

South Korea's KCTU union confederation to stage rally Saturday amid surge in working class anger

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The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) is holding a rally on Saturday as workers around South Korea move into greater opposition to the government and big business. However, the KCTU's purpose is to let off steam while attempting to convince members that the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) can be persuaded to adopt pro-working-class policies.

The planned rally is a far cry from that on October 20, in which an estimated 80,000 demonstrators took part nationally. Even then, the KCTU claimed beforehand that half a million workers would go out on strike to denounce inequalities in society. This time, however, only approximately 10,000 people are estimated to take part in Saturday's demonstration, with 2,500 people spread out over four locations in Seoul.

Undoubtedly, the KCTU is bowing to demands from the government of President Moon Jae-in, a Democrat, not to hold any large protests. While Seoul moves to lift even the minimal existing measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, it continues to use the pandemic as a pretext to ban workers from speaking out against attacks on their economic and living conditions. Chief of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Choi Gwan-ho stated on Monday, "We already notified the KCTU that we are not allowing the reported rallies, so if they hold them, they will be illegal."

The KCTU supports the DP and played a key role in getting Moon elected in May 2017 by suppressing the widespread anger that resulted in protests and the removal of former President Park Geun-hye from office. For more than a year, the KCTU did not call a large-scale one-day strike against Moon's government, only doing so when it became clear that workers were

again moving in opposition to the demands of capitalism.

With the onset of the pandemic, the KCTU attempted to convince workers that the government would protect them, but instead wages have sharply decreased, irregular work and unemployment have grown, and workers have been forced into unsafe conditions to continue turning out profits for big business.

As a result, a number of workers in different industries are threatening to go on strike or are in the process of holding industrial action ballots. Members of Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) and the Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU), both affiliated with the KCTU, held a joint press conference on Tuesday to threaten a strike in late November and again in December, without announcing specific dates.

Instead, the CTS stated that the dates would be tied to debate in the National Assembly on the "Safe Trucking Freight Rates System," which guarantees drivers a minimum rate, as well as other rises in costs. The rate system was put in place in 2018, but is set to expire next year. The CTS's plan to tie the strike to parliamentary debate is meant to convince truck drivers that their demands can be met by Democratic Party politicians.

Drivers are also angry over rising fuel costs that the companies have passed on to them. In particular, a shortage of urea, a component of diesel fuel to cut down on emissions, has resulted in a nearly 81 percent import price rise from last year. The cost increase is the result of reduced exports from China, caused by a coal shortage.

The KRWU put on a phony show of support by stating that its members would refuse to work overtime

from November 19 while engaging in work-to-rule from November 25. The purpose is to reduce the impact of any strike while also preventing railway workers from joining a larger struggle. There is widespread discontent within the transport and logistics industry, which includes railway and delivery workers, who are forced to work extremely long hours, much of it unpaid.

In addition, workers at Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), the world's largest shipbuilder, are also voting this week whether or not to go on strike. Balloting began on Tuesday and will conclude today. The approximately 7,000 members that make up the HHI union branch belong to the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), the most powerful union in the KCTU. The workers are demanding a monthly wage increase of 120,304 won (\$US102), establishing a standard for calculating bonuses, and reductions in wage gaps.

HHI workers have pointed to rising prices during the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall in real wages as a source of discontent. However, there is also anger over workplace safety. At least three workers have died this year at HHI caused by the company's disregard for safety. There have been more than twenty cases of serious industrial accidents at HHI over the past five years.

Despite this, the union's threat of a strike is being used in an attempt to give the appearance of militancy ahead of an agreement the KMWU will try to impose on its members. A union official stated recently, "The company's attitude has not changed despite the strike vote and repeated requests for a package agreement." If the union does call a walkout, it would only stage partial strikes to limit the impact on the company.

Workers have been in regular conflict with HHI and other shipbuilding companies as the industry has undergone restructuring after years of mismanagement and illegal activity. Earlier this year, HHI workers went on strike to protest working without a contract for more than two years. While an agreement was reached in July after two previous attempts to force through deals were rejected, the latest strike vote demonstrates workers' demands have still not been met. The July deal included a basic pay raise of 46,000 won (\$US39) for 2019 and 51,000 won (\$US43) for 2020, as well as additional "bonuses."

For HHI and other shipbuilders, business is booming. At the beginning of November, Korea Shipbuilding and Offshore Engineering (KSOE) had secured deals worth \$US20.9 billion for 2021, exceeding expectations for the year of \$US14.9 billion. KSOE is the sub-holding company of Hyundai Heavy Industries Holdings. KSOE controls HHI, Hyundai Samho Heavy Industries, and Hyundai Mipo Dockyard.

The KCTU and its affiliated unions are working to prevent the outbreak of a larger working-class struggle, not lead it. South Korean workers must break free of the confines of the corporatised unions, establish their own independent rank-and-file workplace committees and link up with their class brothers and sisters internationally.



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