises) in factories. Ulsan, in particular, the Hyundai company town, saw massive street mobilization and street fighting that lasted into 1990.

The 128-day (December 1988-April 1989) strike at Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) culminated in a coordinated military attack on the occupied Hyundai shipyard by 9,000 soldiers and police, coming from sea, air and land. This was followed by ten days of street fighting (mobilizing not merely workers but their wives and children) in the working-class neighborhoods of Ulsan. This struggle in turn was followed in 1990 by the Goliat strike, again at HHI, and which ended in bitter defeat. (Hyundai did built extensive high-rise worker housing in response to these struggles.)

Decline and Rollback Begin, 1990-1997

The ebbing away of the mass offensive struggles of the 1987-1990 period, and the general atmosphere of defeat that ensued, opened a new phase in Korean worker organizations. The wage increases won in the late 1980’s briefly reinforced the illusion of the possibility of capital-labor cohabitation, and hence the reformist currents.

In particular, within the National Congress of Trade Unions (ChoNoHyop), the right-wing and openly reformist (pro-North Korean) National Liberation faction began to gain the upper hand against the weakened radical faction. (The Korean name of the NL faction, Kukminpa, means literally ‘Labor together with the nation’.) This faction was always oriented to bureaucrats and politicians. As mentioned earlier, a government policy of repression aimed at the best militants in the NCTU and toleration of the open reformists destroyed the NCTU by 1995 and led to the regroupment in the KCTU under the right-wing leadership. (Indeed, at the very founding of the NCTU in January 1990, most of its leaders were in jail or in hiding.) The long experience of dictatorship and cronyism also made some workers initially sympathetic to bourgeois democracy and neo-liberalism.

Ulsan remained in intense ferment, however, and in June 1991, when Park Chang Su, a labor leader, was killed in prison, 20,000 HHI workers and 30,000 HMC workers attacked Ulsan City Hall, with the struggle ultimately lasting one month.

In 1992, South Korea joined the International Labor Organization (ILO), just about the same time that the capitalists were regrouping for a crackdown on wage gains. In this period, lower-wage public sector workers started to organize, the Korea Telcom (KT) workers being the most militant, even if their

struggles tended to be mainly wage-focused, though linked to a push for workplace democracy.

In 1993-1994 debate raged in the movement about the way forward, including a felt need for political strikes. The more radical currents wanted to shift the unions from company-based unions (the dominant form of Korean unions to this day) to industry-wide unions, and to create an umbrella organization. As the NCTU further declined under the blows of repression and the machinations of the NL faction, the way was open to the creation of the KCTU, formally created (though not legalized until the IMF crisis) in November 1995.

Some successful strikes continued in 1995-96, notably a KT strike, that won major wage gains. Because of such strikes, blue-collar wages were surpassing civil service wages. At the same time, Korean employers were increasingly shifting from the chaebol model to an orientation to the advantages of globalization. Both sides were gearing up for the 1996-1997 confrontation over the labor casualization law.

In the fall of 1996, rank and file pressure as well as preparation for a general strike grew. Under this pressure, the KCTU had to withdraw from discussions leading to the infamous Tripartite (state-labor-capital) Commission, which, once again, would be created in the midst of the IMF crisis in spring 1998. There was growing rank-and-file rejection of the NL group.

One important counter-measure of the radical militants was the formation of the “hyung-jang jujik”, or shopfloor organizations, which attempted to fight the degeneration of the unions and the KCTU with alternate organization, not “outside” the unions but as a shadow power both within the unions and with “horizontal” ties to militants in other unions, fighting against a trend to company-based parochialism. The arc of the hyung-jang jujik extended from 1990 to 2005. In different circumstances, the hyung-jang jujik managed to take power in major unions and thereupon often succumbed itself to bureaucratization; in their final years, they became prey to various groups seeking a back-door route to power in the unions, and finally collapsed. But at their best, in a generally defensive situation, they preserved a continuity with the radical impulse of the 1987-1990 period.

The General Strike and the IMF Crisis, 1997-1998

Just after Christmas 1996, the Korean government of Kim Young-sam, in a special night session of parliament with no opposition present, pushed

integration was not programatically divorced from the orientation of the major unions, the student movement, nor even the general strike called against the Trade Union Act, which were motivated by not only classic demands such as wage defense and protection from downsizing, but quite specifically mobilized for a ‘democratic reform’ of the chaebol system, eliminating public corruption and maintaining the national employment system. Listen to the KCTU explain its objections to the railroading of the initial Trade Union Act: “The second concern was the way the ‘passage’ itself was executed. The unprecedented clandestine pre-dawn session...aroused popular fears about a precipitous rollback in what has always been a fragile and sporadic progress towards democratisation. The Korean General Strike was one of the first massive popular responses to the uncontrolled rampage of ‘globalisation’ which is threatening to reduce systems of social justice and economic democracy to shambles. It also marked the emergence of organised workers as the central engine of democratic progress which has been derailed by elitist politicians and outdated institutions.” And what of the workers who discover that the engine room is plagued by murderous heat?

The contradictory phenomena that “The Description of Bankruptcy” records; on the one hand unrelenting capitalist austerity and antagonism against it, on the other a profound disconnection with the classical promises of industrial development, the mass worker and democratization, are usefully understood in the same framework that the French group Theorie Communiste have developed around the critique of ‘programmatism’ (the phase in which the activity of the proletariat is oriented around the program of labor as such, and in which revolution appears as the liberation of that labor) and the theory of the restructuring which follows that phase. “The Description of Bankruptcy” describes the fallout from these events, mulling over the status of the ‘mass worker’. The Fordist mode of labor organization, which enabled Korean capital’s expansion and the birth of its industrial work force, is contrasted to the society it has erected, and its racking crisis. We are not introduced to proud workers, only the proletarianized, not in uniforms but dressed plainly, discussing the most mundane aspects of survival. The subjects of the film do not have guarantees, they are overworked and exhausted. The disaggregated workplaces of the interviewed subjects contrast starkly with the archival images of mass industrial organization. There is hardly a ‘mass worker’ among them. In one scene, a man talks to a friend on a windowsill, his body leaning halfway out, soaking in the sun. Another stands outside, idling. They are in pause, they contemplate.

“Currently, anywhere that self-organisation and autonomy triumph, dissatisfaction with them is immediately manifested...Within the current triumphant self-organisation, it is what opposes it which prefigures the abolition of class-

agree on the great cause to revive the national economy'. In a yellow-walled factory, a man cranks an assembly line and bends his head in exhaustion. His fatigue assaults us: when the ecstasy of national pride has rusted, what is left but the factory walls?

Social consensus was a tense prospect during the 1980s given that the ruling class had to ensure that factory-floor mobilizations of workers against the dictatorship did not escape strictly political, democratic forms, since the level of activity and repression threatened to overflow. A system of social consensus was advanced in the 1990s by "agreements between the FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions) and the ANB (Association of National Businessmen) in 1993, and the establishment of the Committee for Reform of Employer-Employee Relations in 1996."⁽²⁾ The establishment of what could be called a 'labor settlement' came in two stages. A coalition effort by the FKTU and the more militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU, which had developed during the democratization movement and yet was still illegal) together with the government deteriorated in late 1996. When the ruling party tried despite this, to rush through reform of the Trade Union laws which meant a severe casualization of workers and an attack on workplace labor organization in early December 1996, militant KCTU sections called a general strike against the move, launching 'the largest organized strike in South Korean history', in which 'workers in the automotive and shipbuilding industries refused to work...After a single day, the strikes started spreading to other sectors including hospitals. On December 28, South Korean riot police turned violent against the strikers, using tear gas to dispel crowds. Strikers responded by throwing bricks. In late January of 1997, the strike ended...' with the promise of a renegotiation of the Trade Union Act, this time with both the FKTU and the KCTU and other unions at the negotiating table, which brought many of the most militant forces of 1980s and allowed the government to legitimate trade union activity in general as a 'labor movement moving in step with the people'. Workers, however, paid a steep price. The new composition of the union movement and its meager victories, such as the rights of teachers to organize (but not strike), were won by accepting attacks on wages, further restrictions on labor organization, the right of companies to lay off workers for economic reasons, the introduction of flexible production and so on. By 1998, at the height of the financial crisis, the privatization of public industries, which had elicited violent strikes even in 1994 and 1995, went largely unprotested, "because it was channeled through tripartite negotiations that included the FKTU and the KCTU."⁽³⁾

The democratization movement had reached a historical limit, setting the stage for similar collaborations in 1997 and 1998. Describing this period, with its widespread labor turmoil, as a 'recuperation' would fail to grasp that this

through the first of a series of labor casualization laws aimed at bringing the South Korean economy fully into the era of "globalization" and making layoffs easier for employers, as well as introducing multi-tier contracts. Employers, as indicated previously, had been steadily chipping away at the worker gains of the late 1980's, and the economy was further weakening through 1996 with accelerating bankruptcies, but this was the first head-on confrontation with the newly-won working-class power.

The KCTU, firmly in the hands of the right-wingers who had defeated and displaced the NCTU, called an immediate general strike under intense rank-and-file pressure, a general strike which was widely followed. Even the conservative, Cold War-era "yellow" FKTU joined in. White-collar workers joined as well, and at its peak three million workers were on strike. (The initial legislation was withdrawn, but a virtually identical law passed in March 1997, with no significant response from the KCTU.) Again, the historical experience of the Korean working class and the novelty of casualization made the strike more "anti-fascist" than anti-neo-liberal. The KCTU did everything in its power to avert a confrontation with the government, and actively demobilized where it could. The rank-and-file, for its part, showed great spontaneity, such as at Hyundai and Kia Motor Company. The KCTU was rumored to have met secretly with the capitalists to assure them that the strike was under control, and waning. They proposed the impotent tactic of the "Wednesday strike", a tactic repeated again and again in later years. The general strike petered out in late January, with (as indicated) nothing resolved.

In the wake of the general strike, the Korean Democratic Labor Party (KDLP, or Minju Nodong Tang) was founded in spring 1997, with the same right-leaning elements dominant in the KCTU majority.

The failure of the general strike of January 1997, however, was in turn eclipsed by the devastation of the Korean economy during the Asian financial meltdown of 1997- 1998.

Beginning in Thailand in July 1997 with the collapse of the Thai currency, the crisis rolled through Asia in subsequent months as every country that had embraced the "free market" and hence loosened capital controls saw a massive flight of capital and the plummeting of its currency, with Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea being the hardest hit. The Korean won fell 40% by November 1997, when the Kim Young Sam government obtained a \$57 billion bailout from the IMF. All four candidates for the December 1997 presidential elections had to sign an acceptance of the IMF agreement as a condition for disbursement. Thus Kim Dae Jong, finally elected president of Korea after decades in the wilderness of the democratic opposition, had to devote his term

in office to implementing the IMF's draconian package of layoffs, cutbacks of government services, the leveraged and deregulated foreign buyout of Korean industries and banks, and the casualization of labor. Korean democracy, like Korean organized labor before it, triumphed at the very moment when the fulfillment of its earlier apparent promise became impossible, and triumphed as the necessary fig leaf for such harsh medicine. Bankruptcies cascaded and suicides skyrocketed. The IMF initially demanded that Korean banks lay off 50% of their personnel (the figure was later lowered to 30%) and similar numbers of civil servants. The unemployment rate tripled by 1999, and millions were thrown back into poverty.

In this situation, Kim Dae Jong and the KCTU played their appointed roles. As previously mentioned, Kim pulled the KCTU leadership into the February 1998 Tripartite accords, with the KCTU assenting to mass emergency layoffs. The KCTU rank-and-file revolted against such abject surrender and ousted the leadership that had signed off on the deal. There were some large-scale strikes against layoffs in 1998, such as the Hyundai Motor Company (HMC) strike, but the new top KCTU officers were imprisoned and the strikes generally defeated.

During the IMF crisis, many small factories were wiped out, including ones with a militant work force originating in the late 1980's strike wave and previously sympathetic to the NCTU. For the first time, in keeping with IMF demands, contingent workers became a major phenomenon in the Korean work force. In response to the imposed sell-off of Korea Telcom shares to Wall Street investors, for example, a strike erupted. This strike showed growing evidence of the rift developing between regular and casual workers. In addition to drawing higher pay for less work, the older regular workers lacked the computer skills of the young casuals, and felt increasing job insecurity. The union leaders talked tough but did nothing. Ultimately, both regular and casual workers did strike but not at the same time. The KT strike ended with the dismissal of 10,000 casual workers.

The February 1998 agreement between Kim Dae Jong and the right-wing leadership of the KCTU for mass layoffs led to a rank-and-file revolt in the KCTU, and the entire leadership was ousted after worker militants occupied the KCTU offices armed with steel pipes.

A new left-wing leadership took control, as mentioned previously, and did attempt to relaunch a general strike against the new labor law in May, June and July, but to no avail. The old leadership remained entrenched in the heavy industry unions, and opposed militant action. In June-August 1998, a 28-

corporate loans now focuses on household loans after 2000.' A housewife tells us: 'since we have a certain amount of money to pay each month, what we can do is to decrease what we eat. But we can't stop eating to pay the debt.' The tempo is raised and the testimonies overlap, repetition implies an overall pattern. Director Lee gives the impression of consumer credit circulating in a broken, discontinuous loop. Songs of the student movement ring out, sung by white-shirted activists on stage. In the crowd people are embracing. There is brief sense of unity, but now we view the scene from a television monitor. Everything is dark except for the image; the scene is externalized, we stand outside of it.

On television, a crying woman clutches her grandmother; her eyes are a well of tears. No words are exchanged in the flood of tears. A man breaks down on television describing how he meticulously cleaned the fingers of his wife as she died of polio. We sense a cathartic event taking hold. Silent white text on black narrates: 'Collective wailing on a grand scale except for a 1% or 2% who will never get hurt by anything'. A woman considers: 'If i had used my credit card right, nothing would have happened. I am living like this because I did it wrong, right?' She goes through the motions: '...that's the price i have to pay...for what i spent', but she doesn't seem convinced. An elderly debtor appears on television behind a facade wall, we see his shadowed outline behind the stage. He describes the hardship his debt has meant for his family, and swears that he will find work, that he will reform himself: 'I will do my best...I will pay the debt'. The crowd applauds.

What brought us here?

The film rewinds to the black and white, to images of the post-war past. President Yoon addresses thousands of assembled public works laborers: 'Whatever direction we had taken so far, from now on, we have to be a new person, with a new decision to make this country a wonderful nation'. The workers are lined up in their thousands, in disciplined blocks, wearing blue jumpsuits and hardhats. Several different scenes are shown in simulacra, shot after shot demonstrates the workers organized in ranks. The television reports: 'The company Dukooraba decided to make more use of lunch time, by finishing eating in 30 minutes and going back to work.' Factory scenes pass before us, we move with a crane across acres of steel rolls, a dam project and micro-electronics; over 50 years of industrial history. Clips of crowds marching with banners, of mass parades; one marching man's sign reads: 'No to foreign goods'. A radio voice celebrates 'raising the consciousness of the workers... the beautiful picture of the workers committed to nation building'. Now, 'Korea is 5th in the world for electronics, 6th for steel...there are signs of 'stable growth in the whole society'! A man speculates: 'there used to be a conflict between labor and management, but in this year, both parties seemed to

stand-by loans. The conditions of structural adjustment dictated that, in order to re-establish the availability of banking capital and therefore the credit rating of the country as a whole, money would have to be summoned from somewhere, given that when fears of default on existing loans hit large investment groups, banks are liable to be stripped of capital in massive sell-offs. Structural adjustment meant among other things expanding consumer credit lines across the board as newly casualized workers struggled to survive within unemployment rates of as much as 33% and heavy inflation. If it was the beginning of the end for capital's crisis, the credit expansion had brought a renewed suffering for the majority of the population. The subjects of "The Description of Bankruptcy" endure this aftermath.

3.

Investors cordially mill about the floor of the World Economic Forum, holding drinks. Now demolition: what was once a neighborhood of apartment buildings is being demolished by cranes, crushed concrete slabs litter a massive plaza bordered by a few remaining high-rises.

Our subjects begin describing their reproduction: coffee in the morning, preparations for work, the commute, the day care, the rent; how to enjoy the free time left to them. A claw plunges into a pile of concrete, extracting a clod of steel wire. Red lips lament, she pays the interest on one credit card with another, her insolvency spirals, her family family is evicted from their house. She had to beg another family to move into a small warehouse they own. A television monitor broadcasts the speech of a student movement veteran on stage, celebrating an electoral victory. Bright lights shine on her face: 'Ladies and gentlemen, we won!'. The crowd cheers and people wave fans. Who won?

A loan officer in a gray explains: '...they requested us to provide our BIS (Bank for International Settlements) capital adequacy ratio; what they mean by this is that when the bank collapses, they want to determine if we have enough capital for them to retrieve.' Investors mill about the WEF floor. 'Banks have watched the big corporations go bankrupt, which have been considered the safest. So, who would provide loans to these groups, when their BIS capital adequacy ratio goes down? As a result, they had to find safer ways to manage their assets, and this led to a larger proportion on household capital.'

We return to the woman with red lips, she describes the warm words of the credit card company: 'strangely enough, the card company was really nice when I opened my credit card account.' But what seems like a way out soon leads to a spiral of credit; one by one, other interviewees relate their collapse into insolvency. 'The data of the Bank of Korea itself, which used to focus on

day strike took place at HMC, leading to the firing of 10,000 regular workers. Within two years, 10,000 casuals had been hired to do their jobs. KT and various banks also fired regular workers and rehired them as casuals.

Post-1998: Regular vs. Casual Workers Becomes The Issue In the Working-Class Movement

From the IMF crisis onward, the question of casual workers loomed larger and larger in the Korean movement, as well as antagonism between regular and casual workers, with regular workers seeing casual workers as undermining their jobs. (In 2000, a nation-wide casual workers' union was founded, and is now an umbrella organization with over 50,000 members.)

As early as 1999, a 32-day nationwide strike of 4000 tutors of the Jaenung schools (hakwon, or private academies for after-hours schooling) won collective bargaining rights. The government had denied that they were workers, calling them instead "independent contractors". The strike was important in showing that organizing casual workers was possible, against state and employer resistance.

In 2000-2002, a renewed KT strike lasted 517 days. In the aftermath of defeat, the KT casual workers union was dissolved. The regular KT workers were generally hostile to the irregular workers. After the strike, KT hired people as "indirect contract workers". In 2002, 49% of KT shares were sold to US investors, with increased severance pay packages as a tradeoff, along with shares given to regular workers.

In 2000-2001, an air-conditioner factory strike lasted over a month, and was betrayed by the regular workers, over and against casual worker militancy. A counter-example, however, was the Lotte Hotel workers organizing drive in 2000, which showed that a regular workers' union could in some circumstances organize irregular workers. After tremendous repression by the hotel owners and imprisonment of strikers, the hotel agreed to regularize workers over a two-year period.

During these same years, however, the KDLP was shifting to the right, and the dominance of the NL line, oriented to the bureaucrats of the KCTU and the politicians of the KDLP, prevented organizing casual workers. (In 2004, the KCTU even helped a Hyundai CEO in his electoral campaign as an independent.) In the view of some militants, the KCTU was an integral part of neo-liberalism, almost to the point of enforcing outsourcing.

In 2003, for example, Pusan truck drivers successfully pulled off a strike, but

the government, employers, KCTU and KDLP sabotaged it. In the same year, a large strike erupted at the LG Caltex (now GS Caltex) refinery, but the KCTU did nothing to help the strikers.

In 2005, 10,000 casual oil and chemical workers in Ulsan struck for 83 days over working conditions. The complicated hiring structure imposed by labor laws and company strategy hobbled the strike. A “Committee for the Ulsan Area” was created to settle the dispute, including capitalists, CEOs, smaller businessmen, NGOs, and the Ulsan branch of the KCTU. An agreement was limited to the recognition of the union. The workers returned to work during six months of committee “discussion”, leading to nothing. The return to work was brought about by small company concessions, but after the KCTU and KDLP withdrew from the scene, no part of the agreement was ever implemented.

Over the summer of 2005, a battle raged again at Ulsan HMC over casualization. One worker immolated himself in protest, and the union refused to link his death to the labor situation. The casual workers tried to stop the assembly line, but the regular workers refused to collaborate. Company managers and scabs restarted the line while the regular workers stood by, doing nothing. All casual workers involved in the struggle were fired.

In June 2006, the metal workers union voted to form an industrial union in an attempt to overcome the fragmentation of workers in the myriad of spinoff subsidiaries with different contracts, but HMC still negotiates with the HMC company union. Many militant workers opposed the industrial union initiative because of its corporatist agenda.

Later that summer the casual construction workers of the giant POSCO steel works in Pohang wildcatted and were defeated. In August 2007, the casual workers of Kia Motor Company wildcatted and occupied part of the factory, where they were physically attacked by the Kia regular workers and forced back to work.

In one positive development, in November 2007 regular and irregular workers of Hyundai Motor Company in Ulsan for the first time organized a rank-and-file movement together.

The E-Land Strike Lights Up the Social Horizon

The still-ongoing (as of this writing, March 2008) E-Land strike is the latest and in some ways the most important struggle of all in placing the question of

tions, demanded mass layoffs, cuts in government spending, labor casualization and resulted in skyrocketing unemployment as companies were gradually sold off to foreign capital. All of this was precipitated by the growth of non-performing loans (those near default) in the Korean bank system, which Korean capitalists accumulated throughout the wave of industrial expansion from 1961, in which the state guaranteed borrowing from domestic banks and provided legal leeway for large-scale public works projects carried out by industrial combines called chaebols. These chaebols, which include major corporations such as Samsung, Hyundai, Lotte and so on, were and are mainly family-controlled concentrations of capital, who emerged in cooperation with the military dictatorship in the 1960s largely to attack the entrenched working class of the light industrial sector by shifting the economy away from light industry and into heavy and chemical industries. These workers had managed to raise wages despite the terroristic conditions enforced upon them and the presence of a government-mandated single industrial union, the FKTU. In this shift, the profitability of Korean capital was maintained by intensive state intervention (not untypical of less industrialized economies trying to compete on the capitalist market) and (at least up until 1979) a rigid protectionism. Still, Korean capitalists were not free of their working classes, whose constant wage pressure and constant militancy contributed to the accumulation of debts and foreign loans on Korean capital. Wage struggles were continuous despite the fact that, on the shop floor at least up until the late 70s, working conditions consisted of “low wages, long working hours, intense flexibility, permanent social control through tying the wage-earner to the company, military occupation of the factories in response to any social conflict, and so on.”(1) Nevertheless, the industrial expansion had by the mid-90s put South Korea on the map as an ‘Asian Tiger’, a ‘capitalist success story’ for the ‘third world’. Prosperity was however, pregnant with crisis.

The persistent series of struggles waged by the Korean working class in the late 80s and early 90s (300 strikes in the first three months of 1989 alone), accompanied by a growth in interest rates (in order to attract foreign investors), contributed to the exponential growth of bank debt in chaebols such as Hanbo, Jinro and Kia, squeezing the margin of profitability for most firms beyond the breaking point. Hanbo steel was the first corporation to go into default, despite massive bail-out efforts, and it was soon joined by many others as the wider East Asian economic crisis hit. Bankruptcies snowballed, the stock market experienced successive single-day losses of 7, 8% and the Korean won went into free fall. Lower profitability on capital, bankruptcy and defaults meant spiraling unemployment and the sale of unused fixed capital via buy-outs and mergers; Kia was acquired by Hyundai, Daewoo was sold to GM. To somehow re-establish a rate of profit, one attractive to foreign speculators, the South Korean government called on the IMF for emergency

Lee Kang Hyun develops this clash of images and information over sixty minutes in order to provoke a totalistic reflection upon life lived in modern industrial capitalism and the aftermath of crisis, using contrast to nullify the sounds and sights of everyday assurances. Hyun traces the effects of the bankruptcy wave on individuals, with testimony by men and women who bear the brunt of the austerities. He skillfully contrasts the survival struggle of debtors under the weight of ballooning loans with a critical perspective on the integration of the 1980s democracy movement, and the role of the laborer in the 'national working class'.

2.

Two collectors arrive at an apartment and we see it from surveillance cam. They knock on the large steel door and are allowed in. 'Want lights on?' 'Yes' 'Stop talking and make the payment'. We see a list of 'items for seizure', but no-one is home. The abrasive sounds of a door being sawed open in blackness: 'We are from the court'; a cut to home video footage where a proud woman narrates to her future daughter, explaining who's who in family pictures. She points to the cross on the wall; years later she is explaining to her young daughter that soon they will have a bigger house. How did this dream die?

Several young men and women describe their job conditions in interview, detailing their everyday tasks and their ominous accumulation of personal debt. One works on the rails, another in an office during the day, delivering newspapers at night; they describe their gradual reliance on credit to finance their survival: 'we can have as much as we dream...'. Some do not show their faces.

Standing against a sky of smog caking the city, a tall gray apartment building; the radio again: 'Our safety can be now secured by 14 songs that clear our heads, and 47 songs that relieve stress...'. Two women with their faces hidden describe the pressure of surviving on credit after their husbands have been laid off over an overhead shot of men in business suits, milling about the floor of the WEF's East Asian summit. Stockbrokers and investment barons share a laugh. The lips of a woman reflect: 'We had to depend on this credit card for our living.'

Her worried statement shows a personal example of how the credit expansion which the South Korean state relied on to overcome the 1997 crisis dragged many into a living nightmare of debt. Her story, and the monetary crisis itself developed in the very heart of Korea's particular experience of industrial capitalism. The series of bankruptcies which would later be understood to have signaled the full appearance of crisis, which under IMF condi-

casual workers front and center in South Korean society.

In November 2006, the Korean government passed yet another in a series of laws on casual labor, called in Orwellian fashion the Casual Worker Protection Law. The law was designed to create the illusion of "doing something" about a condition now affecting over 60% of South Korea's active population. The law provided that after two years on the job, all workers would automatically become regular workers. The law went into effect seven months later, on July 1, 2007, and left huge loopholes for employers who wanted to lay off casuals before the deadline. Some companies complied with the law, but many more did not and laid off their casual workers by June. The whole process came into sharpest focus at a chain of department stores known as E-Land, with a related struggle at a similar chain known as New Core.

E-Land had begun as a small family business, under a fundamentalist Christian owner, and had grown to a \$58 billion annual enterprise with 61 outlets around the country. It had taken over the stores of the French Carrefour chain. The company was known for particularly harsh conditions of employment, with mainly women casual workers earning \$800 per month for 36-hour weeks, often compelled to work 12-hour shifts without even bathroom breaks. Further, the company required all employees, Christian or not, to attend chapel on the premises. The CEO of E-Land tithed \$10 million to his church in 2006. Just before the new law went into effect, E-Land and New Core laid off 1000 workers who would qualify as regular workers under its provisions.

The immediate response was a strike now (March 2008) in its 9th month, and now facing almost certain defeat. But in the initial days of the strike, all over South Korea, thousands of casual workers from other sectors came to help shut down E-Land stores. The KCTU went into action, doing everything to smother the strike under fulsome rhetoric while diverting the energies of the rank-and-file and "outside" supporters into meaningless symbolic actions. On July 20, however, 200 E-Land employees occupied an outlet in Seoul and shut it down. The government response was to send 7000 soldiers, police and hired company thugs to violently oust and arrest 200 people. The fading Noh Moon Yon government (highly unpopular and due to leave office in February 2008) had a great deal riding on the success of the new law. But it was hardly alone in perceiving the importance of the strike. Many big chaebol came to E-Land's assistance with millions of dollars of loans. The KCTU, for its part, promised to lend the E-Land and New Core unions serious money when their strike funds were exhausted by the end of the summer, then reneged on the offer. The KCTU constantly pressured the company unions to come to the bargaining table while E-Land management offered no conces-

sions whatever. In Pohang, in November, E-Land even attempted to open a new outlet with only casual workers. 500 E-Land workers and other casuals not only blocked the entrance to the store, but attacked and disarmed the police and thugs protecting it. Similar actions, including blockages and store occupations, occurred intermittently throughout the fall.

Perhaps most remarkable in the E-Land strike, in contrast to many earlier strikes with casual labor as the main issue, was the broad sympathy for and support of the strike among working people in the same casualized situation. A nationwide boycott had by December 2007 reduced sales nationwide by 30%, and even the media had given generally favorable coverage to the strike, at least in the early weeks. Whether the E-Land strike wins the strikers' jobs back or not (at this point it seems it will not), it will be a victory for the broader working-class movement by finally making the casualization of labor in South Korea a question that can no longer be ignored.

In December 2007, the hard right Hanaratang (One Nation Party) candidate Lee Myoung Back won the presidential elections with significant working-class support, a political development that probably sealed the fate of the E-Land strike, since the new government (now in place) would support E-Land management even more openly than the outgoing, widely despised center-left government that had disappointed so many people. E-Land management continues to benefit from the financial backing of other major Korean chaebols, whereas the E-Land strikers have been abandoned by almost all their allies, KCTU in the lead. The new government promises a full offensive of privatizations and "free market reforms" and must necessarily disappoint its working-class supporters, who were expressing more disgust for the former government than support for the new, along with idle dreams that ex-Hyundai CEO Lee Myoung Back would bring back the glory days of Korean capitalism, which ended 20 years ago. Losing strikes in Korea have been known to drag on for years with a dwindling hard core while most strikers find other jobs or crawl back to the old ones. But, once again, because of the E-Land strike, the growing crisis represented by casualized labor in South Korea can no longer be relegated to silence.

*Seoul, South Korea
March 2008*

On "The Description of Bankruptcy"

If you ask for my life, I will stab you in the heart.

1.

Four black and white camera angles show a subway station; no sound. A train arrives, people get on and off. The lights of the next train shine from the tunnel. An agitated man descends onto the tracks. His final moments are recorded in monochrome, 15 frames per second, 13, 14, 15. In 2006's "The Description of Bankruptcy", director Lee Kang Hyun carries forward the haunting violence of this moment, the despair in the jumper's anonymous fate and the events which would compel it in order to provoke reflection on the financial crisis of 1997 and its aftermath. Images of Seoul are overlapped with radio channel chatter, news reports stream lifestyle advice atop cityscapes. We are taken from one scene to another. Everyday life goes on in industrial spaces; a printing press rapidly stamps paper. Traffic passes through Seoul: 'People who don't smile a lot have wrinkles in their face', a stone-faced man stacks papers in a printing machine, his gloves stained red. '...smile out loud as much as you can. One who smiles a lot also has less chance for mental illnesses such as hypochondria.' Other workers steam-press clothing in a factory with the radio confidently declaring: 'The time has come when all power comes from the people, as stated in the Constitution article 1.' We are not given any cues to celebrate. Steam rises from the cloth.

In the subway big English letters declare: 'Be a professional!' on a billboard featuring a smiling man in a business suit, his gait beckons us to walk with him but meanwhile, morning commuters hurry past. The radio muses: 'It seems as if the mainstream of this society has been replaced...the active participants in student movements in the 1980s have now become the dominant group in our society...', but at the same time, 'more radical and progressive movements have appeared...'

Now a suit-and-tie speaker preaches 'money wisdom', intoning to his seated audience that 'what you really need is self-innovation, self-transformation' for success. The sun pushes through the smog-filled sky of Seoul. A narrator begins reading off recent statistics on causes of death in the city: 'More than 10,000 people die without knowing why in the metropolitan area alone from the effects of tiny dust microbes, less than 10 micrometers in size.' In a gray office, a manager looks over a prospective employee's resume, nodding and smiling as the narrator notes: 'Death by intentional self-injury ranked 4th among the entire causes of death'.