

By Colin Foster

**A**T 6am on 26 December, 154 MPs from Korea's ruling party were bussed to Parliament. Nervously, the deputy Speaker took the podium: the Speaker was not there because opposition MPs were camping out round his house to prevent just such a coup. In a rapid mumble, he called votes on eleven new labour laws. By seven minutes past six the MPs were back on their buses, and by 6.30am the illegal Korean Confederation of Trade Unions had called a general strike.

At Kia Motors, just outside Seoul, 17,000 workers assembled as they arrived for work. By 10 o'clock they had held a meeting, decided to strike, and moved off to the general strike headquarters at Myongdong Cathedral, in Seoul.

Since then the strike has spread from one sector to another. As we go to press on 3 January, the union confederation reports:

"Most of the unions at large companies, such as the major car makers and shipyards, whose holiday lasts till 5 January, will resume the strike on 6 January. The general strike will expand to cover all sectors and industries on 7 January, as unions in most of the public utilities, such as the television and radio networks and hospitals, are set to join in..."

The general strike is demanding that the new labour laws be annulled, and that the government begin discussions with the unions on a new and democratic labour law. Such is the strength of the movement that even the tame, state-sponsored Federation of Korean Trade Unions is denouncing the new laws and supporting strike action.

According to the militant union confederation, "Korean unionists have come to learn [about] an international dimension to their struggle. This was highlighted by knowledge that similar battles are being fought out even in those countries which were once believed to have achieved all there was to achieve for workers' rights and welfare, in countries like Australia, Germany, France and the United States. This has given Korean unionists a sense of being pioneers in this world-wide struggle".

As part of the big campaign of demonstrations alongside the strike, on 27 December some 200 truck-drivers blocked motorway traffic with a low-speed truck parade, in direct imitation of



Striking worker gets to grips with a riot policeman

# General strike "tiger" econ

the French truckers. On New Year's day, the union set up dart boards with pictures of a typical capitalist, a politician, and president Kim Young Sam, for workers to throw darts at.

The government is supposedly reformist and democratic — Kim Young Sam was a leader of the democratic opposition to the old military regime — but retains the huge repressive apparatus of the old regime. Union leaders are frequently jailed, and demonstrations attacked by riot police. So far in the current dispute, however, the government has been on the defensive, with few

arrests and attacks. As we go to press, it has threatened mass arrests.

The new labour laws correspond almost exactly to what the Federation of Korean Industries had demanded from the government. It adjusts but effectively maintains the ban on the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, and the ban on any union organisation for government employees and teachers; it legalises mass sackings, scab labour and unpaid overtime.

The Korean bosses have demanded such measures in a drive to recapture their flagging momentum from the time

## "Korean trade unionists are pioneers in a world-

# A distinct force with their own class interest

**W**ITH a wave of unifications, the latest last November, the independent unions [KCTU] have managed to bring together different sectors, representing a cross-section of the working class. The independent unions' members are still only a representative minority of the working class, but they have broadened out beyond the limits of the earlier independent unions to reach into the big industries. Today they are leading the fight.

The independent unions identify with the general democratic movement, but see themselves as a distinct working-class force with their own class interest. They do not seem to have any great illusions in the established democratic opposition. They call for unification with North Korea, but they do not seem to be any sort of Stalinists.

Their rhetoric is very class-conscious, though they do not talk about socialism, and no hegemonic political tendency is visible. They have had contact with the student radicals, and many of their support

organisations are run by Christian, especially Protestant, groups.

The government has done what it did because labour costs in Korea have been increasing rapidly and the economy is in recession. Until around 1986-7 wages were flat, but since then, thanks to the growth of the independent unions, they have gone up astronomically.

Over the last few years Korea's economic dynamics have changed. The picture most people still have of Korea is a very successful export economy, but some industries have declined and auto exports are in trouble.

Korean corporations are moving abroad. They are investing in Europe and North America to get into those rich markets, and they are also outsourcing to lower-wage areas like Thailand and Indonesia. A lot of their exports are within south-east Asia, and there they are competing with operations based in China, for example, where wage costs are maybe one tenth of what they are in Korea.



Militancy in the car industry. Daewoo workers on strike at the beginning of the 1990s

when South Korea was the most successful capitalist economy in the world, moving from boom to boom. But, as Marx put it, "the development of modern industry cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers... the proletariat". Capitalism is and always will be caught in a double-bind: the more successful it is, the more it creates the forces for its own destruction and replacement.

Messages of support to the KCTU via Internet at [kctuint@chollian.dacom.co.kr](mailto:kctuint@chollian.dacom.co.kr).

-wide struggle."