

COVID-19 cases spike in South Korea

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Since August 14, the number of COVID-19 cases has increased sharply in South Korea with hundreds of new infections per day. Most of these have been located in the densely-populated Seoul metropolitan area, which is home to half of the country's 51 million people.

As of September 2, there had been 5,679 new cases over almost three weeks. This has brought the total since mid-last month to 20,449, or nearly 30 percent of all cases during the course of the pandemic.

By Wednesday, the number of critically-ill patients had also grown from 12 on August 19 to 124. Hospital beds are lacking, however, despite the ongoing pandemic. In Seoul, there were 55 beds available by the middle of this week for COVID-19 patients in a serious or critical condition and only 16 in the neighbouring Gyeonggi Province. Gangwon Province and North and South Jeolla Provinces, as well as the cities of Gwangju and Daejeon, had no available beds.

In response to the surge in cases, the central government raised its three-tier social distancing scale from Level 1 to "2.5," enforcing stricter measures in the capital region, but not implementing a full lockdown. Public schools and private academies have been shut for students, while restaurants, indoor gyms, churches, and other places where large numbers gather have been closed or had their hours reduced.

The government is attempting to justify not going to Level 3 social distancing, which would ban gatherings of ten people or more. President Moon Jae-in stated last week that in the event of a lockdown, "Daily lives will come to a halt, jobs will be lost, and we will have to indeed deal with a huge economic blow."

In other words, Moon is stating that no aid will come to those who lose their jobs, while the actual concern is for the impact on the "economy," i.e., big business and the banks. In the second quarter of this year, the economy contracted by 3.3 percent. The annual contraction is expected to be 1.3 percent, according to

the Bank of Korea.

The government's implementation of limited social distancing measures is meant to give the veneer of safety while most people are kept on the job and therefore placed in danger. Workers are being forced into factories where COVID-19 has a high chance of spreading. Call centers, shipyards and distribution centers have been at the center of numerous COVID-19 spikes throughout the year.

The Samsung Group, for example, issued a statement on August 24 indicating that no genuine safety precautions would be taken: "At Samsung Electronics, most of the employees in offices and production lines continue to come to work. It is impossible for production-line employees to work from home."

Hyundai Motors stated that it would respond "flexibly" to new government guidelines, essentially an admission that it would pay lip service to social distancing while also keeping workers on the assembly lines and in danger in order to turn out surplus value. At least one worker from a Hyundai subcontractor earlier this year died after contracting COVID-19.

That measures are being implemented at all is in part due to the fact that safety is a major political issue in South Korea. In 2015, it was one of the hardest hit countries outside of the Middle East during the MERS epidemic. The indifferent response by the authorities at the time helped contribute to the massive protests that broke out a year later.

Workers and youth were beginning to draw the connection that it is capitalism itself that is at the heart of these crises. While the protests were kept within the bounds of bourgeois politics by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, which is aligned with Moon and the Democratic Party of Korea, Seoul does not want to risk a new outbreak of social anger.

The Democrats also feared that an outbreak would trigger unrest shortly before April's general election.

The government therefore implemented police-state measures to track patients and invaded the privacy of countless people. Now, with the ruling Democrats firmly in control of the National Assembly, and previously credited as preventing a wider outbreak, it has turned its attention firmly to protecting big business.

The current outbreak has been traced to the Sarang Jeil Church in northeastern Seoul, with 1,083 members testing positive for COVID-19 as of September 2. Many of its adherents participated in a right-wing rally in Seoul on August 15, the anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II, which has contributed to the spread.

Far-right churches like Sarang Jeil are bases of support for the conservative United Future Party, the current main opposition. While Christian superstition—such as the belief that the virus can be stopped by prayer—certainly played a role in the transmission of COVID-19 among its members, the government has attempted to place blame for the current outbreak squarely at the feet of the church and its political opponents.

On August 27, Moon stated, “Still, some churches are sticking to face-to-face worship services,” while adding that a “specific church is rejecting and obstructing the government’s coronavirus-related guidelines,” a reference to Sarang Jeil. He continued, “As a result, South Korea’s antiviral fight, which has been exemplary for the world’s antiviral fight, is facing a crisis at the moment, and the whole country is going through big difficulties.”

This is an attempt by Moon to hide the fact that it is the government’s own policies that created the conditions for the spread of the virus in the first place, despite numerous close calls throughout the summer.

Since Seoul seemed to have the spread of the virus under control in March, the government has been content with having anywhere from 20 to 60 new cases a day. There was no mass testing campaign to identify those who may have contracted COVID-19 and were spreading it to others in the event they were asymptomatic.

Only those who are suspected to have come into contact with a positive patient or those showing symptoms have been able to get tested, while the number of new tests has fallen dramatically. The new

outbreak is ultimately a result of the government’s indifference towards the working class and its decision to put big business first.



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