

South Korean railway workers plan to strike

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Rail and subway workers in South Korea are planning to strike next week as they seek higher wages and an overall improvement in labor conditions. Like other sections of the working class, these workers not only face off against the companies and the government, but the pro-capitalist railway unions that are looking to block and sell out a genuine struggle.

The Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) held a press conference in front of Seoul Station last Thursday to announce the date of the strike. Choi Myeong-ho, the head of the KRWU, claimed, "We plan to go on an indefinite general strike on December 5 to restore trust safety standards in the workplace and to protect workers' rights."

Separately, the largest of the three unions at Seoul Metro, which runs a number of subway lines in the South Korean capital, stated that it would hold a strike beginning December 6. Both unions are affiliated with the so-called "militant" Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Workers with the KRWU are employed at the Korea Railroad Corporation (Korail), a public company which operates South Korea's national railway system as well as the Suin-Bundang and Gyeongui-Jungang subway lines. Seoul Metro operates subway lines 1 through 8 in the city with lines 1, 3, and 4 being jointly run by the two companies.

The KRWU leadership has put forward limited demands that include a 2.5 percent pay increase, bonuses equivalent to those paid by other public organizations, the hiring of more safety personnel, and the transition to a four-team, two-shift system to ensure workers do not work two consecutive night shifts. The Seoul Metro union has put forward similar demands.

The KRWU has also stated that the Finance Ministry is pushing Korail to cut 1,566 positions, which would increase the load workers are already under and worsen safety as the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol government

looks to cut costs. The company claims that it has "no plans yet" to sack workers.

Workplace safety is a serious issue. Gang Jeong-nam, the head of the KRWU's Seoul branch stated, "The union cannot jeopardize passengers' safety and make laborers sacrifice in situations where around two employees die on the railways each year." On average, nearly 1,000 workers die annually nationwide in industrial accidents. Just this month, for example, four workers have been killed at the Hyundai Motors plant in Ulsan.

Furthermore, the cost of living has surged in South Korea as a result of the United States/NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine as well as the increased transfer of wealth from the working class to the ruling class throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As the US and allies like South Korea plan for war with China, further attacks on workers conditions are being carried out to force them to pay for the conflict.

A Bank of Korea (BOK) report released in June showed that prices for necessary goods have risen sharply. "Although recent inflation has slowed, the accumulated price rises have significantly elevated the overall price level," the report stated. The price of food stood 56 percent higher than the average for countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Clothing and footwear are now 61 percent higher than the average. Overall, real household income dropped 1.2 percent in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund.

There is also a growing housing crisis, with workers unable to afford the exorbitant costs. Housing prices grew 32.8 percent between 2017 and 2022, according to Statistics Korea released this month. As a result, workers are increasingly being forced to find additional employment to make ends meet. A separate report also released in November by the KB Financial Group showed that in a survey of single-person households,

54.8 percent had taken on another job.

Workers are looking for a way to combat the attacks on their jobs and living conditions, but are being held back and betrayed by the union bureaucracy. Beginning November 18, the KRWU initiated a “work-to-rule” protest, which the subway union joined two days later. It has made a minimal impact on rail services. On Friday, Seoul Metro reported that 99 percent of its trains were on time the previous day, an indication that the unions have no intention of waging a genuine struggle.

From the unions’ perspective, the purpose in staging any type of protest is to allow workers to vent their frustrations and to give the impression that the bureaucrats are attempting to wage an actual struggle. In staging a “work-to-rule” protest, the unions hope to limit the impact on the companies while at the same time giving themselves time to negotiate with the companies and hammer out a sellout deal that can be forced on the membership.

Railway strikes are in fact quite common, yet nothing is resolved. Last year, workers with the KRWU struck for four days before the walkout was called off. In addition, one of the most flagrant examples of the KRWU’s perfidy came in 2022 when it, along with several other unions belonging to the KCTU, claimed they would stage a general strike for improved conditions alongside striking cargo truck drivers.

The latter’s strike lasted for more than two weeks and had a significant impact on the government and big business. For that very reason, the KRWU and the KCTU caved to pressure from the Yoon administration, called off the railway and other planned strikes and left the cargo truckers isolated until the KCTU and its affiliated drivers’ union, Cargo Truckers Solidarity, could shut down the struggle altogether.

Workers should place no faith in the railway unions or the KCTU, which regularly and falsely posture as “militant” and at times even anti-capitalist. The unions operate within the orbit of and support the main opposition Democratic Party, which has carried out the demands of big business no less ruthlessly when in power than the current ruling party of President Yoon, the right-wing People Power Party.

The unions consistently sabotage workers’ struggles. Now, for all the talk from the KRWU of a “general strike,” it will be nothing of the sort unless workers

take control of the struggle out of the hands of the union leaders.



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