

South Korean truckers strike amid growing worker anger

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Thousands of truck drivers in South Korea have gone on strike today, demanding a resolution to safety and freight fare issues. Significantly, other sections of the working class are also taking strike action this week and next, with various public sector, education, and rail and metro workers planning to walk off the job.

The drivers are calling for the extension of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System as well as the expansion of goods covered under it. The system establishes a minimum freight fare so that drivers are not forced to drive dangerously to increase deliveries in order to make ends meet. The current system, however, only covers shipping containers and cement. It went into effect in 2020 and is set to expire at the end of this year.

The strike stands to have a significant impact on business, just as it did in June when the drivers first walked off the job for eight days. That strike affected major companies like Hyundai Motors and POSCO, a steel manufacturer. In total, companies lost 1.6 trillion won (\$US1.2 billion) as a result of the walk-out, demonstrating the tremendous impact workers have on the economy. For that reason, there is a great deal of concern among the ruling elite, who hope to quickly put an end to the current strike.

On Tuesday, the government of right-wing President Yoon Suk-yeol and the ruling People Power Party (PPP) attempted to maintain the status quo by agreeing to extend the freight system another three years, but refused to meet the drivers' demand to expand it. The government and PPP have denounced the drivers and pledged to "strictly respond" to any "illegal" actions.

The truck drivers belong to Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS), representing some 25,000 drivers. CTS is affiliated with the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU), the largest union in the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade

Unions (KCTU) which also represents most of the workers engaged in other strikes this week.

This includes healthcare workers who took part in strikes yesterday; a slow-down today by railway workers, who are also planning to strike on December 2; public sector workers and irregular school workers planning to strike on Friday; and Seoul Metro workers who will walk out on November 30. These workers are demanding an end to the government's anti-worker "reform" and privatization campaign, an expansion of jobs, higher wages, and other improvements to working conditions.

The KPTU and KCTU, however, are attempting to keep each group of workers isolated, and to divert growing anger over the government's agenda. The unions' aim is to allow workers to let off steam while subordinating their struggles to the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP), which still maintains a large majority in the National Assembly.

The unions are working with the DP to deceive workers into believing their demands can be won in the legislature. The staggering of each strike in different industries is intended to prevent a unified struggle while the KPTU attempts to reach sell-out agreements with the government and employers.

This is precisely what happened in June when CTS sold out the eight-day strike with none of the drivers' demands met, promoting government promises not worth the paper they were printed on.

If the unions and the Democrats remain in control, they will impose another defeat. For workers, the only way forward is to break free from the stranglehold of the unions by forming their own rank-and-file committees, to organize a real struggle independent of the entire political establishment. This will provide the means for workers to forge links with their class

brothers and sisters in every industry and beyond the borders of South Korea.

The unions, having suppressed strikes and protests during the previous administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in, are trying to convince workers that the sole source of their problems is the current Yoon government. KPTU leader Hyeon Jeong-hui, for example, told a rally on October 29 that the removal of Yoon from power and his replacement with a Democratic administration would be a “win” for workers.

On November 15, KCTU leader Yang Gyeong-su met with DP leader Lee Jae-myung at the confederation’s offices. Yang shook hands and posed for pictures with Lee, who during his failed presidential bid earlier this year described himself as “pro-business” and pledged to “provide companies with a free environment.”

Yang implored Lee and the DP to put forward a more “progressive” façade that would enable the unions to more easily sell the party to workers. He stated, “We urge the Democratic Party to stand on the side of workers and properly play its role as the opposition party. There must be a sincere change in the Democratic Party’s attitude so that the KCTU can focus on the struggle with the Yoon Suk-yeol government.”

The Democrats are a party of big business. While in power during the Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun administrations (1998-2008), they carried out vicious attacks on the working class, enforcing the demands of the International Monetary Fund for corporate restructuring, job cuts, and the casualization of labor. The current system, under which irregular workers have no job protection and earn significantly less than their regular counterparts for the same work, is a direct result of these policies. The KCTU worked with the Democrats to enforce these attacks.

Under Moon Jae-in, between 2017 and 2022, corporate restructuring continued in industries like shipbuilding where the workers are represented by the Korean Metal Workers’ Union (KMWU), one of the most prominent in the KCTU. The KMWU also enforced wage freezes at major auto companies like Hyundai Motors as the economy worsened due to trade disputes with Japan and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The entire KCTU worked with the Moon government to keep workers on the job, churning out profits for big

business throughout the deadly pandemic. These past betrayals demonstrate that the unions and the Democrats stand on the side of the corporate elite and defend capitalism.

To defend their social rights and living standards, workers need a new political strategy, based on the fight for the socialist reorganization of society, in opposition to the entire framework of capitalist politics. As a crucial step, we call on truck drivers and other striking workers to establish independent rank-and-file committees, laying the basis for the unification of their struggles with other sections of the working class in South Korea internationally. We call on workers in South Korea to contact us and discuss the way forward.



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