

South Korean workers in major industries vote to strike

Ben McGrath
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Workers in major South Korean industries, including shipbuilding and railways, have recently voted to strike, as they face attacks on their wages and working conditions imposed by the companies and the government. In their struggles, workers face the duplicity of the trade unions, which are maneuvering behind the scenes for sellout deals with management and subordinate them to the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP).

On October 26, workers at three shipbuilders—Hyundai Heavy Industries, Hyundai Mipo Dockyard, and Hyundai Samho Heavy Industries—voted to strike as new contract negotiations have stalled since July. The three companies all belong to the larger HD Hyundai chaebol, one of the massive, family-controlled conglomerates that dominate South Korea’s economy.

Workers are calling for the three companies to negotiate collectively rather than on a company-by-company basis. Their demands include an increase of 142,300 won (\$US100) per month in base salary, a guarantee of 250 percent of wages in bonuses, and job security as the shipbuilding industry goes through restructuring. They are also demanding the abolition of the peak wage system that cuts the wages of older workers.

At a press conference on October 27, the Korean Metal Workers’ Union (KMWU), to which the workers belong, claimed that it would call strikes by the end of the year if there was no progress in negotiations. It bemoaned the fact that HD Hyundai has rebuffed the union’s attempts to collaborate with the company. The KMWU stated that last year, the two sides “agreed to end the current wasteful company-union relationship and change the paradigm to a future-oriented relationship, but now, a year later, that promise is not being kept.”

The KMWU, which also represents autoworkers, is one of the most influential unions within the so-called “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which at times, even postures as anti-capitalist.

In a separate vote on October 26, railway workers with the Korean Railway Workers’ Union (KRWU) also elected to take strike action against employer Korail. They are demanding a flat rate wage increase for all workers, the halting of a new company-promoted pay system, equal wages between long-term salaried and annual-contract employees, and an improved promotion system. Railway workers have not struck in three years. The KRWU claims that it will call a strike at the end of November or beginning of December.

The KRWU is a part of the larger Korean Public Service and Transport Workers’ Union (KPTU), another KCTU affiliate. The KPTU participated in a rally of approximately 50,000 public sector workers on October 29, ostensibly to denounce the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol government’s plans for privatization of public industries.

Hyeon Jeong-hui, the head of the KPTU, told demonstrators, “Six years ago today we started the candlelight vigil that impeached the Park Geun-hye regime. Now, tens of thousands of public workers are gathered together again. As it turns out, the privatization policy of the Yoon Suk-yeol administration is the same as it was during the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. If history repeats itself, our public workers will fight back a hundred times, a thousand times. We have already made history where the struggling workers and people win.”

This sums up the perspective of the “militant” KCTU. While denouncing the current and previous

conservative presidents, the coming to power of President Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party of Korea (DP) after Park's removal from office was a "win" for workers, according to Hyeon.

Yet Moon and his Democrat predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun all carried out massive restructuring, privatization, and other attacks on the working class. This included keeping workers on the job in dangerous conditions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, all with the backing of the KCTU. The unions now work to cover up this history.

A genuine struggle of workers is precisely what the KCTU is working to prevent, alongside the other major union organization, the conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), which also took part in the October 29 rally. If the shipbuilders and railway workers do walk off the job, the KCTU will limit the struggles as much as possible, only calling partial strikes while isolating workers at each company; that is, if the unions do not reach sell-out agreements beforehand.

To cover up this agenda and further paint the Democrats as pro-working class, the unions are working with the DP to promote the enactment of the "Yellow Envelope" bill, which would protect union organizations from company lawsuits stemming from financial losses in strikes. Such lawsuits are typically used to intimidate workers into calling off strikes, with the name of the bill referring to yellow envelopes used to collect donations from workers to pay for lawsuits.

The unions claim that pro-working-class policies can be pursued in the National Assembly and that the current bill would defend individual workers. In actuality, it would be used to protect union bureaucrats as well as the union coffers. The Democrats and their allies like the minor opposition Justice Party fear that such lawsuits threaten the stability of the unions, which they rely upon for corralling workers' support.

The unions would also use the legislation to further isolate workers. Since the law would exclude so-called violent or destructive actions, workers who attempt to continue strikes after a union sellout or who take wildcat action could be exposed to lawsuits or other legal repercussions. The unions would hold the legislation over the heads of workers who do not fall into line with bureaucrats' demands while leaving workers hanging out to dry if they rebel.

Workers in South Korea face a choice: Whether to allow the unions, which have demonstrated they have no intention of waging genuine struggles on workers' behalf, to continue to conduct and ultimately sell out workers' struggles. Or to take their struggles out of the hands of the pro-capitalist, pro-Democrat unions and fight their struggles through the formation of rank-and-file committees.

These committees must be elected by workers themselves, completely independent of the unions, the Democrats, and all of their hangers-on in phony left-wing parties. They should link up the fights at individual employers for a united struggle throughout the working class. They must also reach out to workers in other countries, and reject the nationalism and racism promoted by the unions and their allies. Only through a complete break with capitalism and a turn to international socialism will workers in South Korea be able to defend their interests.



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