

South Korean union pushes through sellout deal at Hyundai Motors

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Autoworkers at Hyundai Motors in South Korea reportedly approved a new contract on September 18. The deal, however, received support from barely half the union's membership, making clear there is broad discontent towards what is a sellout. Furthermore, the union bureaucracy imposed the contract at a time when other sections of the working class are similarly moving into struggle.

The vote took place after the union, the Hyundai branch of the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), reached a pro-company deal the previous week. It includes a 111,000 won (\$US83) per month raise or 4.8 percent of a worker's basic salary, so-called "performance-based" bonuses equal to 400 percent of a worker's basic monthly salary, a one-time bonus of 10.5 million won (\$US7,910), and 250,000 won (\$US188) in gift certificates.

From a total union membership of 44,643, only 22,703 reportedly voted to approve the contract, or just barely more than 50 percent of the total union membership. The turnout rate was 86.5 percent. By comparison, 88.9 percent of the total membership voted in August to strike for better pay and conditions, showing the willingness of workers to fight.

The KMWU, however, accepted Hyundai's offer with only minor adjustments to better sell the deal to workers. The company union refused to address the demand for a detailed plan on the company's transition to electric vehicles, a process that is predicted to lead to massive job cuts. The agreement does nothing to stop discrimination against non-regular workers. These workers are paid significantly less than their regular counterparts and lack basic job protections—like temporary part-time workers in the US automotive industry.

The KMWU announced the pro-company deal on the

night of September 12 and then promptly called off a partial strike planned for the following two days. The stoppage was scheduled to last only four hours each day in order to limit the impact on the company. In all likelihood, the strike was announced as window dressing for the deal, by giving the impression that the union was fighting for its members.

The vote for the deal is less an endorsement than a recognition by workers that the union bureaucrats will not fight for anything better. For the past five years, the KMWU Hyundai branch has imposed one sellout deal after another without even the pretense of a struggle. In 2020, the union supported a wage freeze.

Faced with declining economic conditions stemming from a trade dispute with Japan in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic, and then the US-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine, the unions have worked to protect South Korean big business. Companies like Hyundai are enjoying record profits.

The KMWU is one of the most influential within the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which claims a membership of more than 1.2 million. The KCTU postures as a "militant" and even at times anti-capitalist organization, but it is aligned with the opposition Democratic Party (DP), one of the two main parties of bourgeois rule in South Korea. Like the DP, its fearful of a broader, working-class movement that spirals out of its control and threatens the political establishment and the profit system itself.

The KMWU's betrayal of workers at Hyundai is the modus operandi of union bureaucrats around the world. US autoworkers now struggling against the "Big Three" also face the opposition of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy. Claims these bureaucrats can be pushed to the left or made to fight for the membership fly in the face of decades of bitter experiences.

South Korean auto companies view the conclusion of an agreement at Hyundai, the largest auto manufacturer, as an important step to isolating and imposing similar deals on other sections of workers in the industry. At Kia, which is owned by Hyundai, 26,700 workers also overwhelmingly voted to strike by 82.5 percent. However, as of September 18, the KMWU Kia branch announced that it is keeping its members on the job, proposing only to halt overtime production beginning in October.

Struggles are also emerging at GM Korea and Renault Korea. At the former, workers rejected a proposed KMWU-negotiated deal that included a paltry 70,000 won (\$US52.70) basic monthly wage increase in a vote held on September 12 and 13. No strike is planned and negotiations are scheduled to resume after the long Chuseok holiday, which begins September 28 and will last to October 3.

The union sellouts are not limited to the auto industry. Last week, railway workers belonging to the KCTU's Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) struck for the first time since November 2019. The walkout took place from Thursday to Monday morning. The KRWU similarly worked to limit the impact of the strike as much as possible, ensuring that the majority of trains continued to run. Services were only cut by approximately 20 percent.

The union ended the strike without workers' demands being met. No further strikes have been announced, but an additional strike is supposedly being planned. A KRWU official claimed, "The first strike was a kind of warning, but the second one will be an indefinite general strike."

Workers are demanding improved conditions and a scheduling system that prevents workers from having two-night shifts in a row as well as more days off. They are also demanding the expansion of public railway services and are opposed to steps towards privatization that will mean the loss of jobs and conditions.

On September 1, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport cut the number of trains operated by SR Corporation that ran between Seoul's Suseo Station and the city of Busan, sending the trains to other lines that had only been operated by the government-owned Korail KTX trains. SR, which operates independently of the government, was founded in 2013 to compete with Korail's KTX services.



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