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A virtual link can be regarded as an equivalence class of a link L embedded in a thickened surface $S \times I$, under a suitable equivalence relation. Given a representative $L \subset S \times I$, we define a group π_L by lifting L to the universal cover of $S \times I$ and considering the fundamental group of its complement. The group π_L is a finitely presented operator group (in the sense of Noether) with operator set equal to $\pi_1 S$. It is a natural generalization of the group of a classical link. As an application, we give a short proof that the Kishino knot has virtual genus 2. (Received January 17, 2012)