

South Korean autoworkers join global fight against GM

Ben McGrath**26 September 2019**

General Motors workers in South Korea are waging a fight against the global automaker in defense of their jobs and for better pay. They join those around the world, including 48,000 striking GM workers in the United States and workers in Mexico, Brazil and other countries facing similar attacks on their livelihoods.

The more than 10,000 workers at GM Korea have struck this week for six hours each day from Tuesday to Friday. Last Friday, they also struck for four hours. The strikes came after conducting three full days of strike action September 9 to 11. GM Korea operates three plants in the country, two facilities in Bupyeong, Incheon and another in Changwon, South Gyeongsang Province. The partial strike is a common tool the unions use to limit the impact on the company while posturing as fighting for its membership.

Workers are demanding a 5.7 percent raise in their basic monthly salary, an additional one and a half months in performance-based pay, and a one-time bonus of 6.5 million won (US\$5,415) for each worker. GM Korea workers and most of the other autoworkers throughout the country are members of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), one of the most influential unions within the umbrella organization, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Like in the US, the issue of temps, or what the Korean workers call “precarious” workers, is paramount. GM has already shut down one plant in Gunsan and is determining whether or not to “allocate” more models to Korean plants based on wage concessions from the unions and increasing the number of temporary workers who can be easily fired in the event of a downturn. A number of temps are on a hunger strike demanding that precarious workers be reinstated and made permanent.

A Facebook posting from Seoul, Korea noted, “As GM’s shameless behavior is consistent throughout the world, we share a lot of the issues the UAW has in its

fight in the US! Both unions have faced plant closures, weathered bailouts, are fighting unfair treatment of temp/precarious workers. The US strike has stilled the plants across the US and even in Canada as well as unorganized plants in the US, and our strike has stopped the plants here in Korea.

May the workers prevail!”

Among Korean workers there is broad sympathy for the striking GM workers in the US and a striving to unite the struggle across all borders. This is similar to the heroic stand by Mexican GM workers at the Silao plant, who have refused to increase production of the company’s highly profitable Silverado and Sierra pickup trucks during the US strike. Because of this, GM has fired eight workers, including those with more than 20 years seniority.

The biggest obstacles to uniting workers across borders, however, are the KMWU, the UAW and other unions, which are based entirely on the national framework and accept the capitalist profit system. While using all sorts of rhetoric about “international solidarity,” the KMWU has rejected a common fight with striking GM workers in the United States. When asked by a reporter from the *Donga Ilbo* on Tuesday if the KMWU would campaign with the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US, an unnamed union official stated, “While we know that the UAW has suggested a solidarity struggle with GM Korea’s union through the KMWU, if we consider the competition to allocate vehicle models, it is difficult to make the decision.”

Any proposal for “solidarity” from the UAW is no less hollow. The UAW has spent the last four decades doing everything it can to sow hatred against Asian and other international autoworkers. Beginning in the late 1970s union officials would organize events to smash Japanese cars with sledgehammers, print bumper stickers saying, “Remember Pearl Harbor” and calling for boycotts of all

foreign-made cars. The racist agitation against Asians led to the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American engineer, who was beaten to death by a Chrysler foreman and his unemployed stepson. In the current strike, the UAW has sought to inject anti-Mexican chauvinism in the struggle, saying the strike is about bringing various models “back home.”

The KMWU has launched a boycott of two GM models imported to South Korea from the United States, the Traverse SUV and the Colorado pickup truck, both of which were introduced to the South Korean market this past summer. This will only serve to pit Korean workers against their class brothers and sisters in the US and other countries where GM vehicles are produced.

In the same vein, the KMWU leadership is conducting a racist campaign against GM Korea CEO Kaher Kazem and the foreign members of the board of directors, demanding they resign and “get out” of South Korea. Such a demand is meant to convince workers that non-Koreans are somehow to blame for workers’ problems, rather than the corporate bourgeoisie, Korean and non-Korean alike, and capitalism as a whole. A worker has only to look at Korean-owned companies like Hyundai and Kia to see a similar assault on workers’ rights to decent wages and job conditions.

A boycott pushes a broader nationalist agenda that sections of the South Korean bourgeoisie, including the KMWU leadership, hope will lead to increased profits for so-called domestic products, whether they are auto-parts, steel, or other goods. A boycott on Japanese goods, supported by the unions, is already taking place as a result of trade disputes that have been growing over the past several years. In effect, the response by the bourgeoisie around the world to economic decline is increasingly toward trade war.

The KMWU is an agent of big business, just as the UAW is in the US. The KMWU agreed to the May 2018 closure of GM Korea’s plant in Gunsan, North Jeolla Province, leading to 2,000 layoffs. The union readily agreed to the sackings, stating prior to the agreement, “If the company unveils a concrete plan on new models and export volume, the labor union is ready to yield.”

GM promised that if it received a \$750 million bailout from the Korea Development Bank (KDB), which owns 17 percent of GM Korea, it would invest an additional \$6.4 billion. GM pledged to maintain its current stake in GM Korea until 2023 and maintain at least a 35 percent stake in the company until 2028.

Barely a year later, GM is dispensing with its phony

promises. With no new vehicle models planned for the Bupyeong 2 plant, workers again fear another round of mass sackings.

The KMWU also approved a restructuring deal at automaker Ssangyong Motors, which includes cuts to numerous worker benefits, including educational assistance for workers’ children, and medical insurance. Afterwards Ssangyong praised the KMWU, saying, “Unlike incidents where labor unions and companies fight, we believe our moves will be a good example of labor and management cooperating to tackle business difficulties.”

The KMWU also blocked a strike at South Korea’s largest automaker Hyundai Motors in mid-August, despite workers voting to do so, citing the growing trade dispute with Japan. It then pushed through a pro-company deal a little more than two weeks later.

A genuine struggle is only possible if workers take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions and build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees. These committees must reject the demands for endless concessions and will fight for what workers and their families need, not what the corporations, capitalist governments and unions say is affordable.

But it is not possible to fight global companies like GM, which have a global strategy, without autoworkers developing their own international strategy. Autoworkers throughout South Korea, the United States, Mexico, and around the world must reach out to one another to open discussions on how to carry forward the fight against their common class enemy and exploiters, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. Above all, it must be a fight against capitalism and for internationalism and socialism.



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