

South Korean truckers continue indefinite strike against soaring fuel prices

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An indefinite strike of South Korean cargo truck workers continued into its second week on Tuesday, as they struggle against high fuel prices and the tearing up of safety measures.

The strike, which is having an impact on other industries, including steel making and automotive manufacturing, is part of a growing upsurge of working class action around the world against inflation and other attacks on living and working conditions.

Workers in the 25,000-member Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) union are demanding a rise in freight prices to cover soaring fuel costs as well as the extension of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System, which is due to expire at the end of the year. The system sets a legal minimum for freight fares, so workers do not feel forced to drive unsafely to make ends meet. Cargo drivers are also demanding an expansion of the goods covered under the system.

In recent months, the cost of diesel fuel has skyrocketed to a national average of 2,008 won (\$US1.56) per liter. Drivers reported spending as much as 100,000 won (\$US77.50) or more to fill up their gas tanks. Cargo drivers are considered self-employed contractors, so fuel costs are passed on from the companies to the workers.

CTS is negotiating with South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. CTS is affiliated with the so-called militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which claims to have more than 1.1 million members.

The Trade Ministry has estimated that in steel, automotive and other related industries, the strike so far has resulted in disruptions to production and distribution worth 1.6 trillion won (\$US1.24 billion), as companies cannot receive materials or ship finished products. Workers' pickets have obstructed roads

leading to facilities, in addition to drivers refusing to haul goods.

As of Monday, police have detained at least 44 union members for supposedly obstructing business operations.

The country's two largest steelmakers, POSCO and Hyundai Steel, have reported disruptions to their operations. POSCO stated that as of Monday morning, production at its Pohang steel complex in North Gyeongsang Province had halted at several facilities, with daily production of wire rods dropping by 7,500 tons and that of cold-rolled steel declining by 4,500 tons. The Pohang steel complex typically produces 20,000 tons of steel per day. While production has not been halted at Hyundai Steel, an official from the company told the media: "If the strike is protracted, we may have to adjust our production."

Drivers on picket lines at companies like Hyundai Motors and Kia Motors have also caused disruptions to production. Hyundai claimed last week that the strike forced the company to halve production at its Ulsan factory, the largest auto facility in the country. The company normally produces about 6,000 vehicles per day at the plant.

Major ports like Busan, Incheon, and Pyeongtaek are seeing disruptions as drivers demonstrate at the facilities, refuse to move shipping containers and call on non-union drivers to join the strike. At Busan, the largest port in the country, the transportation of containers has fallen to approximately 25 percent of normal activity.

Reflecting the growing concerns of the ruling class about rising workers' struggles internationally, the *New York Times* referred to the strike as "the latest headache for a global supply chain already reeling" from the COVID-19 pandemic and the US/NATO-instigated war

against Russia in Ukraine. South Korea is a major manufacturer of semiconductors, steel, and automobiles.

As in Korea, there is a growing strike wave globally. Millions of workers in the United States, Europe, Asia and throughout the world face huge fuel costs, soaring food prices and other attacks on their wages and living conditions. In this, Korean truck drivers have powerful allies in their class brothers and sisters internationally.

The drivers also face the same enemy: the capitalist system itself. This includes all elements of the ruling elite, from the right-wing government of President Yoon Suk-yeol and the companies to the trade union bureaucracies.

Speaking through administration officials, Yoon told reporters on Monday that he had instructed his government to “come up with solutions from various angles, as the damage to industries could increase this week.”

Already, the government is using the military to serve as strikebreakers and scabs. The Transport Ministry has deployed at least 100 military cargo trucks and dozens of others from local governments to move goods at ports.

However, CTS and the KCTU are attempting to isolate the strike and allow workers to burn themselves out. Kim Gyeong-dong, a CTS official, told the media last week that the union had run out of funds to conduct the strike as of Thursday and it was unlikely that it could continue for another ten days after that.

This is an admission by the union that it is looking to wrap up the strike as quickly as possible. For all the KCTU and its affiliates’ posturing as militant organizations, their goal from the start has been to allow workers to let off steam before sending them back to work without their demands being met, or with vague false promises from the government to address their concerns.

Furthermore, the union is keeping the number of drivers participating in the strike to a minimum. According to the Transport Ministry, only 6,600 drivers were involved in strike action on Monday, though CTS claims that the government is underestimating the number of strikers.

This may be true, but the union itself claimed that only 15,000 drivers went on strike on the first day, leaving another 10,000 drivers on the job to minimize

as much as possible the impact of the stoppage. In total, there are 420,000 truck drivers throughout the industry and while union officials pay lip service to encouraging non-union drivers to join the strike, there has been no genuine effort from the bureaucrats to broaden the struggle.

In this, the CTS and KCTU, like the pro-corporate trade unions around the world, serve to protect capitalism, not allow workers to wage a struggle against it.

Truck drivers should form rank-and-file committees to take their struggle out of the hands of the CTS and KCTU and wage a genuine fight to mobilize all cargo workers and those in the automotive, steel and other industries. They should also reach out to workers internationally who face similar attacks on their working and living conditions.



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