

South Korean truck drivers continue months-long protest for better conditions

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7 September 2022

Truck drivers for South Korean beer and liquor company HiteJinro and its wholly-owned subsidiary Suyang Logistics continue to protest against conditions and unfair dismissals, months after the conflict began. The ongoing demonstrations are a result of management's refusal to meet workers' demands and the betrayals of the unions, which have been seeking to subordinate the struggle to South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP).

Presently, 132 drivers from the company are demanding that they be reinstated to their positions after being fired in June. Their dismissals followed protests and then strikes against HiteJinro that began in March when the drivers, formally employed at Suyang Logistics, joined Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) in the hope of improving working conditions at the company. CTS is a branch of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union, which is affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

The drivers are demanding an increase in shipping fees of at least 30 percent to meet the rising costs of goods. In July, consumer prices rose to 6.3 percent, the highest in almost 24 years. At the same time, shipping charges have been stagnant since 2008. Workers reportedly make as little as 700,000 won (\$US506) to one million won (\$US722) a month when all of their expenses are subtracted.

The HiteJinro drivers are also not covered under the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System, which guarantees a minimum freight fare to ensure that drivers are not forced to drive dangerously to make ends meet. This system, which is already insufficient for drivers' needs, only covers shipping containers and cement.

In addition, the drivers are demanding the withdrawal of HiteJinro's claims for damages against some of the union members resulting from the strikes and protests,

as well as an application for a court injunction against the workers' protest sites outside company plants in Icheon, Gyeonggi Province, Cheongju, North Chungcheong Province, and Hongcheon, Gangwon Province. The company is demanding as much as 2.8 billion won in damages resulting from the protests.

CTS and the KCTU are using these protests in an attempt to convince workers that their struggles can be fought through the pro-capitalist Democrats and the various civic and religious organizations that orbit the DP. In reality, the Democrats and their allies like the fake-left Justice Party share the same anti-working-class agenda as the right-wing administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol and the ruling People Power Party.

On September 5, the KCTU helped stage a press conference with the Korea Institute of Labor Safety and Health and Lawyers for a Democratic Society. These organizations, linked to the Democrats, spoke in front of HiteJinro headquarters in Seoul in order to posture as defenders of the drivers and provide political cover for the KCTU and its ongoing moves to block them from reaching out to other sections of the working class.

On August 25, union bureaucrats from CTS, including its leader Lee Bong-ju, also met with six DP politicians outside the HiteJinro offices to help bolster the Democrats' phony and long-discredited image as a friend of the working class. In reality, the union wants the Democrats to help shut down this struggle and impose a sellout arrangement in favor of the company.

The KCTU also favorably cited the Justice Party in an August 26 article on its news platform, *Nodonggwa Segye (Labor and the World)*, with the party stating HiteJinro's actions were "unfair and illegal labor oppression that nullifies the right to strike guaranteed by the constitution and even ignores the [International

Labor Organization] conventions.” In other words, according to the Justice Party and the KCTU, if only the company would follow the law, workers would not have conflict with their employers.

The drivers’ protests, which originally began in March, developed into partial strikes in May and then a full strike on June 2 at Icheon and Cheongju. The picket lines extended to the company’s plant at Hongcheon on August 2. HiteJinro refuses to meet any of the drivers’ demands, declaring that they should negotiate with Suyang Logistics, despite the latter being a wholly-owned subsidiary.

An official from HiteJinro told the media earlier this month, “The union has not come up with any new proposals, but only reject the proposals from Suyang Logistics. There seems to be no will to negotiate.” However, the union has already ended a sit-in protest at HiteJinro’s headquarters in an attempt to bring the company to the bargaining table.

At the same time, the company has been using strikebreakers, supported by police, from its corporate offices to drive delivery trucks. The KCTU and CTS, however, have tacitly accepted the company’s strikebreaking operations by refusing to organize larger strikes of other drivers, or from among its broader membership, which the KCTU claims exceeds 1.1 million. Even as other unions go on strike or threaten to walk out, the KCTU consciously keeps these struggles isolated from one another.

Furthermore, in June, CTS truck drivers throughout the country launched a week-long strike against similar conditions. This strike began to impact major corporations like steel producer POSCO and Hyundai Motors, at which point CTS promptly shut down the industrial action with none of the demands met. The HiteJinro drivers’ fight continued, however, cut off from other workers even within their own union.

This is the modus operandi of the KCTU and its affiliates. While posturing as “militant” defenders of workers, the union manoeuvres behind the scenes to reach an agreement that it enforces on its members. At the same time, strikes are limited as much as possible in order to protect South Korean corporations and the profit system. When strikes do break out, like the current one involving the freight drivers, they are isolated from other sections of the working class.

In order to take forward their struggle, protesting

drivers at HiteJinro must break with the KCTU and all capitalist parties and organizations through the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees.

These committees must reach out to all sections of the working class in South Korea and internationally, all of which face the same exploitative conditions, in order to expand their struggle. The aim must be to develop an independent movement of the working class against the capitalist system itself.



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