

South Korean public sector workers to strike against job cuts, privatization

Ben McGrath
9 November 2022

Healthcare workers employed in South Korea's public national university hospital system are set to strike today, rebelling against government plans for medical privatization, staff reductions, and other anti-worker "reforms." Many other sections of the working class are also coming into conflict with the government and big business.

Workers are calling for a halt to the attacks on healthcare, which the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol administration has called "innovation guidelines." This includes job and benefit cuts and slashing funding for hospitals by more than 10 percent even as tens of thousands of people continue to be infected with COVID-19 on a daily basis. Workers are demanding the abolition of the guidelines; a ban on contracting services out to the private sector; an expansion of staff; the conversion of irregular workers to regular, full-time positions; and the strengthening of the national university hospital system.

Their union, Health Workers Solidarity (HWS, *Uiryo Yeondae Bonbu*), announced the strike on Monday, declaring: "Through the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole nation has experienced the importance of public medical care. However, the Yoon Suk-yeol government is trying to again squeeze the hospital workers while merging job functions and cutting national university hospital staff, introducing a performance-based pay system, and cutting welfare benefits. The administration is pushing medical privatization policies, including non-interactive treatment and non-medical health management services."

Despite these criticisms, HWS is working behind the scenes to reach sell-out agreements with hospital management and the government in order to isolate individual workplaces. From among 17 HWS branches, workers from only up to eight, including Seoul

National University Hospital, Chungbuk National University Hospital, and Kyungpook National University Hospital are scheduled to take part in today's strike.

At Seoul Hospital alone, 78.6 percent of the union's 3,845 members voted to walk out. However, HWS also announced yesterday that it would postpone possible strike action at Kangwon National University Hospital until next Tuesday, despite 888 workers from among 1,270 union members approving a strike. The same day, HWS also called off a strike at the private Daegu Catholic University Medical Center.

Furthermore, healthcare workers belonging to a second union, the Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union (KHMU), may also strike, but the bureaucracy has been explicit that they are working to isolate their members as well.

A KHMU official told the media on Tuesday that strikes would not be organized by the entire union, but on a branch-by-branch basis: "We included recruitment and fair compensation in our negotiations with management. We set a policy that we cannot strike if we reach an agreement. Currently, we have reached an agreement at Gyeongsang National University Hospital and Chonnam National University Hospital. If our demands are not achieved at the remaining hospitals, we will go out on strike together in the form of branch strikes."

The KHMU previously sold out a strike earlier this year on September 1 when healthcare workers employed at six hospitals belonging to the Gyeonggi Provincial Medical Center were set to strike. The union instead negotiated a paltry wage increase of just 1.4 percent that amounted to a cut in real wages despite workers' demands for 7.6 percent just to keep up with inflation. The union also accepted other vague promises

from the provincial government, with which it was negotiating. These types of pledges are worthless and easily discarded by claims of “economic difficulty.”

Whatever their criticisms of the government, HWS and the KHMU are not appealing to the working class to wage a fight against the destruction of public healthcare and jobs. Instead, they call strikes to give the appearance of waging a struggle while calling off walkouts at the local level, thereby disarming and isolating workers. Yet the attack on job conditions in healthcare and other industries is being carried on at the national level and requires the response of the entire South Korean working class.

This is exactly what the unions are attempting to prevent. HWS is part of the larger Korean Public Service and Transport Workers’ Union (KPTU). Another KPTU-affiliated union, the Seoul Transit Corporation Labor Union, has also announced plans to strike on November 30 if Seoul Metro and the government do not address workers’ concerns over job cuts and privatization. Seoul Metro is a public company operating subway lines 1 through 8 in the capital.

Workers want to ensure there are no job cuts and more safety maintenance workers are hired. In response to workers concerns, the company claims it has plans to only outsource “peripheral” work. Myeong Sun-pil, the head of the subway union claimed, “If Seoul Metro abandons its duties to ensure the safety of workers and citizens, we will stand on the citizens’ side by resolutely staging a general strike.”

If a strike occurs, major lines through Seoul such as 1 and 4 could see their weekday services cut to 53.5 and 56.4 percent respectively. This alone demonstrates that a united struggle of metro and healthcare workers would have a tremendous impact on the government and big business.

Furthermore, the KPTU and the KHMU are affiliated with the so-called “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The KCTU at times postures as anti-capitalist, but supports the main-opposition Democratic Party of Korea. The KCTU’s goal is to turn working-class anger towards attacks on working and living conditions into support for the pro-capitalist Democrats, which support and carry out these attacks no less than the Yoon government and the ruling People Power Party. This is the purpose of the KCTU’s annual large-scale November rally scheduled for this

Saturday.

The KCTU’s outlook was summed up by KPTU head Hyeon Jeong-hui at a rally on October 29, where he stated, “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.”

In other words, the unions consider the removal of Yoon and the replacement with a Democrat—just as Democrat Moon Jae-in replaced Park Geun-hye after her removal from office—a “win” for the working class. Workers must reject this bankrupt perspective. As in the past, a new Democrat administration would only continue and deepen the onslaught on the social and democratic rights of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact