South Korea’s president whips up anti-foreigner chauvinism

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Amid a deepening social crisis and preparations for war in the Asia-Pacific region, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung has recently invoked anti-migrant and anti-foreigner chauvinism during cabinet meetings and with numerous social media posts.

At an October 27 cabinet meeting, Lee stated that “as a matter of national security strategy, we need to revive agriculture, forestry, livestock farming and fisheries—all of them.” He added: “Even if we bring in foreign workers (to do the work), they don’t do much to help the national economy because they send all (their wages) back home.”

The following day, Lee shared a post from FM Korea, a far-right online forum where users, often young men, attack women, immigrants, and any other group they believe receives unfair special treatment. The post that Lee shared claimed multicultural families, particularly those with Chinese backgrounds, were receiving “preferential treatment” at postpartum care centers.

Many of the racist attacks in South Korea are directed at ethnic Chinese and Chinese Koreans, who account for approximately a third of immigrants in the country. Whipped up by the far right, these slanders are an element of Seoul’s preparations to join a US-led war against China.

Lee was criticized both online and by worker groups. In response, the president wrote the next day on Twitter/X, “If foreign nationals feel like the minority here, they can go back to their country.” He went further, attacking women who “come as marriage migrants, only to disappear after getting Korean citizenship.”

Initially, DP leaders defended the president’s remarks. Party spokesman Cho Gye-won stated that “nitpicking isolated phrases from President Lee’s social media posts to distort his true intentions have crossed the line.”

As the remarks increasing gained criticism, the DP resorted to damage control. Jeon Seong-hwan, senior presidential secretary for public engagement and social cohesion, reportedly offered an apology on the president’s behalf during a meeting with migrant rights groups on November 3. However, Lee himself has not withdrawn his comments.

While not yet as blatant as US President Trump, Lee is whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment for the same purpose—to try to divert growing anger over declining economic conditions into rightwing, nationalist channels.

Lee’s comments reveal just how out of touch the government is with the working class as a whole. South Korea is home to 2.8 million foreigners, who work, have families, and are parts of their communities. It is not uncommon to hear multiple different languages spoken on the streets of Seoul. Workers from Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Mongolia, China, and many other countries work and live side-by-side their South Korean colleagues.

At the same time, Lee and the ruling Democratic Party (DP) have overseen skyrocketing housing prices as well as stagnant wages coupled with overall growing social inequality. A Realmeter poll released on November 9 showed Lee’s approval rating falling to 35.9 percent while a separate survey showed support for the Democrats has fallen to just 36.5 percent.

Housing prices in the capital of Seoul have risen for 91 consecutive weeks, including an 8.8 percent surge in 2026. According to the Ministry of Data and Statistics, the prices of goods such as processed foods and gasoline increased by 2.9 and 11.6 percent respectively last month. Core inflation stood at 2.8 percent.

Real wages fell 1 percent in April, 1.4 percent in

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May, 0.1 percent in June, and 0.3 percent in July. They grew 0.8 percent in August, nowhere near enough to make up for the recent decline or the growth in prices. Additionally, a survey of salaried workers by NH NongHyup Bank showed that on average nearly 80 percent of their pay had left their accounts within 10 days, spent on rent, bills, and student loans.

Meanwhile, the corporate elite is enjoying an economic boom. South Korea's GDP growth is expected to reach 3.3 percent this year, up from 1.1 percent growth last year. The Finance Ministry expects South Korean manufacturing exports to exceed $US1 trillion, becoming only the fourth country to reach that mark after the US, China, and Germany.

President Lee's claim that foreign workers "don't do much" for the economy has no bearing on reality. All wealth in society is created by the working class, whether native-born or migrant.

The country's export-led economy is heavily reliant on both irregular, temporary South Korean workers and migrant workers from overseas, both sections of which are heavily exploited. Migrant workers are employed in jobs in manufacturing, construction, farming, and fishing. Just over half of migrant workers (50.2 percent) earn between 2 million and 3 million won ($US1,500 to $US2,200) per month while the overall median wage for all workers is 2.88 million won ($US2,153).

Jeong Yeong-seop of the Alliance for Migrant Workers' Equal Rights, stated: "Farm owners prefer foreign workers because during the busy farming season, when Korean workers earn 140,000 to 150,000 won a day ($US105 to $US112), they only have to pay foreign workers around the minimum wage, 80,000 to 90,000 won ($US60 to $US67). This discrimination keeps causing problems."

In addition, migrant workers are often employed in 3D jobs: dirty, difficult, and dangerous. On July 1, Aung Min Oo, a 37-year-old worker from Myanmar, died at a KTX railway construction site in Asan, South Chungcheong Province after getting trapped in a conveyor belt while inspecting it. According to an August 12 article in the *Korea Herald*, Aung would frequently work 11-hour shifts, with some lasting up to 20 hours while working some months without a day off. Aung's payroll also revealed that in one month, he had worked 355 hours while receiving 103,200 won ($US77) per eight-hour shift, whereas South Korean workers received between 120,000 won and 250,000 won ($US90 to $US187).

Workers' living quarters, often provided by employers, are also frequently reported in poor condition. A survey released in March conducted by Gyeonggi Province of seasonal workers found that 22.8 percent were living in illegal, makeshift housing including vinyl greenhouses or shipping containers, sometimes without heat or electricity. In December 2020, Nuon Sokkheng, a 31-year-old Cambodian farm worker in Pocheon, Gyeonggi Province, died from the cold because her living quarters lacked adequate heating.

Nuon and Aung's deaths are among the many workplace fatalities that take place across South Korea, where deaths regularly top 2,000 annually on official government statistics. Statistics for 2025 from the Labor Ministry recorded 2,248 work-related deaths, which includes those subject to investigation as a result of accidents as well as those resulting from illnesses and other poor conditions on the job site. The latter deaths frequently go unreported in statistics in the media.

Over the past five years, at least 463 migrant workers were killed in industrial accidents, with most deaths taking place in construction. The death rate for migrant workers is 2.3 to 3.6 times higher than that of South Korean workers, according to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea. In many cases, deaths and accidents go unreported as workers either endure injuries to keep their jobs or families of the deceased do not file claims.

Far from "not doing much," foreign workers are in fact an integral component of South Korea's economy, just as they are in countries throughout the world.

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