

GM Korea autoworkers vote to strike

Ben McGrath
14 July 2017

South Korean autoworkers are preparing labor actions in the coming days to demand higher wages and improved working conditions. Union members at GM Korea last Friday voted to strike by a wide margin while those at Hyundai and Kia are also in the process of approving their own walkouts. Contract negotiations are similarly taking place at Renault Samsung Motors and SsangYong Motors.

GM Korea workers voted 79.49 percent in favor of striking, with 11,572 out of 13,449 union members taking part in the vote. They are demanding an increased monthly wage of 154,883 won (US \$135.15) and 500 percent of their basic wages as a bonus, or 4.25 million won (US \$3,709). Other demands include the implementation of a salary system instead of receiving hourly wages and an 8+8 shift schedule, with an eight-hour second shift, rather than a nine-hour one, which would finish at 12:40 am.

Dang Sung-geun, spokesman for the GM union stated, “Last year, the company agreed to start the 8+8 system from June 1 this year, but we have had a meeting only once with the management to discuss follow-up steps to adopt the 8+8 system.”

The company has offered only a 50,000 won (US \$43.64) monthly wage increase and a 9 million won (US \$7,854) bonus per worker, which includes a 4 million won (US \$3,491) performance-based bonus and a 5 million won (US \$4,364) signing incentive.

On top of this, workers are facing an imminent attack on their jobs and GM headquarters in the United States is considering pulling out of the South Korean market altogether, citing three straight years of falling sales. GM has been eyeing layoffs at its factory in Gunsan, one of three in South Korea, since 2014.

The Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), which ostensibly represents GM workers, will not wage a genuine struggle in defense of jobs or working conditions. In 2015, the KMWU, an affiliate of the

Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), sanctioned the elimination of an entire shift at the Gunsan plant with promises that the workers would be relocated to other positions. However, this paved the way for the firing of hundreds of irregular workers—those without contracts making significantly less than their regular counterparts—and laying the groundwork for more sackings in the future.

Hyundai and Kia workers, also with the KMWU, are demanding the same wage increase as at GM as well as 30 percent of net profits and operating profits from last year as bonuses respectively. Hyundai’s 50,000 unionized workers will vote Thursday and Friday on strike action. Workers at the smaller companies of SsangYong and Renault Samsung are not affiliated with the KMWU, but the deals struck by the main auto union set the standards for others. SsangYong workers want a monthly wage increase of 118,000 won (US \$104) while details from Renault have not been made public yet.

If any labor action is taken, the KMWU will likely limit it to partial strikes, short-term walkouts during shifts after which the union will send workers back to their posts. This tactic is designed to lessen the immediate impact on the company while lost production will be made up through enforced overtime and speedups.

The KMWU is also planning a weeklong “Social Solidarity General Strike of All-out Struggle” beginning July 19. Neither the union nor the larger KCTU will call out its full membership to participate in this so-called “all-out struggle,” but will instead stage a few protests to allow workers to blow off steam as they have done in recent weeks.

Furthermore, with President Moon Jae-in and the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) in power, the KCTU is striking an increasingly nationalist tone to defend the government and big business while driving wedges

between workers internationally. On June 21, approximately 8,000 members of the KCTU's construction union took part in a protest in Seoul calling on companies not to hire foreign workers over Koreans.

Immigrant workers, particularly those from Southeast Asia, are heavily exploited with little de facto legal protection. Rather than denounce the government as it did under ousted leader Park Geun-hye, the KCTU, as an ally of the DPK, is utilizing Korean chauvinism and blaming these vulnerable layers for low wages and poor working conditions, ultimately justifying the poor and racist treatment they often receive.

A larger protest, dubbed a "general strike," of approximately 50,000 people was held on June 30 where the KCTU put forward the paltry demand for an increase in the minimum wage to 10,000 won (US \$8.73) as well as the end of irregular labor. Yet the KCTU has never waged a genuine struggle for these demands. In fact, the KCTU has made clear it represents no danger to capitalism.

"The strike is not to drag down the current government," Han Sang-gyun, the KCTU leader wrote in a letter from prison, where he is held on trumped-up charges related to the November 2015 protest that turned violent following police provocations.

His oppressive situation does not negate his defense of South Korean capitalism. "It is a continuation of the spirit of the candlelight vigils of Gwanghwamun Square (against former president Park), to ask (the Moon administration) for protection of labor union members, an increase in the minimum wage, the rooting out of corruption in the government, reform of the conglomerate-based economy and an end to non-salaried employment."

In other words, according to the KCTU, an improvement in workers' living standards can be achieved under Moon and the DPK, a party that has carried out privatizations, mass sackings of workers and casualization of the labor force, all while participating in the United States' imperialist wars whenever it has been in power.

This is also an indictment of the South Korean pseudo-left organization Workers' Solidarity (WS), which painted the removal of Park as a great victory for workers. WS hailed the participation and supposed leadership of the KCTU from the beginning of the anti-

Park protests last year, working to prop up the Democrats and only offering mild criticisms for the sake of appearances. The trade union confederation's support for Moon and chauvinist attacks on foreign workers exposes WS as the pro-capitalist and nationalist organization that it is.

The pseudo-left attempts to disorient workers and youth into believing the unions will wage a struggle in their interests. In reality, whether it is the KMWU, KCTU or WS, none of these organizations are opposed to capitalism nor do they speak for workers in South Korea or internationally. Their goal is to prevent the working class from breaking with the DPK and waging an independent struggle for its own interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact