

South Korean KCTU union confederation holds phony general strike

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The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) staged a large-scale rally last week with plans for an additional rally next month. These protests are designed to allow workers to let off steam over worsening social conditions while promoting the illusion that the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) can be pushed to adopt pro-working-class measures.

The one-day protest took place on October 20 in central Seoul and in other cities around the country. While the KCTU described it as a general strike, only a very small portion of its 1.1 million members took part in the demonstration, despite earlier claims that approximately 500,000 workers and supporters would participate. According to the KCTU, 27,000 demonstrators participated in Seoul while a total of 80,000 took part in 14 cities nationally.

The KCTU regularly calls for “general strikes” that are nothing of the sort. They are organized to create the least disruption to companies and the government while workers in major industries are not called out. The union branches representing auto workers at Hyundai and Kia Motors did not participate in last week’s demonstration. These unions belong to the Korean Metal Workers Union, the largest and most powerful union in the KCTU. The next rally called for November 13 is being organized in the same manner.

The KCTU is maneuvering to direct workers behind the Democrats ahead of next spring’s presidential election. The DP recently selected as its candidate Lee Jae-myung, who resigned as governor of Gyeonggi Province on Tuesday in order to campaign. South Korean presidents are elected to a single, five-year term, making current President Moon Jae-in from the DP ineligible for re-election.

The main opposition party—the right-wing People’s Power Party (PPP)—will select its candidate on

November 5, with former prosecutor general Yoon Seok-youl and Hong Joon-pyo the two leading candidates. Moon Jae-in defeated Hong in the 2017 presidential election.

Moon’s government hypocritically denounced the KCTU for holding the rally during the COVID-19 pandemic. It plans to remove even the limited measures to block the spread of the virus and begin the so-called “living with COVID” era. This means the government will drop its public pretense of trying to stop the spread of the virus and force workers and the most vulnerable to “live with” COVID.

Under current COVID-19 pandemic social distancing measures, all demonstrations in the Seoul Metropolitan Area are banned. Rally participants could therefore face legal actions or reprisals. In a political stunt, KCTU leader Yang Gyeong-su was arrested in September and is facing trial for violating these rules in relation to protests held over the summer.

Prior to the rally, Chief of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Choi Gwan-ho stated, “We will disperse the crowd if any illegal acts happen during the event.” The government organized 12,000 police officers to corral the demonstration and some fights reportedly broke out as they attempted to block rally participants from marching.

Protest participants called for improved worker rights and conditions as well as an end to irregular employment. Many workers are not given permanent contracts despite doing the same work as their regular counterparts. Irregular workers face abuse at worksites, less pay, fewer insurance benefits, and the constant fear of being fired at a moment’s notice.

Irregular work has grown during the pandemic with the latest statistics released October 26 indicating that the number of irregular workers had grown by 640,000

in August over the previous year. They make up 38.4 percent of the 20.99 million salaried workforce in South Korea, an increase of 2.1 percent from 2019.

In particular, there has been a growth in no-contract and on-call work, such as food delivery workers, who make up a significant proportion of South Korea's gig economy. The average monthly salary for an irregular worker is 1.77 million won (\$US1,516) while regular workers earn an average of 3.34 million won (\$US2,860).

Many construction and school workers are in irregular employment and participated in the demonstrations last week. The KCTU-affiliated Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU) stated on October 19, "From January until June of this year, 208 construction workers were killed in workplace industrial accidents. Currently, two construction workers are dying every day." Workers are demanding the passage of a Special Law on Construction Safety.

A section of construction workers who operate cranes struck over the summer, demanding improvements to job safety after a series of injuries and fatal accidents. However, the KCWU called off the strike after phony promises of more inspections.

The school workers who struck belong to the Korean School Irregular Workers Union (KSIWU), also part of the KCTU, and held a demonstration in front of the Hwaseong Osan Office of Education, in Gyeonggi Province on October 20. Lee U-seon, head of the union's Gyeonggi Branch, stated, "Lung cancer patients working in school cafeterias are increasing while irregular school workers suffer from the most severe wage gap among workers in the public sector."

According to a study conducted by the KSIWU of its membership, ventilation in cafeterias is contributing to the rise in lung cancer among these workers at a rate 25 times higher than the general population. The same study found that 96 percent of workers suffered from some type of musculoskeletal disorder.

However, the perspective of the union is to appeal to the government and the state. Lee accused Gyeonggi Province Superintendent of Education Lee Jae-jeong of ignoring recommendations from the National Human Rights Commission. KSIWU official Hong Seong-gyu appealed to the Moon administration not to talk "about harsh suppression, but instead should listen to the desperate voices of workers."

In other words, workers should ask the very government carrying out the attacks on workers to listen to their concerns. The KCTU wants to convince workers that this can be done through rallies and empty threats of mass strikes. As such, the KCTU throws its weight behind the Democratic Party, offering itself as an ally in suppressing the anger and opposition of the working class.



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