

Working class in South Korea bears brunt of Covid-19 outbreak

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29 February 2020

The number of confirmed cases of the Covid-19 coronavirus in South Korea rose by 594 on Friday to a total of 2,931 infections. The majority have been in the country's fourth largest city, Daegu, home to 2.5 million people. Sixteen people have died, including three people on Friday. Nearly half of the infections have been traced back to the Shincheonji religious cult, with 210,000 of its members currently being tested for the virus.

Only 33 cases of Covid-19 infection have come from people who recently travelled overseas or been in direct contact with them. As of Thursday night, 717 confirmed cases were of unknown origin or were still in the process of being tracked, meaning the number of new infections could grow rapidly. South Korea's two largest cities, Seoul and Busan, have reported 62 cases and 65 cases respectively. The Seoul metropolitan area is densely populated, home to half of the country's more than 51 million people.

Medical facilities in Daegu have been overwhelmed by cases, with hospitals lacking enough beds for all the new patients. "It takes a considerable amount of time to transfer patients after triage, and we're getting more than 150 new patients every day. That means we're going to be seeing people waiting for quarantine [in our figures] for some time," said Jeong Eun-gyeong, the director of the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hospitals in Seoul have agreed to accept only patients in critical condition. The total number of people under quarantine, including those being tested for the virus, stands at 30,237.

On February 23, the central government raised the "virus alert level" to red, the highest of four tiers. The new alert level allows the government to impose stricter quarantine measures and ban public activities. The government announced the same day that it would

delay the start of the new school year, set to begin next month, by one week. Public schools will now open on March 9.

President Moon Jae-in called on authorities to take "unprecedented, powerful" measures without consideration for "regulations." In other words, authorities have been given the go-ahead to ignore the law, setting a dangerous precedent for future crises, real or fabricated. Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon has already banned rallies from taking place at the three most popular locations for protests in the city.

As governments lack genuine healthcare plans for responding to epidemics, if the situation with Covid-19 continues to deteriorate, they will not hesitate to respond with increasingly repressive measures.

The economic impact is already being felt. The Bank of Korea is projecting that the country's annual growth rate will fall from 2.3 percent to 2.1 percent, as the economy contracts in the first quarter.

On Friday, Seoul's Finance Ministry announced two bailout packages for businesses affected by the spread of Covid-19. In addition to four trillion won (US\$3.3 billion) already spent, Seoul plans to provide an additional sixteen trillion won (US\$13.3 billion). The Finance Ministry also plans to push for an extra budget topping 6.2 trillion won (US\$5.1 billion) next month.

Major conglomerates have been forced to shut down production at factories temporarily. Hyundai closed its Number 2 factory at Ulsan on Friday, but plans to reopen on Monday after disinfecting the entire plant, despite the fact that exposed workers could still pass on the virus without their knowledge.

Other businesses have closed out of fear or due to a lack of customers. In some cases, workers are being forced to use their paid vacation days so that businesses can close. Small travel agencies, for example, have

been forced to lay off employees or cut wages as the number of people taking trips has drastically dropped.

Depending on their job status, workers directly hired as regular employees are having their pay cut by 30 percent if forced to stay home. However, “independent contractors” or so-called irregular workers could see their wages entirely slashed or lose their jobs if they do not go to work. Afterschool teachers still run classes even though schools are closed and regular teachers will not be at work. These afterschool programs provide necessary daycare for working class families.

Couriers at Korea Post face similar instability. The National Union of Korea Post Couriers stated in early February, “The government announced that it would provide 70 percent paid leave for workers in quarantine based on the Labor Standards Act, but they don’t even have a standard for such financial support for delivery couriers, categorized as specially hired workers.”

With people staying home rather than going out to eat or shop, they are having more things delivered to their homes. One of the leading food delivery app companies, Baedal Minjok, stated recently that if any of its drivers must be quarantined, the company would pay them the paltry minimum wage of 820,000 won (\$US673) for two weeks. In 2018, Baedal Minjok’s revenue came in at \$272.4 million, a jump of 96 percent from the previous year.

These workers have called for increased safety measures. Koo Kyo-hyun, an official at the Riders Union representing delivery drivers, said on Thursday, “Delivery workers who meet customers every day and work outdoors face a risky situation, but measures by companies and the government are not (strong) enough (to protect them). It’s quite worrying since we don’t know how much the virus will spread.”

Other vulnerable layers of the population are being affected as well. Immigrants have complained that they are not receiving health updates regularly sent out to people’s cellphones because the notices are only available in Korean. Some immigrants also fear that if they contract Covid-19 they will be expelled from the country and therefore may run the risk of not receiving help if they do fall ill.

At the beginning of February, many soup kitchens for the poor were also closed or had their services cut back, leaving tens of thousands without a place to get a meal.

In other words, the working class is bearing the brunt

of the Covid-19 crisis, and not just in South Korea. What is needed is a coordinated, international response in which treatments and medical supplies are not subordinated to the capitalist markets.



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