

South Korean government besieged by demonstrations and strikes

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South Korean President Lee Myung-bak heads a government under siege, facing another week of demonstrations demanding his resignation over his decision to lift a ban on US beef imports, and a national strike by truck drivers over rising fuel prices.

As many as 13,000 unionised truck drivers began strike action yesterday, defying government threats to deprive any striker of a \$14,500 annual fuel subsidy and to deploy military vehicles to take over their jobs. The country's major ports are being affected severely. While union drivers make up only 3 percent of the trucking workforce, they move 20 percent of shipping containers, according to a report in the New York Times. The number of trucks transporting containers out of the port of Pusan fell to just 13 percent of normal levels.

The strike enjoys considerable public sympathy and support. Its key demands are for a slashing of the cost of diesel, increased haulage fees and a guaranteed minimum wage. Thousands of non-union drivers, who have been just as hard hit by the rapid rise in fuel prices over the past year, have joined the industrial action. At the port of Incheon, where only 157 drivers are union members, over 2,000 non-union drivers refused to load cargo.

The leadership of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), to which the truck drivers' union belongs, has threatened to call a general strike of its entire membership if the government arrests any strikers or uses force against them. Workers in major industries, such as auto and ship-building, are already holding meetings over whether to launch political strikes in support of the protest campaign against US beef imports.

The beef ban was imposed in 2003 after a case of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) or Mad Cow disease was discovered in American cattle. At the time, South Korea was the third largest market for US beef.

The issue became a major sticking point in negotiations that began 18 months ago on the terms of a Free Trade Agreement between the US and South Korea. South Korea's corporate and financial elites are desperate to finalise the agreement before the Bush administration leaves office. The US Democratic Party, reflecting the interests of American auto manufacturers, has come out against any pact, as it would give their South Korean rivals greater access and competitiveness in the US market. Barak Obama, the Democratic nominee for president, and the candidate the South Korean establishment fears will win the election, has been one of the most vocal opponents of the proposed trade pact.

Upon assuming office in late February, Lee Myung-bak set out to resolve the impasse. In

April, his government announced it was lifting all restrictions on the sale of US beef. The outrage among South Korean workers and youth was immediate and has rapidly grown into a mass political movement against the entire policy agenda of Lee's conservative Grand National Party (GNP) government, as well as against South Korea's political and military alignment with the United States.

Lee's popularity has collapsed to only 17 percent—just six months since his election and after only three months in office. His government is seen as the embodiment of a corrupt US-backed corporate and financial oligarchy that has amassed vast wealth from the exploitation of the Korean working class and is indifferent to ordinary people's problems and concerns.

As demonstrations have grown in size and scope over the past two months, protestors have increasingly carried placards portraying Lee as a rat. As well as opposition to beef imports, demonstrators have denounced rising fuel and food prices, the government's education and health policies, moves to privatise state-owned companies, an unpopular plan to build a canal across the country, the presence of US troops in Korea and Lee's hard-line attitude toward the North Korean regime.

More than one million people demonstrated on Tuesday in the largest political rallies in South Korea since the protests to bring down the military dictatorship in 1987. Last night, over 10,000 people assembled in central Seoul for a vigil to mark the sixth anniversary of the 2002 killings of two young girls by a US military vehicle. The Associated Press reported that speakers demanded both the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea and Lee's resignation.

A student, Sin Jung-ah, told the rally: "I think South Korea is a colony of the United States. We will make efforts to change the situation where both of you [the girls killed six years ago] died unfairly. I hope you will support us from the heavens." Kim Kwang-ho, a cook interviewed by the Associated Press, said: "I want Lee Myung-bak to resign now. He's not qualified to be our president because he unilaterally decided to import US beef without thinking about people's health."

Another vigil is being held today in memory of Lee Byeong-ryeol, a 56-year-old worker who died after setting himself on fire during an anti-government protest on May 25.

A demonstration is taking place tomorrow to mark the eighth anniversary of the first summit between North and South Korea in 2000. Millions of Koreans had illusions at the time that the summit would lead to the country's ultimate reunification and an end to decades of tensions and the constant threat of war on the Korean peninsula. Instead, they have seen the Bush administration embark on a continuous policy of provocation against the North Korean regime, preventing any significant progress toward stability.

More demonstrations have been scheduled for next Wednesday and Saturday by the People's Association for Measures Against Mad Cow Disease—a coalition of 1,700 groups that has been organising virtually daily protests against the government.

In a statement issued on Wednesday, the coalition set June 20 as the deadline for Lee to renegotiate the beef agreement to ensure that no US cattle older than 30 months will be sold in South Korea (younger cattle are less susceptible to contracting BSE). The statement declared: "If the government decides to ignore the mandate from the people, who hold the

sovereign power in this country, we will not hesitate to launch a campaign to drive President Lee Myung-bak out of office.”

Lee claimed later on Wednesday to have secured a verbal undertaking from the Bush administration that no cattle older than 30 months will be exported to South Korea. He also announced he was delaying privatisation and the construction of the canal across the peninsula from Seoul and Pusan. Both policies have attracted mass opposition. In a further attempt to appease opposition, he unveiled subsidies for truck drivers and concessions for low-income earners. He is preparing a major reshuffle of his cabinet and may appoint a new prime minister.

Lee’s desperate efforts to end the protests are a measure of how deeply they have shaken the Korean ruling elite. Their greatest concern is that masses of people are beginning to organise outside the parties that have dominated Korean politics since the end of the dictatorship. Amid the outpouring of anger at Lee, the opposition United New Democratic Party of former President Roh Moon-hyan has registered no significant increase in its support. The underlying cause of the eruption of social discontent is the profound alienation of the Korean working class from the entire political establishment.

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