

South Korean bus drivers overwhelmingly vote to strike

Ben McGrath**26 September 2022**

Bus drivers in South Korea's Gyeonggi Province overwhelmingly voted on September 20 to strike over higher wages and improved conditions. The vote is the latest example of the determination of South Korean workers, and the international working class more broadly, to fight for their class interests.

Drivers from the Gyeonggi Regional Bus Union, a section of the Korean Automobile and Transport Workers' Federation, voted 97.3 percent in favor of a walkout set to take place on September 30. The demand for strike action has broad support among the drivers, with 95.1 percent of the union's 15,234 members taking part in the strike vote. The Transport Workers' Federation is affiliated with the yellow Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU).

The strike stands to have a significant economic impact. It will affect buses throughout Gyeonggi Province, which surrounds the capital city of Seoul and has a population of 13.6 million people. It involves 47 bus companies, approximately 16,600 buses, and 92 percent of the bus lines in the province.

Drivers are demanding monthly wage rises of 600,000 won (\$US426) to 1 million won (\$US709), in order to bring their pay to the same level as bus drivers in Seoul. Furthermore, they are demanding a two-shift per day system so that drivers are not forced to drive for as long as 17 to 18 hours. The union is also pushing for the full implementation of a semi-public management system for the industry.

The semi-public management system leaves the transportation system in the hands of private companies while the provincial government would provide subsidies and take a role in decision-making. A union official told the media, "The problem of systematically solving the wage gap and the two-shift per day system is not one that can be solved at the level of the bus

companies. For now, Gyeonggi Province should implement the semi-public management system."

In other words, the union is absolving the companies of any responsibility for the attacks on workers while hoping to also convince the latter that the provincial government and the Democrat Party of Korea (DP), in particular, will step in to protect the drivers. However, the system is far from sufficient to meet workers' demands. It amounts to a very limited improvement as drivers increasingly refuse to accept grueling hours and low pay.

These conditions have taken a significant toll on drivers. A bus crash in July 2017 on a Gyeonggi expressway publicly highlighted the serious dangers that bus drivers and the public at large face. That driver had spent 21 hours behind the wheel, with only a five-hour break to sleep after his initial 15-hour shift. After falling asleep behind the wheel, the bus struck seven other vehicles, killing two people and injuring 16. In a five-year period from 2012 to 2017, bus driver fatigue led to 2,241 accidents and 414 deaths.

Furthermore, a 2013 study found that the intense work hours led to significantly higher risks of hypertension and other cardiovascular diseases among South Korean bus drivers. Among these workers, 53.3 percent were found to suffer from hypertension, compared to 17.6 percent and 19.7 percent in control groups.

However, even the extremely limited management system the union is proposing to address these issues is opposed in ruling circles. Gyeonggi Governor Kim Dong-yeon, a Democrat, backtracked from a pledge to implement the system, instead significantly scaling down the program.

The bus companies also claim that the drivers' demands are too difficult to meet given rising fuel

prices. Workers are therefore being forced to accept life-threatening conditions in response to the economic crisis that is gripping South Korea and the world, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic and the US/NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine, which have sent inflation soaring.

The union, which is holding additional negotiations on September 23 and 29, will work to limit or call off the strike by accepting the bus companies' and provincial government's demands, and has no intention of genuinely bargaining on drivers' behalf. Instead, the union will attempt to reach a sellout agreement through backroom negotiations, potentially conducting a token walkout to let off steam.

In a similar move last April, sections of the Transport Workers' Federation threatened strikes around the country, including in Gyeonggi Province. However, these strikes were called off after the Seoul bus drivers' section concluded a sellout deal. While no agreement was reached in Gyeonggi, the union called off the strike "in good faith" after the provincial government made phony pledges to meet drivers' demands.

More broadly, the FKTU has worked with the Democrats to ensure that workers remain on the job throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, declaring in 2020 that it would work side-by-side with the DP and the government of then-President Moon Jae-in. In this, both the FKTU and the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) are complicit. While the latter falsely postures as radical and even anti-capitalist, the FKTU collaborates openly with the government. Both union organizations consciously divide and isolate workers.

However, numerous sections of the South Korean working class have gone or threatened to go on strike in recent months, demonstrating that workers are looking for a way to fight back against the attacks on their working and living conditions. Truck drivers belonging to the KCTU went on strike in June, with drivers at liquor and beer company HiteJinro striking for months to demand better conditions. Other sections of workers who have threatened to go on strike include nurses in Gyeonggi Province and autoworkers.

Powerful sections of the working class internationally are also moving into struggle with capitalism, including rail workers in the United States, who held a significant meeting on September 14, passing a resolution not to

accept any sellout contract enforced by the government or the union.

It is to these layers, their class brothers and sisters in South Korea and around the world, that Gyeonggi bus drivers must turn to defend their interests. Drivers should form rank-and-file committees to take their struggle forward. No faith should be placed in the unions or the Democrats.



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