

COVID-19 danger persists in South Korea

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The COVID-19 pandemic is persisting in South Korea as new cluster infections continue to appear, including in the densely-populated Seoul metropolitan area, which is home to half of the country's 51 million people.

Nationally, there were 43 new cases on Monday, raising the total confirmed infections since the outbreak began in January to 12,800. Throughout June, the country has averaged approximately 45 new cases a day.

Health officials have expressed concern at the virus's recent spread, including at churches, noting that a number of infections have been among older, more vulnerable people.

Yun Tae-ho, a senior health official at the Ministry of Health and Welfare stated on Monday: "Infections tied to small gatherings have increased, making it hard to contain virus transmission. It is worrisome that the virus is spreading in regions beyond the Seoul metropolitan area."

By the end of April, the number of new daily infections was in the single digits, leading many to assume that the worst of the pandemic was over for South Korea. In early May, however, new infections began to emerge after an individual who visited several nightclubs in Seoul later tested positive for COVID-19.

The virus then spread to cities in the surrounding Gyeonggi Province. Among the new cases are more than 150 workers at Coupang distribution centers in Bucheon, Goyang, and Incheon. Coupang is a South Korean warehousing company similar to Amazon.

On June 21, almost 200 dockworkers in the port city of Busan came into contact with Russian sailors who later tested positive for COVID-19. The Russian ship that docked at the port was carrying marine products. While port authorities conducted an electronic review of the ship's health documents, a proper quarantine inspection was not conducted due to a lack of

personnel. The longshoremen and sailors, moreover, worked in close contact with one another and often did not wear masks given the difficult work and the below freezing temperatures inside the ship.

All of these cases expose the false claims that workers and others can avoid catching COVID-19 by simply following social distancing guidelines, wearing masks or by regularly checking people's temperatures, as was required at the nightclubs visited by the positive patient in May. The surge in new patients also exposes the fallacy that other countries, where there are far more cases, can safely reopen.

From the outset, the concern of President Moon Jae-in's administration has been to prevent an explosion of social anger and do everything possible to keep workers on the job so that businesses continued making profits. Unlike in other countries, Seoul never implemented a lockdown or broad closure of businesses and workplaces but instead issued recommendations, many of which were ignored by companies or followed in a perfunctory manner to mollify workers' concerns.

Businesses in South Korea have only shut down when new cases have been confirmed. This has only been temporary, putting workers' lives at risk when they reopen. At least one worker in the automotive industry, employed at one of Hyundai Motors' part suppliers, died in June from the virus.

The growth in cases did not stop teaching in schools resuming in May, nor did it halt plans to reopen the few shuttered businesses where large numbers of people gather, including sporting events. Professional sports teams are pressuring the government to allow fans into stadiums, claiming a lack of revenue.

Public safety is a major political issue, particularly following the sinking of the Sewol Ferry in April 2014 that killed over 300 people, and the outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2015 that left South Korea as one of the hardest hit countries

outside of the Middle East.

The massive protests that erupted in 2016 against the Park Geun-hye government were in part driven by anger over the former president's indifference to and incompetence in handling these events. The government acted out of fear of renewed protests as the COVID-19 pandemic developed, particularly in the face of growing social inequality and mounting attacks on working conditions.

In order to carry out its agenda, the government utilized police state measures to track people for testing, including through CCTV cameras. The number of these cameras has exploded over the past decade, increasing from 300,000 in 2010 to well over one million today. Nearly half were installed explicitly for use by the police.

Government authorities are also tracking people's credit cards and cell phones in order to determine where they had been and who else to test. So intrusive is this surveillance that the authorities can identify who a person sat next to in a movie theater. In the hands of the capitalist state, all of these measures can and will be used against government opponents, above all targeting the working class as it enters into social and political struggles.

COVID-19 testing in South Korea has slowed considerably. Having been hailed for its initial aggressive testing regimen, the country has only tested some 24,400 per million of the population. This ranks it 82nd in the percentage of tests conducted by countries according to the Worldometer COVID-19 tracker. The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) only tests those suspected of having the virus or of having been in contact with a positive case.

In other words, the resources are not being made available to carry out a wide scale testing of the population, which means the current number of asymptomatic infections is unknown. The KCDC stated that for the last two weeks of June, it failed to trace 11.8 percent of new cases, meaning an explosion of new cases is very possible.



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