

South Korean main opposition leader in court on corruption charges

Ben McGrath
8 October 2023

The leader of South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) attended his first trial on corruption charges on Friday. Lee Jae-myung faces numerous allegations, with last week's proceedings focused on a land development scandal. The charges are not simply about the immediate allegations at hand, but are the result of growing social tensions and the government's targeting of opposition political figures.

Prosecutors have been investigating Lee for months. Lee is accused of using his position as mayor of Seongnam from 2010 to 2018 to illegally benefit property developers working on projects in the city's Wirye and Daejang-dong districts. This supposedly led to 489.5 billion won (\$US364 million) in financial losses for the local government while the private developers were able to reap upwards of 809 billion won (\$US602 million) in profits.

Lee also stands accused of soliciting 13.3 billion won (\$US9.9 million) in bribes from major corporations, funnelled through Seongnam's professional soccer team. Seongnam is located in Gyeonggi Province, just south of Seoul.

On September 27, Lee avoided arrest in a different case related to accusations that he had similarly used his influence as mayor to benefit private developers in a project in Seongnam's Baekhyeon-dong district.

In addition, Lee faces charges that he oversaw the remittance of \$US8 million to North Korea during his tenure as governor of Gyeonggi Province from 2018-2021. In another separate case, Lee has been accused of violating the election law during his failed bid in last year's presidential election.

Lee has denied the accusations against him and denounced them as politically motivated. On Friday, he stated during his court hearing, "Dozens of prosecutors were mobilized for the investigation of me and

hundreds of raids were carried out." He continued, "They will continue with it again and keep doing it as long as I'm alive, will they not?"

There is no doubt that the cases against Lee are politically motivated, regardless of any alleged personal dishonesty. Bribery and corruption are widespread throughout the South Korean political and business worlds. Corruption cases are used to settle political scores in the ruling class and cover up the real motivations for targeting a given individual or group.

The government of right-wing President Yoon Suk-yeol and the ruling People Power Party are deeply concerned over growing social unrest. As around the globe, South Korea is facing declining economic conditions and an upsurge of the working class that refuses to foot the bill for this downturn. Yoon has also directly lined the country up behind Washington for a US-instigated war against China, which includes forming what is essentially a trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan, Korea's former colonial oppressor.

Lacking any popular support for its agenda, the Yoon regime is responding by reviving the police state measures of past dictatorships. The targeting of the main opposition party stems from the fear that any, even limited, political opposition could become the focal point for a broader struggle against the government and its agenda. The attacks on Lee are aimed at intimidating rival sections of the ruling class while also preparing broader attacks on the working class.

Yoon, who previously served as South Korea's top prosecutor, defeated Lee by less than one percent in the March 2022 presidential election. After taking office, Yoon stacked various government positions, including at the ministerial level, with former prosecutors close to

him. Many of the officials currently holding key positions in the prosecutorial service itself are Yoon allies.

The president has attacked workers' right to strike and organize, pledged to restrict the right to protest, and attempted to silence critics in the media. In a Liberation Day speech on August 15, the president denounced political opponents as "anti-state forces" who are under the influence of "communist totalitarianism."

Only seven years ago, a massive protest movement erupted against the right-wing government of Park Geun-hye, who was impeached and removed from office. While seemingly driven by Park's personal corruption, demonstrators expressed their frustrations with worsening economic conditions and began to draw lines between Park's conduct and the oppressive character of the capitalist system as a whole.

Democrat Moon Jae-in subsequently replaced Park as president in 2017. He came to office posturing as a friend of workers and even as a vaguely anti-war candidate, pledging to negotiate with North Korea. In reality, Moon oversaw attacks on the working class and the expansion of social inequality, particularly throughout the still-ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which helped pave the way for the conservatives to take power again.

Economic conditions have declined further since then. A driving factor is US protectionist measures aimed at China, which are hampering South Korea's ability to trade with its two largest economic partners. Exports have fallen for 12 straight months while those of semiconductors, a key export item, have fallen for 14 straight months. Workers' real wages have declined nearly every month since April 2022 as a result of inflation.

Lee Jae-myung and the Democratic Party are certainly no friends of the working class. The DP represents sections of the bourgeoisie that fear the US-led war drive in the region is cutting across their interests, including business connections in China and the desire to open up North Korea as an ultra-cheap labour platform. The Democrats are also conscious of the widespread anti-war sentiment within the working class, which the party attempts to direct along nationalist channels by utilizing anti-Japanese chauvinism.

In targeting the Democrats, the Yoon administration

wants to ensure that no movement can coalesce around the opposition that will disrupt the government's agenda, including its war preparations alongside Washington and Tokyo. While the DP would attempt to divert or block any working-class movement, the fear within the ruling class is that mass protests could erupt against the government could spiral out of the control of the Democrats and their allies in the trade unions.

The Democrats are downplaying the government's anti-democratic measures and blaming Yoon's lack of experience. An article last month in the DP-aligned *Hankyoreh* newspaper, declared that Yoon had "blundered" his way into office. The article claimed Yoon "ended up running for president and winning without really knowing why he should be president or what he should do if he became president."

In reality, under conditions of geo-political tensions and an intensifying economic and social crisis at home, the Yoon government is reviving the police-state measures of the past. While the South Korean military dictatorship was formally replaced by an elected presidential administration in 1987, the state apparatus has remained largely unchanged.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)