South Korean government threatens striking truck drivers with back-to-work order

Ben McGrath
27 November 2022

Today is the fifth day of a strike by thousands of South Korean truck drivers which is having a significant impact on big business. The drivers are demanding improved safety conditions and delivery fares in the face of threats from the government and the ruling class.

To take their struggle forward, drivers should form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and fight to expand the strike by reaching out to all sections of the working class.

The strikers are calling for the expansion of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System which provides a minimum fare on goods, so that drivers are not pressured to drive dangerously in order to increase deliveries and make ends meet. The current system, which only covers cement and shipping containers, is set to expire at the end of this year.

The 25,000 drivers represented by Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) are demanding that the system be made permanent and that it be expanded to include automobiles, steel goods, hazardous materials, grains, and individual package deliveries. They also want the scrapping of a revised plan the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol government put forward last Tuesday to extend the freight rates system another three years, while maintaining the unsatisfactory status quo.

Media reports indicate that anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 drivers have been taking part in the strike on different days. The movement of containers in and out of South Korea's 12 major ports has fallen by up to 7.6 percent, according to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport (MOLIT). Since Friday, drivers have been picketing at the ports and calling on other workers to join the walk-out in addition to refusing to transport containers.

Disruptions have been reported at automotive and steel companies, and particularly in the cement industry. The Korea Cement Association, which represents major companies like Sampyo Cement and Hanil Hyundai Cement, reported that on Friday only 20 tons of cement and related materials could be moved, out of a planned 200,000 tons. As of Friday, 259 construction sites out of 459 around the country had stopped work as they were unable to access cement, with the rest expected to halt operations by tomorrow.

Last Thursday night, President Yoon claimed strikers were engaging in "acts of violence" by picketing. He threatened to issue an executive order to force drivers back to work, which may come as early as tomorrow.

Yoon stated in a Facebook post: "We will not tolerate acts of taking logistical systems hostage in a national crisis situation," a reference to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-instigated war in Ukraine. "If they continue their irresponsible transport refusal, the government has no choice but to consider various measures, including a work initiation order."

On Saturday, MOLIT head Won Hui-ryong said the government had completed working-level preparations for implementing the order.

Representatives from the cement, auto, steel and petrochemical industries issued a joint statement on Friday demanding repressive measures to end the strike. Lee Dong-geun, vice-chairman of the Korea Enterprises Federation, stated: "The government must normalize distribution and mobilize all possible means, including a back-to-work order to block at an early stage the massive ripple effect that is creating a distribution crisis."

He further claimed: "There are almost no citizens who sympathize with the struggle of CTS… at a time when the government, businesses, and of course citizens must unite as one to recover from the crisis."

© World Socialist Web Site

In reality, there is broad support for the truck drivers. The government has moved quickly to try and shut the strike down before it can spread, as numerous sections of the working class move into struggle with the government and big business.

On Friday, education support staff who are employed in schools as irregular workers, went on strike. Seoul Metro workers are scheduled to strike on November 30, while railway workers will walk out on December 2.

Workers in healthcare, the automotive industry, construction, shipbuilding and package delivery have also struck or voted to strike in recent years against the conditions imposed upon them by both the current People Power Party (PPP) and former Democratic Party of Korea administrations.

While the business elite invokes national unity, South Korea is more divided than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a boon for the wealthy few, which have seen their stocks and real estate assets surge in value thanks to the expansionary monetary policy first implemented by the previous administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in.

According to Statistics Korea, the top 20 percent owned 1.28 billion won in net assets on average in 2021, 125.5 times higher than the bottom 20 percent—an increase of 25.7 percent from 2017. The top 20 percent has also seen average monthly income rise 3.7 percent over last year, while the bottom quintile's wages fell by one percent.

Despite the impact of the drivers' strike, CTS is looking for a way to bring it to an end as quickly as possible, with the union planning to open negotiations with MOLIT today. According to CTS Director of Education and Propaganda Lee Eung-ju, "We must find a resolution through conversation and negotiations. It is regrettable that the government is using the back-to-work order as a means of threat and intimidation."

CTS and other sections of striking workers belong to the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Notwithstanding their radical sounding rhetoric, neither CTS nor the KCTU are attempting to unite workers in a broader struggle against the government. Instead, they are working to suppress information about the strike and subordinate the drivers to the Democratic Party and negotiations in the National Assembly, while preparing a sellout, just as they did during the truckers' last strike in June.

Truck drivers should reject these behind-the-scenes machinations and take matters into their own hands, breaking the stranglehold of the unions, which police the working class on behalf of the state and big business. New organizations are needed—rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves and independent of the unions and capitalist parties—in order to expand the strike and to unify the drivers with different sections of workers who are entering into struggle in South Korea and internationally.

A new political perspective is also necessary—one based on socialist internationalism, aimed at uniting workers against the crisis-ridden capitalist system and its political servants who insist the working class must bear new burdens.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site