

COVID cases surge in South Korea as virtually all public health measures ended

Ben McGrath
16 February 2022

The number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea has skyrocketed by tens of thousands in recent days. On February 10, the number of daily new cases reached 54,122, an increase of 31,218 from the number of daily cases a week earlier. Similar numbers hovering over 50,000 have been reported each day since then. This explosion in new infections is a direct result of the policies of the Moon Jae-in administration, which has essentially junked all measures to stop the spread of the virus.

Nearly 60 percent of all deaths during the two years of the pandemic have taken place since November 1 last year when Seoul began the so-called “with COVID” era, in which the population would be forced to “live” with the virus. The deadly consequences of this policy quickly became apparent as the healthcare system was overwhelmed and deaths shot up. This has not given Seoul pause, however.

On February 7, government health authorities announced that they would no longer provide care for most COVID-19 patients, claiming they would only focus on those over 60 or with underlying health conditions. Infected patients will receive treatment at home, divided up into a high-risk group and a so-called general care group, with the former receiving remote treatment and consultations while the latter will not be monitored at all. The policy of treating patients at home, rather than in designated facilities, is an extension of measures initially implemented last October.

In announcing the new measures, the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters claimed, “The Omicron strain is less likely to develop serious symptoms and has a lower fatality rate compared to the Delta variant, and the majority of the patients suffer light or no symptoms. So the current disease control

and medical system, which equally focuses on all patients, is less efficient and can neglect the care of patients at high risk.”

The decision is being presented as the inevitable and unavoidable outcome of the surge in Omicron variant cases. Actually, it represents Seoul’s decision to allow COVID-19 to run rampant throughout the country and remove any restrictions on big business’ ability to rake in profits.

In addition, the government will only monitor people who are unvaccinated and living with a confirmed COVID patient. Those who have been fully vaccinated will not be monitored or required to quarantine, instead only *advised* to get tested if they begin to show symptoms. Unvaccinated people living with a confirmed COVID patient will not be directly notified, but instead authorities will pass on the information through the patient. The quarantine period for those infected has been reduced to seven days.

Even testing has been restricted. Most people are forced to rely on at-home self-testing kits, which are currently unavailable at most pharmacies and stores. Contact tracing has essentially been discarded. As a part of the new measures, confirmed patients have been asked to merely fill out an online questionnaire regarding their social activities. All of this ensures that people who are infectious will pass on the deadly virus to others.

The surge in the number of cases that began at the end of last year was concentrated in schools as all online classes came to an end and students were forced back into classrooms. Four children and adolescents have since died from the virus, most recently on February 4. A 17-year-old boy from the city of Gwangju passed away, despite having received two doses of the COVID vaccine and no underlying health

conditions. The boy was recuperating at home and was even released from quarantine on January 31 before his symptoms dramatically worsened. He was rushed to a hospital but died the following day.

When the pandemic initially began, Seoul implemented a number of measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including contact tracing, strict quarantines, mask requirements in all public places, restrictions on public facilities, and the closing of schools for in-person lessons. These measures played a big role in preventing mass infection in the densely populated country.

However, these steps were not taken out of concern for public health, but the fear that the failure to protect people from the virus would lead to mass anger. Gradually, these measures were ended as the government claimed the population could return to “normal,” giving a false sense of security.

The media focuses on a small minority of people opposed to vaccine and mask mandates to give the impression that there is widespread opposition to anti-virus measures. In fact, the opposite is true. About 86 percent of people have received two doses of the vaccine while nearly 60 percent have received a third dose. A survey conducted by Statistics Korea at the end of last year found 92 percent of people viewed mask wearing as a positive. An additional poll carried out by Research View in December reported that 71.3 percent of people supported stronger social distancing measures.

However, the huge opposition to the mass infection of the population finds no expression in the official political parties like the ruling Democratic Party of Korea or the right-wing opposition People Power Party. The same is true for minor, so-called progressive parties like the Justice Party and the trade unions. The “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions has worked to block any worker opposition to the Moon government.

Ultimately, these changes are meant to force people carrying COVID-19 to continue going to work and to keep children in schools, so that workers do not have to take time off to care for their children or other family members. This is to ensure that big business can continue to extract record amounts of wealth from the working class as a result of widespread speculation during the pandemic.

In the first half of 2021, for example, the top 30 major conglomerates like Samsung Electronics turned record profits, totaling 33.18 trillion won (\$US27.69 billion), a 220 percent increase over the previous year. At the same time, these companies created less than 1 percent of new jobs in the same time period, with most companies actually reducing their workforces.

On February 13, it was announced that the four major banking firms in South Korea—Hana Financial Group, Shinhan Financial Group, KB Financial Group, and Woori Financial Group—are expected to pay out record dividends of 3.8 trillion won (\$US3.2 billion) or approximately 26 percent of net profits from 2021.

The working class must take the management of the COVID pandemic out of the hands of the ruling class, which only seeks ever greater profits, and implement measures to eradicate the virus.



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