

COVID cases explode in South Korea ahead of presidential election

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6 March 2022

COVID-19 is currently raging out of control in South Korea only days before the country's March 9 presidential election. Daily cases have surged to over 250,000 new infections while the death toll has reached all-time highs as well. Neither the current Moon Jae-in administration nor any of the presidential candidates have proposed any measures to stop the spread of the deadly virus.

On Friday, new cases had increased by 2.6 times compared to two weeks earlier, according to health authorities. On March 4, the number of daily cases reached a record high of 266,850. In little more than a month, daily cases have exploded since first topping 10,000 on January 26. The current positivity rate of those tested is approximately 50 percent. Last week, 1,013 people died, double the number of deaths the previous week. This includes a record 216 people who passed away on March 5 alone. These grim facts expose the fraudulent narrative that the Omicron variant is milder and less dangerous.

Despite the surge in cases, Seoul has further reduced the few anti-virus measures remaining. On Saturday, the curfew on businesses such as cafés and restaurants was pushed back by one hour to 11 p.m. Interior Minister Jeon Hae-cheol made clear the decision was taken for the benefit of businesses, not public health. "The government took into consideration the prolonged and worsening hardship of business owners and small merchants despite a series of government compensations and partial easing of social distancing," Jeon stated.

The QR code check-in system confirming vaccinated individuals was "temporarily" suspended on March 1 and all contact tracing is being eliminated as well. That same day, the government dropped all requirements for someone in close contact with a confirmed patient to

quarantine or to receive a PCR test.

The change came right before the beginning of the new academic year and is certainly meant to keep schools open despite cases spreading among children and adolescents. According to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, about a quarter of all those testing positive nationwide are under 18. Schools are able to have online classes this week if they choose, but are set to have full in-person teaching from March 14.

From the start of the so-called "with COVID" era last November, schools became the new hotbed for transmission of the virus. The first deaths among children were also reported at the end of that month. Since then, five children and one teenager have died from the virus while countless more have been infected and now face the potential debilitating effects of Long COVID.

All of the major candidates have largely ignored the pandemic. The People's Health Institute, a non-profit, released a statement January 24, saying, "Three months have passed since all of the major parties have nominated their candidates. With the election only about a month away, it's still hard to make out what each candidate's views are on pandemic response and health care policy."

Instead, Lee Jae-myung from the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) and Yoon Seok-young of the People Power Party (PPP), when forced to acknowledge it, have pledged support for businesses as they attempt to woo the wealthy elite. Minor candidates Sim Sang-jeong of the "progressive" Justice Party and Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party have also failed to address the pandemic. Ahn dropped out of the race and folded his campaign into Yoon's last Thursday.

Health professionals have also questioned the lack of

any concrete plan from the candidates, leading a healthcare workers' union, undoubtedly under pressure from its rank-and-file, to release a statement on February 15, saying, "No concrete policy proposals for reducing COVID-19 threats have come from the would-be presidents, whose top priority should be the health and safety of the public, with the election rhetoric instead mired in salacious controversies and scandals."

The political establishment is moving quickly to meet the demands from big business and do away with all measures that impact profits. A survey last month by the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) found that only 8.9 percent of companies in South Korea with foreign investors planned to make investments this year, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason for their hesitation. Among that number, only 22.2 percent plan to increase investment from last year.

"The next administration that will be chosen through the presidential election in March will have to acknowledge companies' difficulties and improve tax benefits to those that have good employment and investment performance," said an FKI official told the media. "It should focus on creating a good business environment by refraining from raising the minimum wage and expanding the flexible work system."

In other words, while stock markets have surged and many companies are enjoying record profits, this is not enough for the corporate elite. All restrictions on businesses must be removed, more tax handouts provided to the wealthy, workers forced to labor for pittance, and "flexibility" enforced, i.e., the ability to fire workers at will.

Some 110 representatives of big business released a statement on February 20 in support of Yoon. "We couldn't sit idly by anymore, while the Moon administration and the ruling party put the entire nation in distress with their failed policies," the statement read. Signatories included Hwang Yeong-gi, former chairman at both Woori Financial Group and KB Financial Group. Both groups announced last month that they were paying out record dividends of 3.8 trillion won (\$US3.2 billion) or approximately 26 percent of net profits from 2021.

Lee Jae-myung has attempted to brush aside the corporate concerns that he is insufficiently pro-business. Speaking during an interview in December on Yonhap News TV, "I am a pro-business person in fact,

and people don't know that. Those who don't communicate directly with me, or do not know me enough, suspect that I am anti-corporate, pro-labor and anti-market."

Lee added, "[Companies are] the pillar of the market economy. It's very important that we provide the companies with a free environment." Lee has pledged to push back the curfew on businesses for customers who have received a vaccine booster shot to 12 a.m.

There has undoubtedly been a great deal of financial suffering during the course of the pandemic, but it has been the working class that has borne the brunt of the health disaster. None of the candidates has a genuine solution to this problem. It is only the working class that can end the pandemic by fighting for measures to eliminate the virus.



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