South Korean steel and shipbuilding workers hold partial strikes

Ben McGrath
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Amid a growth of the class struggle around the globe, South Korean workers in different industries are similarly engaged in fights for the improvement of their living and economic conditions. However, as workers look for ways forward, they not only face off against their companies and the government but the entire trade union apparatus that seeks to limit and suppress these struggles for the benefit of big business.

This is currently being demonstrated at POSCO, South Korea's premier steel manufacturer. With a union membership of approximately 10,100, workers at the company overwhelming voted on July 9 to strike by 92.2 percent. However, for two months, the Federation of Korean Metalworkers' Trade Unions (FKMTU) refused to call a strike.

The FKMTU has called for a 7.1 percent pay increase as well as "bonuses" equivalent to 600 percent of base pay, 50 shares of company stock, and a 200 percent holiday bonus. The company has offered a 2 percent increase in base pay, a 3.5 million won ($US2500) bonus, and other assorted paltry measures.

POSCO workers finally stopped work on September 9 for 48 hours in what was the first strike at the company in its 58-year history. In reality, it was a sham. According to the union, at POSCO's Pohang Steel Works, only 40 workers took part while 80 from the company's Gwangyang plant joined in the action. In other words, barely one percent of the FKMTU's total membership struck. Including non-union members, the two plants employ approximately 8,000 and 7,000 workers respectively.

The FKMTU staged a follow-up "strike" on September 16, which lasted for five days. This time, approximately 240 workers took part. Further union stunts have been postponed until the completion of a leadership election scheduled for October 2. The poll was triggered after 13 union officials resigned following the revelation that union chairman Kim Seong-ho had been at a golf outing with a POSCO executive while contract negotiations were taking place.

That the union felt compelled to call even token strikes for the first time in the company's history as well as the a new leadership election is a testament to the anger steel workers feel regarding their conditions.

According to the *Chosun Ilbo*'s affiliated paper *ChosunBiz*, a POSCO union official stated earlier this year, "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."

Subcontracted or irregular workers are those hired through other companies to do similar jobs as regular workers while receiving less pay and fewer job protections. The practice is widespread throughout South Korean industries and is used to cut costs while also putting pressure on workers to speed up production that creates unsafe conditions.

However, the FKMTU previously negotiated a no-strike clause with POSCO for so-called "essential" workers, meaning workers necessary for maintaining production are barred by the union from going on strike. As a result, the September's "strikes" had no impact on the company.

The FKMTU is doing everything possible to prevent a genuine strike from taking place while attempting to give members the impression it is fighting on their behalf.

The FKMTU traces its history back to 1960 and is affiliated with the yellow Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). The latter for decades operated as the

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sole legal umbrella union body in South Korea under the military dictatorship that came to power in 1961 under General Park Chung-hee. These unions have a long history of cooperating with big business to stifle workers' opposition.

Workers at other companies have also struck in recent weeks, most notably at major shipbuilders HD Hyundai Heavy Industries and Hanwha Ocean. Workers at both companies are represented by the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), which belongs to the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). At both companies, the KMWU has requested a 149,600-won ($US110) increase in monthly base pay in addition to a variety of bonuses that are routinely manipulated by management.

While their tactics differ from that of the FKMTU, the KMWU has deliberately limited the struggles and kept workers divided.

Hanwha workers held their first partial strike on August 31 and they continued through September, including shutting down the company's four Goliath cranes at its Geoje shipyard on September 18 for 24 hours. A union official stated last month, "With the boom in shipbuilding this year, business performance is expected to improve significantly compared with last year, but the [company's] proposal falls short of that."

At Hyundai Heavy, workers first held four-hour partial strikes on September 11, 14, and 15 and then seven-hour strikes from September 16 to 18. Though represented by the same union in the same industry, the KMWU has made no genuine attempt to link up the struggles at Hyundai and Hanwha, or any other industry. The KMWU is the same union that also represents Hyundai Motor workers, where it imposed a sell-out deal in August after a series of partial strikes at the auto company.

Across the country, workers face stagnant and falling wages. In recent months, real wages fell 1 percent in April, 1.4 percent in May, and then another 0.1 percent in June. The latest data shows real wages in July fell 0.3 percent. Prices on everyday goods are also rising. The price of rice, a basic food staple, has risen 18 percent for a 20-kilogram bag for example between 2024 and 2026.

As in other countries, workers also face a housing crisis in South Korea, which intensified as a result of widespread property speculation when the COVID-19 pandemic began.

During the first year of President Lee Jae-myung's term, a Democrat who came to power in 2025, housing prices in Seoul and the surrounding metropolitan area grew 14.7 percent, the highest annual increase on record. In major cities outside of the capital region, housing prices have increased each month since May of last year and are expected to continue rising.

To mount a genuine struggle for their basic social rights, workers need to take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union apparatuses. They also need to recognize that what is involved is a political fight not only against the giant corporations but the unions and government that function to defend capitalism. That requires a socialist perspective.

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