

South Korea's Democrats sow complacency and roll back protests

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23 December 2024

Since President Yoon Suk-yeol's failed attempt to impose martial law on December 3 in South Korea, large-scale protests have taken place around the country. While these demonstrations reflect the widespread public outrage over this attack on basic democratic rights, the political establishment is focused on derailing these protests and preventing any challenge to the capitalist system.

On Saturday, approximately 300,000 people took part in rallies in Gwanghwamun, Seoul demanding Yoon's resignation and arrest. Additional protests took place in other major cities like Busan, Daegu, Ulsan, and Gwangju. Demonstrations have continued on a daily basis.

Two weekends ago, some one million participants gathered on December 7 outside of the National Assembly to demand Yoon's removal from office in an impeachment vote scheduled for that day, which failed as it was boycotted by the ruling People Power Party (PPP). On December 14, two million rallied outside the National Assembly against Yoon remaining in power. The impeachment motion, sponsored by the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) and five minor opposition parties, passed that day with 12 PPP lawmakers out of 108 voting in favor.

With Yoon impeached and suspended from office, the Democrats and their allies are seeking to roll back the demonstrations and block any demands that go beyond Yoon's removal from office to address falling real wages and deteriorating social conditions. Yoon's fate will ultimately be decided by the Constitutional Court, which could rule against his removal as president.

The DP conducts its rallies like campaign events. All of the problems workers face are being laid at Yoon's feet. DP leader Lee Jae-myung stated on Saturday in an online post, "The revolution of light has only just

begun. We have barely climbed a small mountain. Let's overcome the counterattacks of those that tried to become permanent rulers and prove with our own hands the people are the masters of the country."

Such empty declarations by Democrats are nothing new and recall a similar event in recent history: the mass protests and removal from office of another right-wing president, Park Geun-hye, whose Saenuri Party was the predecessor of Yoon's PPP.

Like Yoon, Park was already widely despised when corruption allegations surfaced, sparking rallies in opposition to her administration in October 2016. These allegations involved influence peddling through Park's friend, Choi Soon-sil, who also used their friendship for her personal benefit. Park, working through Choi, solicited bribes from South Korean companies like Samsung and Hyundai. Park also exerted control over and censored the media.

Hundreds of thousands protested weekly in Seoul, with the number of attendees reaching nearly two million at times. Many held candles giving the demonstrations the name "candlelight movement" or even "candlelight revolution." Park was impeached on December 9, 2016 and the Constitutional Court removed her from office on March 10, 2017. She was later arrested and found guilty of corruption in April 2018, when she was sentenced to 24 years in prison. Her successor, Democrat Moon Jae-in, pardoned her in December 2021.

The supposed "candlelight revolution" of 2016–2017 led to the government of Democrat Moon Jae-in, who held office from 2017–2022. Moon oversaw sharp attacks on workers, which included wage freezes, job cuts, and renegeing on promises to end irregular and casual work. Moon backed the US-led war drive against China after previously posturing as an opponent

of war. He furthermore oversaw the vast growth of inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic, while laying the groundwork for “living with” the deadly virus.

In carrying this agenda out, the so-called militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) provided the Democrats with a phony “progressive” veneer. Then-KCTU leader Choi Jong-jin declared in April 2017, shortly before Moon’s election, “Our lives must be changed to have a real candlelight revolution and there must be a presidential election that changes our lives.” In other words, workers were told, the election of Moon would lead to “change” and even “revolution.”

All of this was to dull workers’ awareness of the pro-business policies that Moon would implement and the danger of martial law, which the ruling class always has in its back pocket to be used when necessary. According to plans leaked to the public in July 2018, if the Constitutional Court had ruled in Park’s favor, the military planned to impose martial law to suppress any renewal of protests. The Moon administration, which was kept in the dark for a year about these plans, downplayed the threat at the time.

Similar plans could be in the works now. At present, only six judges sit on the Constitutional Court while three seats are vacant. Acting President Han Duck-soo and the PPP are blocking the appointment of three new judges. Furthermore, six judges must vote to remove a president in an impeachment trial, meaning Yoon only needs one judge to side with him. The court is not a neutral arbiter deciding what is best for the entire population, but a wing of the bourgeois state and a defender of capitalist rule.

If Yoon returns to office, he would have all his previous powers, including over the military and the ability to declare martial law again. Both he and the PPP are stonewalling the proceedings, indicating that Yoon has no intention of going quietly, no doubt emboldened by the rolling back of protests and strikes.

Rather than draw workers’ attention to the danger of dictatorship, the KCTU has ended its limited protests and strikes, playing the same role it did in 2017.

On December 4, KCTU head Yang Gyeong-su claimed the union confederation would conduct an “indefinite general strike” until Yoon was removed from power.

However, the reality is very different. Previously planned strikes by railway workers took place on December 5 and lasted until December 11, shut down after the intervention of Democrat leader Lee Jae-myung. School staff workers in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province also struck on December 6. Hyundai Motors workers took part in four-hour strikes on December 5 and 6. Kia and GM Korea workers held additional two-hour strikes on December 11.

Then on December 16, the KCTU announced that it was lifting its “general strike guidelines” following Yoon’s impeachment. KCTU leader Yang claimed, “President Yoon Suk-yeol’s powers have been suspended. Yoon pushed the people’s lives into suffering while committing anti-labor violence and violating the constitution. In the end, democracy, workers and citizens, and the KCTU won.”

This is not simply a mistaken policy on the part of the unions. The KCTU has worked in league with the Democrats for decades. Though emerging out of the struggle of workers in the 1980s and early 1990s, the KCTU was formally founded in November 1995 and quickly adapted itself to the state. In the mass strike waves that erupted in December 1996, the KCTU agreed to suppress the strikes and impose so-called “labor flexibility” on the working class in exchange for semi-legality. The KCTU did the same following the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis and received full legal recognition in 1999 under the presidency of Democrat Kim Dae-jung. Since then, the KCTU has been integrated into the state.

Contrary to the assertions that democracy “won,” the danger to the working class is not over. The perfidy of the Democrats and the KCTU demonstrates that no faction of the ruling class has any genuine commitment to democratic rights. Rather the fight for democratic rights must be taken up by workers as part of the struggle for socialism as the means for resolving the worsening social and economic crisis.



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