

South Korean trade unions hold mass rally in Seoul

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The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), one of the largest union organizations in South Korea, held a large-scale rally this past Saturday. Tens of thousands gathered in Seoul to oppose government and big business' plans for job cuts, restructuring, and other anti-worker "reforms." However, the KCTU's purpose is not to galvanize workers for a coming struggle, but to block such a movement from occurring.

Approximately 90,000 demonstrators gathered in the rain in front of Sungnyemun, near Seoul City Hall, chanting slogans that included "Stop anti-worker reforms," "Reform articles 2 and 3 of the Labor Union Act," and "Halt privatization." Participants and union leaders also denounced the right-wing government of Yoon Suk-yeol for the tragedy in Itaewon on October 29 that left 158 people dead.

The rally is an annual event held each November on the anniversary of the death of Jeon Tae-il, a 22-year-old textile worker and activist who committed suicide by self-immolation on November 13, 1970 to protest the brutal conditions in sweatshops under Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship. The KCTU exploits the memories of past struggles such as this to bolster its phony image as a militant or even anti-capitalist organization.

The KCTU's rally takes place amid increasing struggles by different sections of workers, which the unions are keeping separate and isolated from each other. On November 10, healthcare workers in the national university hospital system struck; railway and subway workers have voted to strike later this month; and workers at three major shipbuilders affiliated with the HD Hyundai chaebol (family-run conglomerates) voted at the end of October for strike action. Workers at Incheon International Airport have also staged protests.

Fearing an upsurge of the working class which would

threaten the profits of South Korean corporations and the privileged position of the union bureaucracy, the KCTU's goal is to channel working-class anger into support for the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea. The unions tell workers, whether explicitly or implicitly, that their rights can be defended through this pro-capitalist party and the National Assembly.

The KCTU reported prominently in its publication *Nodonggwa Segye* (*Labor and the World*) that Saturday's rally was the largest since the demonstrations that began in 2016 that led to the removal of right-wing President Park Geun-hye from office the following year. After Park's ouster, the union apparatus played the key role in suppressing the class struggle during the 2017-2022 administration of Democrat Moon Jae-in.

KCTU leader Yang Gyeong-su demagogically declared that "the rich do not care" and will "make a lot of money" if public transport and energy prices rise. "Privatization of water, electricity, gas, transportation, telecommunications, education, and medical care will squeeze the people and further enrich the chaebol," he said.

Yang then sought to promote illusions in the capitalist state, which has been responsible for waves of privatization and restructuring, under successive governments of every political stripe. He said: "In order to protect the lives of the working people (*minjung*), the role of the government should be expanded, not reduced, and the state should take responsibility."

The South Korean state, however, is not a neutral body ensuring fairness and equality for all, but the tool of the bourgeoisie for enforcing its dictatorship on the working class. Yang's use of the word "*minjung*," meaning "people," is also revealing: this term has long

been popular among South Korea's anti-socialist activists and middle-class ex-radicals; it is meant to invoke a sense of camaraderie across all classes in society, and thus imply that workers' problems can be solved along national and ethnic lines, instead of through the fight to unify the international working class against capitalism.

The KCTU and its allies, including various pseudo-left and other phony "socialist" groups present at Saturday's rally, strive to convince workers that capitalism can be made to benefit them, so long as "responsible" politicians are in office.

The Democrats, however, have a long history of attacks on the working class, including privatization, the casualization of labor, and support for imperialist wars led by the United States. Democrat Moon Jae-in's government, with the support of the unions, adopted the homicidal "let it rip" COVID policy, allowing the deadly virus to spread rapidly across the country, while protecting the profits of big business and paving the way for the assault on jobs and living conditions now taking place under Yoon.

During the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun (1998-2008), the Democrats played the leading role in enforcing the demands of big business and the International Monetary Fund by eliminating "lifetime employment" while carrying out mass sackings and corporate restructuring to prop up the chaebols. The KCTU supported these measures.

Saturday's rally also promoted the Democrats' demand for the revision of articles 2 and 3 of the Labor Union Act. This would supposedly protect workers from company lawsuits stemming from financial losses due to strikes. It is also known as the "Yellow Envelope" bill, referring to yellow envelopes used to collect donations from workers to pay for such lawsuits.

Rather than defend workers, however, the proposed law change is aimed at protecting union bureaucrats, as well as the unions' coffers. The Democrats fear that company lawsuits threaten the stability of these bureaucratic organizations, which the ruling elite relies on as key instruments to suppress the class struggle.

The unions would be able to use such legislation to isolate workers during strikes. The revised bill would exclude so-called violent or destructive acts, meaning that workers who seek to continue a strike following a

union sellout, or who take wildcat action, could face lawsuits or other legal repercussions. The unions would hold the law over workers' heads to force them to fall into line with the bureaucracy's demands.

For all its radical phrase-mongering, the KCTU staged a cheap stunt on Saturday, meant to pull the wool over the eyes of the working class. The fight for social equality requires a political rebellion against these pro-capitalist organizations, which are staffed by privileged middle class officials and are the tools of big business and the Democrats.

The fight to defend jobs, wages and working conditions necessitates the building of new organizations—rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves, like those which have been established by auto workers and railway workers in the United States. This will provide the means by which different sections of workers can overcome the isolation imposed on them by the unions, and link up their struggles both in South Korea and internationally.

Workers should reject the unions' bankrupt perspective of pressuring the capitalist parties and the state. The worsening social and economic crisis, and the increasingly imminent danger of nuclear war, proves that capitalism cannot be reformed. What is required is the building of a genuine socialist party to lead the fight for a workers' government that will put an end to capitalism and carry out the socialist reorganization of society. We urge workers in South Korea to contact us to discuss this perspective.



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