

South Korean university students fined over fees protest

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South Korean students, who took part in demonstrations last year calling for the halving of university tuition fees, were punished last month with fines ranging from 150,000 won to 5,000,000 won (\$US4,230). As of May 28, fines totalling about 140 million won were imposed on more than 150 student protesters for holding “illegal congregations” without official approval. More penalties are likely as the police investigation is ongoing.

For many students already struggling financially, the fines are intended to send an intimidating message: no protest will be tolerated. Throughout last summer, hundreds and in some cases thousands of students gathered nightly to hold candlelight protests. Larger demonstrations, attracting tens of thousands, were organised by various opposition parties, especially the Democrats, which sought to exploit the students’ resentment.

Many were angry not just over the high cost of tuition, but over the unfulfilled promises of the conservative Saenuri (previously the Grand National Party) government to ease the burden on college students. As part of his 2007 presidential campaign, President Lee Myeong-bak pledged to halve tuition fees. Lee’s answer to the protesting students last year was police, water cannons, mass arrests and now heavy fines.

Since the early 1990s, tuition costs have increased by about 10 percent annually. Caps restricting tuition increases were removed for private universities in 1989, then later for public universities. From 2001 to 2010, the cost of university tuition shot up by 82 percent, making education in South Korea the most expensive in

the world after the US, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

University enrolments have increased dramatically over the past 30 years, due to the rising demand for skilled labour in the increasingly industrialised economy. Around 80 percent of students attend university today—up from 27 percent in 1980. Of the country’s 440 universities and colleges, 90 percent are privately-owned and account for three-quarters of the tertiary student population. Public and private colleges are both very expensive.

There is intense competition for the limited places in a handful of prestige universities, such as Seoul National University and Yonsei University, which are viewed as a stepping stone to a coveted position at a major corporation. These institutions charge high fees, ensuring the students are mainly from the upper middle classes.

The entire education system is geared to those whose parents can afford to pay. Starting in elementary school, many parents spend hundreds of dollars to send their children to after-school academies and on private tutoring, particularly to learn mathematics and English. According to Statistics Korea, high-income families (on more than 7 million won a month) spend 163,000 won a month on English tutoring, ten times more than low income families (on less than 1 million won a month).

At the top institutes, nearly 40 percent of students come from high-income families, according to the Korea Student Aid Foundation. Students from low-income families represent just 1 percent. Students from working class families enter less prestigious institutes

with poorer job prospects and incur high debts in order to pay the increasing tuition fees. Between 2006 and 2010, student loans climbed dramatically from 65.7 billion won to 304.6 billion won. At the same time, private universities accumulated more than 10 trillion won (\$US8.5 billion) in reserve funds in 2010.

An English instructor at Kyung Hee University, Clara Kaitlyn McCurdy-Kirlis, explained in the *Hankyoreh* newspaper recently that 82 percent of her students relied on their parents to pay tuition fees of about \$5,500 a year—excluding the cost of books, rent and other living expenses. About 12 percent of students took out bank loans to support their education, and 40 percent had at least one part-time job. Some students even participated in medical experiments to make ends meet.

After graduation, there is no guarantee that students will find a decent job. Youth unemployment is officially around 8 percent but some estimates have put the real figure at 20 percent.

In response to the mass student protests last year, universities announced a small fee reduction—the first since 1948. Instead of the 50 percent cut demanded by students, the universities lowered tuition fees by an average of 4.5 percent. The average annual cost of fees is still 6.7 million won (\$6,000) and, for private universities, the average is 7.3 million won.

The Lee administration has touted a plan to set aside 1.75 trillion won for tertiary scholarships, but this amounts to 3.8 percent of the total education budget for 2012. The scholarship funds as proportion of education spending was actually higher in 2011, at 4.4 percent, and is substantially lower than the OECD average of 11.4 percent. Moreover, despite charging high tuition fees, South Korean universities invest \$8,920 per student, less than the OECD average of \$12,970.

Both the ruling Saenuri Party and opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) are making populist promises ahead of December's presidential elections. Part of the DUP's "3 plus 3" plan includes free school lunch and free child care, plus half-priced tuition.

Such promises will be quickly dropped after the election. An editorial in the *Korea Herald* on May 30 warned that the halving of university fees and other spending pledged "would impose a significant financial burden on the government and private companies." Pointing to the European debt crisis, it declared: "In a word, now is not the time for the political parties to force the government to increase unnecessary spending or put extra burden on corporations. They should instead focus on helping the government boost the sagging economy and urge companies to prepare for the storm that might come their way."

This is the agenda that the next government will impose on the working class and young people. The fines imposed on protesting students last month are just one indication of the anti-democratic measures that will be used to suppress any opposition.



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