Hyundai autoworkers in South Korea continue strike action

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Autoworkers at Hyundai Motors remain locked in a contract dispute with the company several weeks after the launching of a series of partial strikes. The struggle takes place amid a growing upsurge of workers' struggles throughout the country in the face of declining economic conditions.

On Friday, Hyundai workers who belong to the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) conducted two eight-hour strikes, shutting down both the day and night shifts. Production at Hyundai's Ulsan, Jeonju and Asan plants was shut down, involving the union's 39,668 members at the branch of the company. It was the first time in 10 years that the union called a strike for an entire shift.

Since the first partial strike beginning on July 13, the Hyundai union has held a total of 120 hours of walkouts, consisting mostly of two-hour and four-hour partial strikes before workers went back on the job. According to the company, production losses have surpassed 2.3 trillion won ($US1.66 billion) in sales of approximately 55,200 vehicles.

The extension of the strike time on Friday is not a sign of the union's growing militancy or desire to wage a genuine struggle on behalf of autoworkers. The KMWU has refused to call out its membership in a sustained general strike or to link the struggle at Hyundai with others breaking out, such as at the automaker's sister company, Kia.

Instead, the union has called partial strikes to deliberately limit the impact on the company as much as possible while appearing to fight for workers. Workers are not only up against management, but the trade union apparatus as well.

The KMWU had planned additional four-hour walkouts during shifts this Monday and Tuesday. However, the union announced on Sunday that it was canceling Monday's walkout in order to hold negotiations with Hyundai; whether the union proceeds with Tuesday's walkout will depend on the results of those talks.

The union is clearly under pressure from workers who voted overwhelmingly in June to take strike action for better conditions with 92.03 percent in favour. The fact that the KMWU called a longer strike on Friday to allow workers to let off steam then immediately announced talks with the company is a warning sign. The union is preparing a sell-out.

The working class throughout South Korea, like workers internationally, is facing growing economic stress. Real wages fell in April and May this year, by 1 and 1.4 percent respectively, according to figures released last month. The consumer price index last month grew 2.8 percent over the previous year. Food prices are expected to rise due to the summer's heatwave, which is expected to have a larger impact on costs beginning this month. Core inflation grew 2.6 percent annually, the largest increase since December 2023.

The Hyundai KMWU has called for a 149,600 won ($US107.95) monthly pay increase, and a performance bonus equal to 30 percent of Hyundai's 2025 net profits, which totaled 10.36 trillion won ($US7.48 billion). It also called for an increase in bonuses from 750 percent to 800 percent of base salary, and job protections as the result of the expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) in auto factories.

The union has also called for shorter working hours, the expansion of hiring, and the raising of the retirement age from 60 to 65, a measure supported by older, higher-paid workers opposed to being forced out of work. Such demands are frequently included in contract negotiations but serve as little more than window dressing, appearing year after year, before being jettisoned by the union during actual talks.

Workers receive a base salary, which according to Job Korea, an employment portal website, is an average 40.45 million won ($US29,186). They then receive so-called performance bonuses, which are in fact a major component of a worker's overall annual income. Yet these bonuses are subject to manipulation. In 2024, for example, after reaching another rotten agreement, the union bragged it had secured bonuses of more than 50 million won ($US36,077) for each worker. But a Hyundai insider told the media that the pay increases were estimated at no more than 10 million won ($US7,215).

The media uses inflated wage figures to discredit autoworkers' struggles and to accuse them of being "labor aristocrats." These claims are frequently based on the union's own overstated claims or the average of all Hyundai employees, including the well-paid upper management. At the same time, the company is tight-lipped about what workers actually receive.

The KMWU is one of the most influential unions within the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The KMWU routinely isolates workers at different companies where it has branches as does the KCTU more broadly. Both have a long history of selling out workers' struggles.

Until 2025, the Hyundai KMWU imposed new contracts on workers for seven years straight without calling a strike. At Kia Motors, the KMWU has not called a strike for the past five years. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the union imposed wage freezes on workers for the first time since the 2009 global financial crisis. When big business is in trouble, the unions step in to impose the burden on the working class.

Both Hyundai and Kia are part of the Hyundai Motor Group, which also owns numerous auto parts companies and other subsidiaries. On July 23, Kia workers also overwhelming approved a strike, with 92.5 percent of workers participating in the vote supporting a walkout. Out of the Kia branch's 24,695 members, 21,909 took part.

The KMWU dragged its feet and more than a month later called partial strikes from August 26 to 28. The KMWU has put forward similar demands to those at Hyundai, including a 149,600 won basic wage increase and 30 percent of last year's operating profits as a so-called "performance bonus."

Other struggles are looming in South Korea at major companies including POSCO, South Korea's premier steel manufacturer, which has not had a full-scale strike since its founding in 1968. Workers voted 92.2 percent on July 9 to go on strike. The POSCO union, which belongs to the yellow Federation of Korean Trade Unions, has called for a 7.1 percent pay increase. It has still not called a strike despite negotiations being suspended on August 18.

According to the *Chosun Ilbo*'s affiliated paper *ChosunBiz*, a POSCO union official stated, "Unlike last year, there is significant pent-up anger on the shop floor this year over inadequate rewards for performance, safety issues, and management's unilateral decision to directly hire subcontracted workers."

Workers need to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions in every factory and workplace and link their struggles in a general offensive for decent wages and conditions. Such a fight will inevitably bring them into conflict with not just the companies but the unions and government which defend the capitalist system that is responsible for deteriorating living conditions.