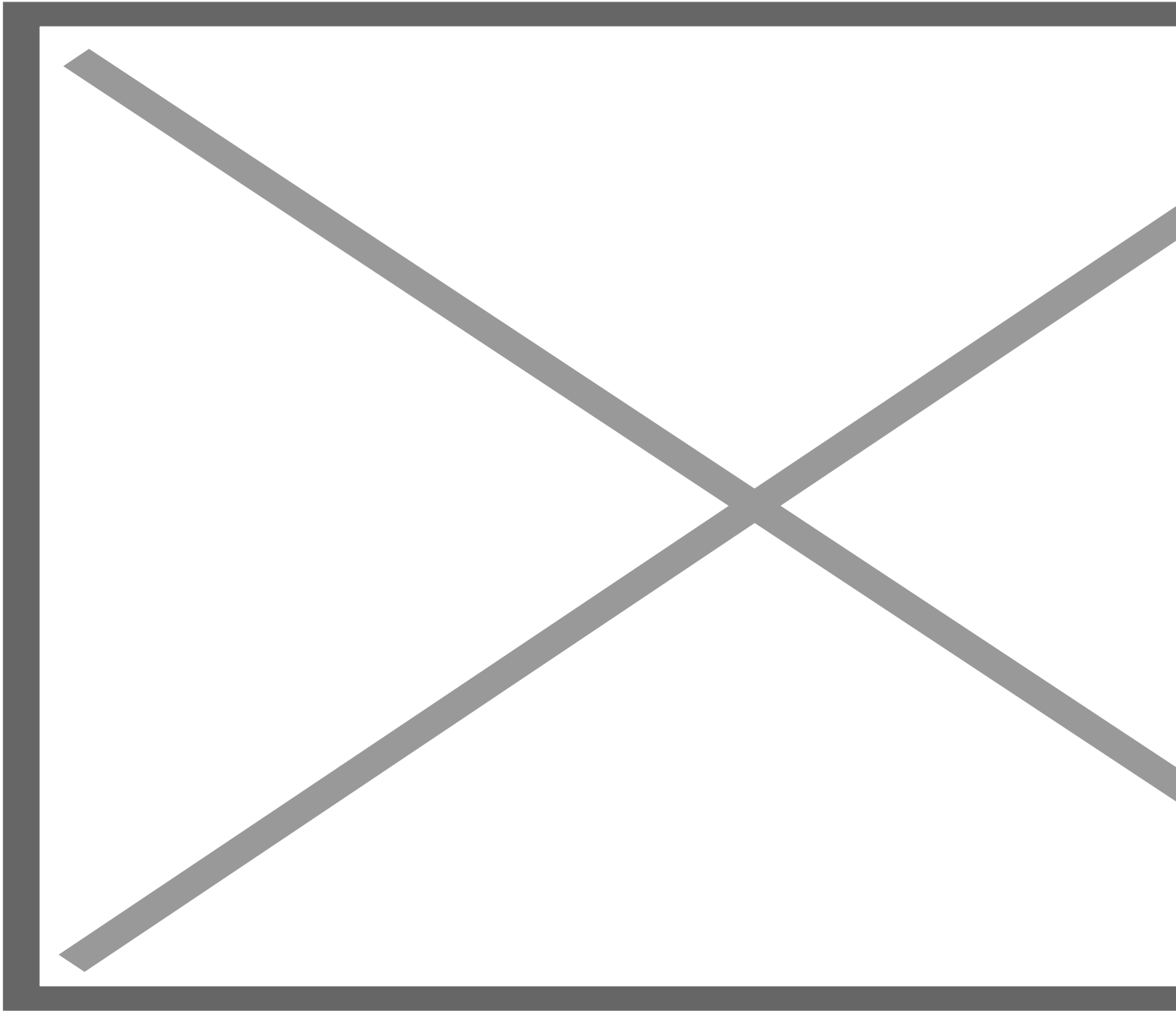


The brutal ax of capitalism

In *No Other Choice*, the unemployed anti-hero turns to a life of crime to solve his economic woes. He's not the only one.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 2026](#) issue
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“The Americans say to be fired is to ‘be axed.’ Do you know what we say in Korea? ‘Off with your head!’ So being fired is having your head chopped clear off with an ax!” Man-su (Lee Byung-hun) is practicing this impassioned speech with three of his fellow workers at a paper factory in South Korea in an early scene in *No Other Choice* (directed by Park Chan-wook). Solar Paper has just been purchased by an American company, and Man-su, a veteran floor manager, has been asked to provide a list of expendable employees to support the company’s cost-saving measures. Offended on behalf of his fellow workers, many of whom have worked for the company since their late adolescence, Man-su prepares his rousing speech, sure it will convince the higher-ups. He barely gets out a first sentence before he learns that he is expendable, too.

The next thing he knows, he is weeping alongside other middle-aged men in a support group for the unemployed, practicing mantras like “I am a good person” and “My family loves me,” as though job loss might call both propositions into question. The humiliations don’t end there. His wife oscillates between relentless optimism and brutal cost-saving measures that threaten their middle-class identity. No more Netflix, no more tennis lessons; even the family dogs are shipped off to the grandparents to shrink the food bills.

When Man-su notices the same crop of applicants at all his interviews, he begins to suspect that his woes are more universal. The paper business is being automated and outsourced. There are more overqualified mid-career candidates for a shrinking pool of jobs. Faced with this realization, he decides he has no other choice than to knock off his competition—literally. His plan is harder to execute in practice than theory (pun intended), and the film veers into madcap farce and dark social commentary. Man-su stalks, manipulates, and even sometimes befriends his intended victims, getting snared in details of their personal lives. Each turn around the murderous carousel yields more outlandish schemes and requires more devious planning. All the while, his family, for whom he believes he is undertaking such drastic action, begins to disintegrate under the pressure of his violent distraction.

Man-su isn’t the only antihero to turn to crime to solve his economic woes in these uncertain times. Ordinary men from all over the cinematic spectrum feel Man-su’s sense of having no other choice, from the down on his luck army vet who robs more than 40 McDonald’s, escapes from prison, and hides out in a Toys “R” Us in *Roofman* (directed by Derek Cianfrance) to the moody art school graduate who robs his local art museum when he can’t find enough business for his master craftsman woodworking in *The Mastermind* (directed by Kelly Reichardt).

There is a shared bitter social satire underlying these films: As the brutal ax of capitalism swings for more employees, they have no choice but to wield it themselves. In each of these stories, however, one can’t help but wonder what is stopping these men from looking for a different line of work. As much as they are hemmed in by the cruelty of an economic system ready to discard them, they are also paralyzed by their own wounded pride and sense of grievance.

No Other Choice is a wild mix of genres, blurring family drama, gangster violence, police procedural, and surreal comedy. It uses this mélange to address this paradox of agency and fate head-on. Man-su devotes hours to his murderous schemes, setting up a fake business to gather information about his competition, stalking his intended victims to learn about their lives, staying up all night working on his plans. What might have happened if he poured this much energy into retooling for a different line of work? Man-su wonders this himself as he learns more about each man he is pursuing. Beom-mo (Lee Sung-min) has descended into alcoholism and despair even as his wife begs him to accept her father’s help to switch careers. Si-jo (Cha Seung-won) has swallowed his pride and taken work as a shoe salesman while he waits for a better job. Even the man Man-su most envies, Seon-chul (Park Hee-soon), the current line manager at a booming paper company, turns out to be miserable and insecure about his work. Each moment is a mirror held up to Man-su’s own assumptions about what is necessary and what he can control. Each time he swings his metaphorical ax, he severs that thin line of

grace.

The film fluctuates between skewering Man-su's bumbling attempts to find agency in violence and skewering the cruel system that sets up workers to compete to the death to hold on to their rung of the ladder. These are not separate processes, of course, and it is the ruthlessness of Man-su's new American overlords' efforts to save a buck that convince him he too has no choice but to resort to cutthroat tactics. Whether Man-su's mission is successful is left for the viewer to judge. But if the entire plot was set in motion because Man-su was trying to save his fellow workers from getting the ax in the face of automation, the final scenes of the film are not very comforting. The ax is automated now and swinging for any head in its path.