

South Korean health care workers strike despite union attempts to enforce sellout

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The Korean Health and Medical Workers Union (KHMU) called off its planned strike in the early morning on September 2, only hours before nurses and other health care workers were scheduled to stop work across South Korea. The deal reached with the government is a sellout of the membership that voted overwhelmingly to strike.

The agreement between the KHMU and the Ministry of Health and Welfare will do nothing to address the demands of nurses, nursing aides, medical engineers, and other hospital workers. Already overworked prior to the pandemic, the spread of COVID-19 has worsened the long hours, serious stress and fatigue, and burnout for these highly exploited workers.

The union claimed victory, stating Thursday, “We have established a basis to overcome the exploitation of the medical personnel. This will be a new turning point to establish personnel guidelines for each job to improve chronic staff shortages and poor working conditions.”

The agreement includes six points: the government pledged to systematize the bonus pay for nurses treating patients with infectious illnesses, by January 2022; prepare guidelines this month for assigning nurses to treat COVID-19 patients, based on severity; expand the number of public hospitals by at least one in each of the country’s 70 medical zones by 2025; establish a ratio for the number of patients per nurse; expand the number of those who train new nurses; and raise pay for nurses working night shifts.

Missing from the agreement is the demand initially put forward for the construction of new infectious disease hospitals, as quickly as possible, an end to illegal medical practices, increased funding to address deficits, and the expansion of the number of doctors and public medical colleges.

Reflecting the widespread anger that exists and lack of faith in the union, thousands of health care workers at individual hospitals around the country walked out on Thursday. Stoppages continued into Friday involving at least 10 medical facilities.

In Seoul, 100 workers at Hanyang University Medical Center and another 1,000 from Korea University Anam Hospital, and Korea University Guro Hospital, stopped work. About 300 workers at Chonnam National University Hospital are participating in the strike, and another 850 at Chosun University Hospital in the city of Gwangju. Workers at Konyang University Hospital in Daejeon and at Pusan National University Hospital in Busan have also struck.

In contrast to the KHMU’s attempt to drive a wedge between irregular and regular workers, with its demand to push irregular workers out of employment, the strikers at Chosun Hospital are fighting for 200 of their irregular co-workers and demanding their transfer to regular status.

On Friday, the KHMU signaled that it had no intention of defending its striking membership: “We reached a deal when the government called off the strike, but workers at ten medical facilities are proceeding with the strike.” On its website, the KHMU calls only for the government to “respond” to the workers.

Health care workers should reject the sellout by the KHMU, and break the isolation imposed by the union, by reaching out to other health care workers, as well as regular and irregular laborers in industries such as logistics, shipbuilding, and auto manufacturing. As the KHMU’s stance shows, its militant posturing, and that of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) to which it belongs, is entirely fraudulent. Union bureaucrats call fake strikes in order to give the

appearance they are fighting for workers, while making backroom deals with the government and big business.

From the beginning, the KHMU, with a membership of 80,000, had no intention of waging a campaign against the government. While initially claiming, at an August 18 press conference, that all members would take part in a general strike, the union maneuvered to isolate workers from each other. The KHMU planned to call out only 124 branches and their 56,091 members, excluding 72 other chapters. The union later announced that only 30 percent of workers from these 124 branches would have taken part in the strike.

This is the modus operandi of the unions affiliated with the KCTU. These organizations falsely pose as militant workers' organizations, at times even employing anti-capitalist phrases, while claiming to organize large-scale labor struggles. In reality, the KCTU strangles workers' struggles and binds the working class to the political establishment, particularly the Democratic Party.

When strikes do take place, the unions call them off after a few days, with little to nothing to show for it, as a means for letting off steam. Strikes are kept to a limited number of workers and are often only partial walkouts, lasting a few hours, all designed to limit their impact on big business and the government.

Sensing the spinelessness of the KHMU, the government has no intention of abiding by even the limited pledges in Thursday's agreement. With the promises slated for implementation in the future, the administration of President Moon Jae-in, or a future government, will discard these pledges, with claims that there is no money, or some other lie to justify its exploitation of medical workers.

President Moon thanked the KHMU for calling off the strike and "thinking first about the people." This is entirely cynical. While health care workers have been slandered in the press for supposedly taking action that would harm the population during the pandemic, Seoul is refusing to take the necessary measures to contain the COVID-19 virus. Instead, it is shifting to the so-called "with COVID" era, where the government no longer tries to stop the spread of COVID-19, but merely treats the most severe cases. The KHMU bureaucracy has embraced this position.

Throughout the pandemic, workers around the world have struck and fought back against the demands of big

business to force them into unsafe workplaces, including factories, hospitals, and schools. These struggles must be joined together on the basis of international socialism. Striking health care workers in South Korea should reach out to their counterparts in Japan, the United States, and globally to wage a genuine struggle against exploitation and the pandemic.



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