

As contract deadline looms in US, 8,000 GM autoworkers strike in South Korea

By James Cogan
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Some 8,000 autoworkers employed by General Motors Korea are engaged in the first full strike against the US-based transnational since it took over Daewoo in 2001-2002. A further 2,000 workers at GM Korea's Technical Centre intend to join the industrial action today, which is slated to continue until the end of Wednesday.

The strike in Korea is taking place just days ahead of the expiration of the contract for some 155,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler autoworkers in the United States. Workers at plants across the US have voted by margins ranging from 92 to 99 percent to authorise strikes against the US automakers.

The issues over which the Korean workers are striking are ones that their co-workers in the US and around the world will readily identify with. In May 2018, GM shut down its Gunsan assembly plant, directly destroying some 2,000 jobs and thousands more indirectly. With the assistance of the GM Korea branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), it then pressured workers at its remaining plants to accept a wage and bonus freeze, while speeding up production as part of restructuring operations to boost profitability.

After it secured both a cash injection from the Korean government and the union delivered massive attacks on workers' conditions, GM guaranteed that it would maintain operations in the country for at least the next 10 years. In the 2019 contract talks, however, GM once again demanded that workers accept an ongoing wage freeze because of purported losses in Korea. On a world scale, however, the transnational reported profits of some \$US11.8 billion in 2018, on the back of job destruction and ruthless speed-up and exploitation.

GM workers in Korea have had enough. Sentiment in the plants is such that the union felt it could not convince workers to bow down to the company. The union filed for a 5.7 percent increase in the monthly wage,

“performance” payment equalling one-and-half months for meeting production targets and a cash bonus to every worker of 6.5 million won (\$US5,400).

GM has refused to entertain the log of claims. Instead, GM international operations senior vice president Julian Blissett last month declared management was “very disappointed” and threatened that production—and therefore jobs—would be cut in South Korea.

Workers defied the threats and struck yesterday at the GM plants in Incheon and Changwon. Last month, they staged a series of partial four-hour walk-outs and have been refusing to work overtime.

The greatest threat to Korean GM workers is identical to the one that American workers face: the treacherous role by the thoroughly corporatised trade unions. Within South Korea, the unions are splitting autoworkers company by company, while dividing autoworkers as a whole from other sections of the working class, which have come forward to demand desperately needed improvements in their conditions. A unified struggle has been actively opposed by the unions, which function as nothing more than agencies for management and the global corporate oligarchy.

On September 3, the KMWU at Hyundai successfully bullied 56 percent of the 50,000-strong workforce to accept just a 1.7 percent wage increase and the lowest bonus offered by the company in some 20 years. In an initial contract vote at the end of July, 84 percent of Hyundai workers had voted to strike.

The KMWU prevailed in having the overwhelming sentiment for industrial action squashed by pressuring workers with threats of job destruction. In a statement last week, its Hyundai branch welcomed the vote to accept the company's terms “considering a US-China trade war, a Korea-Japan economic war and the auto industry's downturn.”

That is, like unions around the world, it fully accepts

that workers and their families must pay to protect the profits of corporate shareholders under conditions of growing global economic turbulence and slump.

Workers at other Korean-based auto conglomerates are also being pressured to accept corporate dictates. At Kia—which is part-owned by Hyundai—83 percent of the 26,000-strong workforce voted for strike action at the end of July in defiance of the management demand for a wage freeze. In an utterly reactionary campaign, which parallels the nationalist divisions promoted by the United Auto Workers in the US, KMWU at Kia has since sought to channel workers into demands that the company shut down production at plants in the US and India and bring it back to Korea.

Moreover, autoworkers, one of the powerful sections of the South Korean working class, have been kept divided from other Korean workers. In June, the KMWU refused to call out the auto plants in support of striking ship workers, who are part of the same union. The KMWU and the peak union umbrella organisation, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), likewise refused to bring their entire membership out in July in support of a national strike by poorly-paid contract school workers, or to back calls for strike action by Korea Post workers.

The situation poses clear questions of perspective before not only workers in South Korea, but workers in all countries.

The Korean strike is part of the general upsurge of working-class militancy internationally. 2019 began with the powerful strike movement by Mexican auto parts workers in Matamoros and has witnessed escalating industrial action on every continent and in numerous sectors of the economy. British Airways' workers are on strike today, shutting down the company's global operations. In the political upheaval in the US territory of Puerto Rico and Hong Kong, it has been action by workers that has prompted the greatest alarm within the political and corporate establishment.

In every country, the demands and struggles of workers are motivated by a common international aspiration for an end to ever widening levels of social inequality and for the right of the working-class majority to be able to enjoy decent wages, conditions and social services.

In case after case, however, the corporatist trade unions are exerting what little influence they have left to prevent unified action across industries, and, above all, across national borders. At GM facilities around the world, the unions are organically hostile to even the suggestion that workers engage in a common fight against the company.

In the US, the UAW seeks to divide American workers from autoworkers in countries such as South Korea and Mexico, not unite them.

International unity, however, is vital for the success of any struggle, by any section of workers, anywhere in the world. Transnational corporations operate with global strategies. To suppress workers' militancy in one country, they hold over their head the threat they will transfer production elsewhere.

The first step that needs to be taken by autoworkers in GM Korea is the same as in the US: workers should form rank-and-file factory committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the company agents in the trade unions. Immediate appeals need to be made to workers at Hyundai, Kia, and other auto and auto parts manufacturers, and to the broadest sections of the Korean working class. Workers' committees should make contact with workers, independent of the trade unions, at GM-owned operations in the US and internationally. The call must be made for internationally unified and coordinated industrial and political action.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, through its *Autoworker Newsletter*, is leading the fight to win autoworkers to an international and socialist strategy, as the necessary answer to the international strategy of divide-and-rule of the corporations and the unions. We urge workers and young people everywhere to subscribe and help circulate the newsletter to the broadest sections of the international working class.

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