

South Korean opposition exploits ferry disaster

Ben McGrath
26 May 2014

More than one month since the sinking of the Sewol ferry on April 16 off the coast of South Korea, the political opposition is exploiting the tragedy ahead of the June 4 regional elections. Since 172 passengers—revised from 174—were initially rescued from the vessel as it was sinking, 288 have been confirmed dead with 16 still considered missing. Of those on board, 325 were 16- and 17-year-old students on a school trip.

President Park Geun-hye's response to the tragedy—both the badly managed rescue and her attempts to fend off criticism of the government—have only compounded public anger. Protests by grieving families, university students, and others have been met by police barricades and arrests.

On May 17, 30,000 people attended protests in Seoul organized by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, and other opposition-aligned organizations. A teacher at the protest told the *Korea Herald*: "Park's excessive focus on deregulation was why the businessmen paid no attention to the pricey safety measures. The president is using her unparalleled powers to protect the large corporations' profits, not the lives of citizens." Some 115 people were arrested as well as another 95 at protests the following day.

Anti-government sentiment grew following accusations that Park was attempting to control coverage of the disaster by state broadcaster KBS. Kim Si-gon, the former newsroom chief for KBS, stated: "It wasn't that KBS was doing less reporting about the sinking of Sewol than other broadcasters, but Cheongwadae did instruct us once not to criticize the Coast Guard. But when I ignored this and ran a critical report about the Coast Guard, [KBS CEO] Gil Hwan-yeong himself told me not to do that. He said that the

instructions had come from Cheongwadae." Cheongwadae is the presidential residence.

Kim recently quit after the KBS' union claimed he had stated, "Although 300 deaths seems like a high figure, it's not that much compared to the annual number of people who die in traffic accidents." Kim also is accused of ordering news anchors not to wear black in mourning. This infuriated grieving family members, which led to a protest outside KBS headquarters on the night of May 8.

As a result of these allegations of government interference, reporters, editors, and anchors have refused to produce new stories with a vote currently being conducted to decide if they should strike to demand Gil's resignation. Gil, who was appointed CEO by former President Lee Myung-bak, said he would not resign, stating, "I won't tolerate any moves by politically oriented workers to destroy KBS. I will hold them responsible."

The family members who gathered in front of KBS's studios on May 8 continued their protest outside Cheongwadae the following day, demanding to see President Park. They were surrounded by 900 police officers in order to prevent the protest from growing. The same day, 2,000 high school students held a rally in Ansan, the hometown of the students aboard the Sewol. On May 10, 15,000 people gathered in protest in Ansan as well.

Smaller protests have been organized by groups such as university student councils. Student Im Won-bin was quoted in the *Korea Times* saying, "I feel frustrated and furious about the disaster."

However, the KCTU and the various civic groups are intent on directing public anger into support for the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD). Token protests are being used to allow people

to vent their frustrations while the NPAD and its allies like the KCTU demand Park take responsibility for the sinking and resign from office. The KCTU's criticism of Park as "an incompetent president who cannot save one life" is not a condemnation of the capitalist system that created the causes for the sinking, but a call to support the NPAD.

The NPAD, however, is as responsible as the Park administration for the undermining of safety standards that led to the ferry disaster.

The Sewol sank due to gross negligence by the company and the government in overseeing shipping operations as well as by the hiring of an untrained crew at the lowest wages in the industry. The captain of the Sewol, who has been charged with murder for his role in the ship's sinking, was working on a one-year temporary contract and lacked the necessary safety training.

Eleven other crewmembers were also temporary workers lacking safety training. The Sewol itself was cleared for operation despite numerous problems with the ferry, including to the steering system, of which the company was aware. Both big business parties in South Korea have deregulated and privatized business while increasing the use of cheap labor through the casualization of the workforce.

It was the Democrats under Kim Dae-jung, with the aid of the KCTU, who began privatizing state-run industries and eliminating the life-time employment system in the wake of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis. The KCTU's posturing as an opponent of Park's own privatization plans is nothing but a cover up of its own role in creating the conditions that exist today.

President Park last week promised several reforms, including the disbanding of the Coast Guard and setting up special committees to oversee safety. Following her announcement, co-leader of the NPAD, Ahn Cheol-soo, criticized the plans saying: "It is not right for Cheongwadae to use a national tragedy as an opportunity to unilaterally create a plan for reforming the government. What we should be doing now is setting up a commission centered on the National Assembly and including a diverse range of experts as well as representatives from civic society and the bereaved families to come up with a plan to reform the government."

With the June 4 elections less than two weeks away,

all of the NPAD's allies are lining up behind it to place as much blame on Park as possible in the hope of bettering its chances at the polls. The only way of preventing further tragedies is to put an end to the root cause of the lack of essential safety standards—the capitalist drive for profit.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact