

South Korea moves to end social distancing restrictions despite COVID-19 surge

Ben McGrath
24 August 2021

Even as South Korea is experiencing its worst surge of COVID-19, the government of President Moon Jae-in is moving towards eliminating current social distancing measures. Moon and other government officials are not driven by the need to protect people's lives, but to defend the profits of big business. There were 2,155 new cases reported Wednesday from the previous day, a near record high, as well as nine new deaths.

On August 20, while extending most of the current social distancing measures for two weeks, the Ministry of Health and Welfare announced the ban on more than two people at facilities like restaurants after 6pm would be lifted to four people on Monday for those who are fully vaccinated.

The government is portraying the decision as an incentive for people to get vaccinated. Son Yeong-rae, a spokesman for the Health Ministry, stated, "Vaccination status will come into play more and more in how social distancing rules apply."

However, the reality, as Son admitted, is that the easing of rules is meant to lessen the impact on big business, particularly in the food and entertainment industries that have been required to close at 10pm and only offer take-out orders after 9pm.

The danger is that vaccines alone are not enough to stop the spread of COVID-19. Even those who are fully vaccinated can still contract and pass on the virus, making public health measures such as social distancing a vital component of ending the pandemic.

Highlighting this point, nursing homes are "back in crisis mode," according to Dr. Son Deok-hyeon, the director of the Eson nursing hospital in the city of Ulsan. Since the end of July, nine instances of breakthrough cases have occurred at nursing homes and other aged care facilities, infecting at least 159 people

who were previously vaccinated. Three have died while another seven had to be placed on life support.

Despite this, there are no plans to administer a third booster shot to those whose defenses may have decreased since first becoming vaccinated. Seoul has struggled to obtain enough vaccines to provide people with their first two doses. Currently, only 50.5 percent of the population has received one dose of a two-dose regimen while 22 percent are considered fully vaccinated. This makes clear that strict social distancing measures are needed now more than ever.

The government's actions follow a now common pattern. When cases first surged in February 2020 in the city of Daegu, businesses were encouraged or forced to close, the opening of the new academic school year was postponed before beginning online, and other measures were taken to stop the spread of the virus. These steps were taken following the 2015 outbreak of the more deadly, but less contagious MERS virus. The Moon government was conscious that a failure to stop the spread of a similar deadly virus could lead to an explosion of social anger.

At each surge in new cases, the government imposed certain social distancing measures to give the appearance of dealing with the virus but with each round of restrictions less effective than the last. Each time after a relative drop in cases, the government re-worked its social distancing scheme to lessen the impact on big business. This included keeping schools open to ensure parents could go to work and capitalism could continue to profit.

Now, with the virus continuing to rage throughout the country, including in densely populated cities like Seoul and Busan, the government is signalling that even these limited measures will be discarded. The reality is that the population is now being told that it

must “live with the virus.”

The removal of restrictions for those who are vaccinated will only lead to the removal of restrictions altogether if workers and students do not take matters into their own hands. The Health Ministry admitted on August 6 that its “new pandemic strategy” is increasingly seen as accepting, in government officials’ minds, that COVID-19 is not going away and allowing a return to so-called normal.

Taking the lead in defending big business and calling for an end to social distancing measures has been the ostensible “Left” in South Korea; those aligned with President Moon and the Democratic Party.

In an August 22 article, the so-called “left-wing” *Hankyoreh* newspaper proclaimed, “On the 20th, as the government extended the current distancing measures (Level 4 in the Seoul metropolitan area and Level 3 in some non-metropolitan areas) for two weeks, voices from all levels of society are saying fatigue from quarantine has reached its limit.”

The paper claims to voice the concerns of workers, students, and small business owners who have undoubtedly suffered from the pandemic. The *Hankyoreh*’s crocodile tears are meant to obfuscate the fact that Moon’s government and its supporters in the unions are the cause of this suffering. While Seoul announced at the beginning of the pandemic that unlimited amounts of money would be made available to the country’s financial institutions, no questions asked, workers and ordinary people received either a pittance from the government, not enough to even cover the cost of rent, or nothing at all.

Furthermore, when delivery workers struck in January and then again in June over the brutal conditions they face, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and its affiliated Parcel Delivery Workers Solidarity Union shut down the strikes. This was on the basis of worthless promises from the government and the companies that more would be done to alleviate the conditions workers face. The KCTU has played a key role in keeping workers on the job during the pandemic for the benefit of big business.

Workers and students must take the fight against COVID-19 out of the hands of the government and the unions and form rank-and-file safety committees that place lives and public safety before profits. This struggle can only be taken forward on the basis of a

genuine socialist and internationalist program to address this global crisis rooted in the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact