

COVID-19 pandemic worsens in South Korea

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The COVID-19 pandemic is intensifying in South Korea because the Moon Jae-in government refuses to take the necessary measures to stop the spread of the virus.

The daily number of cases reached a national all-time high of 2,222 on August 11. As of Monday, there have officially been 226,854 cases and 2,173 deaths, including six people who passed away that day.

The seven-day moving average for daily new cases stood at 1,871 as of Saturday, having almost quadrupled in a month.

The Seoul metropolitan area, the southern city of Busan and Jeju Island are under Level 4 restrictions in the government's four-tier system. This limits the number of people allowed to gather in groups, but allows businesses and private study academies to remain open, contributing to the spread of the virus. The other regions of the country are under Level 3 restrictions.

A major reason for the sharp eruption of the virus in recent weeks is the slow rollout of vaccines, compounded by the spread of the Delta variant. Only 43.6 percent of people have received one dose of the vaccine, while 19 percent have been fully vaccinated. The situation has been worsened by glitches in the online reservation system, as well as a delay in vaccine delivery from US drug maker Moderna.

Despite this, schools are set to re-open this month following the summer break, with students attending on a rotational basis. This means the virus could spread even more quickly.

Under Level 4 restrictions, all classes should be online. But the Education Ministry absurdly stated on August 9: "Only 16 percent [of students] contracted the virus at school, meaning that schools are the least common place for transmission."

The government consciously ignores the fact that students may contract the virus from school-aged

siblings at home or from parents forced to go to work. Moreover, new studies demonstrate that infection can lead to cognitive impairment worse than that from lead poisoning or from a stroke.

Students, teachers, and parents are speaking out against school reopenings. A student wrote in an online petition to halt the return to in-person classes: "It is difficult for all schools to thoroughly control students' wearing of masks. And especially during physical activities, the frequency of students' contact is very high and there is no way to deal with it."

The drive to force students and teachers back into dangerous classrooms is fueled by the same interests as in other countries: the demand from the capitalist ruling class to keep workers on the job. Since the start of the pandemic, the Moon administration has sought to avoid restrictions on big business as much as possible to meet this end.

When the government introduced its multi-level restriction system in June 2020, daily cases stood at around 50. The system initially had three levels, with the third and highest being implemented if daily cases rose above 100 for 14 straight days. This required the government to close schools and ban gatherings of ten or more people.

By the end of August last year, cases had spiked to well over 200 per day, including 441 new infections on August 27. At the time, schools and private study academies were closed, while other public facilities were either shut or had their hours reduced. The Moon government, however, refused to implement the highest tier restrictions, instead creating a "Level 2.5." Moon said he wanted to avoid "a huge economic blow," which in fact meant protecting corporate profits.

In November 2020, the administration formalized this new level and added a "Level 1.5" as well, creating a five-tier system until June this year. The lowest tiers required businesses like restaurants and entertainment

facilities to do little more than ask customers to maintain social distancing and to wear masks. Stricter limits were only implemented after daily cases exceeded 400 for Level 2.5 and 800 for Level 3.

The authorities stated last November that their goal was no longer to eliminate COVID-19, but to live with the virus. Then-Prime Minister Jeong Se-gyun stated: “The latest reorganization [in the levels] is aimed at settling a sustainable quarantine system.” That is, the government would do little more than quarantine cases, not try to actively prevent them.

Winter saw a then record-high in total daily cases of 1,240 on December 25. While conditions were met to go to Level 3, the government kept the Seoul metropolitan area at Level 2.5 and the remaining regions at Level 2. Prime Minister Jeong sought to blame ordinary people for not following the rules, saying on December 27: “The key in controlling the spread of the coronavirus is whether we actually carry out the rules in place ourselves.”

While the number of daily cases fell, they remained in the hundreds, even as children returned to schools for the start of the new academic year in March. The same number of cases that had led to school closures the previous August, now was met with little more than a few perfunctory statements from government officials about social distancing.

Throughout the spring months and into summer, daily cases stood at between 500 and 800, with the seven-day average on June 30 sitting at 631. At this point, the government introduced its current four-tier system, which went into effect on July 1, in order to further remove restrictions on big business. As cases surged, the new system was postponed for the Seoul area, while the rest of the country was initially placed under Level 1, the lowest tier.

Since then, the spread of COVID-19 has exploded, producing the worst situation since the pandemic began. Yet the Moon administration is downplaying the danger as much as possible, continuing the drive for profits at the expense of lives.



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