

South Korean workers and farmers denounce Park government

Ben McGrath
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A second large protest took place in Seoul on Saturday against President Park Geun-hye's government. Although the demonstration was smaller than one held three weeks ago, the protestors once again denounced Park and demanded her resignation. Further strikes and protests have been scheduled for December 16 and 19 respectively.

According to organizers, 50,000 people joined Saturday's "Second General People's Uprising," considerably less than the 130,000 who came out on November 14. Police estimated the numbers at just 14,000. The demonstrators condemned government plans to alter the labor market in favor of big business and rewrite school history books to glorify the past dictatorships of Syngman Rhee and the president's father, General Park Chung-hee.

Unlike the first demonstration, no violence was reported and there were no arrests. Demonstrators gathered at Seoul Plaza outside City Hall before marching to Seoul National University Hospital where farmer Baek Nam-gi is in a coma. Baek, 69, was struck by a police water cannon at the November rally and required emergency brain surgery after hitting his head on the ground.

Protestors carried signs that read, "Park Geun-hye resign" and "Stop regressive changes to labor laws." Others chanted slogans like "Oppose state-issued history textbooks." Many people wore simple and even comical paper masks to protest against recent demands by ruling Saenuri Party lawmakers for a law banning the wearing of such items at rallies. Demonstrators sometimes wear masks to avoid being victimized by the government or employers.

The protesters not only included workers and farmers, but also young people, who are facing attacks on their education, as well as bleak job prospects. A 17-year-old

high school student Eum Go-eun, stated: "I came here today wearing a mask to criticize President Park for comparing her citizens to terrorists and to oppose the government trying to adopt a state-authored history textbook." At a cabinet meeting last month, Park stated: "Masked protests should be banned. Isn't that how the Islamic State does things now, hiding their faces?"

The protest was organized by 118 civic groups, despite attempts by the government and police to ban it altogether. Under South Korean law, rally and protest organizers must first seek police approval before holding an event.

The groups involved have ties to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the Korean Peasants League (KPL), as well as the main opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) The KCTU and KPL organized the first demonstration on November 14, which resulted in clashes following police provocations and the use of illegal measures to block the rally from taking place. The police argued that because of this connection, Saturday's protest would inevitably be violent as well.

However, the Seoul Administrative Court ruled on December 3 in favor of a lawsuit that the protest should be allowed to take place. "Even if the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions is the principal force behind both this rally and the first mass rally [on November 14], that fact alone does not imply certainty that the December 5 event will clearly be characterized by collective violence, intimidation, property damage, or arson," the court stated.

The police chiefs mobilized some 20,000 officers, more than their estimated number of participants, but did not attempt to set up barricades with buses or water cannons as during the November demonstration, a practice ruled illegal by the Constitutional Court.

In the days following the first protest, the government and South Korean media demonized the participants, comparing them to terrorists, in order to justify new, anti-democratic legislation. The government also threatened to deal harshly with organizations or individuals who defied the initial ban on last Saturday's protest, with Justice Minister Kim Hyeon-ung stating in a televised address that they would "pay the price."

The fear of police-instigated violence may be one reason additional supporters stayed away from Saturday's rally. However, the KCTU is an organization claiming to represent nearly 700,000 members who were not mobilized prior to Saturday. In addition, the protest demand for President Park to resign gives tacit support to the NPAD, by directing workers' anger toward one politician and party, not the capitalist system as a whole.

The KCTU has a long history of supporting the NPAD, which postures as a progressive labor party, and subordinating workers' interests to big business. In that sense, these rallies are designed as safety valves to allow workers to blow off steam while also building support ahead of next April's general election. There is a fear that if a movement built up in the working class, it would begin to voice demands that go well beyond what the NPAD is willing to grant.

Thirty NPAD lawmakers, including party head Moon Jae-in, also took part in Saturday's events, holding a meeting at the nearby Gwanghwamun Plaza with 500 leaders and followers of five religious groups. "We appreciate the rally participants for holding the protest peacefully," the NPAD stated at the end of the day. "Also we appreciate the police for letting the rally run peacefully by not setting up barricades with buses."

The NPAD voices support to workers' causes in the hope of winning votes. The NPAD, however, no less than the Saenuri Party, defends South Korean capitalism. The NPAD's limited criticisms of the ruling party have not stopped it from agreeing with the need for so-called labor reform. Just three days before Saturday's protest, both parties agreed to pass five labor-related bills by the end of the year that will increase the casualization of workers—the very bills workers protested against on Saturday.

If passed, the new laws would expand the number of industries that can hire irregular workers, or those

without contracts. Another law would expand, from two to four, the number of years a worker can be employed on an irregular basis. The ruling party is also preparing separate bills to allow companies to more easily fire regular employees and alter labor contracts.

Moon Jae-in stated on Sunday: "We cannot accept their (the Saenuri Party) legislative proposals. These will only increase the number of non-regular workers." However, the NPAD proposed an inter-party body that would "seek to find a way to allow the employment of irregular workers with condition-based terms, instead of period-based terms." These cosmetic changes would not improve working conditions one bit.



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