

South Korean trade union confederation launches phony two-week strike

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5 July 2023

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in South Korea launched what it is calling a two-week strike on Monday. Along with walkouts by different sections of its membership, the KCTU will also hold rallies denouncing the current government of President Yoon Suk-yeol and calling for his resignation. In reality, these demonstrations are meant to diffuse worker anger while limiting the impact on big business as much as possible.

An estimated 400,000 KCTU members out of 1.2 million will supposedly take part in the strike, which is being held under the slogan, “Down with the Yoon Suk-yeol government.” It will conclude on July 15. The demands being put forward include an end to the government’s “pro-chaebol and anti-labor” policies. Chaebol refers to South Korea’s huge family-run conglomerates like Samsung. The additional evening rallies are being held on July 4, July 7, July 11, and July 14. A final demonstration will also be held on July 15.

Other demands include the revision of the trade union act, halting the discharge of radioactive water from Fukushima in Japan, a rise in the minimum wage to more than 12,000 won (\$US9.23) an hour (currently at 9,620 won or \$US7.40), expansion of public healthcare, halting privatization, an end to excessively long work hours, strengthened punishments for serious industrial accidents, and the protection of freedom of speech and assembly.

Different branches of the KCTU will only participate one or two days, at most. Approximately 3,000 workers struck on Monday, including logistics and home appliance repair workers, for example. Among the affiliated unions, the Korean Metal Workers’ Union (KMWU), which includes autoworkers and is one of the most influential in the KCTU, will strike on July 12

while medical workers will walk off the job the following day.

There is obviously a great deal of anger among South Korea workers, just as there is among workers internationally. Economic conditions are declining as wages stagnate amid rising inflation and deepening social inequality. Core inflation, which excludes food and energy prices, is currently at 4.1 percent. Yet workers from the bottom three quintiles of wage earners have seen their incomes grow by between approximately 2 and 3 percent in 2023, meaning a cut in real wages.

However, workers internationally are moving into counteroffensive against the attacks of the ruling classes. Last Saturday in western Canada, 7,400 dock workers went on strike to whom South Korean workers should give their support.

Yet, it is this sort of working-class unity the unions are trying to prevent. The KCTU postures as a “militant” and at times even as an anti-capitalist organization. However, the KCTU’s goal in launching a series of separate, staggered strikes over two weeks is to allow workers to let off steam while dividing and preventing them from launching a common struggle.

At the same time, the unions are seeking to divert workers’ anger against the Yoon administration alone, rather than the entire capitalist system. KCTU leader Yang Gyeong-su stated, “We are going on a general strike because we need to stop regressive labor reforms. The KCTU declares an all-out struggle against the Yoon government, and this two-week strike is the first step.”

Many of these workers, including logistics workers, autoworkers, shipbuilders, and truck drivers, have struck in recent years against exploitation under both the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the main

opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) when it was in power. The KCTU was responsible for isolating and shutting down these strikes. Notably, during the more than two-week long strike of truck drivers in November and December last year, the KCTU refused to mobilize a broader struggle in support of the drivers, while caving in to government pressure.

The Yoon government is undoubtedly attacking workers' right to organize and free speech, including pushing for sharp restrictions on the right to protest. Earlier this year, the Yoon administration demanded that unions open their financial books to government inspection in the name of "normalizing" their operations, or, in other words, exerting government control over the unions. The administration has also accused the unions of conducting illegal activities at job sites while being under the influence of North Korea.

The government is clearly concerned over the impact of growing worker discontent and the power that workers have in the economy. The administration denounced the strike on Tuesday, with presidential spokesman Lee Do-un stating, "The president stressed that the Yoon Suk-yeol government will never bow to the blackmail of those who take the people and the people's economy hostage and stage political strikes and illegal protests, and will respond firmly."

Rather than being anti-capitalist, however, the KCTU is ultimately attempting to direct anger back behind the Democrats. In blaming Yoon and the PPP alone for carrying out an anti-worker agenda, the implication is that the DP can be expected to defend the working class.

Workers should ask themselves why labor reforms were not taken under the previous government of Democrat Moon Jae-in. It is because the DP supports capitalism and the attacks on the working class no less than the conservatives. The Moon administration made vague and empty promises to address workers' concerns while overseeing a sharp increase in economic inequality. His government tore up COVID-19 mitigation measures at the behest of big business, paving the way for the mass infection of the population in order for greater corporate profits.

The KCTU played a critical role in propping up Moon's government, limiting strikes and protests while he was in office, agreeing to wage freezes in many key

industries including for autoworkers, and defending the government's COVID-19 policies even as big business began carrying out mass job cuts at the start of the pandemic.

The KCTU's phony two-week strike demonstrates that it has no genuine intention to wage a political struggle against the government on workers' behalf. It is a stunt meant to give the illusion of taking joint action while preventing workers from doing just that.

This demonstrates the need for workers' independent rank-and-file committees in South Korean industries. Workers cannot place their faith in the so-called "militant" KCTU. Instead, they should take the struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist, pro-Democrat unions and reach out to workers throughout the country and internationally to carry their fight forward based on a socialist perspective.



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