

Campaigning begins for South Korea's general election

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Official campaigning for South Korea's April 10 general election begins tomorrow as candidates compete for the 300 seats in the country's unicameral National Assembly. Candidates in the quadrennial contest will contend for 254 direct-election seats and 46 seats allocated by proportional representation. None of the parties or candidates competing in the election represents a genuine, progressive choice for workers and youth.

Candidate registration took place last week with 951 potential lawmakers registering and 21 parties competing in the direct-election races. President Yoon Suk-yeol's right-wing ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the so-called "liberal" opposition Democratic Party (DP) currently dominate the legislature with the latter holding a majority. Additionally, 38 parties are running for proportional representation seats.

Neither the DP or PPP are officially running for proportionally allocated seats. Under the election law passed prior to the 2020 general election, supposedly meant to help minor parties secure more seats, parties winning larger numbers of directly elected seats earn fewer proportionally allocated seats. As a result, the DP and PPP have set up satellite parties to run as their proxies, fully intending to integrate them into the main party after the election.

In other cases, politicians from the main parties, who found themselves excluded from positions of influence by rivals, have also set up minor parties in order to use any seats they gain as leverage in their disputes or to scoop up disaffected voters and direct them back behind the establishment camps. A significant amount of horse-trading behind the scenes has therefore already taken place or will take place following the election.

Neither of the two main parties has a clear advantage in opinion polls, although the Democrats appear to have

a slight edge. In a survey published by Yonhap News Agency on March 21, the DP led the PPP by 49 percent to 44 percent. The same poll found President Yoon's approval rating was only 36 percent, which could affect his party's performance.

The limited election campaigning that has taken place so far has been marked by various empty populist pledges. The election has also been cast as a choice between DP leader Lee Jae-myung, who has been embroiled in a number of politically-motivated corruption scandals, and President Yoon, even though the latter is not running for re-election. South Korean presidents are chosen in separate elections for single, five-year terms.

Neither the Democrats nor the PPP has put forward any serious measures to address the needs of the working class. Instead, the various handouts that have been proposed and other vague promises, such as improving childcare to raise the country's low birthrate, will quickly be junked as soon as the election is over. Neither party has seriously addressed growing social inequality or the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has been entirely ignored even as it continues to rip through the population.

Regarding inequality, a March 24 report from Chaebol.com, which analyzes South Korea's massive family-owned conglomerates, found that top executives at these companies, on average, were paid 1.09 billion won (\$US813,000) last year. In contrast, the average yearly salary across the entire population as of 2022 was only 40.2 million won (\$US29,970), according to the National Tax Service. Furthermore, the largest chaebol, Hyundai Motors, last year took in a record profit of 15.1 trillion won (\$US11.3 billion), a 54 percent increase from the previous year.

Nor have any parties addressed the danger of a United

States-instigated war with China. Yoon and the PPP have openly lined up behind the US war drive. Last year, Yoon agreed to a de facto trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan while also expanding Seoul's involvement in the planning for the use of Washington's nuclear weapons. He has also overseen a number of massive war games and military exercises alongside the US and Japan, provocatively held on China's doorstep. This has also drastically raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula, a significant flashpoint in the region.

The DP falsely postures as an anti-war party. "Since Yoon, living costs have skyrocketed, the risk of a war on the Korean Peninsula has escalated, and South Korean democracy is under attack," Lee Jae-myung claimed at a meeting of Democratic Party leaders on March 11. "All that is going to change when we claim victory on April 10."

In reality, the DP has consciously ignored Washington's growing threats towards China by pledging to step up diplomacy with the US, Japan, China, and Russia over North Korea. In reality, the Democrats are limiting any "anti-war" measures to those approved by Washington, which has no intention of pulling back from a conflict with Beijing. At the same time, in an acknowledgement of the war preparations taking place, the DP has pledged to rapidly acquire new weapon systems.

No-one should take Lee or the Democrats seriously. The DP already holds a majority in the National Assembly, a result of its 2020 general election victory. The party did nothing for workers when it controlled the legislature and the presidency while Democrat Moon Jae-in held power between 2017 and 2022.

In fact, the Moon government carried out multiple attacks on workers, imposing wage freezes in the auto industry, the expansion of unstable and underpaid irregular jobs to record levels, and overseeing mass job cuts, particularly under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of this, Moon expanded the military alliance with the US, which included the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to South Korea, which is directed at China.

Providing cover for the Democrats, as always, is the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which masquerades as a "militant" workers' organization. Branches of the KCTU have held rallies in recent days

to supposedly denounce pro-chaebol and pro-capitalist policies of the government. This is a fraud. The KCTU, while not officially backing the DP, supports the party by claiming that it is necessary to limit Yoon's power, implying this would occur with a Democrat-led National Assembly.

During a rally in front of the National Assembly in Seoul on March 21, for example, Eom Mi-gyeong, vice-chairwoman of the KCTU, denounced Yoon, saying, "President Yoon Suk-yeol has been actively conducting a general election tour rather than maintaining political neutrality. At the same time, he is deceiving the public by overstating policies that he cannot keep. As this happens, the public cannot but raise their voices to judge the Yoon administration."

What this means, according to the KCTU leader, is that workers and youth should vote for the Democrats while all of the problems the working class confronts are placed at the feet of Yoon and the PPP. She was of course silent on the broken promises of the Democrats. In reality, the crisis workers face is the result of the entire capitalist system.



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