

GM Korea workers narrowly approve new contract

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Auto workers at General Motors Korea narrowly approved a new contract on Friday after previously rejecting a similar deal on December 1 negotiated by the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU). The vote took place under threats by GM that it would close factories and move substantial parts of its production out of the country if workers did not accept the contract.

The contract passed supposedly with 54.1 percent approval, indicating that there is still substantial opposition to the sellout agreement. Out of 7,774 union members, 94 percent took part in the vote. The deal maintains the wage freeze imposed on workers by the company and the union since 2018 while offering four million won (\$US3,643) per worker in bonuses. The company also stated it would drop a lawsuit against the union for losses incurred during strikes and a vague, noncommittal pledge to maintain production at its Bupyeong No. 2 plant for as long as possible.

Under pressure from workers, the union had initially demanded a 120,000 won (\$109) monthly raise and 22 million won (\$20,037) in bonuses. In addition, it called for concrete plans for future production at the Bupyeong No. 2 plant. The KMWU's agreement to a deal without such a plan is a clear indication that it will not fight future plant closures. In 2018, it agreed to the shutting down of GM Korea's Gunsan plant without a struggle.

GM Korea is the third auto company to reach an agreement with its union this year following deals at Hyundai and Ssangyong. It comes as Kia workers strike this week, with the KMWU consciously driving a wedge between workers in the auto industry in order to better impose the demands of the companies. That the union at GM Korea approved continuing the wage freeze will only further embolden Kia to demand the

same of its workers.

There is however no lack of will to fight among autoworkers, especially among the irregular workers at GM Korea and other companies. These workers are heavily exploited, lacking job protections, any social safety net if they are fired, and typically make 40 to 50 percent less than their regular counterparts doing the same jobs.

Statistics Korea, part of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, regularly reports that irregular workers comprise as much as one-third of the total labor force. However, this involves a drastic undercounting. In reality, when all forms of non-regular work are included, such as short term, hourly, dispatch, and temporary workers, nearly 50 percent of the work force can be considered irregular.

This section of the working class has been particularly hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of temporary workers and day laborers have lost employment in the course of this year. In November alone, there were 206,000 fewer temporary positions and day labor jobs compared to the previous year. Irregular workers have seen their disposable income fall by at least 3.4 percent.

Companies like GM Korea regularly use this labor illegally to cut costs. In July, the company's CEO Kaher Kazem, along with four other GM Korea executives and 13 from other companies, was indicted on charges of illegally hiring 1,810 temporary workers. The law requires companies to hire workers only through authorized human resource agencies. However, GM Korea hired workers from at least 27 unauthorized agencies.

What has been the KMWU's response to this? It fosters divisions between regular and irregular workers. At this same time, the union falsely claims that

President Moon Jae-in and his ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) can be made to implement policies beneficial to the working class if only enough pressure is applied.

On December 3, two days after GM Korea workers first rejected the sellout contract, union bureaucrats from GM Korea's irregular workers' union staged a sit-down protest outside of the offices of Hong Yeong-pyo, a DPK lawmaker in the National Assembly from Incheon, where the company headquarters is located.

Bae Seong-do, one of the union leaders involved in the protest, appealed to the lawmaker stating, "If Representative Hong Yeong-pyo feels the slightest bit of responsibility for the situation at GM Korea, he will work hard to reinstate irregular workers at GM Korea. If he does not act, workers have no choice but to continue their struggle."

Bae further called on Hong to immediately come out against "labor reform" currently being pushed by President Moon and the DPK. Those "reforms" would make it illegal for workers to occupy factories and extend collective bargaining agreements from two to three years.

No section of the KMWU intends to launch a genuine struggle against the government or GM Korea as Bae claims. The purpose of his sit-down strike is to give the appearance of militancy to GM Korea workers who rightly fear for their jobs while diverting their anger behind such stunts in the hopes of preventing workers from walking off the job. At the same time, the unions beg capitalist politicians to present a façade of defending auto workers so that the unions can continue to tie the working class to a non-existent "progressive" section of the DPK.

In reality, Moon and the ruling DPK have overseen growing social inequality. As a result of the pandemic, 23 percent of all workers have lost their jobs this year while an additional 26.7 percent have had their wages cut. At the same time, the wealthiest layers of society have seen their incomes increase. When the pandemic began, Moon's government immediately made clear that his administration would provide unlimited bailouts to the banks and major corporations. Workers, on the other hand, have been left in the lurch.

The union appeals to the very forces responsible for the destruction of workers' livelihoods demonstrating that the KMWU, and the Korean Confederation of

Trade Unions of which it is a part, are the enemies of the working class. Workers must break with these organizations that continually sell out their struggles and form rank-and-file committees completely independent of the capitalists and their stooges in the unions. South Korean auto workers must reach out to their class brothers and sisters throughout the country and internationally and take up a unified fight for socialism.



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