

From APEC to WTO: Trajectories of Protest in Korea and East Asia

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Angry protests in Busan, South Korea during an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference there in November have alarmed Hong Kong police preparing for a mid-December World Trade Organization ministerial conference. Hong Kong police fear that some of the groups who showed up to protest APEC may also bring strident street protests to Hong Kong. This article examines some of the trajectories of protest apparent at the APEC events by looking more closely at the national and international dynamics of Korean activism, revealing growing coordination between workers, farmers and anti-war activists, and the implications for the Hong Kong meeting.

The specter of farmer protest

Since Korean activist Lee Kyeong-Hae screamed “WTO kills farmers” before taking his life at the WTO protests in Cancun, Mexico in 2003, Korean farmers have directly targeted global trade talks as well as the Korean government’s own plans to liberalize its rice market. Under a deal negotiated last year with rice-exporting countries and the World Trade Organization, South Korea pledged to raise its rice import quota to 7.96 percent of total domestic consumption from the current four percent in exchange for a 10-year grace period before it must fully open up to rice imports. The

Korean government has also tried to ease the pressure on Korean farmers by providing incentives to grow different grains and other agricultural products.

According to South Korea’s Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ), however, the Korean government has confused the public by claiming that it only plans to increase the imported rice quota to 7.9 percent. The CCEJ maintains that the 1988-90 statistics on which this figure is based are inflated compared to current levels of consumption; furthermore, the government has established separate quotas for rice importation for use in food and beverage processing which would also considerably inflate the amount of rice imported [1].

Nearly 150,000 Korean farmers rallied across the country in October to protest the bill and they also showed up en masse to protest APEC in Busan where WTO agricultural policy was one of the key topics tabled at the APEC leaders’ summit. Protests began on September 12 with a march of 20,000 in Seoul organized by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and People’s Action against APEC and Bush. They were quiet enough until 15 November, when the Korean Peasants League held a protest in Seoul. The League’s protest turned into a four-hour confrontation with police, leaving seven police buses burned out and many police and protesters injured, including Korean farmer Jeon Yong-cheol, who later died of head injuries. This was a precursor to the larger protest that took place in Busan on 18 November. Protest organizers had expected over 100,000 to show up; however,

police stopped at least 70 busloads of protestors from the neighboring province of South Cholla from reaching the rally, in some cases stealing the keys from bus drivers. Still, 30,000 managed to rally in Busan and march on the summit. Korean farmers carried ceremonial effigies for two farmers who had committed suicide by drinking herbicide in the week previous to the conference as a protest against South Korea's plan to liberalize its rice market.



A bus burns near the National Assembly in Seoul after a four-hour confrontation between riot police and protesting farmers on November 15.

In anticipation of a confrontation, riot police used armored buses and a double layer of shipping containers to seal off the bridges leading to the Busan Exhibition and Convention Center (BEXCO). In response, the protestors - mainly farmers - tied ropes to the containers and pulled them down, succeeding, under a barrage of water cannon, in dragging some of them into the sea [2].



Protestors tie ropes to shipping containers forming a barricade across a bridge leading to the convention center in Busan. (Ch'am Sesang)



Police use water cannon to beat back protestors attempting to dismantle the shipping container barricade. (Oh My News, Kwon U-song)

What happened next was captured and circulated by the international media: well armed police - equipped with batons, shields and in some cases, three-meter steel pipes - clashed with protestors brandishing bamboo poles well into the evening.



Protestors clash fiercely with riot police close to one of the bridges to the APEC venue on the evening of November 18. (Oh My News, Kwon U-song)

Fearing that Korean farmers might contribute to similar mayhem at the WTO meeting in Hong Kong this month, officials sent police to South Korea for the APEC summit in order to “assess the characteristics of Korean protestors and devise ways of dealing with them [3],” and have warned the 1,500 Korean farmers who plan to join the protests that gatherings of 50 people or rallies of more than 30 require written notice in advance or will be considered illegal and broken up. In addition, anyone who organizes or participates in illegal gatherings or rallies faces up to five years in prison or more if property is damaged or traffic disrupted.

Growing internationalism?

There is something of a gloomy atmosphere hanging over the Korean left these days, primarily due to the recent corruption scandals in the left union federation, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and the loss of the Democratic Labour Party’s seat in the worker concentrated city of Ulsan during recent by-elections. The unity between the KCTU and Korea’s other large labour federation, the FKTU, has recently crumbled over the issue of labour market restructuring. Besides the evident crisis in the labour movement there has also been talk of divisions

in South Korea’s famously leftwing student politics. Nevertheless, changes are afoot that could bring the Korean left closer to global movements, such as the ‘anti-globalization’ or global justice movements.

Korean workers did not come out in full force in Busan, but they joined protests leading up to it and participated in larger coordinating bodies such as NO to APEC and Korean People’s Action against the WTO. The KCTU has instead been focusing on a domestic battle against labour market restructuring. Contingent or non-regular forms of work have been expanding since the 1997 economic crisis in South Korea, after the union reluctantly agreed to concessions on labour reform. Recently, as the Roh government tries to position South Korea as an economic hub in the Northeast Asian region, there has been increased pressure to make the labour market more flexible, both to attract foreign investors to South Korea’s financial sector and to compete with other export oriented manufacturing economies.

The “Non-Regular Workers’ Protection Law,” which was expected to be passed in the April extraordinary session of the National Assembly was postponed till the present session due to labour protests and the breakdown of tripartite negotiations. The new law is comprised of three different bills that would expand use of temporary workers, ‘dispatched’ workers (casual or contract workers through staffing agencies), and revise labour arbitration processes.

In a January 2005 report to an OECD mission, the KCTU criticized the government’s failure to commit to the principle of “equal pay for equal work” for non-regular workers. “Without a written policy statement on the principle of equal pay for equal work,” the reports states, “there is no standard on which to judge discrimination. The major problem that irregular workers face is the infringement of

their three basic labour rights---the right to organize, the right to strike, and the right to a collective bargaining agreement---due to a clear lack of accountability from employers." [4]

The KCTU's criticism was strengthened in the spring by a report from South Korea's National Human Rights Commission criticizing 'unreasonable discrimination' against irregular workers. The Commission's report was the product of a two-year taskforce study on irregular workers which reviewed their situation in light of the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as major ILO conventions and the Korean Constitution, which guarantees the right to equal treatment for employees. Cho Young-hoang, president of National Human Rights Commission, urged adherence to the principle that non-regular forms of employment be adopted only 'exceptionally and limitedly.' Emphasizing equal pay for equal work, the commission stated that any new draft of the bill should clearly stipulate that a company can hire temporary workers only when there is an understandable need and, in addition, there should be a limit on the period that temporary workers can be used. [5]

On 1 December, the KCTU launched a nine-day general strike against the new labour package, despite the lack of support from the FKTU and disarray in some of its own unions. The KCTU allied with many of the farmer and student groups present at the APEC protests, holding a large joint protest on 4 December in Seoul in opposition to both the labor and rice liberalization bills, whose joint effect, they claim, will be a proliferation of low-paid, irregular forms of work.

While Korea's social movements are simultaneously fighting rearguard actions on a number of fronts, and despite a lower-than expected turnout for the anti-APEC protests,

many activists have positively assessed the results. Writing in the socialist newspaper Ta Hamkke, Kim Kwang-il noted that the protests exceeded earlier anti-globalisation demonstrations in Korea, and, perhaps more importantly, they revealed the sort of 'unity in diversity' that has become the trademark of the global justice movement. The throngs who converged at the bridges to the convention center on 18 November included farmers, workers, students, street vendors, environmentalists, health workers, women anti-war activists, gay rights activists and foreign migrant workers. Kim also notes that the protests represented the growing internationalism of the social movements in Korea as activists were inspired by recent events both in Argentina (the Mar del Plata demonstrations against the Summit of the Americas) and Washington (the massive anti-war demo of 24 September) [6].

This global outlook was well illustrated by the largely student rally that took place during the afternoon at the T'ogok junction before the group of around a thousand headed off to join the other protest marches converging at the bridges over to the BEXCO Center. The rally passed a resolution containing the following passage: "We oppose the neo-liberal globalization and war that are pushing the people of the whole world into greater poverty and inequality and threatening our peace." [7].



Student groups rally at T'ogok junction in

Busan, November 18 (Minjung ui Sori)

A separate rally of protesting farmers of the Peasants League issued a statement that reveals a more nationalist attitude to the issues surrounding liberalization and the WTO, while at the same time recognizing the global dimension of the problem: We stand resolutely against the APEC summit, which prioritizes free trade and tramples on our national agriculture We proclaim to the whole world the determination of 3.5 million Korean farmers to defend our nation's 'food sovereignty' by halting the APEC talks taking place in Busan today and preventing the opening of our rice market" [8].

After the protests, there was some criticism that the organizers had placed too much emphasis on the anti-Bush theme and not enough on the substantive issues of neo-liberal globalization, thus risking the potential of falling into a kind of blunt anti-Americanism that had been apparent on some placards and internet sites. Others expressed concern that the nationalist left had dominated the protests while the internationalist left had been too weak [9]. Both of these point to an older fault line on the Korean left between the long dominant nationalist tendency, with its focus on the issues of unification and the continued presence of US troops in South Korea, and the more outward-looking 'new left' and internationalist left. This tension existed in the older divisions between 'National Liberation' and 'Peoples Democracy' activists of the eighties and to some degree has continued to inform the trajectories of the radical left and civil society groups that emerged out of the democracy movement. Of course, similar tensions are found in social movements across the global south and even, to an extent, in the developed world where tension exists between initiatives aimed at stronger state control and economic sovereignty as part of the solution to the problems of neo-liberal globalization on the one hand, and grassroots initiatives that are

more ambivalent concerning both state and market power.

In this context it is worth considering how the nature of the current South Korean government inflects social movements. The government of former human rights lawyer Roh Moo-hyun has continued his predecessor's 'sunshine policy' of engagement toward the North and instituted a more independent and nationalist stance toward the US that is widely supported among the younger generation of workers and urban professionals who grew up during the era of rapid development and anti-communist military dictatorship. This seems to reflect something of a fundamental divergence between the interests of South Korea's newly ascendant political class and its traditional ruling groups, as well as the current US administration. While Bush administration policy toward North Korea has been rather indecisive over the past few years, the overall tendency has been to maintain the status quo in Northeast Asia, possibly as part of a more general China-containment strategy. This does not sit well with the views of those who seek a peaceful resolution to the Korean peninsula's six-decade division, and is also at odds with sections of the South Korean elite who seek a 'soft landing' for North Korea and even have long-term ambitions for a future united peninsula that will become a major economic and political player in the region. With its recent joint industrial development in the North Korean city of Kaesong, South Korea can be seen as slowly integrating the North, while also potentially tapping cheap, North Korean labour as a source for greater competitiveness. A diluted version of this ambition to become a regional power can perhaps be detected in Roh's recent pronouncements about Korea's role as a 'power balancer' between China and Japan.

The Roh government is often described by the opposition Grand National Party (GNP), and by other forces on the right and far right of Korean politics as a 'leftwing' government,

mainly for its allegedly pro-North and anti-American stance and for its perceived 'pro-labour' policies. The Korean political reality is, however, more complex. It is true that labour and students supported Roh during the impeachment moves against him, however, labour groups have maintained strong opposition to his labour reform proposals all along. Though the Roh government may have had some success in strengthening the social safety net, it has continued to suppress segments of the labour movement, failed to reform the outdated National Security Law and, perhaps most significantly, continues to pursue labour market reform, market liberalization and privatization policies with some vigour. Ironically, the GNP itself has slowly begun to support the policy of engagement with the North, while Roh Moo-hyun has demonstrated his loyalty to the United States by dispatching ROK troops to serve in Iraq, a move he felt necessary to give South Korea more room to maneuver on initiatives involving North Korea but which alienated many of his supporters.

These developments coincide with the rise of a new and more confident nationalism among the South Korean public that no longer sees North Korea as the main enemy. It is a double-edged sword that can be expressed in a cultural and at times chauvinistic nationalism, as has been seen in recent sporting events such as the 2002 Football World Cup and, perhaps more famously, the 2002 Winter Olympics controversy around the disqualification of South Korean speed skater Kim Dong-sung; the controversies with China over the history of the ancient Koguryo kingdom and Japan over the disputed Tokdo islets; or most recently, the public uproar over allegations made in a TV documentary against cloning pioneer and new national hero, Hwang Woo-suk. But this nationalism can also take on a left hue, with anti-imperialist undercurrents, as seen in the huge demonstrations that followed the killing of two middle-school students by a US

armoured personnel carrier in 2002, or the current protests over the expansion of a US Army base at P'yongt'aek. These often contradictory nationalist currents inform the responses of the Korean left to neo-liberal globalisation and the spaces of resistance it chooses to occupy - spaces, sometimes, where there is the potential for a more internationalist outlook.

From APEC to WTO

Like the APEC protests, those planned for the WTO meeting in Hong Kong have the potential to increase future cooperation between social movements opposed to neo-liberal politics. Years of coordination at the World Social Forum and various regional and national social forums has led to stronger networks among activists than has been seen in past decades with numerous East Asian students, farmers and workers' groups expected this year to protest the WTO ministerial. Thus, the protests are likely to take on a strong regional as well as global dimension.

The weeklong Hong Kong protest will provide these activists with a chance to explore their common interests and create new dimensions of protest. A remarkable amount of effort has been put into organizing the protests by local foreign migrant workers and their supporters, many of who are particularly apt at bridging between issues important to farmers, workers, and anti-war activists and providing a more internationalist focus. Foreign activists will also be joined in Hong Kong this month by domestic trade unions and human rights groups, as well as Anti-war activists who will be using the WTO meeting to protest the war in Iraq. Indeed, evidence of some synthesis of these interests is already apparent. South Korean farmers' groups have printed protest headbands that read: Against WTO and BUSH, and events have been planned that draw on connections between multiple campaigns.

Nonetheless, certain groups are likely to be more prominent than others at the protests. The extensive farmers' network of Via Campesina will be present in full force to continue to protest WTO talks on agriculture, as it has at previous WTO meetings; meanwhile, the presence of trade union movements is likely to be much more uneven. Though representatives from the larger international labour federations will be attending events, there seems to be less grassroots mobilization of workers than farmers, with the strongest foreign contingent of labour activists likely to be coming from India and Malaysia to protest the WTO's general agreement on trade and services. Observers note that the fact that Hong Kong trade unions have come out against the WTO is also a positive step.

Alan Chen, a Hong Kong-based activist recently interviewed at chinaworker.org, is excited about the potential for WTO protests to draw in new constituents. Specifically, he discusses the prospects for involving more mainland Chinese activists in the global justice movement.

In December, if there are 10,000 demonstrating against the WTO, it will come across in China and it will be reported all over the world, on the internet and so on. It will be a good opportunity to tell Chinese working people that... it is common farmers and workers who have come to protest against the WTO, which the Chinese government has always hailed as a great success. [10]

Chen notes that workers at mainland Chinese firms have cause for concern about the WTO, as their wages are influenced by the Chinese government's ability to intervene successfully and build up its larger state-owned enterprises - a task which will be made more difficult when China's full accession to the WTO is completed. It seems though, that any potential integration of Chinese workers and farmers into global protest networks is likely to be a very gradual

process, as has been witnessed in the ongoing attempts at dialogue between the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the All China Confederation of Trade Unions. Nevertheless, if the spark of interest in the global justice movement that Chen feels Chinese people may attain from witnessing large anti-WTO protests on Chinese soil is realized, it is possible that a variety of new alliances may be made.

There are fears that opposition to the WTO may cause Hong Kong police to crack down on protest in ways similar to the repression in Busan and at other international meetings. From the inside alone, the WTO faces challenges: there has been sharp divergence between members of the WTO over its agricultural policies, with delegates from poorer countries increasingly organized collectively against any policy that could potentially displace farmers. Walden Bello of Focus on the Global South has speculated that disagreement over agriculture alone may cause trade talks at the WTO to collapse in coming weeks [11]. Thus, activists fear that the Hong Kong administration may try to minimize public images of dissent using similar methods to the South Korean government. Prior to the APEC protest, the Korean government prevented 998 members of foreign NGOs with records of protesting global trade meetings from entering the country. It also circulated a list of 400 other activists who were to be closely monitored. Busan was no exception to the pattern of excessive policing at other international summits, with some 47,000 police and additional private security forces on hand to prevent protesters from getting anywhere near the BEXCO convention center.

Like South Korea, Hong Kong has circulated lists of protestors that will be prevented from entering the country, among them many South Korean farmers. Hong Kong has also created a designated protest pen for demonstrators, and surrounded it with fencing, while 10,000 police

will be patrolling conference venues and protests. Locally, the Hong Kong People's Alliance, a network comprised of some 30 local farmer, worker, and other activist groups, from trade unions to organizations of foreign domestic workers, has been negotiating with authorities over venues for rallies and public protest. Organizers expect around 10,000 participants for their Action Week against the WTO beginning on 13 December.

The upcoming WTO demonstrations provide an important venue with the potential for expanded regional and international coordination among farmers, workers, and anti-war activists, and the potential to expand the movement to China. If the APEC protests were any indication, East Asian activists are increasingly involved in the difficult task of overcoming national and international tensions among themselves and organizing against neo-liberalism and war, at home and abroad.

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Notes

- [1] Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice. "Withdraw the rice negotiation and reconsider the process." [CCEJ website](#) 11 January 2005.
- [2] Kim To-gyun, et al., "Kungmin taehoe mamuri... kyongch'al, swaep'aip'u tulgo chinap." [As the citizen's rally comes to an end... police attack with steel pipes.] [Minjung ui sori](#), 18 November 2005.
- [3] Hong Kong police official Alfred Ma, quoted in "Hong Kong urges Korean protestors to behave at WTO meeting." *Chosun Ilbo*, 23 November 2005.
- [4] KCTU Report on Recent Situation of Labour Laws and Industrial Relations For the Meeting with OECD Mission 18th January, 2005.
- [5] *Korea Herald* (2005.04.15)
- [6] Kim Kwang-il. "Sam man myong i pusi wa ap'ek e pandaehae haengjinhada." [30,000 march to oppose Bush and APEC.] *Ta Hamkke* 68, 26 November 2005.
- [7] "1 ch'a kungmin taehoe mamuri." [The first citizen's rally comes to an end.] *Ch'am sesang*, 18 November 2005.
- [8] Kim To-gyun, et al., as above.
- [9] Ra Un-yong, "Pan ap'ek t'ujaeng ui namgin kot." [The legacy of the anti-APEC struggle.] [Ch'am Sesang](#), 22 November 2005.
- [10] [Interview](#) with Alan Chen, *Chinaworker.org*. 30 November 2005.
- [11] Walden Bello, "Nothing to gain, everything to lose: [Developing Country Prospects](#)." 25, November, 2005.