

Two right-wing figures to contest South Korean presidential election

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On March 9, South Korea will hold an election to replace outgoing President Moon Jae-in. Neither the candidate from the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) nor from the opposition People Power Party (PPP) has anything progressive to offer workers and youth. Both are determined to further open the economy despite the surge of COVID-19 cases and have backed the US war drive in the region against China.

The DP has put forward former Gyeonggi Province Governor Lee Jae-myung as its candidate while the PPP's candidate is former Prosecutor General Yoon Seok-youl. Ahn Cheol-soo from the minor conservative People's Party and Sim Sang-jeong of the pseudo-left Justice Party are also running. Moon Jae-in from the DP is ineligible as South Korean presidents serve for a single, five-year term.

The pandemic is a central concern for workers and youth. The government began the so-called "with COVID" era last November, an open admission that it would no longer take serious measures to stop the spread of the virus. Its aim was to get students back into classrooms and workers back on the job to ensure profits for big business. Since then, the number of daily new cases has surged to record highs of more than 17,000, with schools being major centers of transmission.

Neither Lee nor Yoon will deviate from this agenda. Instead, both have pledged to provide additional payments to businesses affected by the pandemic. While portrayed as assisting small businesses, in reality this amounts to further bailouts for big business and a pittance for everyone else.

Big business, in fact, has enjoyed a surge in profits, as they have exploited the pandemic to engage in stock market speculation while forcing workers into unsafe workplaces. The economy grew by 4 percent in 2021,

the fastest in eleven years. In response, both Lee and Yoon have pledged to further deregulate the economy, that is remove any restrictions on profit-making at the expense of the working class. Lee stated on January 6, "If regulations limit competition and efficiency, abolishing or easing them is desirable for the whole economy."

However, workers are suffering from rising unemployment. Officially, unemployment stands at approximately 3.7 percent, down from 4 percent in 2020. However, Statistics Korea reported on January 24 that 628,000 people had given up looking for work in 2021, a record high. An additional 2.4 million people have taken time off from working, unrelated to education, illness, or childcare. Neither figure is counted in the official unemployment figures. The number of long-term unemployed last year stood at 128,000, approximately half of whom are in their 20s and 30s. This was an 8.1 percent increase over 2020.

The election also takes place under the shadow of the US-led drive to war against China. Under Moon Jae-in, Seoul has backed Washington's agenda against Beijing, including over Taiwan, risking the outbreak of a dangerous conflagration that would engulf South Korea.

Whoever becomes president following the election will continue and deepen this militarist agenda. Lee stated, in early January, when asked if South Korea would join the US-led Quad, a quasi-military alliance aimed at Beijing, "We don't have to respond in advance, and even if they do ask, we can give a third-party response from our point of view. We could choose the United States and China simultaneously or not choose either and, depending on the issue, choose one side a little more than the other."

In other words, since Seoul has supposedly not been

asked to join the alliance made up of Japan, Australia, India, and the United States, Lee avoids making his position clear. While undoubtedly conscious of the broad anti-war sentiment in South Korea, Lee and the Democrats speak for sections of the ruling class that fear the conflict stoked by Washington with Beijing is undermining their business interests in China, South Korea's largest trading partner.

Lee's posturing is entirely for show. When push comes to shove, Lee will fall in line with Washington's demands. His public statements commit him to nothing. At the same time, he has not made a single warning about the danger of war between the US and China. He is as responsible for keeping the war preparations hidden from public view as the current Moon administration.

Yoon, on the other hand, has been more vocal in his support for the US campaign against China. Echoing Washington's propaganda, he stated on January 24, "I would focus on bolstering a comprehensive and strategic alliance with the United States based on the shared values and principles of freedom, democracy, the market economy, constitutionalism and human rights."

Yoon also stated that he would expand Seoul's cooperation with the Quad alliance. In November, Yoon called for clearly aligning with Washington against Beijing, saying, "You have to lead the nation's business with strategic clarity."

Both the DP and PPP are capitalist parties but orient to different factions of the bourgeoisie.

The PPP's origins lie in the military dictatorship that came to power after Park Chung-hee's 1961 coup d'état and ruthlessly suppressed any opposition over the next three decades. Faced with growing unrest in the late 1980s, the South Korean ruling class moved to allow democratic elections, believing that the Democrats would serve as a crucial brake on the growing militancy of the working class.

The Democrat bloc served as a rallying point for various forces opposed to the military dictatorship while blocking any struggle against the capitalist system itself. Since the early 1990s and the advent of elections, the so-called liberal bloc has undergone various name changes as well as splits between the more openly right-wing politicians and those clinging to a thin, and insincere, veil of vague progressivism.

Emerging from this milieu, current President Moon Jae-in was elected in 2017 following the removal of Park Geun-hye, daughter of Park Chung-hee, from office for corruption. Moon previously challenged Park in the 2012 election, but was narrowly defeated. His election came amid of a surge of popular discontent resulting in massive protests demanding the removal of Park from office, but also broader social changes.

Backed by the so-called militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), Moon falsely postured as a friend of the working class and even as a president who would stand up to the US war machinations. None of this was true, as Moon quickly fell into line behind the Trump and then Biden administrations and backed big businesses in disputes with striking workers, including in the auto, shipbuilding, and package delivery industries.

Workers and youth should put no faith in either Lee, Yoon, or any of the other candidates, all of whom defend the profit system. The dangers posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and war can only be ended through the independent mobilization of the working class to end the bankrupt social order of capitalism that puts profits ahead of lives.



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