

Tens of thousands of Korean health care workers go on general strike

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Among their demands include a nurse-to-patient ratio of 1:5 and the strengthening of public health care

Unionized health care and medical workers in Korea went on general strike on Thursday to demand better working conditions to allow them to better care for patients.

The Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union (KHMU), which is affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and comprised of various health care workers such as nurses, nurse's aides, radiology technicians, and admin workers, began its general strike on Thursday.

The KHMU last went on general strike 19 years ago, when it fought to prevent the privatization of health care and to urge the protection of the five-day workweek in 2004.

The union announced the beginning of its general strike Thursday morning, stating that 45,000 union members belonging to 122 branches and 140 workplaces across the nation were participating. Approximately 20,000 union members (as estimated by the KHMU) gathered in Gwanghwamun, Seoul, the same day for a rally. Rallies in Seoul, Busan, Gwangju, and Sejong are scheduled for Friday as well.

The KHMU is demanding the expansion of the nursing and caregiving integrated service system, which aims to lower the cost of caregiving for patients, as well as the institutionalization of a nurse-to-patient ratio of 1:5 for patient safety.

Other core demands include increasing the number of doctors in the workforce to put an end to illegal practices in the medical field, such as nurses performing procedures or providing prescriptions instead of doctors; strengthening public health care, which is responsible for essential medical services that directly tie into the lives of the public; and government support for the normalization of hospitals dedicated to COVID-19 treatment.

The KHMU's position is that although negotiations with employers regarding these demands were carried out starting in May, employers did not accept the union's demands, citing the government as its excuse, while the government kept postponing the schedule for system reform, making the strike inevitable.

Hospitals with a large number of employees participating in the strike, such as Pusan National University Hospital, Pusan National University Yangsan Hospital, Korea University Anam Hospital, and the National Medical Center experienced disruptions in medical treatment, having to reduce the number of surgeries and discourage emergency patients from transferring hospitals, but no nationwide medical disruptions were reported.

Workers performing essential services in emergency rooms, operating rooms, intensive care units, and delivery rooms continue to perform their work duties even during strikes according to the law.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare upgraded the health care disaster crisis alert level by one notch from “attention” to “caution” while forming the central emergency medical treatment countermeasure headquarters with Second Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo as its head to prepare for potential gaps in medical service.

During a closed-door meeting between the government and the ruling party at the National Assembly, Health Minister Cho Kyoo-hong said, “It is not fair for a labor union to force the government to announce policy in time for a KCTU strike,” adding, “It would be proper for [the KHMU] to not join in on a KCTU strike but to propose opinions in order to come up with reasonable policies.”

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