

South Korean government demands “normalization” of labor unions

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The South Korean government of President Yoon Suk-yeol is stepping up repressive measures against the country’s labor unions and opposition political figures. Dressed up as a “law-and-order” campaign, the administration is concerned above all about the growth of unrest and opposition in the working class as social and economic conditions sharply decline.

The government has declared it is necessary to “normalize” trade unions, increase their financial transparency and put an end to “illegal acts.” Last Thursday, the Ministry of Employment and Labor stated it will push for a revision of the country’s trade union law, formally called the Trade Union and Labor Relations Adjustment Act, in collaboration with the ruling People Power Party (PPP).

The proposed changes would give the government more control over unions. Labor Minister Lee Jeong-sik stated, “[Through the revision] the ministry will regulate what can be deemed as clear irregularities by labor unions within a scope that does not compromise labor activities.”

In pushing for these changes, the government has accused unions of hiding their finances from public view, including money received from the government. In February, government inspectors demanded that 327 labor unions with more than 1,000 members open their accounting books for inspection—207 unions refused.

Kim Dong-myeong, head of the yellow Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), called for the government to recognize the unions as “dialogue partners.” The so-called “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) stated that it did not receive any money from the government except for some 3 billion won (\$US2.3 million) on office space it rents, which is guaranteed by law.

The Yoon administration has also accused unions of

conducting illegal activities, such as demanding bribes and hindering work at construction sites. Conditions for construction workers are so poor that courts have previously ruled bribes are a part of doing business. The Gwangju Higher Court ruling on February 21 that they constitute “a decades-long practice and have virtually become a part of the wage.”

However, this campaign has nothing to do with upholding the law but is about boosting the profitability of big business and suppressing political opposition to the government’s policies, including its strengthening of South Korea’s military alliance with the US.

“If labor unions are normalized, our capital market will also be greatly developed,” Yoon said during a cabinet meeting on February 21. “Should labor unions, which shout opposition to (South) Korea-US military exercises or peddle employment opportunities, be normalized, the value of companies will rise automatically and jobs will be produced greatly.”

Any legal changes would limit workers’ democratic rights by essentially barring them from taking part in political rallies or demonstrations. Anything other than narrowly defined “labor activities” would be deemed illegal, which could include taking time off to attend demonstrations or using union funds for things like placards or transportation to rallies.

This also lies behind the government’s campaign against the leader of the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP), Lee Jae-myung. On February 27, a request submitted for Lee’s arrest was narrowly defeated in the National Assembly by a vote of 139 to 138, with nine abstentions and 11 invalid votes. Two other lawmakers were not present and one seat is vacant in the 300-seat assembly. Parliamentary approval is required for the arrest of a sitting lawmaker. Majority approval of those present, or 149 votes, was

needed to approve the arrest warrant.

Government prosecutors have accused Lee of corruption in a number of cases from his time as mayor of Seongnam, a city in Gyeonggi Province just south of Seoul, and then later as Gyeonggi governor. Lee ran against President Yoon in last year's presidential election. Corruption charges in South Korea are regularly utilized to settle political scores.

The Yoon administration is reviving old police-state measures in preparation for social conflict. For three decades, the South Korean bourgeoisie has relied on the unions and the Democrats to block a movement of the working class against capitalism. Neither the FKTU nor the KCTU, regardless of the latter's phony "militant" rhetoric, represent the interests of the working class, but instead orbit the DP, which defends capitalism no less than the PPP. The unions call strikes as safety valves on workers' anger while working to isolate them, preventing the growth of the class struggle, and shutting down job actions on management's terms.

However, with the growing social crisis, the ruling class increasingly feels it can no longer allow even this, lest a workers' movement grow outside the control of the DP and the unions. This became apparent following the truck drivers' strike in November and December of last year, which President Yoon likened it to a "threat" from North Korea.

The economic crisis in South Korea is worsening. According to the Bank of Korea, the economy is only expected to grow 1.6 percent this year after expanding by just 2.6 percent last year. The export-reliant country recorded a trade deficit in February for the 12th month in a row, the first time this has happened since 1997, just prior to the Asian Financial Crisis.

While the official unemployment rate stands at 3.6 percent, this is an underestimate of the true situation facing workers. It does not take into account the growth of low quality and poor-paying positions that exploded throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Statistics Korea, at the end of October the number of full-time jobs had fallen by 8.7 million from the previous year, the biggest drop in 11 years. Full-time workers now make up just 43.3 percent of the entire workforce. Many workers have taken jobs in the gig economy, working as delivery drivers. In other cases, jobs in manufacturing and the tourism industry offer little more than minimum hourly wage, which is

only 9,620 won (\$US7.42) this year.

Furthermore, inflation grew to 5.2 percent in January. This has in part been led by rising utility costs for electricity, water, and gas. These combined costs have grown by 28.3 percent over the same period last year. The rise in consumer prices has resulted in a drop in real wages for workers.

The working class should take the government's campaign against opposition figures and trade unions as a serious warning of the repression that will be directed against workers who take action to defend their social rights.



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