

South Korean union reaches sellout agreement to force striking delivery workers back on the job

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On Wednesday, a parcel delivery union called off a week-long strike in South Korea while it continues negotiations with the companies involved in the dispute and the government. Workers struck on June 9 citing exhausting 12 to 14 hour workdays, much of it unpaid. They previously walked-off the job in January over the conditions.

The Parcel Delivery Workers Solidarity Union (PDWSU) claimed to have reached a tentative agreement with logistics companies including Hanjin Transportation, Lotte Global Logistics and CJ Logistics. It has said the deal means workers will no longer be forced to sort packages beginning on January 1 next year and weekly hours will be limited to 60. Additional details have not been made public.

This agreement will do next to nothing to address the strikers' demands. Workers have complained that package sorting takes up a great deal of time while they are not being paid for the additional labor. Instead, they are paid per package delivered. They have also accused Korea Post, the country's national postal service, which employs the majority of the strikers, of shifting the blame for accidents onto workers, imposing excessive delivery quotas, and violating the Labor Standards Act.

In addition, at least sixteen workers throughout the industry died last year as a result of overwork as people have increasingly used delivery services during the COVID-19 pandemic. A worker from Coupang took his own life in March, leaving a note that said, "I'm too tired." The rise in online shopping has produced a surge in profits for the companies. Food delivery alone has increased 79 percent, generating \$US15.6 billion.

As a result of these conditions, the strike had

overwhelming support from the workers. Some 4,910 union members out of a total of 5,310 voted to strike. This represents about ten percent of all delivery workers nationwide.

At the beginning of the strike, a union official told a rally of workers: "Logistics companies and the postal service have gained enormous benefits for decades by forcing delivery workers to sort parcels. By asking to delay the implementation of the overwork prevention measures by one year, they are saying they will continue to subject workers to long work hours and the risk of death from overwork."

This did not stop the PDWSU from ending the strike in order to meet the demands of big business. The union only called the stoppage after weeks of negotiations yielded no results it could force on its membership. The union wanted to allow workers to let off steam before sending them back to work. On Tuesday evening, the union staged an overnight protest in Yeouido, Seoul to bolster its image with workers before shutting the strike down the next day.

Demonstrating the government's hostility to the striking workers, police attempted to disperse the rally, citing the COVID-19 pandemic. Some clashes between cops and the striking workers took place. "As thousands of people have assembled in Yeouido, concerns have grown that the efforts by the people and the government to stop the spread of the virus could go to waste," the Seoul Metropolitan Police stated.

Ultimately, the tentative deal amounts to an attempt by the union to force through a sellout, as it tries to prevent an explosion of anger from this section of highly exploited laborers. More than anything, the unions, acting as an industrial police force for big

business, fear that a protracted strike could become the focal point for a broader movement of the working class, directed not only against the delivery companies, but the corporate elite as a whole and the government.

Workers are now being forced back to the same jobs they walked out on with no changes except a tentative “promise” that companies will alleviate their workloads next year. At the same time, the workers will still be expected to put in twenty hours of overtime a week, assuming management does not simply ignore the agreement as they did earlier in the year.

Following a strike in January, logistics firms agreed to hire more workers to sort packages and put an end to overwork while paying employees who do the sorting. This did not happen. On June 13, the PDWSU reported on its Facebook page that another worker had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, likely caused by working an average of 93 hours a week.

Furthermore, Korea Post has to this point refused to sign on to the latest deal with private delivery companies.

From the start, the PDWSU isolated workers even within the same union. Kowtowing to the demands of the government and big business, the union kept workers on the job in order to minimize the impact of the walk-out on the companies. No appeal was made to the 45,000 other delivery workers in the country, let alone other sections of the working class, such as the crane operators in the Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU) who had struck at the same time over deadly conditions.

Both the PDWSU and the KCWU are affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The KCTU postures as a militant, and at times even anti-capitalist, organization, but in reality, has a long history of betraying workers’ struggles. The union backed President Moon Jae-in, whose government now oversees the brutal conditions at Korea Post, in the 2017 presidential election.

The PDWSU is now working to prevent another strike from taking place. The union leadership is using cheap stunts to give the impression that it is carrying on the fight. The bureaucrats claim they will begin a hunger strike if the tentative deal is not concluded within a week. Jin Gyeong-ho, the head of the union, said on Thursday, “We make it clear that the union can never sign a deal if the issue with the postal service is

not resolved.” Workers must ask themselves: if this is the case, why are they back on the job?

Delivery workers and those in other industries throughout the country must take their struggles out of the hands of these corporatised organizations. Workers should form rank-and-file committees completely independent of the unions in order to carry forward their struggles for safe conditions, decent wages and workplace rights.



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