

# South Korean president pledges restrictions on right to protest

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The government of President Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea is stepping up its crackdown on workers' basic democratic rights, in particular the rights to free speech and assembly. It is part of the revival of the police state measures that the ruling class used for decades to suppress political dissent.

The Yoon administration and the ruling People Power Party (PPP) are seeking to forcibly block the growth of working-class struggle against attacks on economic and social conditions, as well as opposition to the growing threat of a US-instigated war against China.

On May 23, President Yoon announced he would strengthen the police and restrict protests, condemning an overnight rally the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) held on May 16 and 17. "It will be difficult for the people to tolerate the actions of the KCTU during the rally that infringed on people's freedoms and basic rights, and disturbed the public order," he claimed. "Our government will not neglect or tolerate any form of illegal action."

During the May 16-17 rally, approximately 25,000 members of the Korean Construction Workers' Union (KCWU), under the KCTU umbrella, held a march to the presidential office in Seoul to protest the government's anti-union policies. They staged sit-ins throughout the night in the streets around Gwanghwamun and Seoul City Hall, where many government offices are located. The next day, they were joined by another 15,000 KCTU members to continue their protest.

That demonstration was held, in part, in memorial to Yang Hoe-dong, a KCWU official who died on May 2, after self-immolating the previous day to protest criminal charges being brought against him. The government had accused Yang of extorting money from construction projects, allegations which the union

denounced as fabricated.

Following Yoon's denunciation of the KCTU's protests as "illegal," the union confederation held another rally on May 31, with approximately 20,000 taking part. At the demonstration, police carried crowd-control pepper spray for the first time in six years, though it was not used. The authorities also deployed 80 riot squads. Police clashed with union members and four protesters were arrested while another four were injured.

The KCWU released a statement on the May 31 rally, saying, "If they want to stop us from setting up a public memorial space and remembering the deceased, the right thing to do would be for the Yoon Suk-yeol government and Police Commissioner General Yun Hui-geun, who drove Yang Hoe-dong to his death, to first apologize to Yang and his family." It continued, "The police should not try to crush actions to remember Yang Hoe-dong with violence. The Construction Workers' Union will continue the struggle according to the wishes of the late activist until they sincerely apologize."

Despite this posturing, the KCTU does not genuinely represent the interests of the working class. It is closely aligned with the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP), which is pro-capitalist and has backed the US-led war drive against China.

However, the government's attacks on the union confederation are, above all, an attack on workers' rights to speak out and protest. While the KCTU attempts to portray itself as a "militant" labor organization, it will fall into line with the demands of the political establishment. The strengthening of the police state apparatus will be used against workers themselves, particularly those who attempt to break the confines established by the unions, such as by taking

wildcat strike action or organizing independently.

Workers' anger is growing as their conditions decline markedly. Statistics Korea reported on May 25 that the lowest, second lowest, and middle quintiles of wage earners saw their incomes increase by 3.2 percent, 2.2 percent, and 2.5 percent respectively in the first quarter of 2023. Factoring in inflation of around 5 percent, these amount to declines in real wages. The top two quintiles, however, saw their incomes exceed inflation, leading to further wage inequality.

Conscious of anti-war sentiment in the working class, the government and PPP are also accusing the KCTU of connections with North Korea. On May 10, the government indicted four former KCTU officials, charging them under South Korea's draconian National Security Act with espionage and meeting with North Korean spies. The identities of the four have not been revealed.

The allegations against the four include claims that Pyongyang directed them to hold protests against joint US-South Korea military exercises. The government is moving towards labelling any opposition to the growing danger of a US-instigated war with China as "pro-North Korean" in an attempt to intimidate workers and youth from speaking out.

Seoul has already taken an active role in preparing for such a conflict under both former President Moon Jae-in, a Democrat, and now under the right-wing Yoon. In April, Yoon and US President Joe Biden agreed to increased cooperation over the planning and potential use of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, South Korea participates in the US's anti-ballistic missile system in the region through the hosting of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery, holds joint military exercises with the US and Japan, and embraces the deployment of US strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula which are capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

More broadly, the Yoon administration's manoeuvrings are part of growing attacks on democratic rights around the globe. Last week, for example, the South Australia state Labor Party government pushed through parliament new legislation imposing harsh penalties on any protesters causing an "obstruction" in a public place.

In Toronto, Canada, far-right forces led by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, backed by the Ontario

Minister of Labour Monte McNaughton, attacked a meeting held Sunday by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, called "The war in Ukraine and how to stop it," demanding the Toronto Public Library cancel the IYSSE's room booking for the event.

The ruling classes around the world simply cannot tolerate discussion and dissent on the most pressing issues facing the working class and young people today. In that regard, the Yoon government's attacks on South Korean workers' democratic rights are not unique. Workers around the world are experiencing the same assaults, demonstrating the need for the working class internationally to unite in defence against these attacks.



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