

COVID-19 cases surge to record highs in South Korea

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Last Tuesday, South Korea recorded 4,116 new COVID-19 cases, the greatest number for a 24-hour period since the pandemic began almost two years ago. The new high surpassed the previous record set the previous Thursday of 3,292. Another 3,937 new cases were registered on November 25. The explosion in infections is the direct result of the Moon Jae-in administration's abandonment of any attempt to prevent the spread of the virus.

Seoul initiated its so-called “with COVID” era on November 1, in which the population would supposedly “live with the virus” while health officials only treated the most severe cases. Most social distancing restrictions have been lifted throughout the country under the rationale that nearly 80 percent of the population has been vaccinated and that masks are still required in public.

The new infections demonstrate the fact—already made clear around the world—that there is no living with COVID-19. Daily deaths have been climbing steadily since September with 38 people losing their lives on Thursday, the most since January.

At the same time, the number of patients in a critical condition also reached an all-time high of 617 yesterday, up five from the previous day, putting a strain on the country's intensive care unit (ICU) wards, particularly in the Seoul metropolitan area. As of Tuesday, 83.7 percent of ICU beds in the capital city, Incheon, and Gyeonggi Province were occupied. Nearly three quarters of ICU beds have been filled nationwide. As of Wednesday, 778 people have also been left on a waiting list for a hospital bed, unable to access care.

Despite the surge and the danger to the population, the government is doing all it can to avoid even moderate social distancing measures that would negatively impact big business. Korea Disease Control

and Prevention Agency Commissioner Jeong Eun-yeong stated November 22 that no new measures to stop the spread of the virus were being considered, despite evaluating the situation as “very dangerous,” and noting the growing pressure on the health care system.

Prime Minister Kim Bu-gyeom backed this position on Wednesday, stating, “Our gradual return to normal life has faced its first hurdle. We are at a point to review whether we should move to the next phase or not, but the situation is more serious than we expected.” In other words, while the country faces record highs in infections and the danger of an even wider spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus, the government is content to do nothing besides “review” the situation.

The lifting of restrictions comes with the full reopening of schools on November 22, resulting in a surge of new cases among children. In an interview that day with *Arirang News*, Dr. Alice Tan of MizMedi Women's Hospital in Seoul said that children between the ages of 0 and 19 were “one of the fastest growing demographics in terms of new cases with COVID. I think school administrators, superintendents need to keep that in mind, that there are just that many more children with COVID in the community right now.”

Mass infection and death are the realities of the so-called “return to normal,” being ushered in by the Moon administration, which has lifted social distancing measures at the demand of big business. For the wealthy in South Korea, the pandemic has already been an enormous boon and inequality has risen sharply.

Large companies have used the pandemic as a pretext to slash thousands of jobs. A survey of 313 companies by market researcher Leaders Index found that these companies had cut approximately 18,200 regular jobs

while adding 5,400 irregular positions. Irregular workers earn significantly less pay than their regular counterparts despite doing the same jobs. They also receive fewer benefits and risk being fired at any moment without recourse. The number of irregular workers has surged this year to 8.07 million people, an increase of 640,000 from 2020. This officially represents 38.4 percent of the total workforce.

Workers who have been fired or furloughed also face enormous difficulties. Over the past year, there has been a 75 percent surge of new cases from workers seeking workers' compensation as a result of mental illness. Indicative of the pressures that workers face is the suicide of a flight attendant last fall after she had been furloughed by Korean Air. Following a review on September 30, the Workers' Compensation Insurance Eligibility Review Commission ruled the case a work-related accident.

Internet-based companies, such as food delivery apps, have taken advantage of the situation and seen their sales surge through the exploitation of low-paid workers in South Korea's gig economy. The leading food delivery app in South Korea, Baedal Minjok, has had sales increase by 94.4 percent over last year, bringing in 1.09 trillion won (\$US917 million).

Inequality is also being driven by a sharp rise in real estate and stock prices. The price of an average apartment in Seoul has doubled over the past four years, from 607 million won (\$US510,689) to 1.21 billion won (\$US1 million). This includes an 11.98 percent jump between January and September this year, the biggest increase in 15 years.

"The value of all assets has escalated to an all-time high, ranging from stocks, real estate, and virtual assets, which is pretty unprecedented," Cho Young-hyun, from the Korea Insurance Research Institute, told the *Korea Times* in October.

"Rising household debt is also worrisome, not only from the perspective of its size, but also from the speed of the debt increase rate, which is one of the fastest among OECD countries. As it could later impact mid-to long-term financial stability, it is necessary to alleviate such an imbalance," Cho said.

As a result, the wealth gap has sharply increased. The bottom 20 percent of income earners hold, on average, 24.7 million won (\$US20,779) in assets. By contrast, the top 20 percent hold 35.2 times more for an average

of 870 million won (\$US731,940). This is an increase of two percent from last year.

The current policy of the government to live "with COVID" is designed to continue and normalize these conditions to allow big business to deepen its attacks on working and living standards. The working class in South Korea must demand policies that put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. This can only be done by a turn to international socialism and workers throughout the world.



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