

# South Korean pseudo-lefts cover up union sell-out of striking truck drivers

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The recent 16-day strike by thousands of truck drivers in South Korea demonstrated the serious political challenges the working class faces. Workers not only confront big business and the government but the trade unions, which isolate and routinely sell out workers' struggles. The strike has also exposed the role of the pseudo-left organisations, which serve as apologists for the unions and block the development of an independent movement of the working class.

The drivers struck on November 24, demanding improved wages and safety conditions, including the expansion of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System that guarantees a minimum fare so that drivers are not forced to drive dangerously to make ends meet. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) presented the strike as part of a wave of planned stoppages that would include public sector, education, and railway workers.

Instead, the KCTU and its affiliated unions, which included the truckers' union, Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS), isolated the drivers, called off planned strikes by workers in other sectors, and shut down the strike through a sham vote on December 9. None of the truckers' demands were met.

Pseudo-left organizations like Workers' Solidarity (WS) helped prepare the betrayal by promoting the KCTU's false militant-sounding phrase-mongering as good coin. WS is affiliated with the International Socialist Tendency, which includes the Socialist Workers Party in the United Kingdom. It is not oriented to the working class, but to privileged middle-class layers including in the union apparatus at the expense of workers.

From the beginning of the truckers' strike, WS aligned its rhetoric with the KCTU's own. Both sought to convince workers that the current right-wing government of President Yoon Suk-yeol is the sole cause of the attacks on the working class, whether out of maliciousness or incompetence. Workers are led to believe that if only Yoon were removed from office, working and social conditions would improve, deflecting blame from the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) and the capitalist system as a whole.

The drivers, who previously struck in June, were told in a November 23 article on the WS website, for example, that the Yoon government was "ignoring workers' demands while even unilaterally overturning" the agreement that had ended the June strike. The deal, orchestrated by CTS, met none of the drivers' demands, and included only vague and empty promises from the Yoon government to address workers' concerns.

With drivers then preparing to strike once again, WS obscured CTS's role in the first sellout and told workers that the promises of the capitalist government should be taken as good coin. However, under Yoon, these promises had not been kept, implying that a different capitalist government—i.e., a Democratic administration—would honor such agreements.

Continuing along this line, WS wrote on December 2, "[T]he Yoon government does not care at all about the lives or existence of ordinary people. The point that has become clear once again is that if Yoon is not brought down, ordinary people's lives will be completely ruined."

While WS called on workers to bring down the Yoon government, left in the hands of the pro-capitalist KCTU, such a struggle would be diverted into the return of the Democrats which have a long record of making deep inroads into the social position of the working class.

The only criticisms of the unions by the WS were to call for greater militancy, not its political orientation to the capitalist parties. It deliberately fostered the dangerous illusion that the KCTU could be pushed to the left at a time when the union was actively isolating and selling out the drivers' strike.

In fact, WS repeatedly called for a KCTU-led one-day strike, including after the unions called off of a railway workers' strike on December 1 that was scheduled for the next day.

Writing on December 2, WS stated, "As the Yoon government has declared war against workers, the KCTU leadership must call a real general strike even if only for one day. Instead of issuing an apology to Yoon and a 'strict warning,' the KCTU must target Yoon head-on, calling for his resignation and expanding the struggle."

WS knew full well that the KCTU was not going to mobilise the working class in genuine political struggle to bring down the Yoon government. The KCTU modus operandi is call limited protests fraudulently promoted as "general strikes" to give the impression of radicalism before shutting down any struggle. That is precisely why WS's call for a general strike "if only for one day" encouraged workers to go along with this fraud.

After the union shut down the truckers' strike on December 9, WS went into damage control in an article that day titled, "The CTS strike is over. Solidarity was lacking." WS wrote, "The response of the reformist leaders of the workers' movement, including the Justice Party, the KCTU, and its affiliated Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union did not go beyond

the level of simply keeping up appearances. Solidarity was organized, but it was extremely insufficient. For example, the KCTU leadership belatedly declared a general strike, but this remained at the level of organized action for one day on December 6.”

Yet it was WS that had promoted this fraud and remained silent on the betrayal that was being prepared. Only a week before, it had called for a general strike, “if only for a day,” as the means for taking on the Yoon administration.

The treacherous role of the KCTU and its WS apologists is not an aberration. Both organizations emerged in the 1980s and 1990s during a period of insurgent working-class struggles that contributed to the end of South Korea’s military dictatorship, then led by Chun Doo-hwan and Noh Tae-woo. Both functioned to prevent this movement of the working class developing into a struggle against the profit system.

WS was founded in 1990, then known as the International Socialists of South Korea. The organization presented itself as a “third” path to the various Stalinist factions, in particular to those oriented to Moscow, which was in intense crisis amid the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe that culminated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

However, far from advocating a genuine socialist program, WS rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity for an independent, socialist party, and instead oriented itself to the opposition Democrats through the unions. Based on the anti-scientific theory that the Stalinist regime had represented “state capitalism,” it adapted itself to the imperialist powers.

At the same time, the globalization of production was turning trade unions around the world into organizations for pressuring workers to accept the never-ending demands of big business in order to attract international capital.

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In South Korea, globalization had undermined the military dictatorship, which had been based on the development of industry within a nationally regulated economy. The key role in opening up the economy and ramming through pro-market restructuring at the expense of the working class was played by the Democrats.

The KCTU’s forerunner, the National Council of Trade Unions (NCTU), was founded in January 1990 as an illegal organization, in contrast to the yellow unions within the Federation of Korean Trade Unions. The NCTU quickly adapted to the Democrats, a process which led to the founding of the KCTU in November 1995.

The KCTU quickly expressed a willingness to work with the government of conservative President Kim Young-sam. During the enormous strike movement that began in December 1996 in opposition to new anti-labor legislation, the KCTU agreed to suppress the strike the following February in exchange for semi-legality. It agreed to recognize “labor flexibility,” or the ability of companies to fire workers at will—a fundamental shift from previous guarantees of life-long employment, at least in the major corporations.

The KCTU played a similar role during the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis. The union body participated in tripartite

discussions with the government of Democrat Kim Dae-jung and big business. It agreed to enforce mass sackings, reconfirming its adherence to ensuring “labor flexibility,” paving the way a massive casualization of the labor force. The KCTU received legal recognition in 1999.

In the eyes of many workers, the KCTU was discredited. WS stepped in to provide a “socialist” cover. In 1999, the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) was founded as the political wing of the KCTU. WS joined the party, providing phony socialist credentials for the pro-business policies of the KCTU, and therefore of the Democrats, which the KCTU had agreed to carry out.

WS has continued to prop up the Democrats, particularly in times of crisis for the bourgeoisie. Following the mass protests that led to the removal of right-wing President Park Geun-hye from office in 2017, WS told workers that a period of positive social change was on horizon. It worked with the unions and Democrats to put an end to the protests before they took aim at the capitalist system as a whole.

Following the 2017 election, the Democrat government of President Moon Jae-in continued to oversee sharp attacks on workers’ social conditions, the growth of inequality, and allowing COVID-19 to run rampant through the population.

WS openly called for a vote for Democrat Lee Jae-myung in the 2022 presidential election, claiming to give only “critical support” to “stop” the right-wing candidate. However, it was the Democrats themselves that had generated widespread disillusion through their anti-working class policies that paved the way for the return of the conservatives and the Yoon administration.

Workers and youth looking for a genuine socialist alternative to all the capitalist parties, the trade unions and their pseudo-left hangers-on should study the political struggle of the international Trotskyist movement against all of these anti-working class tendencies and contact the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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