

South Korean autoworkers at Hyundai Motors vote to strike

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Autoworkers at Hyundai Motors in South Korea voted on July 1 to strike, demanding improved wages and working conditions. Workers at Kia, GM Korea, and Renault Korea are also moving into conflict with management. These workers, like those throughout South Korea and internationally, are looking to take action as the ruling classes attempt to force the working class to pay for the growing economic crisis.

Of the 40,958 union members taking part in the vote, 81.6 percent voted to strike. The Hyundai branch has a total membership of 46,568 and belongs to the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU). If workers walk off the job, it would be the first time in four years. The Hyundai branch is the largest in the industry, with negotiations at the company often setting the benchmark for deals at other auto manufacturers.

Negotiations between the KMWU and Hyundai began in May, but broke down on June 22 after 12 rounds of talks, prompting the strike vote. However, the union announced on July 5 that it would postpone strike action and resume discussions with Hyundai until at least July 13.

Hyundai autoworkers are demanding a 165,200 won (\$US126) increase in their basic monthly salary, 30 percent of net profits from 2021 in bonus pay, the extension of the retirement age from 60 to 64, and the reinstating of fired workers. Fearing job cuts, workers are also demanding concrete plans for building new electric vehicles in South Korea. Hyundai has refused to accept these demands.

Workers at Kia, which is also owned by conglomerate Hyundai Motor Group, have made similar demands, including a 162,000 won (\$US124) monthly pay increase, 30 percent of operating profits in bonuses, and the operation of a bus system to take workers to and from factories. The KMWU Kia branch claimed it

would walk out as well if Hyundai workers struck.

GM Korea workers are demanding a 142,300 won (\$US109) monthly pay increase, 400 percent of regular wages as bonuses, and the reversal of a decision to close a plant at Bupyeong, Incheon by building electric vehicles. Workers at Renault Korea, formerly called Renault Samsung, are demanding 97,472 won (\$US75) monthly pay increases, and the hiring of regular workers rather than dispatch or irregular workers who lack many basic job protections.

Workers at all the auto manufacturers are demanding the abolition of the peak wage system, which the companies previously introduced with the union bureaucracy's approval. The system cuts the wages of older workers, who are currently forced to retire at 60. The unions claimed that they would later negotiate the system's abolition in order to sell the cost-cutting measure to their memberships.

Hyundai workers must draw the lessons of past struggles, and in particular the previous four years, when the KMWU demonstrated it is not willing to wage any struggle for autoworkers. In 2019, Hyundai and the union reached a pro-company deal without a walkout, in the midst of a trade dispute between South Korea and Japan. The following year, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, the union forced a wage freeze on workers for the first time in 11 years.

On July 4, Hyundai CEO Lee Dong-seok delivered a thinly veiled warning to workers about the dire economic conditions. "Stagflation is spreading, another global economic recession is imminent, and the recession is likely to dwarf the global financial crisis of 2008... Besides, the ongoing automotive chip shortage and the recent strike in the transportation industry already led to approximately 90,000 cars that failed to be produced in the first half of this year."

Lee's reference to the trucker workers' strike in the second week of June demonstrates both the power workers have, as well as the fear in corporate circles over the prospect of united workers' actions.

The truckers' strike ended abruptly the night of June 14 after their union, Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS), reached a back-room deal with the government to end the strike just as it was beginning to have a significant impact on companies, including Hyundai. Truckers received nothing more than vague promises, which the government has no intention of keeping.

Both CTS and the KMWU are affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which postures as militant, and at times even anti-capitalist, but seeks to subordinate workers to the companies and the bourgeois parties, particularly the Democratic Party of Korea.

Strikes by unions belonging to the KCTU follow a predictable pattern: First, a so-called "general strike" is called, which is nothing of the sort. Strikes are limited to partial walkouts, lasting a couple of hours, or are limited to a small portion of union members and confined to a single company. The union bureaucrats make no genuine attempt to fight for unity among different sections of workers, even within the same industry. After workers have been allowed to let off steam, the union announces a sellout deal which it forces on workers.

The fact that Hyundai union branch leader An Hyeon-ho is described as a "hard-liner" does not change how the strike will be conducted, if it takes place at all. No layer of the union bureaucracy has opposed the regular sellouts imposed by any of the KCTU affiliates.

The KMWU Hyundai branch has already shown it is unwilling to take strike action by re-opening negotiations after the strike-authorization vote. It postures as a defender of workers while collaborating with the company on a deal that can be forced on its members.

Hyundai workers are not alone in their struggle. Autoworkers should form independent rank-and-file committees, take their struggle out of the hands of the KMWU, and reach out to drivers in the trucking and logistics industries, to autoworkers in the United States and Japan, to rail workers in the United Kingdom, and nurses and teachers around the globe on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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