

COVID-19 cases skyrocket in South Korea and Japan

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Both South Korea and Japan have seen sharp increases in COVID-19 cases over the past several weeks, brought on by government neglect and a refusal to take any serious measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Instead, as in countries around the world, the responses of Tokyo and Seoul to the pandemic have been driven by concerns for big business.

South Korea reported 808 new COVID-19 cases for Sunday, down from a record number of 1,241 new cases on Friday. The decline, however, is attributed to fewer tests over the weekend. By 9.30 p.m. Monday evening, there were already 931 cases. The numbers have been growing by approximately 800 to 1,000 new infections per day since mid-December. In total, there have been 58,611 cases in the country while at least 819 deaths have occurred.

The densely populated capital of Seoul has overtaken Daegu as the epicenter of the pandemic in the country. The city continues to be the location of most new infections, with the surrounding metropolitan area of Gyeonggi Province close behind. In total, there were 485 new cases between the two areas on Sunday. The region is home to approximately half of South Korea's population of 51 million.

Under the central government's five-tier social distancing scheme, the Seoul metropolitan area is under "Level 2.5" while the rest of the country is under Level 2. Level 3 is the highest. On December 21, the government announced that it would ban personal gatherings of five or more people from December 23 until January 3. This means that workers are still being kept on the job and most businesses can remain open, though with some restrictions.

Despite the skyrocketing numbers, the government of South Korean President Moon Jae-in has refused to implement enhanced social distancing measures. Moon

stated earlier this month that doing so would cause too much "pain and damages" through the closure of stores and other facilities. In other words, the government has no intention of providing aid or assistance to workers or small businesses adversely affected by the pandemic.

The ban on personal gatherings is an attempt to shift blame onto individuals and away from the government. On Friday, Prime Minister Jeong Se-gyun, sounded a similar note, saying, "The vast majority of the nation is faithfully adhering to the government's antivirus measures despite the inconvenience and pain they entail, but if a few cheat for their own gains, it is difficult to expect results from participating in the antivirus measures."

Seoul's response to the pandemic has been reactive from the beginning, making decisions in response to new developments, rather than having any serious plan in place. Despite the nearly year-long pandemic and time to prepare, Seoul is now scrambling to find enough hospital beds to accommodate seriously ill patients. The Health Ministry stated Sunday that there were only 68 available beds in the capital region.

While workers and those without material means are being left out to dry, the government's response in March demonstrates its true concerns. That month, the Bank of Korea stated that it had "decided to provide an unlimited amount of liquidity to financial firms to help minimise the economic fallout from the spread of COVID-19 and remove uncertainties in the financial market." While workers suffer, the rich get anything they want.

It is a similar situation in Japan, which has also reported a record high number of new COVID-19 cases, with 3,841 new infections on Friday. There were 888 cases in Tokyo, which was also a record. In total, there have been more than 217,312 cases and 3,213

deaths.

The number of new cases is quickly putting a strain on the medical system. In seven prefectures and regions including Tokyo and Osaka, hospital bed capacity has surpassed 50 percent—the threshold for declaring the most affected regions to be at “Stage 4,” the highest level in a four-tier system indicating the most rapid growth of the virus.

The tier system was implemented in July as part of the government’s reckless “Go to Travel” campaign, designed to stimulate the economy and present a sense of normality to justify its own refusal to adopt safety measures. It has undoubtedly contributed to the proliferation of the virus. Even as cases spread, the program, which provides government subsidies for domestic travel, has not been halted, but only suspended from December 28 to January 11.

As of now, the government of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga has denied the need for a state of emergency that would enable the government to implement limited lockdown measures. This is despite the fact that the Japan Medical Association and eight other healthcare organisations declared on December 21 that the country was facing an emergency. In a joint statement, the groups said: “The spread of the coronavirus infection shows no signs of stopping. Left unchecked, people in Japan will not be able to receive regular medical care, let alone care for COVID-19.”

Suga responded on Friday by appealing, “Please cooperate by refraining from gatherings as much as possible, so that we can stop infections from spreading.” In other words, just as the government in Seoul has claimed, spreading infections is the fault of individuals—many of whom are forced to go to work or school while taking overcrowded public transportation. The Tokyo metropolitan area is home to approximately 38 million people.

Suga’s refusal to implement a state of emergency demonstrates that the main concern is protecting big business and the extraction of profit from the working class. However, it also demonstrates the real nature of the state-of-emergency law that was passed in March. Rather than being a tool to protect the population, the government has used the pandemic as a pretext for strengthening laws that will be used to suppress political dissent.

On Friday, Japanese health authorities also confirmed

the first cases of the new, mutated COVID-19 strain that is currently spreading in the United Kingdom. The strain was detected in five people who had recently arrived from the UK. The Health Ministry claims that none of the patients has had close contact with others since returning to Japan, but this is almost certainly not the case given the nature of travel.

The lack of preparation or regard for the health of the majority of the people in both countries demonstrates the need for a working class response to the pandemic.



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