

Hyundai autoworkers in South Korea vote to strike

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Autoworkers at Hyundai Motors in South Korea overwhelmingly voted to strike on Wednesday. They join workers around the world looking for a means to fight back against the attacks on wages and conditions as big business attempts to force the working class to pay for the worsening crisis of capitalism.

The Hyundai workers belong to the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU). From among the 94.15 percent of union members who voted, 92.03 percent approved a strike. The KMWU's Hyundai branch has a total of 39,668 members.

The KMWU has requested a 149,600 won (\$US97.42) monthly pay increase, and a performance bonus equal to 30 percent of Hyundai's 2025 net profits, which totaled 10.36 trillion won (\$US6.75 billion). It also called for an increase in bonuses from 750 percent to 800 percent of base salary, and job protections as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) expands in auto factories. The union claims included shorter working hours and that Hyundai expand hiring.

The KMWU has no intention of waging a genuine struggle against Hyundai Motors let alone the administration of President Lee Jae-myung, which is responsible the onslaught on the South Korean working class as a whole. The same is true for the KMWU's parent organization, the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Instead, the KMWU is doing everything it can to prevent a strike while isolating Hyundai autoworkers. If a strike is called, the union will use it as a safety valve to let off steam before trying to impose a pro-company deal. The trade unions function as an industrial police force for big business.

The Hyundai strike vote only took place after weeks of negotiations failed to produce a contract suitable to the company that the union could sell to its

membership. The strike vote took place only one day before government-mediated wage negotiations between the company and the KMWU broke down.

Despite the vote results, there is no guarantee the KMWU will call a strike. The union has announced that it will convene a strike committee launch meeting on June 30 to determine the scope and timing of any industrial action. Any strikes that do take place will almost certainly be limited to partial walk-outs for a few hours in order to limit the impact on the company. That has been the KMWU's longstanding modus operandi.

Furthermore, demands such as shorter working hours and the expansion of hiring serve as little more than window-dressing to give the impression the union is fighting for its members. These demands frequently make appearances during contract negotiations only to be dropped and dragged back out the following year. A decade ago the Hyundai branch membership of the KMWU stood at more than 48,000.

The major auto manufacturers like Hyundai, Kia, and GM Korea have carried out a jobs bloodbath, slashing thousands of positions, all with the assistance of the KMWU and the KCTU. Throughout the past ten years, the KMWU limited strikes while also imposing wage freezes, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partial walkouts last September were the first at Hyundai in seven years.

Hyundai has increasingly promoted automation and AI as a means of boosting productivity. Through its investments in robotics, including the development and planned deployment of humanoid robots capable of performing repetitive manufacturing tasks, the company has signaled that automation will play a growing role in production. Hyundai has also expanded the use of AI-driven quality inspection systems,

predictive maintenance software, and automated production management tools designed to increase factory efficiency while slashing costs.

“Earlier this year, Hyundai Motors announced that it would deploy a physical AI robot called Atlas for parts sequencing work starting in 2028 and for vehicle assembly work in 2030, replacing human labor and operating an unmanned factory that runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, even with the lights off,” KMWU Hyundai branch head Lee Jong-cheol told the *Korea Times* in April.

In the hands of the working class, these technologies would be used to improve people’s lives, lessening their physical labor while increasing time for culture and leisure. Instead, under capitalism, AI and automation are being used to immiserate the working class. While the unions acknowledge the fact, they have offered no genuine solutions to fight back against these attacks.

The rapid transition to electric vehicle production has further heightened concerns over jobs. Electric vehicles generally require fewer components and less assembly labor than vehicles powered by internal combustion engines.

Hyundai workers are not alone in this struggle in South Korea or internationally. Across the country’s automotive sector, workers at both large companies and smaller parts suppliers are moving into struggle. Negotiations have stalled at GM Korea, where the KMWU has requested a similar agreement as that proposed for Hyundai. GM Korea workers voted to go on strike on June 18. Of the 5,934 union branch members who took part in the vote, 94.96 percent approved a walkout. The union has a total membership of 6,517.

In the United States, workers at auto parts manufacturers like Nexteer Automotive, American Axle, Dana, and Bridgewater Interiors have also been in struggle.

The 1,700 workers at Nexteer in Saginaw, Michigan overwhelmingly authorized a strike in May while voting to reject three proposed sellout agreements orchestrated by the United Auto Workers (UAW). Rather than call a strike however, the UAW rigged a fourth vote on a similar deal with the union claiming it had passed on Friday.

This took place as 1,000 workers at American Axle in

Three Rivers, Michigan struck during the first two weeks of June before the UAW rushed through a concessions contract.

The campaign of autoworker Will Lehman for UAW president is playing a significant role in fighting against these betrayals. Lehman has called for the abolition of the union bureaucracy and the transfer of power to the rank-and-file. The Lehman campaign is fighting to build independent committees at factories and workplaces and uniting them through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). In contrast to the nationalism of the trade unions, the IWA-RFC fights to unite workers across industries and national borders.

South Korean workers at Hyundai Motors should take their struggle out of the hands of the KMWU and the union bureaucrats and form their own rank-and-file factory committees. They should reach out to workers at GM Korea and Kia as well as workers in the United States, Japan, and around the world for a united fight the corporate auto giants to defend jobs, wages and conditions.



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