

South Korean truckers' union calls off strike following sham vote

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The South Korean truck driver's union, Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS), held a vote yesterday to end the 16-day long strike by drivers that has had a significant impact on big business around the country. While the vote supposedly came back in favor of halting the strike, workers should reject the attempt to enforce the result, which was obtained through anti-democratic measures.

The purpose of the vote was not to gauge workers' feelings on continuing the strike, but to provide a threadbare cover for shutting it down. It was announced on Thursday and took place between 9 a.m. and noon on Friday, leaving drivers little time to discuss with one another or other workers how to proceed.

As a result, only 3,575 out of 26,144 union members participated. Of those taking part, 2,211 voted to end the walk-out. In other words, the union called off the strike with only 8.46 percent of the membership giving its approval—a complete and anti-democratic farce. Some drivers reportedly refused to take part in the vote, denouncing CTS for trying to foist responsibility for its predetermined decision to send drivers back to work onto the rank-and-file membership.

CTS was already presenting the end of the strike as a done deal on Thursday, stating, “Cargo truckers cannot continue to watch any longer as the logistics industry, our workplaces, are destroyed through the government's excessive application of administrative measures. Accordingly, CTS made the difficult decision to minimize the damage to union members and urge a change in the government's attitude, which has been consistent with hardline oppression.”

From the beginning, CTS worked to isolate and foster demoralization among its members, limiting the number of drivers taking part to between five and six thousand on most days. The trade unions as a whole

also blocked the expansion of the struggle to other sections of the working class. CTS is affiliated with the so-called militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which claims a membership of over 1.1 million.

Plans for additional strikes by KCTU workers were blocked. Railway workers who were scheduled to walk off the job on December 2 had their strike called off at the last minute after the Korean Railway Workers' Union reached a sell-out deal with management and the government of right-wing President Yoon Suk-yeol. Seoul subway workers similarly had their strike on November 30 called off after only one day.

The truckers went on strike on November 24, demanding the expansion of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System, which provides drivers with a guaranteed minimum fare on concrete and container shipments. This is meant to reduce the pressure drivers feel to increase deliveries by driving dangerously in order to make ends meet. They have called for the system to not only cover other goods including, automobiles, steel, grains, hazardous materials, and individual package deliveries, but for the government to make it permanent before it expires at the end of the year.

The unions, however, used the strike and other protests, including the so-called national “general strike” on December 6—in reality a cheap stunt to cover up Friday's betrayal—to portray the Yoon administration and ruling People Power Party (PPP) as the sole cause of the attacks on workers' social conditions, deflecting blame from the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) and the capitalist system itself.

The unions hope to convince workers that the pro-capitalist Democrats will defend their interests within

the National Assembly, where the DP maintains a sizable majority. While calling on the government and PPP to pass a three-year extension on the freight rates system, CTS stated on Thursday, “The government and National Assembly must also actively continue discussions and guarantee the participation of relevant parties including CTS in the discussion process.”

This was the second CTS strike this year, following an eight-day walk-out in June for the same demands. CTS ended the first strike by misleading drivers into putting their faith in the Yoon government to negotiate a new agreement over the freight rates system. This gave the government time to take the measure of CTS and the KCTU as a whole while preparing to suppress new strikes.

In contrast to the sell-out imposed in June, the drivers now do not even have empty promises from the government to address their concerns in the future. The Yoon administration stated on Friday that it would reexamine the freight rates system from scratch, stating that its proposal before the strike to extend the current system another three years was now off the table.

Workers have undoubtedly shown a great deal of courage in their struggle, with no lack of determination, even after the government issued back-to-work orders for steel and petrochemical drivers on Thursday. In fact, the decision to shut down the strike contrasted sharply with the union’s claims earlier that day.

The KCTU’s house organ *Nodonggwa Segye (Labor and the World)* highlighted the fact that no drivers belonging to the Jeju Island CTS branch had broken ranks and returned to work on Thursday. The publication wrote, “According to the CTS Jeju branch, as of the 8th, all union members in the branch had rejected the Yoon government’s unconstitutional back-to-work order and stood united in the struggle, displaying steadfast ranks in the prolonged strike.”

The same cannot be said for the CTS leadership, which has proven unwilling and unable to challenge the government. On November 29, the Yoon administration issued the first back-to-work order for some 2,500 cement truck drivers, which the unions did nothing to oppose.

While initially hesitant, undoubtedly worried how the unions and workers would respond, the government sensed CTS’s cowardice and issued the new orders on Thursday. The Finance Ministry claimed that the steel

and petrochemical industries have each suffered approximately 1.3 trillion won (\$US996 million) in losses during the strike, an indication of the power the working class wields.

Workers in CTS and throughout South Korea cannot defend their basic rights through the pro-capitalist unions. They should reject the latest sellout agreement and organize independent rank-and-file committees to take their struggle forward, reaching out to workers throughout the country and internationally. The attacks on workers in South Korea and around the world stem from a deep-going crisis of global capitalism and can only be fought on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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