

Struggling in Solidarity

Alongside with Subcontracted Precarious Workers in Daewoo Shipbuilding

Malangchism

July 4, 2022

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1. Nay! Yook-sik shan't leave : About the solidarity with the DSME subcontract workers' struggle

I am a son(-in-law) of Geoje Island. I am not sure exactly how; life just led me to it. No, it is said that there is a reason for everything in the world, so if I were to trace back for a reason, I guess it is because I used to hum the lyrics "at rainy the docks of Okpo, along the blizzard rails of Seoul," like a habit throughout my 20s. Of course, I couldn't have known that my partner's hometown was Geoje before I began dating her, but such is life. Being an ignorant Seoul bumpkin, uncertain of whether Okpo was in Geoje Island nor where Geoje even was, I guess this is a natural outcome of mindlessly singing a song about Okpo. Thusly, the drive to Geoje with the comrades from Mutual Aid of Ours Malangchism and the anarchist club from Seoul National University, Black Crane, was not an unfamiliar one.

Even so, just because I was familiar with the place, because I had come previously a couple of times, I ended up showing off my knowledge on such things as Geoje's geography to the comrades who had come with me. Though I had received news that the Irregular Workers No More Coalition was organizing solidarity buses, I hastened regardless. It felt as if not only my mind, but my body would suffer as well if I did not arrive at the scene of the strike a day, no, even hours earlier and join the comrades of the Geoje-Tongyeong-Goseong Dockyard Subcontractors' Branch (GTG; ~~XXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXXX~~) striking tooth and nail against Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering company (DSME; ~~XXXXXXXX~~). So, I quickly organized with comrades who could go to Geoje together and left Seoul on Thursday evening and arrived at Geoje around midnight.

Geoje Island used to have a strange custom. It was said that before the actual wedding, a reception would be held in Geoje for the parents' co-workers who could not attend the wedding in Seoul. After arriving and waiting for a bit at the suite where such reception for my wedding was being held, my father-in-law's co-workers began to gather one by one. No suits nor casual clothing were at sight. Rather, grey work clothes. Safety boots. That was what they wore, without exception. It was unfamiliar, yet I felt comfortable in the curious longing throughout. Occasionally at home, I stare at the commemorative towel for the 30th anniversary of the DSME Workers' Union, given to me by my mother-in-law -who surely must have kept for some time before handing it down to me- without reason.

To hear it was at this very same DSME where the subcontracted comrades were fighting for their lives; I was terrified. The pain from the ruin of the world I believed in resonated in me more deeply than I imagined. To be honest, I was so perplexed at myself since I did not think it would at all feel like my heart being cut out. Who was I to even feel this way? However, I was not the only one who was hit with that feeling. Looking at the numerous comrades from the Metal Workers' Union of the Yeongnam region, the Irregular Workers No More Coalition -who quickly mobilised from Seoul in a heartbeat-, and many others who had come from all over the country, I realised: I wasn't alone in my restlessness. We could finally face the two ominous enemies known as the DSME and the Industrial Bank in a proper big fight.

The demands from our comrades of the GTG are not difficult to understand nor implement. While the shipbuilding industry sang complaints about its own collapse, while numerous workers left the Geoje Island that would come to ruins if the dockyards went bankrupt, wages were cut by 30%. If someone were to suddenly lower your wage by 30%, would you accept it without a fight? But the GTG comrades just bore with it. Now that the shipbuilding industry is back recovering,

is it so absurd to ask for the wages to be back the way they were before, not even counting what had not been paid? Of seven comrades, six were on the railing, 20 meters above the dock floor, and one welded himself into a prison using his livelihood's craftsmanship, at a depth lower than the water. Is the idea of having their Union recognized and getting their negotiations through something that irregular workers should not even dare dream of?

Faced with this desperate struggle, the DSME and the Industrial Bank mobilised their union busters to commit violence, tried to destroy the sit-in sites time and time again, They also created an internet chat group where they would mock the protest, drawing parallels to the Ssangyong Motor incident, saying that the compensation would cost the Union billions of Korean won and laughing at the prospect of dozens dying just like how the Ssangyong Motor incident turned out. They are dishing out derogatory claims about the struggle with each breath of theirs, saying that the worker who imprisoned himself in a 1 metre in width and height metal box actually made a secret back door to freely go in and out of his own prison. They are intruding in the chat rooms of our comrades who are fighting, and continued to throw personal insults and provocations. Just how long do we let these evildoers run amok?

There is a song called "Yoon-sik is leaving"¹ sung by comrade Yeon Young-seok. It was inspired by a tradition surrounding the launching ceremonies at the dockyard, where if a worker had died while constructing the ship, a cigarette would be lit in the place where they used to work and sing "Yoon-sik left to sea" to mourn them. But this time Yook-sik shan't leave. There are comrades who have been deprived of what they rightfully deserve, and knowing this there would be no comfort navigating the seas around the world with that ship. This time, Yoon-sik cannot ever leave. Until the strike of the subcontracted workers ends in victory, he shall never leave.

All workers are one. The value of their sweat is all the same. There is no way that Capital's conspiracy to instigate infighting between the regular and irregular workers is going under the noses of the comrades of the DSME branch under the Metal Workers' Union, affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, they who have prevailed through countless battles, including the Great Struggle of 87, with an indomitable will. Even if it was met with indifference or even misunderstood, the workers' unity cannot and will never be destroyed in the face of false accusations and conspiracies that attempt to divide them. Comrades from the DSME branch, comrades from the Yeongnam region, and comrades from all over the country will fight in solidarity with GTG comrades and achieve victory in this struggle. If not, I guess I will have to throw away out of shame the towel I mentioned earlier. But I firmly doubt that this will ever happen.

Again, and until then, Yoon-sik can never leave. Mutual Aid of Ours Malangchism too will try all possible ways to join in solidarity and fight alongside.

Yeon Young-seok - 'Yoon-sik is out'

2. That thing floats?! : On our 2 days with the DSME subcontract workers' struggle

Is it one of the dockyard buildings? Or is it a ship still under construction? That was the question tickling my mind as the huge white structure, faintly visible beyond the entrance on the bridge leading to the west gate of the Okpo Dockyard in Geoje, DSME, came within sight.

¹ Lyrics to the song mentioned in-text. "Yoon-sik" is used as a sort of a pronoun in this context rather than a specific name

As of the time of this writing, 25th of June 2022, the strike of subcontract workers in DSME has been going on for 23 days. As part of the strategy for the strike, workers mobilised to prevent a ship launch at Dock 1, scheduled for the same day. On the 24th, the day before, a resolution rally was held by the Metal Workers' Union on the dockyard's west gate bridge. After the protest of the Metal Workers' Union, the Irregular Workers No More Coalition continued the protest in solidarity for two more days. Several groups came from all over the country to join in the struggle, among them being familiar faces such as Unions of the Asiana KO branch and the Sejong Hotel branch. Of course, after reading the statement by Irregular Workers No More Coalition published on the 20th of June, we at Malangchism also arrived at Geoje on Thursday and participated in the 2 days protest.

Even at this moment of writing, inside the dockyard, the vice president of the GTG subcontract branch is locked-up in an iron box he made himself by welding 1 metre-squared metal plates, and 7 other comrades are blocking the launch by climbing on the ship under construction. The shipbuilding industry is already infamous for its intensive labour and wages not proportional to it. In addition to that, in 2016, 25,000 subcontracted workers were fired and wages were cut by 30%. This is the comrades' struggle against the tough oppression forced upon them for being irregular workers. Yet as much as it is a difficult fight, the voices of the vice president and other comrades who could not come out of the dockyard were full of determination.

The weather has been gloomy since Thursday, but fortunately it has only cloudy, without the rain or scorching late June sun. However, maybe it was because the Hope Bus and the protest were prepared within just a few days, but not many people had gathered than expected, and the slogans chanted during the propaganda operations on commuting roads were at times sloppy due to lack of preparations. Nevertheless, the passion of the comrades who rushed to aid the subcontract workers of DSME at the call to action against injustice were like the simmering of the heavy rain itself waiting to pour. Not yet at full throttle, but as if it would brutally pour at the slightest touch. In such a short preparation period, enough people had gathered to fill the west gate bridge, and in addition, fundraising to support the strike and the evening and morning meals of the participants of the rally were also actively carried out. Despite the difficult times, I am happy to reaffirm the mutual aid present when people gather to get through times of suffering together.

Later I zoomed in at the gigantic white structure I mentioned at the beginning, only to confirm it was a ship the size of a dozen-story building, still under construction. Looking at the dockyard from afar, in addition to ships such as these, it was possible to see several cranes used for their construction. It seemed as if the dockyard could make spaceships that could travel outer space with ease, not just the sea. Whether the strikers broke the laws of the state or not, their true illegality must be breaking the very laws of physics, making seemingly impossible massive iron structures float on water! Such great feats the dockyard workers achieved by toiling without weekends.

It is said that occupying a ship under construction for a strike is illegal. The state and capital, though conceding the workers the right to strike, is ultimately preventing such strikes from being actual threats to them. But why should we expect others to provide the justification to our struggles and our livelihoods? We must free ourselves from the illusion that the law will guarantee us true justice as soon as possible. I wish for the workers to believe at a fundamental level the slogan that they are the true masters of the world. Until the subcontract workers of

DSME overcome the oppression and aggression of DSME and the Industrial Bank, and forge a victorious end, Mutual Aid of Ours Malangchism will join them in support and solidarity.

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