

South Korean logistics workers strike against brutal conditions

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Nearly 2,000 logistic workers in South Korea are on strike to protest the brutal conditions in their industry. Extreme overwork and low wages are the norm while package delivery companies have reaped huge profits throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike takes place as part of a series of struggles by delivery workers over the past year.

Workers are fighting to expand a strike that initially began December 28, when 1,700 workers at CJ Logistics, the largest logistics company in South Korea, walked off the job. The strike enjoys wide support. In the approval vote, 93.6 percent of workers voted to take strike action from among 2,290 participants. Workers also struck in January and June of last year, while some logistics workers also took part in a larger, one day strike held by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in October.

On February 14, the Parcel Delivery Workers Union (PDWU) stated that it would consider an industry-wide walkout if CJ Logistics refused to hold talks with striking workers within a week. The previous Thursday, approximately 200 members of the KCTU, to which the PDWU belongs, also occupied the company's office in a sit-down protest. A demonstration is scheduled for February 21 of up to 7,000 delivery workers in Seoul. Jin Gyeong-ho, the head of the PDWU, claimed, "We will fight to the end to prevent CJ Logistics' unfair profiteering and achieve the fulfillment of the social deal (in preventing overwork)."

Conditions in the package delivery industry are harsh. Logistics workers are often on the job for 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week. They are paid per package delivered and are not compensated for sorting the parcels, which takes up a great part of their work day. Not only do workers face low pay and long hours, but the physical stress and demands have led to

gwarosa, literally, death from overwork. Throughout the course of the pandemic, at least 21 logistics workers have died from causes related to these conditions on the job.

Last June, the PDWU reached an agreement with CJ Logistics, Hanjin Transportation, and Lotte Global Logistics under which workers would no longer sort packages and the work week would be limited to 60 hours. It followed a similar deal in January in which the companies promised to hire more workers and to pay them for sorting packages.

These pledges were not kept. Instead, workers are accusing CJ Logistics of raising delivery prices and pocketing most of the additional income. Last April, the company claimed it increased prices by an average 140 won (\$US0.12) per package, with workers receiving only a paltry 50 percent from this increase. The union, however, states prices increased to 170 won per package, from which workers only receive 51.6 won.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, delivery companies have enjoyed a surge in profits as more and more people ordered goods online. CJ Logistics reported on February 11 that its net profit for 2021 reached 158.3 billion won (\$US132 million), an 11 percent increase from the previous year. CJ CheilJedang, the conglomerate that owns 40.16 percent of the logistics firm, saw its net profit rise 13.5 percent to 892.3 billion won (\$US745 million), beating market expectations.

Like the previous agreements, any deal reached with CJ Logistics or other companies, will be ignored. It is simply the means to get workers back on the job to ensure these huge profits are maintained. In this, the PDWU is entirely complicit.

The PDWU does not represent the legitimate interests of its members. Instead it works to limit the

impact of strikes and end them as quickly as possible in the interests of big business. This was summed up by an industry official, speaking anonymously, who told the *Joongang Ilbo* in December, “Of the 20,000 CJ Logistics delivery workers nationwide, 1,700 is not a big number. And whether all those 1,700 will take part in the strike, which requires taking days off, is uncertain.”

From the beginning of the strike, the PDWU, with a total membership of approximately 7,000, has attempted to isolate the workers. The union branch at CJ Logistics has a membership of 2,500, meaning the union has ensured that at least 800 union workers are crossing the picket line. Furthermore, there has been no genuine appeal to the other 17,500 delivery workers at CJ who are not in the union nor to the tens of thousands of other delivery workers in other companies. There are approximately 50,000 delivery workers nationwide.

During the week-long strike last June, the union called off the struggle while negotiations were ongoing. The PDWU had reached a sell-out deal with several companies, but Korea Post, the country’s national postal service, rejected the agreement. Union head Jin Gyeong-ho claimed that the PDWU would never sign a deal if the dispute with the postal service was not resolved. However, this did not stop the union from sending its members back to work.

The PDWU and the KCTU as a whole, posture as militant worker organizations. However, the KCTU has spent the pandemic keeping workers on the job, while holding phony one-day general strikes, to let off steam and to give the impression of a fight for better conditions. During such “strikes,” workers in major industries such as auto manufacturing are typically kept on the job. Only a small portion of the KCTU’s membership is actually called out to participate in the one-day protests.

That the PDWU and KCTU now take action more than a month after the initial delivery workers’ strike began is due to the pressure they face from rank-and-file workers. The unions, however, have no intention of leading a genuine struggle. Instead, they will resort to cheap stunts while reaching new sell-out agreements behind workers’ backs.

Logistics workers in South Korea must take the struggle out of the hands of the unions and form independent rank-and-file committees. They should

reach out to their colleagues throughout the industry and to other workers nationally and internationally who face similar conditions. Above all, such a struggle has to be guided by a socialist perspective to re-order society based on the social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.



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