

COVID-19 continues to run rampant in South Korea

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It has been more than one year since South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol took office. In that time, his administration has torn up the country's remaining COVID-19 mitigation measures, a process that began under the previous Democratic Party of Korea (DP) government. Thousands continue to be infected each day while Seoul promotes the lie that the pandemic is over.

The Yoon administration has seized on the World Health Organization's May 5 announcement that COVID-19 was no longer a global health emergency in order to justify downgrading the crisis level for the deadly disease from "serious" to "alert." COVID-19 case numbers point to a different reality.

In the past week, there have been on average 18,985 official new cases per day as of Monday while an average of 11 people have died each day. Put into perspective, 159 people died in last year's Halloween crowd crush tragedy in Itaewon, meaning approximately double that number is dying from COVID-19 each month.

These facts did not stop Yoon from declaring on May 11 that the COVID-19 health emergency was over, and announcing that on June 1, nearly all remaining mitigation measures would be lifted. This includes eliminating the required seven-day isolation period for a person testing positive and replacing it with a "recommended" five-day isolation period.

Under conditions where governments around the world have similarly declared the pandemic over, even this recommended isolation period will not be encouraged. Ultimately workers will be forced back on the job while sick, inevitably leading to further infections. In addition, the few remaining indoor mask requirements at medical clinics and pharmacies will also be lifted, except for hospital wards serving

vulnerable patients. It will also become harder for people to receive PCR tests, as more and more screening centers are being closed.

The government claims that COVID-19 has now become "endemic," stating that the disease is now predictable and constant. Yoon declared on May 11, "I am pleased that the people are returning to their daily lives after three years and four months." In other words, the South Korean ruling class is imposing a new normal in which the death toll mounts and thousands are infected each day putting them at risk of Long COVID and other long-term health consequences.

Seoul had already lifted its indoor mask mandate for most places at the end of January. The government then lifted mask requirements on public transportation on March 20. Tracking the spread of the disease is also being suppressed. Previously, the government had announced new case numbers in cities and regions with a daily text message to people's phones, but that no longer occurs. Now, the government will make it even harder for people to receive updates on new cases, with figures released publicly on a weekly basis rather than each day.

However, many people continue to wear masks, reflecting the continued support for stopping the spread of COVID-19 among the population. If there are those that are increasingly removing their masks, it is a result of the constant barrage of disinformation from the government and media, spreading the lie that the pandemic has ended.

Yoon falsely declared, "The government has been doing its best to build an expert-centered, science-based response system, moving away from political disease control." The exact opposite is true. The claim that requirements like mask-wearing, online learning for students, and social distancing requirements were

nothing but politically motivated, denies that these science-backed measures helped halt the spread of COVID-19 early in the pandemic and are still required now. Conversely, the lifting of all mitigation measures is entirely political.

When the previous government of Democrat Moon Jae-in implemented mitigation measures at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, it was out of fear of opposition from the working class if it did not. These measures were widely popular and the vast majority adhered to them. However, the Moon government slowly began to chip away at these measures in the interest of big business, before announcing at the end of 2021 that South Korea would enter the “with COVID” era.

Between January 2 and October 29, 2022, according to Statistics Korea, 304,931 people died from all causes throughout the country. This was approximately 47,000 higher than the number of deaths during the same period in each of the preceding three years. The number of excess deaths in this 10-month period alone is significantly higher than the official death toll from COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic of 34,687.

Like the Yoon administration’s decision to downgrade COVID-19’s status and claim the pandemic is over, the announcement of the “with COVID” era was entirely political and in the interests of the ruling class.

It was aimed at winning support from big business for the DP’s presidential candidate, Lee Jae-myung, in the March 2022 election, which Yoon won. After taking office in May 2022, Yoon followed the path set by his predecessor and largely ignored the pandemic. Prior to the May 11 announcement, Yoon had not led a COVID-19 response meeting since July 29, 2022.

Yoon claimed the government’s decision on COVID had the support of medical professionals in South Korea. In announcing the supposed end of the pandemic, he appeared alongside 12 healthcare workers and thanked “doctors, nurses, and nursing assistants who committed themselves” to treating patients with COVID-19.

Throughout the pandemic, these workers, particularly nurses and support staff, waged struggles against the policies of both the Moon and Yoon administrations, demanding improved conditions. Healthcare workers

struck or attempted to strike at various times, including in September 2021, then again the same month the following year, and in November 2022. While already difficult before the pandemic, their conditions had worsened as a result of government policies to keep them on the job and then to allow COVID-19 to spread.

In each case, unions belonging to the so-called “militant” Korean Confederation of Trade Unions suppressed and sold out the strikes, reaching sellout deals to block a genuine struggle against the COVID-19 policies and other attacks on workers.

South Korean workers should not accept the unending COVID-19 pandemic as the new normal. However, they cannot look to the Democrats or the trade unions for support in a struggle against the disease and other attacks on their working and living conditions.



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