

# Union sabotaging South Korean shipbuilding workers' strike

By Ben McGrath  
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Workers at South Korea's two largest shipbuilding companies are continuing strike action in opposition to a planned merger. Amid increasing demands from the mainstream media for a violent police crackdown on the strikers, the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) is manoeuvring to shut down the struggle.

Workers at Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME) last Monday blocked officials of Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) and the state-owned Korea Development Bank (KDB) from entering and inspecting the DSME shipyards on Geoje Island in South Gyeongsang Province. The KDB, which owns 55.7 percent of Daewoo shares, sold the company to HHI on March 8 for an estimated two trillion won (\$US1.7 billion).

HHI workers held a full strike on Monday, a seven-hour walkout on Tuesday, and a four-hour stoppage on Wednesday. While the KMWU is allowing workers to vent their anger, it is moving to end the strike and prevent a broader struggle from breaking out.

As part of the acquisition plan, HHI shareholders met on May 31 in Ulsan to vote on a plan to split the company into a parent branch and a new subholding company. Workers at both HHI and DSME justifiably fear that the merger will lead to massive job cuts. Thirty thousand jobs from the two companies have already been slashed in the past four years.

Protesting workers attempted to prevent the shareholders' meeting from occurring by occupying the original venue, but the meeting was moved to Ulsan University at the last minute.

The union declared the shareholders vote illegitimate as HHI workers collectively own about 3 percent of HHI shares. Therefore, the union stated, "a general shareholders' meeting that does not guarantee the free attendance of shareholders is in violation of the law,

and any motions passed are invalid."

The KMWU has promised to launch legal action against the company.

At the same time, the media has continued its denunciations of the striking workers with the conservative *Joongang Ilbo* publishing several slanderous editorials. A June 3 piece painted the police as victims who were "only" armed with "protection gear and shields" at a May 22 rally outside HHI headquarters. It quoted several anonymous officers who complained they were not allowed to use as much violence as they wished.

One stated, "Often, police are sued for touching [protesters] without permission." Another complained, "In principle, it is possible for us to 'go forward and push' [the protesters] or use batons or capsaicin [sprays], etc., but most of the time, these tools are not used on-site." In other words, the police are pressing to use more violent methods to put down protests as they see fit.

South Korea's ruling elite is seeking a return to the dictatorial means used in the past. Workers' demands for decent wages and job security are illegitimate and harm "competitiveness," big business cries. The same thing can be heard around the world as companies like Ford, Volkswagen, AT&T, and Telstra announce thousands of layoffs.

Workers must take this as a serious threat. The KMWU, which is part of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), will not defend their interests. Instead, workers must form independent rank-and-file committees and reach out to other Korean workers and their allies in the international working class to develop a fight to defend jobs, wages and working conditions.

The KMWU/KCTU is isolating HHI workers from others facing similar attacks. The union, which also

represents auto workers, had promised to call out the entire Hyundai Motors membership if HHI tried to illegally remove workers from the original shareholders' meeting venue. When the meeting was moved to a new location and workers were barred from attending, the union simply declared it was illegal and that it would take court action.

Wages and jobs at Hyundai Motors and companies like Kia and GM Korea are on the chopping block. Why has the KMWU not called out the auto workers? Furthermore, why has the KCTU, claiming a membership of one million workers, not called them out in defense of the working class as a whole?

The answers lie in the fact that the unions defend the capitalist profit system. As the KMWU declared on May 28: "We are only trying to protect the company from the Chung family (HHI's chaebol owners) destroying Hyundai Heavy Industries." In other words, the unions are an arm of a faction of company management.

The KCTU played a large role in stabilizing the South Korean government following the court removal of previous President Park Geun-hye in March 2017, ensuring that mass protests did not turn against the ruling elite as a whole. When President Moon Jae-in was elected that May, the KCTU claimed that the "social meaning of Moon's election is profound." It did not call a nationwide, one-day strike during his presidency until November 2018.

In sabotaging the HHI strike, the KMWU is aided by Workers' Solidarity, a South Korean pseudo-left group aligned with the Socialist Workers Party in Britain. Any criticisms this formation makes of the president and the ruling Democratic Party of Korea are coupled with claims that these capitalist politicians can be pushed to the left. Neither the KMWU/KCTU nor Workers' Solidarity has called for the bringing down of Moon's government as they regularly did while the conservative Park was in office.

Workers' Solidarity seeks to convince workers and youth that their interests can be defended through the pro-capitalist unions. In a May 19 article on its website, Workers' Solidarity wrote, "As the division of HHI becomes government policy through the merger and acquisition of DSME, it is important to unite with DSME workers, and the KCTU and KMWU."

In its last article covering the HHI/DSME strikes on

May 31, Workers' Solidarity praised the KMWU and led readers to believe that it would expand the struggle. This is completely false. Shipbuilding workers in South Korea, like their counterparts internationally, can only advance their interests through a break with the corporatised unions, and the turn to a new perspective, aimed at establishing workers' governments that would implement socialist policies.

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