

South Korean trade unions isolate striking truckers amid government threats

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The strike by South Korean truck drivers entered its 10th day on Saturday, making it longer than the drivers' eight-day strike in June. The strike has so far resulted in a loss of up to 1.6 trillion won (\$US1.23 billion) for big business. While the government issues threats against the drivers, the ruling class is relying on the trade unions to isolate these workers and strangle the strike.

The strike has had its biggest impact on the cement, steel, and petrochemical industries. Earlier in the week, as many as 459 construction sites around the country shut down or were on the verge of shutting down due to a lack of cement and other materials. In the petrochemical industry, shipments were cut to 30 percent of the daily average, resulting in 68 billion won (\$US52.3 million) in losses per day.

In response, the right-wing government of President Yoon Suk-yeol issued a back-to-work order on Tuesday to some 2,500 cement truck drivers at more than 200 companies. The anti-democratic Trucking Transport Business Act allows the government to order drivers back to work if the national economy is at risk. This is the first time such an order has been issued since the Act went into effect in 2004. Workers defying the order could face up to three years in jail and fines of up to 30 million won (\$US23,000).

Yoon denounced the drivers for taking the economy "hostage." A presidential spokesperson told the media that more measures could be taken, stating "there is no other choice but to take all available action if the labor union continues to put forward unjustified demands." Action could also be taken against fuel truck drivers as petrol stations around the country begin to run out of gasoline.

Drivers are demanding a decent income and improvements to safety standards by making the Safe

Trucking Freight Rates System permanent. The system, set to expire at the end of the year, guarantees a minimum fare on cement and cargo containers, so that drivers are not pressured to drive dangerously to boost deliveries and their income. The truckers are calling for its expansion to cover automobiles, steel goods, hazardous materials, grains, and individual package deliveries.

On Tuesday, the drivers' union, Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS), denounced the government's order as unconstitutional, while warning that it would lead to increased strike action.

In fact, the union is working hand-in-hand with the government to wind down the strike. As of Friday, the government reported that cement shipments had returned to 46 percent of their pre-strike daily average as a result of the executive order. Activity at ports has risen to 81 percent of the normal average, compared to just 7.6 percent last Sunday.

The back-to-work order is clearly having an effect, but the government is proceeding cautiously, undoubtedly fearing how workers could respond angrily to wide-scale repressive measures. As of Friday, only 178 drivers had received a direct, written order to return to work, however the government plans to start issuing penalties to workers beginning Monday. This includes a maximum 30-day operating suspension and the revocation of drivers' certifications.

The greatest pressure on workers, however, is the isolation imposed by CTS. The union is a section of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU), which itself is affiliated with the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Since the beginning of the strike, only as many as 10,000 drivers from the 25,000-strong truckers' union took part in the strike as CTS sought to

limit the impact on big business as much as possible. The union bureaucracy is allowing drivers to burn themselves out on the picket lines while preventing the expansion of the strike within CTS and the broader KCTU, which claims a membership of over 1.1 million.

The drivers have demonstrated they do not lack the determination to fight. But with the conduct of the strike left in the hands of CTS, workers are being led towards defeat.

To take their struggle forward, workers need to take the strike out of the hands of the unions and form their own rank-and-file committees. These independent organizations, controlled by workers themselves, should break out of the isolation imposed by the unions, forging links with railway and Seoul Metro workers—whose unions also belong to the KPTU and who recently had sell-out agreements imposed.

Prior to the truck drivers' strike beginning on November 24, the KCTU promoted upcoming strikes by all these workers as part of a growing strike wave. A week later, this stands exposed as completely fraudulent.

On Wednesday, Seoul Metro workers belonging to the Seoul Transit Corporation Labor Union struck for one day, opposing plans for job cuts and privatization. The union reached a deal early Thursday morning without initially releasing the details, keeping its members in the dark while sending them back to work that day.

Railway workers, who were demanding a 187,000 won (\$US144) per month wage increase and improved working conditions, were similarly demobilized. The Korean Railway Workers' Union blocked a token walk-out on Friday, instead imposing a deal reached late Thursday night that includes an empty promise from the government and the company, Korail, to devise a plan for improved wages.

The unions shut down these workers' struggles, at the same time preventing any unified struggle with the striking truckers.

This is the modus operandi of the KCTU as a whole. From its founding in 1995, the KCTU has worked with various conservative and Democratic governments to impose the demands of capitalism while blocking a broader struggle of the working class. At the same time, various union bureaucrats and others in their orbit have carved out lucrative and privileged positions within the

state.

The KCTU calls strikes as safety valves to defuse workers' anger while ensuring that they are isolated to individual companies, demoralizing workers into giving up their struggles. It promotes the illusion that workers' demands can be secured in the National Assembly and by supporting the pro-capitalist Democratic Party of Korea.

Truck drivers and other sections of the South Korean working class should reject these endless sell-outs and the politics of the unions and the established parties, which insist that workers' demands must be subordinated to the needs of big business. A new perspective is necessary, one based on international socialism: the fight to unify workers in Korea and throughout the world to abolish the crisis-ridden capitalist system—the source of all attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class.



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