

South Korean online retail workers to hold one-day strike

Ben McGrath
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South Korean workers at the online retailer and delivery company Coupang are planning to hold a one-day strike Friday following a similar walkout on August 1. Workers at the company and throughout the logistics industry are underpaid and have long faced unsafe working conditions and brutal hours.

Coupang is a South Korean company similar to Amazon, which in addition to providing online sales, also operates food delivery services, mobile payment services, and online streaming. It is a regular part of the daily lives of many South Koreans and also has a growing presence in Taiwan.

Mirroring companies like Amazon, Coupang exploits its workers by enforcing oppressive conditions in fulfillment centers and rapid, round-the-clock delivery. In 2024, Coupang posted record sales of 41.29 trillion won (\$US29.73 billion).

Workers involved in the strike are affiliated with the Coupang Logistics Center branch of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU), which is the largest union within the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). In a strike authorization vote, 88 percent of workers approved the strike with an 82 percent turn-out rate.

The initial walkout on August 1 included a demonstration in front of the company headquarters in Jamsil, Seoul. According to the union, approximately a thousand workers from both the day and night shifts are taking part in the strikes, though Coupang as a whole employs 99,881 people as of last year.

The union has put forward requests that include a guaranteed 20-minute break within a two-hour period during heatwaves, the expansion of air conditioning and rest facilities, allowing workers to use their phones, raising the minimum wage level, and collective bargaining between the union and the company.

The union has pointed out that their requests include pledges Coupang made during a National Assembly hearing in January. The union stated that the company has instead "continued to focus on speed and volume, which has led to accumulated fatigue and dissatisfaction among workers."

Friday's walkout comes as workers deal with a summer heatwave in which temperatures have reached record highs. Throughout July and August, heat advisories have been a near-daily occurrence. In July, temperatures often broke 40 degrees Celsius around the country. Temperatures in facilities can reach well into the 30s, with breaks not mandated by law until the heat reaches 33 degrees. Even then the company refuses to grant breaks.

However, neither the KPTU nor its Coupang branch are waging a genuine struggle to defend workers. Instead, the union has called limited walkouts to allow workers to let off steam while reducing the impact on the company as much as possible. At the same time, it is attempting to give itself the appearance of fighting for better conditions.

This includes holding various demonstrations in front of Coupang headquarters both last week and this week. Today, the Coupang Countermeasures Committee, which is affiliated with the KPTU, has called for a boycott of "Rocket Delivery," Coupang's express delivery service. Rather than call for a continuous strike that includes drivers, the union ensures that disruptions to the delivery service are kept to a minimum.

The issues facing workers are not new. Jeong Dong-heon, the head of the Coupang Logistics Center branch stated recently, "We've been negotiating with Coupang Fulfillment Services for four years since August 2021, but due to management's apathy, no collective agreement has been reached." In other words, the issues

that workers face have been ongoing for years. Yet the response from the union is to stage limited, one-day strikes that will ultimately do nothing to resolve the situation.

In fact, workers at both Coupang and at other logistics companies have regularly staged protests and walkouts during this period. Knowing it has nothing to fear from the unions, Coupang's response has been to use its profits to pursue various investments including automating logistics facilities to enforce speed-ups.

The KPTU has been at the center of major sellouts, including of a 16-day truckers' strike at the end of 2022 that was called off after it began to have a major impact on big business including automotive and construction. Without any of the drivers' demands being met, their union branch forced through a phony vote to end the strike.

The union ensures workers stay on the job despite Coupang's long track record of unsafe working conditions. Last year, a worker died at a Coupang fulfillment center in Gyeonggi Province on August 18. A month before that on July 18, a worker at a Coupang facility on Jeju Island also died. Both reportedly died from overwork.

Gwarosa, or death by overwork, is a serious issue in South Korea, where the condition is so prevalent it is legally recognized as a workplace accident when it occurs. Logistics workers are particularly affected. Workers suffer from heart attacks, strokes, or in some cases are driven to suicide. Similar situations exist in countries like Japan, where it is called *karoshi*, and in China, where it is known as the 996 work culture (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week).

In an interview with the Korea Institute of Labor Safety and Health, Jeong Seong-yong, the head of the National Logistics Center of the KPTU, stated, "In the past five years since the establishment of the Coupang Logistics Center branch in 2020, 19 people have died while working at Coupang, and 12 of them were working at night."

Other serious incidents of Coupang's neglect for safety include in June 2021 when a fire broke out at a Coupang warehouse in Icheon that burned for six days and killed a firefighter. Authorities stated that the building's fire alarm system had been manually turned off when the fire began, causing a 20-minute delay in the sprinkler system activating.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Coupang forced workers to labor through an outbreak at its facilities. The unions did nothing to defend workers' health at Coupang or any other company, instead collaborating with the government of Democrat President Moon Jae-in to keep workers on the job.

Whether it is in South Korea or any other country, companies like Coupang, with the aid of the unions, profit from what is in reality an industrial meat grinder. Workers must break free from the straitjacket imposed on them by the union bureaucrats and take the fight into their own hands and expand the struggle to other companies and industries on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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