

South Korean union reaches sellout deal with government in attempt to shut down truck drivers' strike

Ben McGrath
14 June 2022

Late Tuesday night, the union covering 25,000 striking cargo truck drivers reached a sellout agreement with the government, seeking to end an eight-day strike that threatened production at many of South Korea's leading conglomerates. The union is trying to send drivers back to work today without even a vote on the deal that commits the government to absolutely nothing.

Workers belonging to Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) struck on June 7, demanding support to cope with skyrocketing fuel costs. The price of diesel fuel per liter soared to 2,008 won (\$US1.56) per liter on average nationally during the first week of June.

Drivers also demanded the permanent extension of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System, and the expansion of goods covered under it, which at present only include shipping containers and cement. This system was implemented in 2020 and was set to expire this year. It is meant to provide drivers with a minimum freight fare so that they are not forced to drive dangerously in order to deliver goods and make ends meet. The deal reached with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport will not address any of this.

The Transport Ministry instead simply promised to report the results of the freight rates system to the National Assembly where debate over it is ongoing, so there is no guarantee the government will maintain the system. The ministry also issued a vague pledge to continue discussing the expansion of goods covered by the system and to review the possibility of providing fuel subsidies for cargo truck drivers. In other words, none of the drivers' demands have been met.

After agreeing to the sellout deal, CTS issued a

statement, saying: "Even though it's late, we welcome the promise from the government to continue and not abolish the freight rates system. We will continue discussions with both the ruling and main opposition parties for the speedy handling of a bill to abolish the sunset clause on the freight rates system." CTS claimed it would also continue discussions with the government and the ruling People Power Party (PPP) over expanding the system to cover all other shipped goods.

CTS is promoting illusions among workers that capitalist politicians can be pressured to defend them. The deal is based on the belief that the ruling PPP and the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) will pass pro-worker legislation. The DP, which postures as pro-worker, refused to take action on expanding and improving the freight rate system while in office because it would have cut across the interests of big business. The DP maintains a majority in the National Assembly, with 169 seats out of 300.

Cargo drivers must reject this sellout deal and continue strike action. The speed with which CTS, an affiliate of the so-called militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), wrapped up negotiations is an indication of the ruling class's deep concern the strike could have on the economy, not just in South Korea, but globally. Steel producer POSCO and Hyundai Motors reported being forced to cut production due to the strike. The *New York Times* denounced the strike as another "headache" for global supply chains impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine.

In addition to rejecting the sellout agreement, cargo drivers should make appeals to workers throughout

South Korea and internationally. Workers on the picket lines this past week made attempts to reach out to other workers, while the union merely paid lip service to this. To genuinely broaden the struggle, drivers and other workers need to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions and capitalist parties.

The sellout deal was prepared behind the scenes. Seemingly far apart in “official talks” on June 11 and 12, observers familiar with the backroom discussions began leaking the possibility of a conclusion to the strike to the media on Tuesday. Seemingly within a matter of two days, after months of negotiations and a three-day strike last November, CTS had a deal.

The reality is that both the ruling class and its servants in the trade unions feared the struggle would find widespread support in South Korea and internationally. Workers in country after country face soaring fuel costs and attacks on wages and working conditions. Their militancy is growing as workers refuse to be forced to pay for an economic crisis caused by the capitalist profit system itself.

From the start, neither the CTS nor the KCTU as a whole intended to lead a genuine struggle of the truck drivers. As the WSWs wrote at the beginning of the strike, KCTU unions typically call a “general” strike when they feel they have no other option to contain workers’ anger. The strike is then limited to a relatively small number of workers and after a few days the government or companies make vague promises they have no intention of keeping and the strike is shut down.

This is exactly what happened over the past week. During the strike itself, CTS limited the number of drivers participating to a few thousand each day, refusing to mobilize the entire 25,000-strong membership in order to limit the impact on companies and the government. The KCTU, which claims a membership of more than 1.1 million workers, also isolated the strike from workers in other industries.

In a further sign of CTS’s perfidy, 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 June 9—just two days after the strike began—and that it was unlikely the strike could continue for another ten days after that. This was a tacit admission that the union had no intention of waging a serious struggle

from the start.

Workers must also demand they be told what their dues money is being spent on, as KCTU members pay on average 25,000 won (\$US19.39) in monthly dues. Why was no adequate strike fund set up for the truck drivers?

Truck drivers can only protect their interests by taking the fight out of the hands of the CTS and the KCTU, which have betrayed the strike. Drivers must form rank-and-committees and turn toward the international working class, their true allies in the fight against capitalist exploitation.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact