

South Korean truck drivers strike against skyrocketing fuel prices

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7 June 2022

Truck drivers in South Korea struck Tuesday as fuel costs surge amid rising inflation. They are demanding measures to address these costs and an extension of a safety system meant to prevent unsafe driving. They join a growing strike wave of workers around the world looking to fight back against growing inequality.

Truckers belonging to the Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) union staged demonstrations in at least 16 locations throughout the country, including at major corporations like Hyundai Steel in Pohang, North Gyeongsang Province. Other protests were held in cities such as Busan, Incheon, and Uiwang. The CTS is affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Fuel costs are rising rapidly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine. During the first week of June, diesel costs rose to a national average of 2,008 won (\$US1.60) per liter, a 45.8 percent increase from last year, surpassing 2,000 won for the first time on May 24.

The average price for gasoline has gone up to 2,013 won, a 27 percent increase over last year. One truck driver told the media in May, “Before, when I’d fill up, it’d cost me 250 to 260,000 won (\$US200–\$US207). But now it costs me 350,000 won (\$US279).”

Drivers are therefore demanding a rise in freight prices. A statement released by the CTS’s Jeju Branch, for example, stated, “While the average price of diesel fuel surpasses 2,000 won (per liter), cargo drivers are being pushed to the edge. The solution is obvious. Freight fares must rise as does the price of diesel.”

In addition, drivers are calling for an extension of the Safe Trucking Freight Rate System, which sets a legal minimum for freight prices, and the expansion of goods covered under it. The system went into effect in 2020,

but is set to expire at the end of this year. It is meant to protect truckers from feeling forced to drive dangerously or when tired in order to complete more deliveries and make ends meet.

However, the CTS and KCTU are doing everything possible to isolate the strike and prevent it from having a bigger impact on businesses and the government. Union officials claimed beforehand that most of the 25,000 CTS members would take part in the strike, but by the end of the first day, only 9,000 drivers were participating, though the union claimed 15,000. The Transport Ministry, however, stated that disruptions were minimal and that its 12 ports nationwide were operating normally.

In fact, the union is making clear that it has only taken strike action, because the government has offered nothing that the CTS can enforce on its membership. A union official stated, “In light of the impact this general strike could have on the national economy, we had tried to negotiate with the government, but the transport ministry in charge came up short on dialogue.”

All of this is going by the KCTU’s usual playbook when it feels it must call a strike to allow workers to let off steam.

A so-called “general” strike is called, but in reality, it is limited to a relatively small number of workers or to partial stoppages. Union officials make radical-sounding speeches, which amount to nothing more than appeals for negotiations. After a few days, the government or company makes vague promises to meet workers’ demands and the union sends its membership back to work. These promises are not kept and whatever wage increases are won are offset in other areas by speedups, job cuts, or other attacks on conditions.

In fact, CTS has already done this. In November last

year, it held a three-day strike from the 25th to the 27th without any of the major issues being resolved. At the time, the union tied the strike to debate over the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System in the National Assembly. The union's goal, however, was to try and convince truck drivers that their demands could be met by Democratic Party politicians, particularly ahead of the March presidential election.

There is of course no talk of waging a united struggle throughout the KCTU, which claims a membership of more than 1.1 million workers, or with other union organizations. In general, even unions within the same industry do not strike together, with negotiations often being completed with one company, only to undermine the struggle of workers at other companies, something common during autoworkers' stoppages.

Over the past year, package delivery and healthcare workers have launched strikes or protests demanding improvements to their working conditions. Logistics workers, facing severe overwork, held a two-month long strike at the beginning of this year, only to have it shut down without a resolution. They held multiple strikes last year as well. More than 4,000 nurses protested on May 12 calling for better conditions as well, including a reduction in patient loads.

The government of President Yoon Suk-yeol is responding to the trucker strike with veiled threats. Speaking to reporters, Yoon stated, "Whether it's the unjust labor actions of employers or illegal actions of laborers, I've made clear since the campaign that I will handle them in accordance with the law and principles." In other words, while employers may simply be guilty of some moral transgression—undoubtedly mentioned to keep up the appearance of "fairness"—it is the workers who are breaking the law by going on strike.

If striking truck drivers do not turn to workers in other fields, independently of the unions, they will be left isolated and exposed to attacks by the government and police. The KCTU has a long history of turning its back on workers when faced with this sort of government pressure. This includes agreeing to mass layoffs during the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis, selling out the workers occupying the Ssangyong auto plant in 2009 by accepting job cuts and refusing to launch strikes in their defense, and ending a three-week railway workers' strike in 2013 following a police raid

on KCTU headquarters.

The role of the KCTU and its unions is not to defend workers against the capitalist system, but to ensure workers' struggles do not go beyond the confines of bourgeois politics. Truck drivers should form rank-and-file committees to take control of their struggle out of the unions' hands and broaden the fight to include logistic workers, nurses, and all workers facing similar conditions.



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