

Kia auto workers in South Korea launch week-long strike action

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Auto workers at Kia Motors have struck again this week, their fourth industrial action within the past month. Workers stopped work last week from Wednesday to Friday and are demanding improvements in pay and other working conditions in a situation where the auto companies and the unions are attempting to impose wage freezes throughout the industry.

Workers began their latest strike on Monday and it will last until Friday. Both the day and night shifts at all three of Kia's plants in Gwangmyeong, Hwaseong, and Gwangju will strike for four hours each on Monday through Thursday and then for six hours each on Friday. Workers are demanding a 120,000 won (\$109) monthly wage increase, 30 percent of the company's operating profits as bonuses, and raising the retirement age from 60 to 65. They are also demanding the restoration of 30 minutes of guaranteed overtime, which the company has rejected as too costly.

Instead, Kia is attempting to freeze wages while offering bonuses totaling as much as 150 percent of monthly wages as "performance-based" pay. In addition, Kia would also pay 1.2 million won (\$1,097) as part of a COVID-19 package while providing 200,000 won (\$183) in gift certificates. According to media reports, the Kia branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) has reached an agreement with the company on these issues, but has still not reached an agreement on the additional overtime.

Kia workers should place no faith in the KMWU to bargain honestly on their behalf. As they walk off the job, the KMWU is attempting to force workers at General Motors Korea to accept a similar sellout contract, while isolating workers and their struggles at the two companies from one another. GM Korea workers are voting this week on whether or not to

accept a tentative deal that is similar to the one they already rejected on December 1.

Looming over the heads of GM Korea workers is also the threat that GM will move operations out of the country, resulting in thousands of job losses, despite previously signing agreements to keep production in South Korea until 2028. That agreement, accepted by the KMWU, resulted in the closure of GM Korea's factory in Gunsan.

The current deals are similar to the one already imposed on Hyundai Motors workers in September. It included a wage freeze for only the third time in the union's history. The KMWU is making clear that it is on the side of management and the exploitative capitalist system, a fact that becomes all the more evident during the economic crisis facing the working class.

Throughout 2020, workers in South Korea have faced massive job losses and wage cuts. In the third quarter of 2020, monthly earnings for the bottom 20 percent income bracket fell 1.1 percent to 1.63 million won (\$1,490) from the previous year while the second lowest bracket also saw a 1.3 percent drop. On the other hand, the monthly income of the top 20 percent rose 2.9 percent, to 10.39 million won (\$10,000).

The official unemployment rate, which drastically undercounts the underemployed, rose to 3.7 percent in October, the highest in two decades for that month. Officially, 1.03 million people were out of work as of that month. The overall number of economically inactive increased by 508,000 to 16.74 million people. Young adults between 15 and 29 are especially hard hit, with the official unemployment rate at 8.3 percent. The actual unemployment rate skyrockets to 24.4 percent when the underemployed and economically inactive are taken into account.

In short, President Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party of Korea, who came to power posturing as a friend of the working class, has overseen widening social inequality and worsening working conditions. His government has defended the wealthy and the capitalist class no less than his conservative predecessors Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017).

The KMWU is taking an active role in this attack on the working class as the largest union within the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The KCTU is one of the two leading umbrella trade union organizations in South Korea, the other being the yellow Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). While the FKTU openly collaborates with the government and management, the KCTU postures as militant, and at times, even anti-capitalist. This is entirely fraudulent.

In fact, the KCTU bears direct political responsibility for the policies of the Moon administration, having helped elect the president in May 2017 by portraying him as a progressive alternative to the despised Park Geun-hye, who was ousted following mass protests. The KCTU worked to ensure the protests would stay within the confines of bourgeois politics.

Throughout the course of Moon's administration, the unions have held only four mass protests, the most recent on November 25. These have been staged in order to allow workers to let off steam and to convince workers that the current government can be pressured to adopt worker friendly policies.

Furthermore, economic disaster facing the working class did not begin with the COVID-19 pandemic, but widespread restructuring was underway in numerous industries like auto manufacturing and shipbuilding. Hyundai Motors already planned to slash as many as 10,000 jobs last year. Retail giant Lotte announced tens of thousands of job cuts just prior to the pandemic.

As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and the corporate assault on the working class intensified, the KCTU promoted the government's COVID-19 economic measures in March. It claimed that any negative impacts on workers were nothing more than unforeseen "blind spots" that could be resolved through "special labor supervision" and the KCTU's collaboration with the government.

Over the summer, the KCTU gave de facto support to

a "tripartite agreement" between the government, big business, and the unions, which approved job and wage cuts as well as other cost saving measures.

Workers at Kia and GM Korea must take their struggles beyond the confines imposed on them by the unions. This requires the building of independent rank-and-committees that will unite auto workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout South Korea and internationally, who face the same assaults on their working conditions and livelihoods. Such a struggle has to be based on a socialist perspective in opposition to big business, government and the unions, which all rely on and defend the capitalist system.



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