

Samsung Electronics workers' strike in South Korea continues into third week

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23 July 2024

On Tuesday, as Samsung Electronics workers in South Korea continued their more than two-week long strike, the union and management resumed negotiations for the first time since the beginning of the walkout. The strike is a significant expression of workers' anger more broadly and their desire to fight back against attacks on their economic and social conditions. However, the union is preparing a sellout agreement that will not address any of the workers' concerns.

The workers are represented by the National Samsung Electronics Union (NSEU), the largest of five unions at the company. It is affiliated with the Federation of Korean Trade Unions. Samsung Electronics is the flagship company of the Samsung Group, one of South Korea's massive family-controlled conglomerates known as *chaebol*. The NSEU is requesting a 5.6 percent pay increase and the implementation of promised paid leave.

In addition, the union is also asking for clear guidelines that explain the company's bonus system, which is tied to operating profits. When workers struck on July 8—the first official strike in Samsung Electronics' 55-year history—the majority of those walking off the job belonged to the semiconductor division called Device Solutions (DS). DS workers were denied bonuses last year, with the company claiming the division had not produced any profits despite being a cash cow for Samsung in the past.

Bonuses at South Korean companies are considered major parts of a worker's salary, meaning that withholding them amounts to a significant wage cut. As a result, DS workers flooded into the NSEU in the hopes of fighting back. Instead, the union is working as the company's police force to block workers' struggles and prevent them from launching a greater struggle against Samsung and big business in South Korea as a

whole.

The NSEU is carrying this out by isolating Samsung workers, even from those within the company itself. The union has a membership of 30,657, but only 6,540 members are taking part in the strike, most from the DS division. No genuine effort is being made to appeal to other workers at the company, which employs 124,804 people. Instead, the NSEU is wearing the strikers down before attempting to impose a sellout agreement.

The union in fact repeatedly acceded to company demands since the start of negotiations in January. Their wage increase request of 5.6 percent is down from 8.1 percent when negotiations started at the beginning of the year. Recognizing that workers' anger was growing, the NSEU called the strike to let off steam. At the same time, the union is conducting the walkout line by line, attempting to limit the impact on the company as much as possible.

The NSEU first targeted Samsung's 8-inch semiconductor wafer production line at the company's Giheung campus in Yongin, just south of Seoul. The 8-inch (200mm) wafers are important for third generation semiconductor production for cars and home appliances. As of Tuesday, Samsung claimed it had minimal disruptions, but the 8-inch line has reportedly undergone production cuts. The union claimed that if this pressure campaign did not work, it would target the high-bandwidth memory line.

The union held a rally at the Giheung facility on Monday to give the false appearance of "militancy" before the resumption of talks the next day. This is a tactic South Korean unions often use. The rally is meant to give the impression that the union leadership fought as hard as it could before presenting the members with a pro-company deal. Approximately 1,200 workers took part, or about a quarter of the

number who demonstrated in the rain at the beginning of the strike on July 8.

NSEU leaders Chairman Son U-mok and Vice Chairman Lee Hyeon-guk also attempted to tone down workers' expectations. Son stated on Monday that Samsung "will not change all at once, but let's work to change it bit by bit. Let's not be impatient..." In other words, Son told workers not to expect any serious results from the strike and to be happy with whatever the company offers, claiming it would be a "first step." For union bureaucrats and their allies, struggles are always put off to a distant, unforeseen future that never arrives in order to accommodate themselves to big business and capitalism.

Lee was perhaps even clearer in what the NSEU intends to do. He stated "If the number of our union members increases only slightly, it will be possible to negotiate with management even if we do not strike. It is only a matter of time before we surpass the Hyundai Motors union, the largest union in the country with about 47,000 members."

First, Lee is claiming that the NSEU does not have enough members to wage a struggle. This is a complete fraud. It is meant to demoralize workers and convince them they are isolated from other sections of the working class while paving the way for the union's sellout.

The reference to the Hyundai Motors union is also highly revealing. In the middle of the Samsung strike on July 15, the Hyundai union, a branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), reached a deal with the auto company to prevent a strike for the sixth year in a row. The contract faced widespread opposition from workers with more than 40 percent voting to reject the agreement.

The union, which belongs to the supposedly "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, claimed that each worker would receive on average an additional 50.12 million won (\$US36,178) annually when bonuses and other benefits were calculated. In response, a Hyundai official told the *JoongAng Ilbo* that "The average annual wage increase for each worker is estimated at an amount in the 10 million won (\$US7,218) range."

Neither amount is to be believed, but it demonstrates how wages are promised to workers when they sign contracts only to have these figures reduced at the end

of the year when "performance-based bonuses" are calculated and withheld. Despite media claims and portrayals of Hyundai workers as "labor aristocrats," the average worker at Hyundai made only 40.39 million won (\$US29,162) last year, according to Job Korea, an online recruiting company.

Like the KMWU, the NSEU is selling itself as a means to prevent workers' struggles, not lead them. This is precisely why Samsung lifted its "no union policy" in 2020 as the class struggle began to intensify around the world. Rather than being a detriment to profits, management recognised that the union would seek to prevent a wider outbreak of workers' struggles while limiting the impact of workers who did attempt to fight back against attacks on their economic conditions, just as the unions have done at companies like Hyundai.

That underscores the need for workers to take matters into their own hands, including through the establishment of strike committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, to break the isolation of their struggle and develop a fight involving workers throughout Samsung and more broadly.



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