

South Korean government to revise school history texts

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The right-wing South Korean government is planning to revise history textbooks for middle and high school students to be used from March 2017. By whitewashing past dictatorships, it is preparing to make even deeper inroads into democratic rights as the country's social and economic crisis worsens.

Speaking at the National Assembly on October 27, President Park Geun-hye stated: "The correction of an abnormal situation that I am currently pursuing is an attempt to fix mistakes and vices that have become common practice throughout society and to create a Korea with the 'right fundamentals.'"

Conservatives have derided the textbooks currently being used as containing "predominately left-leaning content," and have singled out six publishers. The government wants to whip up anti-North Korean sentiment while papering over the crimes of past South Korean dictators, including those of President Park's father, Park Chung-hee.

The government has selected the state-run National Institute of Korean History to write the material. Park's cabinet recently allocated 4.4 billion won (\$3.9 million) from a reserve emergency fund, thus bypassing a budget vote in the National Assembly. Park Chung-hee established state control over history textbooks in 1974, which was only ended in 2010.

On October 22, during discussions with leaders from the ruling party and main opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), Park claimed: "Some of the textbooks children are learning from these days state that South Korea shouldn't have been born, and call North Korea a legitimate country. We should not teach students defeatism. Descriptions make students feel shame for being born in the Republic of Korea [South Korea]."

Park also criticized some textbooks for not placing

the blame for the Korean War solely on North Korea.

The chief responsibility for the Korean War lies with US imperialism which, determined to establish a pro-American enclave following World War II, divided the peninsula and installed a puppet regime headed by Syngman Rhee to suppress any opposition. When tensions between the two Koreas erupted in fighting, the US intervened to wage a long and brutal war in an attempt to crush the North Korean regime and deal a blow against the newly-established People's Republic of China.

The government's decision to re-write the history textbooks takes place amid rising social tensions in South Korea, produced by high unemployment and the high cost of living. President Park is whipping up nationalism in a bid to project these social tensions outward and to condition young people, in particular, for war.

Told from a young age that education, at the expense of other social activities, was the key to landing decent jobs, many of the country's youth are angry at their inability to find good-paying work. Among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations, South Korea has the third highest rate of youth in the NEET category—not in education, employment, or training—at 15.6 percent.

Conservatives seek to cover up the crimes committed under Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee. Park Chung-hee in particular is often credited by the right wing with South Korea's economic development, ignoring the police-state measures that enforced the brutal exploitation of the working class and the gross human rights abuses committed against political opponents.

General Park Chung-hee's military coup in 1961 was in response to the student-led overthrow of Syngman Rhee in 1960. Ruling circles in South Korea grew

increasingly concerned that the government of Prime Minister Jang Myeon and President Yun Bo-seon was too weak and unable to suppress the growing working class, disaffected by widespread poverty and the extreme corruption of the family-owned chaebol conglomerates.

After Park's assassination in 1979, he was succeeded by Chun Doo-hwan, an equally brutal general and supporter of Park. Protests grew in the 1980s, however, leading to fears in the United States that the South Korean military was losing control. Having lost the faith of Washington, Chun and his successor Noh Tae-woo agreed to a transition in 1987 as massive demonstrations took place throughout the country. Elections ultimately paved the way for Kim Dae-jung in 1997, the first so-called progressive president, and then Noh Moo-hyun in 2003.

The two Democrats, relying on their personal histories of opposition to the military dictatorship, were called on to push through capitalism's anti-working class agenda. Kim implemented sweeping austerity measures following the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis. The casualization of the workforce began under Kim and accelerated under Noh.

Now, with the Democrats (the NPAD is their current incarnation) widely discredited in the eyes of the working class, Park's administration is relying on increasingly autocratic means to suppress opposition.

Last December, the Unified Progressive Party was forcibly disbanded on the basis of trumped-up claims of supporting North Korea. The government also attacked the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU), which supports the opposition, banning it in October 2013.

The NPAD and its allies are not opposed to the government's anti-working class agenda. Instead, they are denouncing the government in chauvinist terms. Moon Jae-in, head of the NPAD, said on October 12: "Promoting the state-designated textbook is an anachronistic idea of publishing a pro-Japanese textbook beautifying pro-Japanese activities as modernization and a Yushin textbook praising dictatorship as a Korean-style democracy." Yushin refers to the dictatorial constitution Park Chung-hee declared in 1972 to solidify his hold on power.

The NPAD traces its origins back through the various Democrat parties that served as the opposition to South

Korea's decades-long dictatorship. They have long relied on promoting anti-Japanese sentiment. Park Chung-hee, and many others who constituted the new South Korean government and army officer ranks following World War II, were indeed right-wing Japanese collaborators. However the stirring up of anti-Japanese sentiment only divides the working class and diverts attention from the real source of the deteriorating social conditions, which lies in the worsening crisis of global capitalism.



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