

South Korean health care workers set to strike on Thursday

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Health care workers belonging to the Korean Health and Medical Workers Union (KHMU) in South Korea, have overwhelmingly voted to strike, citing overwork and stress, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers are demanding improved conditions and plan to walk out at 7am on September 2, if their demands are not met. It will be the largest strike of medical workers since 2004.

From among the 56,091 union members, 45,892 workers took part in a strike authorization vote, with 41,191 voting yes, the union announced Friday. Of the union branches, 124 took part in the vote while 72 others, representing approximately 24,000 workers, did not, with the union claiming their individual site situations prevented them from joining the strike.

The health care workers have put forward eight demands. These include three demands to improve medical conditions and services: the construction of specialized infectious disease hospitals as quickly as possible; one additional health services center for each of South Korea's 70 medical zones; and improvements to existing medical infrastructure, as well as increased funding to address deficit issues.

The five other demands address working conditions. First, workers are demanding clear guidelines for a sufficient number of personnel by job type, along with legislation for a maximum number of patients per nurse; second, regular and predictable work schedules and expansion of support for nurses dedicated to training; third, eliminating illegal medical practices; fourth, strengthening assessment criteria to eliminate irregular workers; and fifth, increase the number of doctors and public medical colleges.

The conditions facing health care workers, like those in other industries, have worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. One nurse, who works in an

infectious disease ward, told the *Hankyoreh* newspaper, "Even when I'm sick, I can't take a day off. I have to go back to work because we're short-staffed. A lot of people campaigned for a while to increase the number of health workers, but we're still working under the same conditions as last year, yet a lot of people have forgotten about us. It's very sad."

However, even before the strike begins, the KHMU, which is affiliated with the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), is working to isolate the workers and shut down the strike. The KHMU initially claimed, at an August 18 press conference, that all 80,000 members of the union would take part in the strike, yet, in reality, the union did not intend to call out the 24,000 who will be kept on the job.

Laborers in other industries have also either gone out on strike or threatened to strike in recent months. Workers in the package delivery industry, for example, remain highly exploited and labor under brutal conditions, after their strikes in January and June this year were sold out by their union. They are represented by the Parcel Delivery Workers Solidarity Union, which is also a part of the KCTU.

Furthermore, the demand to eliminate irregular workers is not about increasing the quality of healthcare, but is meant to drive a wedge between workers in the same industry, a common practice of the unions. Irregular workers are highly exploited and have even fewer workplace protections than their regular counterparts, while being paid significantly less for doing the same job.

The union leadership is also addressing itself to the government, not to workers, in order to prevent a larger outbreak of working-class anger. KHMU leader Na Sun-ja stated during an August 18 press conference, "Over

the past six months, hospitals could barely afford to function, as they squeezed out the sweat and blood of medical staff. But no one is sure of when this pandemic ends, and President Moon (Jae-in) has not kept his word to secure more nurses and improve working conditions.”

For the unions, the goal is not to fight against the highly exploitative conditions under capitalism, which workers around the world face. If enough pressure is applied, the unions claim, bourgeois politicians and parties like Moon and his Democratic Party, which the KCTU supports, can be made to “keep their word.” This only serves to protect the capitalist system and maintain the exploitation of the working class.

The KHMU is also supporting the Moon administration’s plans to drop trying to eliminate COVID-19, and to “live with the virus,” in order to defend the profits of big business. “I anticipate a lot of people will be very concerned, wondering how we can be going on strike during the COVID-19 situation,” Na said, on August 18. “But we can’t go on with this approach of grinding workers up in our COVID-19 response when we have no idea when it’s going to end. *In the ‘with COVID’ era*, it is difficult for society to cope without an expanding health and public medical personnel.” (emphasis added)

In other words, workers and young people must accept that the COVID-19 is here to stay, and not demand that the deadly virus be eradicated. If the struggle remains in the hands of the union bureaucracy, it will be sold out after a few days. The government will make a few vague promises it has no intention of keeping, and the union will send workers back on the job, having allowed them to blow off steam.

The South Korean health care workers should join their counterparts internationally, fighting against the same brutal conditions. Nurses in Japan have protested against being overworked, as well as being forced to work at the Olympic Games. “Nurses are expendable in the eyes of organizers and public officials,” Mari Nagasawa, a nurse at a public hospital in Tokyo told the *Japan Times* in early August. “Human lives are being endangered needlessly.”

In Worcester, Massachusetts, 700 nurses have been on strike for six months to demand safer working conditions. Another 30,000 nurses and health care workers in New Zealand have also struck this year, as

they wage a similar struggle.

It is to nurses and workers in Japan, the United States, New Zealand, and internationally that South Korean health care workers must turn. This requires a break with the unions and the Democratic Party, and the building of independent rank-and-file committees.

Like its counterparts around the world, the South Korean government is placing the profits of big business ahead of the health and lives of working people. The struggles of health workers need to be animated by the fight against the capitalist profit system on the basis of socialist internationalism.



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