

Hyundai autoworkers in South Korea take strike action

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This past week, South Korean autoworkers at Hyundai Motors engaged in a three-day partial strike as negotiations between the company and the union failed to produce a new contract. As workers throughout the country face rising prices and deteriorating economic conditions, the union is working to isolate Hyundai workers to prevent a broader working-class movement emerging in South Korea.

The partial strike began on Monday and was only scheduled to last through Wednesday. Workers walked off the job for two hours during the day shift and another two hours during the evening shift. The Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), which represents a large number of workers in the automotive industry throughout South Korea, called the stoppages. It is also one of the most influential unions within the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which falsely postures as a radical, militant organization.

The KMWU has requested a 149,600 won (\$US101.03) monthly base pay increase, and a performance bonus equal to 30 percent of Hyundai's 2025 net profits, which totaled 10.36 trillion won (\$US6.97 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 calls for shorter working hours and that Hyundai expand hiring.

Hyundai Motors has countered with a proposed 80,000 won (\$US54.03) monthly base pay increase, a performance bonus equal to 350 percent of a worker's monthly salary, an additional 10 million won (\$US6,755), and 15 shares of company stock.

It is important to note that the additional bonuses are not on top of a worker's full salary, but are an integral part of it. The inclusion of "performance bonuses" allows the company to manipulate what is actually paid

to the workers. According to Job Korea, an employment portal website, the average worker's salary at Hyundai is 40.45 million won (\$US27,350).

As scheduled, the KMWU called off its three-day "strike" on Wednesday even though not a single one of its requests was met. The purpose of this so-called "strike" was not to wage a struggle, but to give the impression the union is fighting for workers while orchestrating a sell-out agreement behind the scenes.

The KMWU issued a statement saying, "Neither working-level discussions nor formal bargaining are taking place at the moment. Management's responsibility is to prevent the situation from worsening by presenting a revised proposal as soon as possible." This is not the language of struggle; it amounts to begging for new talks.

After the brief walkouts, the union waited for a response from the company, which is well acquainted with the KMWU leadership's cowardice. No new offer from the company was forthcoming. On Thursday, the KMWU announced it would begin another round of partial strikes from July 20 to 22, holding four-hour walkouts per shift.

At the same time, workers at Hyundai Motors' sister company Kia and at GM Korea are also coming into sharp conflict with management. GM Korea workers voted to strike on June 18 by an overwhelming 94.96 percent. Though representing workers at all three companies, the KMWU is doing nothing to mobilize joint action.

South Korean corporations are enjoying an economic boost, with growth predicted at 3 percent growth rate this year. This stems in particular from the semiconductor industry and an export boom, which includes record-high auto exports for the month of June, totaling \$US6.79 billion.

As a result, the Lee Jae-myung government announced on July 14 its so-called “3-4-5 growth vision.” It aims to achieve a three percent economic growth rate, becoming one of the world’s top four exporters, and raising per capita income to \$US50,000, which means more money in the pockets of the wealthy.

This has not translated into higher wages or better conditions for the working class. In fact, the opposite is the case. Consumer prices have shot up, increasing 3.2 percent in June over last year after a similar rise the previous month. The cost of rice grew 11.7 percent while gasoline prices shot up 23.1 percent, driven by the US’s expanding criminal war against Iran.

Real wages for workers are stagnating or falling. At the end of June, the Ministry of Employment and Labor reported that real wages had shrunk by 1 percent in April over the previous year after growing a paltry 0.1 percent in March.

To organize a struggle against these conditions, workers cannot place any faith in the KMWU or the KCTU, regardless of their phony militant rhetoric. The KCTU and its affiliated unions are closely connected to the ruling Democratic Party. They have sabotaged every major struggle that has erupted in the working class since the KCTU was incorporated into the political establishment by the Democrats in the 1990s.

In the most recent period, the KCTU and KMWU played a particularly filthy role in shutting down workers’ strikes that were erupting following the December 2024 failed coup attempt by former President Yoon Suk-yeol, who now sits in prison. Opposition to the coup included autoworkers’ strikes, but the unions called on workers to put their faith in the Democratic Party, helping to install Lee Jae-myung as president the following June. Lee has implemented the policies of big business, backed the US-instigated war in Ukraine and Washington’s criminal attacks on Iran, and kowtowed before US President Trump.

In the auto industry, the KMWU has overseen mass job cuts at Hyundai and other companies over the last decade, as manufacturers turn to the production of electric vehicles, which require fewer parts and labor, and more reliance on artificial intelligence to cut jobs.

At Hyundai, approximately 10,000 jobs have been cut over this period. At GM Korea, the union has overseen the slashing of jobs, which includes the shuttering of

the company’s Gunsan plant in 2018 and the suspension of operations at the Bupyeong Plant 2 in 2022.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the KMWU imposed a wage freeze on workers for the first time in eleven years while keeping workers on the job under unsafe conditions. The KCTU as a whole also gave its support to the government. Until 2025, the KMWU imposed new contracts on Hyundai workers for seven years straight without calling a strike, even as workers faced the economic fallout from the pandemic and the spread of war in Ukraine and the Middle East.

A struggle for better wages and conditions requires not only a fight against Hyundai, but against the union bureaucrats in the KMWU and KCTU who seek to chain workers to the capitalist system, and the Lee administration. Hyundai workers should unite with their class brothers and sisters at Kia, GM Korea, and throughout the auto industry to carry their struggle forward on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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