

Workers' strikes spreading throughout South Korea

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Large numbers of South Korean workers in different industries have gone on strike in recent days, protesting the government of President Park Geun-hye's onslaught on working conditions. These actions are a clear sign of the willingness to fight within broad layers of the working class despite the efforts of the unions to contain and stymie the movement.

The largest strike took place Monday when the 50,000 unionized workers at Hyundai Motors halted work at each of the company's three domestic plants, the first full strike in 12 years. Additional six-hour, partial strikes have been scheduled for the rest of the week while workers at KIA, a Hyundai affiliate, will hold partial walkouts on three days.

Four-fifths of union members voted to strike in July with 19 partial strikes taking place before Monday's walkout. The demands included a 7.2 percent monthly wage increase (152,050 won or \$US139), bonus equivalent to 30 percent of Hyundai's 2015 net profits, and the withdrawal of a plan to reduce wages of employees aged 58 and 59 by 10 percent and to freeze wages for those who are 60, the retirement age. Known as the peak wage system, it is a government initiative to cut labor costs at companies throughout South Korea.

An agreement between the union and company reached on August 24 was rejected by 78 percent of workers. Failing to match workers' demands or even last year's contract, the failed agreement raised wages by only 58,000 won and included a one-time bonus of 3.3 million won and other bonuses worth 3.5 times the basic monthly wage. It was the first wage deal union members had rejected since 2008.

According to Hyundai, which has posted 10 consecutive declines in quarterly profits, strikes this year have resulted in production losses of 101,400 vehicles worth approximately 2.23 trillion won.

However, Hyundai's union regularly forces workers to make up lost work after agreements are signed.

The political establishment has plied its usual tricks, denouncing the Hyundai workers as labor aristocrats. "The average annual wage of Hyundai Motor workers stands at 96 million won (\$83,900)," said Jeong Jin-seok, the floor leader of the Saenuri Party. "Due to [the strike] of such high-income earners, those working at subcontractors that supply parts to Hyundai [and do not get paid as much] are being hurt."

In actuality, the average base monthly pay of union members at Hyundai is only 2 million won or \$US21,871 annually. The minimum cost of living determined by the government is 1.63 million won monthly for a family of four, which does not come close to meeting expenses as consumer prices rise. Kim Jeong-sik, a professor of economics at Yonsei University in Seoul, told the Yonhap News Agency bluntly last November, "The high cost of living in Korea is not reflected correctly in the consumer price index."

The decision to launch a complete one-day strike at Hyundai is a sign that the union's usual tactics designed to lessen the impact on the company are no longer working. The union, the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), has consistently blocked a united struggle of all workers in the auto industry and in other industries throughout the country, to say nothing of workers internationally.

The partial strikes are often not organized on the same days even with workers under the same parent company, as in the case of Hyundai and KIA. When strikes are called, the full membership is rarely called out. The KMWU narrowly passed an agreement early this month with GM Korea, isolating auto workers at different companies.

Other workers in the public and financial sectors have gone on strike against the government's attempts to push through a "merit"-based pay scheme that will be used to suppress wages by as much as 40 percent, the *Korea Times* reported, as well as create pretexts to fire "underperforming" employees.

The Federation of Korean Public Industry Trade Unions held a rally on September 22, attended by approximately 5,000 people. "The lives of public sector workers have been pushed to the edge of a cliff by the violence committed under the name of reform in the last three and a half years," union leader Kim Ju-yeong said.

The following day, the Korean Financial Industry Union (KFIU) held a strike with a union-estimated 65,000 bank workers attending a protest at the World Cup Stadium in Seoul. The Financial Supervisory Service put the number of participants at only 18,000. The KFIU has stated additional walkouts could be coming.

On Tuesday, Seoul's two subway unions covering lines 1 through 8, along with the Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU), struck jointly for the first time in 22 years. Some 2,380 subway workers, or about 30 percent of the total, took part. A similar number of railway workers walked off the job, though the KRWU claims a membership of nearly 22,000. It employed a similar strategy during a strike in December 2013 in order to limit the impact on the company and government. None of the issues from that strike, called off under government and police pressure, has been resolved.

Around 400 union members at Seoul National University Hospital also walked out on Tuesday after 88.5 percent of the members voted to strike. "Performance-based pay will make institutions, which exist for the public, operate according to capitalism. This will result in squeezing money out of patients or only treating patients who need expensive treatments—hospitals will forget their duty and become commercialized," the union stated. Additional job actions are planned with hospital employees from around the country intending to take part.

Workers in the shipbuilding and shipping sectors are also facing massive job losses, with sackings likely to total in the tens of thousands. All though not limited to these companies, they include industry leaders like

Hyundai Heavy Industries, Samsung Heavy Industries, and Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering, all of which are undergoing restructuring, and Hanjin Shipping, which was placed under court receivership earlier this month. Their unions have put up little resistance, either accepting the job cuts or staging the impotent partial strikes.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, an umbrella organization to which unions like the KMWU and KRWU belong, also organized a "general strike" for Wednesday, following a day of protests held in front of Seoul Station. These protests are a common tool the KCTU uses to allow workers to let off steam in a controlled setting. In this case, with the growth of working class militancy, the KCTU is positioning itself to sellout workers while pretending to stand at the forefront of the movement.



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