

South Korean workers take action against assault on working conditions

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Workers in South Korea are coming into conflict with big business and taking strike action to defend themselves against the attacks on their living and working conditions. Truck drivers, autoworkers, medical workers, among others are all demanding increased wages as inflation drives up prices and cuts real income. However, not only do workers face the companies and the government of President Yoon Suk-yeol, but the trade unions that are isolating workers' struggles and blocking a political fight against capitalism.

Truck drivers at beer and liquor company HiteJinro and its wholly-owned subsidiary Suyang Logistics have been in conflict with management over shipping fees, which have been stagnant since 2008. This situation is being compounded by surging prices, which has resulted in cuts to drivers' real wages. In addition, the HiteJinro drivers are not covered under the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System, which guarantees a minimum freight fare to ensure that drivers are not forced to drive dangerously to make ends meet. This system, which is already insufficient for drivers' needs, only covers shipping containers and cement.

In March, 132 drivers joined Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS), which is affiliated with the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Drivers began holding protests at HiteJinro plants at Icheon, Gyeonggi Province and Cheongju, North Chungcheong Province, which developed into partial strikes in May and then an ongoing full strike on June 2. The picket lines extended to the company's plant at Hongcheon in Gangwon Province on August 2. Last week, union members staged a sit-in protest at the HiteJinro corporate offices in Seoul while also occupying the roof.

HiteJinro has refused to meet workers' demands,

claiming that the drivers should negotiate with Suyang Logistics. Instead, the company has sent strikebreakers, supported by police, from its corporate offices to drive delivery trucks. CTS responded by saying, "HiteJinro and Suyang Logistics are actually the same company. HiteJinro should negotiate with us because executives of Suyang Logistics assume executive positions at HiteJinro."

However, despite its posturing, CTS and the KCTU have consciously isolated and betrayed the truck drivers' struggle. The KCTU has tacitly accepted the company's strikebreaking operations by refusing to organize larger strikes of other drivers, or from among its broader membership, which the KCTU claims exceeds 1.1 million.

Cheap stunts like occupying the company's rooftop are meant to burnish the union's "militant" image and to distract workers while the union orchestrates a sellout deal with management behind the scenes. It is to block demands for wider actions that would have a genuine impact on big business.

In June, CTS truck drivers throughout the country launched a week-long strike against similar conditions. This strike began to impact major corporations like steel producer POSCO and Hyundai Motors, at which point CTS promptly shut down the strike with none of the demands met. The HiteJinro drivers' fight continued, however, cut off from other workers even within their own union.

The KCTU is using these and other strikes to divert workers back behind the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP), which carries out the same anti-working-class policies as the Yoon administration and the ruling People Power Party.

On August 18, CTS released a statement saying, "From the moment the Yoon Suk-yeol administration

said it would protect capital and businesses, HiteJinro has driven workers on to the streets, under bridges, and now onto billboards,” a reference to protest locations. “If the right to live is not guaranteed, we will start a struggle not only against the HiteJinro chaebol [family owned-conglomerate], but also against the Yoon Suk-yeol administration.”

Such language from the KCTU or its constituent unions was entirely absent during the previous government of Moon Jae-in, a Democrat. In fact, for more than a year after Moon’s election in May 2017, the KCTU did not call a large-scale demonstration and certainly did not call for bringing down his government. Strikes and demonstrations that were called, especially towards the end of Moon’s term, were designed to allow workers to let off steam and to direct workers’ support behind the Democrats, or one of the so-called progressive parties that help prop up the DP.

Other workers moving into struggle should draw the necessary lessons about the role of the unions and the KCTU.

On August 19, autoworkers at Kia Motors voted overwhelming to strike, as contract negotiations with the company broke down. From among approximately 28,200 eligible voters, 89.4 percent of the 24,200 workers taking part elected to strike. The potential for strikes at automakers GM Korea and Renault Korea is also strong.

Kia workers are demanding a basic monthly wage increase of 165,200 won (\$US123.64), 30 percent of last year’s operating profits as bonuses, the extension of the retirement age from 60 to 64, and the abolition of the two-tier wage system that pays new hires significantly less than more senior workers.

However, Kia workers have already been handicapped by their own union, the Korean Metal Workers’ Union (KMWU), another KCTU affiliate, which pushed through a sellout contract at Hyundai Motors in July, despite workers voting to walk off the job. This ensured that the largest company, which also owns Kia, would not go out on strike, thereby dividing workers within the same industry and union, in order to protect the auto companies.

Another KCTU affiliate, the Korean Health and Medical Workers’ Union (KHMU) is also planning a strike at Gyeonggi Provincial Medical Center,

comprising six hospitals, on September 1. Workers battling the COVID-19 pandemic are demanding a 7.6 percent wage increase for 2022, the abolition of Gyeonggi Province’s unilaterally imposed staffing guidelines, and a strengthening of the functions and abilities of infectious disease hospitals.

Nurses and other healthcare workers have held numerous strikes and protests during the pandemic, as they face overwork and the threat of infection. Last September, the KHMU called off a planned nationwide strike at the last minute after reaching a sellout deal with the government.

Workers can only conduct a genuine struggle against the devastation of their living and working conditions by breaking with the KCTU and establishing their own independent, democratically-elected rank-and-file committees. Such rank-and-file committees need to reach out to other sections of workers who confront similar attacks and to fight for a socialist perspective against the capitalist system and all its defenders, including the KCTU and the Democrats, that invariably put profits ahead of the basic needs of working people.



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