



HYUN LEE

1970-2022

COLLECTED WRITINGS

**Hyun Lee (1970 - 2022):
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Hyun Lee and the Movement for Peace in Korea

By Christine Hong | July 27, 2022

On March 7, 2022, Hyun-jung Lee, a beloved and deeply respected comrade in the Korea peace movement, a talented acupuncturist, and a cherished daughter, sister, and emom, passed away after a long and courageous battle with breast cancer. Just 51 years old, she was a brilliant beacon of light within a transnational struggle for peace on the Korean peninsula. As Ramsay Liem, curator of the multimedia Korean War exhibit *Still Present Pasts*, stated, “Each era of the seemingly endless struggle for Korean independence, democracy, and unification has its pillars. Hyun [was] one of ours.” Goal-oriented to the very end, Hyun offered video-recorded parting words in late February to the people alongside whom she had organized over the past three decades. “I



don’t know how far I will make it,” she stated while in hospice, “But I feel so confident because we now have an army of people fighting for peace in Korea.” Although ravaged by the cancer that had metastasized to her brain yet refusing pain medication in order to keep her mind as clear as possible, Hyun assumed her well-worn position within the trenches of the anti-imperialist wing of the Korea peace movement. Urging all of us to keep our eyes on the prize of genuine peace, she rallied us “to push together, nobody leading and somebody following—everybody together.”

Not one to clamor for the limelight or driven by ego, Hyun was a people’s organizer, unswayed by the capitalist aura around celebrity activists. If she could be described as a leader of any kind, it was from below and to the left. Without fuss, drama, or complaint, Hyun time and again rolled up her sleeves to do whatever work was required, often behind the scenes. Maximally impactful yet unassuming, she was a force to be reckoned with, not only as an astute strategist and a workhorse of an organizer unwavering in her dedication to various interrelated causes but also as a fearless queer woman fighter against racism, sexism, and imperialism whose example inspired generations of activists in the diasporic Korean, pan-Asian, and multiracial organizing spaces in which she moved. Having worked closely with Hyun in multiple overlapping

arenas in the 1990s, including Iban/QKNY, a multi-gender queer Korean community group, John Won noted she was “at the heart of so many movements, as many Queer Korean women/femmes have been.” In the broader progressive landscape in New York, Hyun belonged to a formidable cohort of radical Asian women organizers who moved and shook the world with an eye to its transformation. Theirs was and continues to be a feminism grounded in praxis.

Albeit a classically trained cellist with an Ivy League education, Hyun embraced the work of urban community organizing. After earning an undergraduate degree in English literature from Columbia University, Hyun in 1994 joined CAAAV, an Asian community organization in New York City where she cut her teeth as a “non-Chinese person training young Chinese immigrants to do street vendor and tenant organizing,” in former executive director Helena Wong’s words. To no small degree, Hyun came of age in a grassroots organization that she would help grow, staying with CAAAV until 2004. Indeed, CAAAV credits her as vital to its three-plus-decade legacy of “remarkable women who built the base, developed leadership of community members, developed strategic campaigns, coordinated direct actions, showed up in solidarity for others, and built the infrastructure of the organization.”¹ Gifted at staging street performances and community art projects, Hyun approached such endeavors as the cultural front of political struggle and a form of popular education. “I think Hyun...secretly wanted to be an artist,” Wong stated. With CAAAV youth, she was “always concocting up ideas. ...One summer, they decided to do this exhibit where they would take plywood and trace the bodies of the young people on them, and then cut them out and put stories about gentrification in Chinatown.”

In CAAAV, Hyun accrued extensive experience initiating grassroots campaigns—a skill set that would transfer to organizing work she undertook in other arenas. She created the Chinatown Justice Project (formerly Racial Justice Project). She was central to a multiracial coalitional effort to have the policeman who in March 1995 shot 16-year-old Yong Xin Huang in the back of the head indicted for murder. Five years into this campaign, when the system failed to deliver justice, Hyun, in her own recollection, “cried all night in the empty CAAAV office,” resolving never again to harbor “illusions about this system in the United States.” Born out of hard firsthand experience, this clarity would inform the ferocity of her analysis and methodical preparation for long struggle in other organizing arenas. As Wong recalled, by developing political education in CAAAV, Hyun was critical, moreover, to helping members “connect struggles in different parts of the world to our own work in the United States.”

¹ CAAAV, “CAAAV’s 30th Anniversary: The People Build the Place, the People Build the Power,” May 25, 2016, https://www.caaav.org/30th_anniversary/caaav_30th.html.



Hyun (center), holding the megaphone, at an action in front of City Hall that was part of the five-year campaign for justice for Yong Xin Huang.

Indeed, from the 1990s onward, Hyun kept the militancy of Third World internationalism alive in her solidarity work. From 2001 to 2007, she was a member of Third World Within, a New York City-based, multiracial mobilization whose campaigns and direct actions sought to link “the struggle between those in the Third World and those who subsist in the Third World within the United States” by exposing the structural ties between exploitative racist labor conditions in the United States, on the one hand, and imperial policies and practices, including war violence, on the other.² In an era when neoliberal multiculturalism served ideologically to disable an anti-imperialist critique of racism, Hyun’s participation in numerous delegations—to Cuba in 1996, the World Social Forum in India in 2004, the Philippines on three occasions through BAYAN USA from 2005 to 2015, and Palestine in 2012—testified to her unswerving solidarity with the revolutionary struggles of peoples of color around the world against imperialism. In Cuba, the Philippines, and Palestine, all sites shaped by militarized U.S. foreign policy, Hyun further perceived lines of continuity with Korea. She memorably spoke, on her return from Palestine, about the strange familiarity of being among another partitioned people.

A commitment to Korea’s reunification intensified over the course of Hyun’s three decades of organizing, including in her insistence on doing Korea solidarity work as part of CAAAV’s Chinatown Justice Project. Over time, her investment in Korea peace work deepened into a priority. Having emigrated in 1981 to the United States from Seoul where she was born on September 20, 1970, Hyun was too young to claim membership in the generation that fought for democracy in South Korea during the era of U.S.-backed military dictatorship. Yet she, too, keenly felt what she described as “the deep scars” of the U.S.-authored division of Korea and the continued harm of U.S. war politics on the peninsula. Within a U.S. context, especially in the post-9/11 era after George W. Bush targeted North Korea, now part of the “axis of evil,” for renewed

² “April 16 Demonstrations Against the IMF and World Bank,” *CAA AV Voice*, special issue on “Women, Race, and Work” 10:4 (2000):17.

intervention, Hyun and other diasporic Koreans were vital to materializing past and present U.S. imperial violence in Korea as an urgent organizing focus. Disclosing her family's tragic Cold War secret, namely, that her paternal great-uncles had been killed for daring to oppose Korea's partition, Hyun reflected on how the Korean "people's desire for reunification" began to take deep root in her, becoming her own desire and shaping her organizing.



Hyun (fourth from left) taking part with Nodutdol members in the May Day protests of 2017.

Nodutdol, the New York-based, multigenerational, progressive Korean community organization that most Koreans in the diaspora came to associate Hyun with, served as a stepping stone—in keeping with its name—for her full-blown entry into Korea movement work. From 2006 to 2017, as a strategist behind the organization's campaigns—those against the neoliberal Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, the unilateral expansion of the U.S. basing system to Pyeongtaek, and the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system to Seongju, as well as those in support of South Korean labor—Hyun continued developing her capabilities as an international solidarity worker. In Nodutdol, however, she did so specifically as a diasporic Korean, alongside other militantly anti-imperialist diasporic Koreans, with regard to a divided and occupied Korea. As Nodutdol's campaigns demonstrated, diasporic Koreans were uniquely positioned within a struggle for a genuine people's democracy in South Korea that was necessarily transnational in scope, given South Korea's subimperial subordination to the United States. Gonji Lee recalls Hyun as being part of a formidable "squad of Nodutdol eonnis," women who collectively shaped the organization's focus and directions in durable ways—and by extension the broader Korean left within the United States. As Minju Bae has remarked, Hyun, through the political foundation she helped to build in Nodutdol, "lives on in the organization."



Juyeon Rhee, Hyun (second to left), Hye-jung Park, and Father Mun Jeong-hyun in the Nodutdol office.

Even prior to Nodutdol's formation, Hyun was one of several Korean organizers in New York who, in 1995, collaborated in the development of the Korea Education and Exposure Program (KEEP), a grassroots political educational initiative that would subsequently be incorporated into Nodutdol and emerge as one of its signature programs. Profound in impact, KEEP has enabled successive generations of diasporic Koreans to engage directly with both progressive and left organizations in South Korea and to visit North Korea on peace missions. Hyun herself took part in the program three times. In 1995, she participated in the inaugural trip to South Korea and she returned there in 2005 as part of KEEP's tenth-anniversary delegation.

Fatefully, in terms of her evolving political consciousness, Hyun also traveled as part of the 2011 KEEP (then called "DPRK Education and Exposure Program," or DEEP) delegation to North Korea. The latter experience, which Julayne Lee, also a delegation member, has described as part of a larger "journey for peace and healing," transformed Hyun's relationship to Korea. No longer a space "split in two," Korea emerged during this revelatory visit as a homeland Hyun felt, in her words, "with my whole heart." While in North Korea, Hyun, who had been taunted in her youth by white American children who cruelly told her to "Go back to your country," mused about moving to Pyongyang after reunification. Contemplating the possibility of living together in Pyongyang, Lee recalled, "made reunification seem like more of a possibility."



Hyun Lee (second to right) and two members of the DEEP delegation alongside North Korean comrades in North Korea, July 2011

In retrospect, Hyun’s visit to North Korea coincided with a clarification of her organizing focus, signaling a redirection of her talents. Although always disciplined as a thinker and strategist, she emerged in the last chapter of her life as a powerful “propagandist,” in her blunt self-description, committed to “promoting Korea issues to international audiences, supporting Korean progressive parties, and organizing for the signing of the peace treaty.” In multiple fora—radio broadcasts, mainstream and progressive news outlets, policy journals and academic publications, activist presentations, academic talks, as well as a blog she created—Hyun, through meticulously well-researched analysis, sought to shift received wisdom about and thereby to transform U.S. policy toward Korea. One of her earliest policy pieces, a co-authored analysis of Obama’s “strategic patience” policy toward Korea, was the third most influential article in *Foreign Policy in Focus* for the 2013 year. As a Korea analyst for the past decade, Hyun also demonstrated herself to be an extraordinarily gifted speaker, offering informed, lucid analysis of complex issues in live-commentary format. From 2010 to 2015, she produced and hosted shows at Asia Pacific Forum, a WBAI radio program. In 2015, along with Juyeon Rhee, she launched the highly influential *Zoom in Korea*, an English-language blog and news aggregator that she edited until 2019. From 2016 until her passing, she was an associate with the Korea Policy Institute, a U.S.-based public educational and policy organization with roots in the Korean diasporic peace movement. She was especially effective in using these and other platforms to deliver hard-hitting bulletins from the frontlines of struggles in South Korea, illustrating the harm of U.S. foreign policy to audiences for whom such policy’s effects might otherwise have been out of sight and out of mind.

Hyun’s writings from the past decade constitute a significant body of research in their own right. With something akin to gusto, she pored over Korean- and English-language

sources including U.S. government reports, diplomatic statements, studies produced by South Korean progressive organizations, and North Korean materials. Reflective of her engagement with a range of South Korean progressive party formations—the United Progressive Party, the Minjung Party, and the Progressive Party—Hyun’s writings on Korea issues paired in-depth analysis of political developments in the southern half of the peninsula with a hard-hitting critique of the deleterious impact of U.S. militarism on the Korean people. Contributing to the possibility of a progressive U.S. policy toward Korea, her writings emerged as a go-to resource for U.S.-based and international readers, including foreign policy specialists, Asian Americanist and critical Asianist researchers and teachers, community organizers, and antiwar activists. In stark contrast to the alienated prescriptions of American think-tank analysis, her writings were attuned to the lived experiences and concerns of ordinary Korean people. In this way grounded in the movement for peace and distinguished by firsthand knowledge of and alignment with people’s struggles in Korea, her analysis reflected an ethical commitment to collective life possibility.

As a driver behind the Solidarity Committee for Democracy and Peace in Korea, which she and others formed at the tail-end of Lee Myung-bak’s 2008-13 presidency, Hyun wielded her pen as a sword in an unflinching battle against the ruthless and corrupt government of Park Geun-hye (2013-17), the daughter of U.S.-backed military dictator Park Chung-hee and a neoconservative ally of Barack Obama. Seeking to alert the U.S. public to the top-down danger to democracy in South Korea—with the Park administration seizing the undemocratic National Security Law to dissolve the Unified Progressive Party (UPP) and to jail National Assembly representative and UPP member Lee Seok-ki—Hyun delivered English-language analysis that, in depth of damning detail and clarity of critique, was unparalleled in the western media sphere. The danger, she made plain, was no less than “a return to the politics of fear that ruled South Korea only a few decades ago when government surveillance and unwarranted arrests of citizens were routine.”³

By speaking out against the authoritarianism of Park whose subimperial collaboration was key to Obama’s militarized Pacific pivot policy, Hyun faced the consequences. In late July 2016, on the cusp of the millions-strong candlelight demonstrations that eventually led to Park’s ouster, Hyun and Juyeon Rhee, a fellow Nodutdol and Solidarity Committee member, were unceremoniously blocked from entering South Korea. Deported from Incheon Airport, they were unable to join the Veterans for Peace delegation they had organized to protest Obama’s imposition of the THAAD system on

³ Hyun Lee, “Erosion of Democracy in South Korea: The Dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party and the Incarceration of Lee Seok-ki,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12:52 (2015), <https://apjpf.org/2014/12/52/Hyun-Lee/4245.html>.

the people of Seongju in South Korea. Stopping by Hawai'i en route to New York, Hyun and Juyeon, while trying their hand at surfing, took part in local political education about Native Hawaiian resistance to settler colonialism and U.S. militarism. On their return, Nodutdol mounted a grassroots social media campaign against South Korea's and U.S. travel bans, seeking to expose the latter as a coordinated inter-country means of repressing international solidarity. Four years later, in late 2020, Hyun took to Twitter to recognize the role that the transpacific agitation of U.S. and South Korean organizations and individuals had in catalyzing the lifting of Juyeon's travel ban. Hyun exulted: "She's now free to return to her homeland."



Juyeon Rhee and Hyun (right) at Incheon Airport after being banned from entering South Korea, July 25, 2016

Ultimately, few people were more impactful than Hyun in fostering international solidarity over the past decade with progressive political struggles in South Korea and furnishing informed and enlightening views on North Korea. As early as 2005, while traveling through East Asia with CAAAV's Chinatown Justice Project, Hyun used her perfect bilingualism to enable the participation of 1,000 Koreans in a grassroots international effort to halt the World Trade Organization meetings in Hong Kong. As her focus on Korea issues deepened, Hyun emerged as one of a handful of diasporic Koreans—in particular, the 1.5-generation of Koreans who came to the United States in their youth—who played outsized roles in facilitating communication in anti-imperialist organizing spaces, serving as nodes within the transnational Korea peace movement. As Wol-san Liem, international affairs director for the Korean Federation of Public and Social Services and Transportation Workers Union, noted, Hyun facilitated "a deeper perspective on the Korean movement to non-Korean-speaking Korean American activists."

Indeed, Hyun possessed not only flawless command of English and Korean but also a seemingly effortless ability to perform simultaneous interpretation. In 2007, she flew to Omaha, Nebraska, to interpret for Ko Youngdae of Solidarity for Peace and Reunification in Korea (SPARK) who had been invited to speak at a Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space conference. Oh Hyeran, a SPARK member who accompanied Ko, recalls, "Afterwards we heard from so many attendees how beautifully touching his speech was. Such feedback was unusual. We all agreed that it was thanks to Hyun's translation." From this point onward, Hyun frequently interpreted for SPARK in consequential settings, including the 2010 and 2015 United Nations Non-Proliferation Treaty Review conferences in New York. Hyun also accompanied scholar Gregory Elich, *The Nation* journalist Tim Shorrock, and civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, Sr., on solidarity tours to South Korea, facilitating their interactions with progressive Korean leaders and organizers. Others who worked alongside Hyun recall how she, on numerous occasions, stepped forward to bridge structurally interrelated yet linguistically siloed worlds, connecting people in common cause. During their North Korea trip, Julayne Lee recalled that "Hyun would often casually step in to interpret for me in a way that was helpful and never overbearing or condescending. For some of the North Koreans, I was the first overseas adopted Korean they had met and it was an emotional interaction for them. Hyun was there to bridge the communication."

Hyun's pathway to transnational Korea peace organizing organically converged with her pursuit of healing practices grounded in traditional Asian medicine. From 2005 to 2008, after leaving CAAAV, she studied acupuncture at Tri-State College. Her immersion in acupuncture and herbs could be seen as part of a more general pattern of community and labor organizers taking up the healing arts in ways, often unrecognized, that have in turn enabled and fortified movement work. In both arenas, health care and social justice organizing, Hyun sought to foster survival in the face of trauma and pain. Indeed, as she conveyed to her herb clinic partner Joo-hyun Kang, she was propelled to go into acupuncture not just because "it was something that she could...make a living at as an Asian in a racist country" but also because she could help fellow organizers and activists "utilize their own individual body resources toward healing." Committed to furnishing "accessible and effective acupuncture to people of all class backgrounds," Hyun elaborated on the website of her practice, Woodside Acupuncture, that "[a]cupuncture, like social justice, is fundamentally based on the belief that people have an innate capacity to heal themselves. The needles simply stimulate the body to remember its way back to its natural state, just as a good organizer inspires people to arrive at their own solutions through struggle." Recalling Hyun's support of her family, Nodutdol member Minju Bae described "the comfort you offered when my 할아버지 [*harabeogi*] got covid at the beginning of the pandemic. It was

such a scary time, and my family found so much solace and hope through your herbal medication package and recommendations.” One of her patients, Tiisetso Dladla, described the healing comfort of Hyun’s care: “I came to your practice after months and months of chronic pain. You not only took that pain away but healed me enough to allow me to conceive. ...I came to you, and you let me rest.”

Having initially been diagnosed with estrogen-positive receptor breast cancer in 2010, Hyun had a mastectomy and her cancer went into remission. By mid-2015, plagued by a worrying chronic cough but unable to get her primary doctor to authorize a scan to ascertain if her cancer had returned, Hyun animated a strategy she had picked up from her days as an urban community organizer: namely, she checked herself into the emergency room to trigger the treatment she knew she needed. This time around, she learned she had advanced inflammatory breast cancer, a rare and exceedingly aggressive form of cancer. Her oncologist at Columbia Hospital advised her to prepare to die. Never one to give up without a fight, Hyun researched cutting-edge treatments and remained buoyant in conversations about her health with friends. Through a combination of allopathic measures and traditional Asian medicine, including ginseng from North Korea, she prolonged her own life far past her oncologist’s predictions. Those around Hyun cheered her on, knowing every extra moment was a victory. Quietly, however, beginning in 2015, she began Buddhist meditative practices, envisioning her own death and the decomposition of her body.

Following Hyun’s diagnosis, knowing she seldom traveled for leisure, Juyeon and I organized a road trip to Joshua Tree for early summer of 2016. Wanting to go for mid-day hikes, even though the sun was baking the earth around us, Hyun somehow remained cool as a cucumber, never breaking a sweat. “I could live here in a trailer,” she mused aloud, “This is heaven.” During this trip, the three of us spoke about organizing, shared stories, cobbled meals together, marveled at the stars in the desert sky, and alternately laughed and cried. We also butted heads. No nonsense in all things, Hyun prided herself, much to the admiration and frustration of those around her, on possessing no nunchi, viewing the latter, as she revealed to us, as a socially ingrained, gendered sensibility essential to the reproduction of Korean heteropatriarchy. “Oh my god, that’s your philosophy? That explains so much!” Juyeon exclaimed when Hyun shared her views.

Unfussy and modest in her demeanor, Hyun had a penchant for simple pleasures at the same time she voraciously consumed the worst possible TV and had notoriously cheap taste in food. Yul-san Liem, operations director for the Justice Committee in New York and a former Nodutdol member, recalled Hyun’s inexplicable devotion to the show, *America’s Next Top Model*. Eunhy Kim, a fellow founder of KEEP, also recalled that

during dwipuri, “unlike many of us who always sang the same old sappy songs at noraebang, Hyun somehow always knew the upbeat recent Korean songs.” Both surprisingly current in her cultural tastes and oblivious, Hyun once purchased, as Joo-hyun recalled, “a Subaru with Kisuk and didn’t realize it was a lesbo-mobile.” Her ex-girlfriend Kisuk Yom remembered how “she used to eat cheap street food with a special photogenic smile on her happy face.” Nodutdol members recall Hyun’s dismay during the 2013 Los Angeles moim when a bold seagull swooped down, plucking an uneaten veggie burger out of her hands at Venice Beach. It was a story she would retell with palpable pathos. Hyun also insisted on using the entirety of a budget-sized bag of garish henna that she had purchased in Chinatown to dye her hair, despite friends pleading with her to throw the remainder away.

In the last few years of her life, Hyun worked with Women Cross DMZ, putting her organizing skills and policy acumen into powerful motion. She launched twelve regional chapters of Korea Peace Now! and advocated inside the Beltway for a peace treaty to end the Korean War. From 2019 to 2020, she labored tirelessly on HR 152, legislation supported by 52 representatives that called for a formal end to the Korean War. In mid-January of this year, speaking over Zoom about the urgent need to end over seven decades of war on the Korean peninsula, Hyun, though visibly and audibly unwell, sought to reassure her audience: “You might notice that I cough a lot tonight. Don’t be alarmed. It’s just a little condition I have. ...Hopefully it won’t be too distracting.” Politically active until nearly the very end, Hyun continued doing public education around the unresolved Korean War. As Sally Jones of the New Jersey and New York chapter of Korea Peace Now! recalled of one of Hyun’s final presentations: “Most of the people...had no idea Hyun was ill. Before she began, she told people she might cough a little...but that everything was perfectly okay. ...And then she proceeded to give a brilliant presentation and answered every question with such grace, patience, and deep, deep understanding.”

Near the end of her life, Hyun’s friends, D. Chou and Mijeonga Chang, lovingly served as her primary caregivers. Hyun is survived by her parents, Jae-on and Young-ja Lee, her sister Tina Lee Hadari, and her beloved nieces Tali and Emma. Before passing, she requested that any commemorative donations be directed to the [Tongil Peace Foundation](#), which she and other Korean diasporic activists created over two years ago with their own money. The purpose of the foundation is to foster Korea peace and reunification work for future generations of organizers.

Roughly two months before her passing, Hyun posted a heartfelt online tribute to her comrade Yang Jeong-yong, Secretary General of Korean Americans for the Progressive Party of Korea. Like her, Yang had battled cancer for many years. “Dongji,” she wrote in a luminous message that we might now fittingly direct to her, “thank you for your

radiance and humility while here on earth. We who remain have much to do to fulfill your dream of peace, democracy and reunification. Go freely now. Hope you soar as high as you desire and watch over us as we redouble our efforts.”

We Will Not Kneel

By Hyun Lee | November 8, 2020

An interview with Han San-gyun, former president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The interview was conducted on July 31, 2018 by Hyun Lee, KPI Associate and ZoominKorea contributor

Translated by Jane Lyon Lee and Kyung Rae Lee



In December 2015, Han San-gyun, then-President of the Korean Confederation of Unions (KCTU), was imprisoned for his role in leading resistance against then-President Park Geun-hye's wave of repression against labor. Long noted as the most militant and progressive of Korean trade union organizations, the KCTU was a primary target in Park's campaign to crush the labor movement. Public outrage over Park Geun-hye's crimes and misdeeds grew into a mass national movement called the Candlelight Revolution, which ultimately drove her from office and led to her arrest and imprisonment. The KCTU played a key role in that movement.

Lee: The last time I interviewed you, President Han Sang-gyun, was November of 2015. At that time you were putting your efforts towards creating a united front of progressive forces led by the KCTU--to fight against labor market reforms, and to oppose the anti-democratic policies of the Park Geun-hye administration. Since then, a lot has happened. I think it is because of those proactive actions by the KCTU that the Candlelight Revolution was possible. Through that movement, there was a change in the government, but I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Han: In 2015, I declared a people's uprising and actually it was from that point on that I was targeted and pursued by the Park Geun-hye government. After that, amid a total awakening, the demands of the people were heard. That anger was reinforced when it became known that the collapse of farmer Baek Nam-gi was the result of a high water pressure cannon stream [fired at protesters].[1] We saw then that those in power would use whatever means available--not to take care of basic rights and democracy but to maintain their own power.

After witnessing that, to protect myself, I went to Jogyesa [Temple] for several days. Korean society was in denial.[2] The government's public security measures were horrific and though the government did not wield guns or knives, it was an extremely serious situation in which no one could act freely. I was thinking that if at this point, the KCTU, as representative of organized labor, were to succumb to them, then wouldn't the anti-democracy, anti-labor, anti-history Park Geun-hye government just forge ahead with even more egregious actions?

They wanted us to kneel down to authoritarian suppression, but the KCTU was born as an organization dedicated to justice, democracy, and to the rights of laborers, and is an organization that will not kneel down. As an organization that does not bow down, the KCTU resisted and had to endure a really difficult time.

And then I brought to the forefront fundamental issues of Korean society: the labor problems, issues of class polarization, and grievances of the working class. The Park Geun-hye government was destroying democracy. It had to be called out for its anti-history, anti-labor path of governance.

Up to that point, I had been involved in organizing the masses, and saw the reality of angry laborers, farmers, the poor, youth, and students. But then [when I was imprisoned] I was separated from society. I look at those mass uprisings from my personal point of view, and see that there are many different opinions as to how the rest of society connected itself to this, and how it all evolved into a movement. As you pointed out in the question you asked, I agree that the role that the KCTU played in all this was not a small one. The Railroad Union strike really played a decisive role in the Candlelight Movement as it secured a physical position in Gwanghwamun [Plaza, in Seoul].

Lee: When was that?

Han: It was the fall of 2016. It went on from the fall, so citizens were able to pick up their candles and participate. The momentum of this strike made it possible for Gwanghwamun to be established as a place where citizens could safely protest and call for the resignation of Park Geun-hye. That moment marked the birth of what is today the Moon Jae-in government. It was also the time when the minority party came to publicly show its face in politics. This time was also about whether Park Geun-hye should be impeached right away through an early election, whether we should withdraw from the frontlines for safety reasons, whether the first and second lines of defense should be dispatched, and a lot of other unbelievable conversations. This was

when the KCTU and others in the democracy camp decisively demanded that Park Geun-hye had to resign. With that, things naturally moved down that path.

This process spread, but the KCTU did not just play a role in Seoul at Gwanghwamun. There were the rural areas and cities across the country--there was no place we didn't go, making it possible for the people who could not get to Seoul to gather in the streets. The workers did everything to safely manage the assembly [of the people]; they installed speakers and emceed. Doing all this took enormous strength, and they made all kinds of posters and signs. The KCTU is a flagship organization and has done this kind of thing throughout its history.

Of course, this will have to be further evaluated by others, but if the KCTU had really created a massive strike that effectively stopped all production, logistics, and service, and without going to constitutional trial, had condemned the unrighteous power of the state, it would have been the most revolutionary thing ever done. I regret that we did not go that far, but would the anger of the Korean society really have been revealed if we had done that? Everyone was so skeptical at that time. Amidst those circumstances, we created momentum that gave rise to a sense of hopefulness. I'd like to sum up things that way.

Lee: As you have said, the KCTU stood at the forefront during the most difficult times, and you brought together a broad spectrum of progressive forces to maximize full power. How was this possible?

Han: On the one hand, we were completely surprised. I, too, from prison, was amazed at the situation. But eventually, although each group differed in terms of where they were headed, and their standards of worth, this was a matter of coming together as one, cohesively, and then jumping over ideological differences, the different views of common sense and justice, among the women, men, young, and old. There was really an indescribable national anger. This anger was over the mishandling of government affairs and the atrocities committed by the Park Geun-hye government. No one could disagree that injustice had been done.

There was a time when I made a direct order telling others not to demand my release from prison. My reason for doing this was one of justice and out of fear that there would be an amplification of the demands and ideas of individual units. Instead, everyone, despite having their own individual different thoughts, became one as they stood at the forefront of justice.

Lee: Please explain the process of preparing the mass gatherings.

Han: In 2015, the KCTU introduced the first-ever direct re-election. There were four slates that came forth as candidates for the direct re-election. When we went to meet the union members at the different sites, we had already set the platform. That platform included opposition to labor market reform, holding a general strike in April, organizing a mass demonstration in November, and correcting the wrongs of the anti-labor policies of the Park Geun-hye government. As a result, cooperating partners had already agreed to the platform and our slate was elected.

No one predicted that we would win the election. The reason we were elected was because there was a sense of urgency that things should be done differently than had been done up to that point. We then needed the decision of the approval committee, so we opened a proxy system and via that system, the platform was passed unanimously. Upon passage, we knew that nothing would change unless we fought. Why? The Park Geun-hye government had defined labor, the KCTU, and the National Teachers Union as enemies.

We came to the conclusion that if we compromised with our enemies, we would be left with only two choices in the end--to kneel before them or to oppose them and fight alongside labor. Because fighting would be hard for the workers alone, we met with other social progressive groups such as farmers, the urban poor, youth, and student groups. With all of us at the table for discussion, something surprising happened at that meeting. When we insisted that the Park Geun-hye administration had to resign, the representative from the farmers was in agreement, and the representatives of the urban poor, the youth, and the students were all in agreement, too. This momentous decision took just twenty minutes to make. This is written in the police reports. Just like that, it's in there, but there probably had never been a case in which a decision for public progress had been made so quickly. It was important that regardless of difference in opinion, we came together as one voice. In this way, the bureaucrats who had previously been unable to see that the people's anger had reached a boiling point saw now that anger was boiling. Because of this, the decision was reached so clearly and the direction set forth was so exact.

Lee: So, you went to prison. What were you charged of doing?

Han: At first, they charged me with instigation, and then they made up some crimes I never heard of before to frame me.

Lee: What was that?

Han: Things like paralyzing the city and inciting a coup, and conspiring on those kinds of enormous things. In the end, they could not convict me on any of those charges. So after that, [the charges] turned into violations of traffic and riot laws, and ten or more other crimes around obstruction of official duties and obstruction of the execution of special public services. I was convicted and received a sentence of three years. I was released on April 21 of this year [2018] with six months remaining on my sentence.

Lee: Please talk about your experience of being in prison. While you were in prison, the Candlelight Revolution happened. Park Geun-hye was impeached. How did you feel then?

Han: When I was in prison, I was actually still the president of the KCTU, so the KCTU officers would come to the visitors' room and we would give and receive updates to each other. We were forced by [the authorities] to either kneel down in front of them or courageously fight the war to the end. As I say this, I think if we had prepared for 100,000 to gather, 100,000 people would have gathered. If we believed in the people and that 500,000 would gather, 500,000 would have gathered. With the anger of the farmers and laborers in the current situation, if we said 1,000,000 would come at any moment, 1,000,000 would gather. It was to this level that, with confidence, trust, and love, we were going to forge ahead.

No matter how tyrannical the Park Geun-hye government was, they could not win over public consensus. We continued to send this message—be confident; let's not waver here. Those people were inflicting fear and we had to overcome that fear. We continued like that and the situation changed. The candlelight spread like wildfire. Park Geun-hye was impeached and then jailed. One by one, things happened and the process expanded. I too was surprised by it all. Actually, I believed that eventually a day like this would come, but I didn't know that it would come this quickly. I looked to the sky and to farmer Baek Nam-gi and to all the martyrs that came before us. The strength of the workers in Korean society was leading to significant change.

From then, although I was trapped alone within the prison walls, I thought, "I am no longer imprisoned." I lived each day with a full heart.

Lee: Even now, there is a lot of change on the Korean peninsula. Exchanges between the North and South have started and conversations between the North and the United States are happening. What do you think about the current state of affairs?

Han: I am not an expert on the Korean peninsula's state of affairs. That is difficult to answer, but just seeing things from the perspective of the workers, this is a government

that has made new connections in relations between the North and South--a vein that had been blocked. The two are validating each other, making promises, and more than at any other time, national support and hopes are high for peace, reconciliation, prosperity, and the path to unification. I think that since the [2018] meeting at Panmunjom between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in, a feeling of confidence has spread that if the people of the North and South put their minds together, we can do anything. This feeling is particularly true in South Korea.

I think that in order for us to realize that, the exchanges among the workers and exchanges among the people need to be fundamentally better. There must be a goal-oriented consciousness.

When that way of thinking expands and accumulates, no longer will our people's future and happiness be determined by external forces and imperialistic power. On the other hand, the two leaders met at Panmunjom and sat together at the Dobo Bridge. Just seeing them talking with each other, seeing them honestly sharing with each other the many issues of the peninsula's peoples--this created a consensus that regardless of social status or generation, there is no reason we cannot make this peninsula a place overflowing with vitality of economic development and reconciliation without war. If you look at it, in a way, this has been the greatest outcome [of the exchange].

Of course, in order to do this, we have to look at how specific efforts and organized labor are going to play a part. Actually, when the special zones in the North are expanded and South Korea puts forward capital, we will need the citizens to oppose further private investment in North Korea via the exploitation of workers and low wages. Our important homework and preparation going forward are how we, especially workers, are going to demand from capitalists that the process be one of mutual prosperity.

Lee: From the perspective of labor, what kind of country should a unified Korea be? To that end, how should labor participate in the South-North talks, and have their voices thus far been heard?

Han: Korean society, particularly South Korean society, has been centered on an ideology of separation and anti-communism, which is really an abnormal basis on which to form a democracy. We do have a democratic republic, but as we just discussed, it is clear that the ideology I just mentioned and an anti-communist framework have produced an imperfect democracy. This peace process will determine the collapse or survival of those who have enjoyed power without any particular skills and have ruled via anti-communist propaganda and an ideology of separation. We shall see, but many

experts predict that the incompetent right wing will inevitably become obsolete. This will mean the entire political spectrum will shift to the left, and a new force will occupy the right. If the current government in power becomes the center-right, then the positions the progressive forces take up will become a critical viewfinder in establishing new inter-Korean relations. Ultimately the progressive working class has an absolute historical responsibility to go through a rebirth.

Actually, I will be sixty very soon. I wonder to what extent we really know about the North based on all our brainwashed learning. How much do we know about North-South absurdities? How much do we know about the real meaning of the Korean peninsula's geopolitical position in terms of Sino-U.S. relations? We need a more generalized argument around this issue. Truly, what kind of process is necessary for peace and prosperity on our Korean peninsula?

Lee: Last week, I visited the site where the SsangYong laid-off workers were protesting. The administration in power has changed; how do you see this problem getting solved?

Han: The Moon Jae-in government took office and pledged the creation of a labor-respecting society as a priority and a basis for its policies. Naturally, many workers have high expectations, and in many respects, there have been partial successes. Moon has said things like, "You must join labor unions in order to secure the rights of workers," and that he would work until such-and-such year to [ratify the ILO agreement](#) so that the right to form a labor union becomes common sense. And then there was talk about the exploitative pyramid structure of dispatched labor, and problems of outsourced labor, and in relation to this, the necessity of a government decision to overcome the current laws in this regard.

But all these issues are being hindered one at a time by privileged groups like the Korean conglomerates (*chaebol*). In addition, the extremely conservative media has reached a peak in its negative distortion of the income-led growth model advocated by the Moon Jae-in as leading to South Korea's downfall.

In the conflict between the government and labor, the foremost issue was the [National Teachers Union](#) as well as non-union issues. In addition, at the forefront of the conflict between labor and capitalists is [General Motors \(GM\) Korea](#). Despite the fact that a [court ruling found that GM Korea's irregular workers were illegally dispatched](#), the workers still remain in the distressing predicament where they are still laid off and unable to gain reinstatement as regular employees. This is the real crux of the labor-capitalist conflict. In the [case of the SsangYong conflict](#), the government--albeit a previous administration--was complicit. For example, there was the violent and

murderous [former President] Lee Myung-bak government and his policy of suppression and its willingness to turn a blind eye to [\[SsangYong's\] accounting manipulation](#). This is just coming to light, but [Supreme Court Judge Yang Sung-tae's business ventures](#) are also an issue, as well as the Supreme Court's deal with the Park Geun-hye administration to baselessly overturn the ruling that SsangYong's lay-offs were unjustified. When we look at this, really, whether it was the mistakes of the Lee Myung-bak government or the Park Geun-hye government, the Korean government made mistakes. In this regard, it would not be acceptable for the Moon Jae-in government to drag its feet or tepidly address these mistakes, and then claim to be a government dedicated to justice.

I am very concerned that on his formal visit to India, President Moon will deliver a message internationally, saying that the SsangYong layoff has been resolved. The president needs to know that the SsangYong problem is not just a simple SsangYong-specific issue; we are at a point with this where any worker in this country could be kicked out of his job. There is no greater trauma than being a worker who is kicked out because your boss does not like how things are going. In other words, it is as if the citizens of this world are playing musical chairs with each other and amidst this, a loud warning bell is sounding, calling for things to get fixed. In addition, Korea's national violence is an important problem that was uncovered by the deaths of workers, as in the case with SsangYong. Without a doubt, the SsangYong problem is said to have left the most painful scar on the Korean society.

So I see that it is the absolute duty of the Moon Jae-in government to make sure the first steps it takes are towards resolving the pain and anguish caused by these problems in Korean society. I hope these issues are resolved quickly and even if only it is the making of the decision to do so, [the 119 employees must have their employment reinstated \[3\]](#); there must be a national apology to those individuals, and they should be compensated. If this problem is drawn out any longer or spreads and ends up tied to another death, how can we say there is justice?

Lee: What plans do you have now after your release

Han: I always have the mindset of a worker and the greatest happiness in my life is doing everything I am capable of to help those workers who are in the hardest and most difficult places. This is what I believe has the greatest value and how I will live my life.

Lee: Do you not have any more specific plans?

Han: I was released six months earlier than I thought I would be, so I missed making specific plans before I got out. I am going around to different sites and am listening to the voices of workers, the voices of those workers who have been kicked out, those being discriminated against, and the problems of women laborers.

Lee: Do we again need a united front of the progressive groups?

Han: The united front of progressive groups does not happen by just talking about it. Up to now, when we have talked about such total unity, it has always been in terms of making requests of the heads of the progressive groups, urging them to play a role, and then just staring at their mouths to see what they will say. This has been the history of the progressive movement. But it is my thought that we are repeating this history and have been unable yet to open the door to a new path. I have a question as to how we can bring about a real chemical reaction of dynamic energy to obtain justice. I am thinking that at this moment in time, we need a bottom-up grassroots movement that the workers create themselves.

[1] Baek Nam-gi was a 68-year-old farmer who was struck by a high-pressure jet fired by a police water cannon at a demonstration on November 14, 2015. Baek was knocked unconscious and remained in a coma until his death on September 25, 2016. [2] Located in downtown Seoul, Jogyesa played a crucial role as a site of refuge and collective organizing for the Candlelight Revolution. [3] An agreement on reinstatement was reached shortly after this interview took place.

Trump's Broad-Based Sanctions Failed in Iran and Will Fail in North Korea

By Hyun Lee | January 20, 2020 | Originally published by Truthout.org



Kim Jong Un speaks at the Fifth Plenary Meeting of Seventh Central Committee of Workers Party of Korea (Dec. 2019)

In both Iran and North Korea, the Trump administration has pursued an aggressive policy of “[maximum pressure](#)” — [crushing economic sanctions](#), diplomatic isolation and military threats — in order to thwart their nuclear ambitions. In both cases, “maximum pressure” has not only failed to achieve the desired goal but has had the opposite effect: ramping up tensions and hardening both countries’ resolve to obtain nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, sanctions are having devastating consequences for ordinary citizens in both countries.

Despite summit meetings and the exchange of what Trump described as “love letters” between him and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, peace between the two countries seems as out of reach as ever. At the end of 2019, Kim declared that as long as “the U.S. persists in its hostile policy towards the [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea], there will never be the denuclearization on the Korean peninsula” and warned that the world will soon witness their “new strategic weapon.”

Maximum pressure took us to the brink of war with Iran. If we don’t change course, we will find ourselves in the same place with North Korea. It’s time for Washington, with its entanglements around the world testing the limits of its military and alliances, to reconsider its security objectives and course-shift away from endless wars

How Did We Get Here?

In the last year, it seemed as if the U.S. and North Korea were poised to make a historic breakthrough toward peace. If you ask U.S. officials, [North Korea is entirely to blame](#) for the lack of progress in negotiations. But by refusing to abandon the maximum pressure policy — the same failed approach we just saw result in disaster with Iran — the Trump administration may have botched its last opportunity to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

In a dramatic turnaround from threatening “fire and fury” in 2017, Trump took a decidedly friendlier route when he began meeting with Kim Jong Un in 2018. Engagement worked. North Korea took steps to build trust, including by voluntarily freezing its nuclear and long-range missile tests, beginning to dismantle a rocket launch site and a nuclear test site, and returning 55 boxes of remains of U.S. servicemen. The U.S., for its part, scaled down joint military exercises with South Korea, but the exercises continued nonetheless. The U.S. also stymied South Korea’s efforts to re-engage the North at every step.

At Trump and Kim’s second summit in Hanoi in February 2019, Kim reportedly offered to completely dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex in exchange for the partial lifting of UN sanctions — a “big, big deal” that would eliminate the “heart of their nuclear program,” according to leading nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker. But Trump rejected the proposal and instead bluntly proposed that Pyongyang basically give up its entire weapons arsenal — a plan which North Korea had previously rejected.

Kim announced he would wait until the end of 2019 for the U.S. to come to the table with a different offer. But when the two countries’ negotiators finally met in Stockholm in October 2019, the North Koreans walked out, saying the U.S. brought “nothing to the negotiation table.”

North Korea repeatedly made clear that it will only resume negotiations when the U.S. has removed all threats to its security and development. North Korea closed out 2019 reiterating that point. At a meeting of the Central Committee of its Workers’ Party at the end of 2019, Kim criticized the U.S., saying its “true intention is to seek its own political and diplomatic interests while maintaining the sanctions to gradually deplete and weaken our strength.” He announced that his country “will steadily develop necessary and prerequisite strategic weapons for the security of the state until the U.S. rolls back its hostile policy towards the [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea].”

The U.S. military intervention in Libya led Pyongyang to vow it would never follow the “Libya model” of denuclearization. Now the assassination of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani will likely only reinforce its resolve. After all, the Pentagon has already deployed attack drones in South Korea and worked out a plot to decapitate North Korea’s leadership. Not only has Pyongyang decided to tighten its hold on its nuclear weapons as a guarantee of its survival, it is also strengthening its alliances with Beijing and Moscow to tip the balance of power in its favor in a region that is vital to U.S.’s economic and political interests.

The pattern is obvious: when the U.S. is willing to engage in diplomacy and take reciprocal steps toward peace, it moves forward with North Korea. When it doubles down on sanctions and military exercises, talks fail. Just as it has in Iran, maximum pressure on North Korea will inevitably backfire.

The Human Toll of “Maximum Pressure”

“Maximum pressure” has also taken significant tolls on the ordinary citizens of Iran and North Korea. According to [two recently released reports](#), sanctions are impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid in both Iran and North Korea. What’s more, sanctions against North Korea disproportionately impact women by targeting the industries in which they are heavily represented, such as textiles (82 percent of workers), by producing greater social disorder (which leads to increased gender discrimination and violence), and by harming their access to food, water and health care.

If broad-based sanctions are [intended to result in policy changes](#), there are no signs of such a scenario playing out in Iran or North Korea. As the authors of “[The Human Costs and Gendered Impact of Sanctions on North Korea](#)” state, “[studies suggest](#) that sanctions are particularly prone to failure in this respect when they aim to force major policy changes, when they target authoritarian countries, and when they are tightened over an extended period of time. [It has also been observed](#) that sanctions can be counterproductive by actually cementing political unity — the so-called ‘rally around the flag’ effect.”

The Choice Before Trump, and Peace as the Way Forward

Now that North Korea has clarified that it will resume its nuclear weapons and missile development until the U.S. drops its “hostile policy,” the choice before the Trump administration is also plain: either prepare a political and military response to North Korea’s “new path” or end all hostile relations.

As long as the U.S. refused to drop its maximum pressure policy, Pyongyang has been [honing](#) its missile technology and strengthening its relationships with China and Russia. North Korea now has the ability to hit the U.S.’s largest overseas military base in South Korea with a missile that can evade the U.S.’s missile defense system. Russia [recently announced](#) that it put into service a hypersonic nuclear-capable missile system that can strike the United States at 20 times the speed of sound. China also unveiled the world’s longest-range intercontinental nuclear-capable missile, [believed](#) to be able to reach the U.S. in 30 minutes. Currently, the U.S. does not have a defense against either weapon. An alliance of China, Russia and North Korea poses a considerable challenge

to U.S. supremacy in the region, especially if the current crisis with Iran further mires the U.S. in the Middle East.

The U.S.'s reflexive response to the tipping balance of power in the region is to rally South Korea and Japan into a trilateral alliance that cements Cold War divisions against China, Russia and North Korea. But this requires considerable arm-twisting of its allies. The Trump administration exerted [unparalleled pressure](#) on South Korea's Moon Jae-in government to reverse its decision to terminate an [intelligence-sharing agreement](#) with Japan — a key to the trilateral alliance. What's more, the Trump administration recently demanded that South Korea pay \$5 billion — five times more than in the past — for the cost of stationing U.S. troops there. This has sown growing resentment among South Koreans against the U.S.'s authority over their country's affairs and could lead to irreparable fissures in the U.S.- South Korea alliance.

There is a more sensible option: make peace with North Korea. U.S.-North Korea relations have been governed by a fragile armistice for the past seven decades. In order to transition to a permanent peace regime, both sides need to pledge to not attack each other, agree on measures to eliminate the risk of future wars and discuss a plan for gradual arms reduction by all parties. To that end, the U.S. Congress can and should help forge that new path by passing [H.Res.152](#), which calls for a formal end to this war that was supposed to be resolved more than a half-century ago.

Replacing the armistice with a peace agreement can also be the catalyst for a shift toward a multilateral peace and security system that facilitates cooperation between the U.S., China and Russia to gradually diminish the threat level — constructive for both Northeast Asia and the Middle East.

It's time for the U.S. to reconsider its failed policy of maximum pressure and endless wars. It may have avoided escalation with Iran, for now, but it is most certainly headed back to collision with North Korea. And 2020, which marks the 70th year of the un-ended Korean War, may be Washington's last chance to change course.

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Women Workers and the Fight to Eradicate Precarious Labor in South Korea

By Hyun Lee | September 5, 2017



Irregular women workers—part-time and/or short-term contract workers without job security or benefits—are emerging as the new face of organized labor in South Korea. On June 29, ahead of a nationwide strike called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) for an increase in the national minimum wage, tens of thousands of contract workers at public schools walked off their jobs. They are mostly women who work as caregivers, cleaners, and cafeteria staff, and they demand regular employment (i.e., full-time with job security and benefits) as well as an increase in wages. Workers in over three thousand public schools—27 percent of public schools nationwide—participated in the walk-out, forcing many schools to cut classes short, according to the South Korean Ministry of Education.

KCTU is known for its militant actions by predominantly male industrial unions like the Korean Metal Workers Union, and it's rare to see women at the fore of its mass strikes. But women comprise the majority of the South Korean irregular workforce, currently estimated at nearly 9 million and steadily growing due to neoliberal policies aimed at increasing labor flexibility and reducing labor costs. Once overlooked by government institutions as well as organized labor, this growing sector of irregular and largely women workers has become an important force in the country's economy.

Forty-three percent of all public school employees are irregular workers, according to the National School Irregular Workers Union, which includes cafeteria and administrative staff, librarians, computer room assistants, caregivers, as well as special

education teachers and counselors. The union [estimates](#) the total number of irregular public school employees at approximately 400,000—including 141,965 education support staff, 153,015 teachers, 27,266 dispatch workers, and 42,033 temporary / substitute teachers.

Sweating for Half the Pay

“I stand next to a hot grill and a boiling pot all day,” wrote an anonymous cafeteria worker on the union’s public bulletin board, which has emerged as an archive of worker testimonies about the job-related hardships they endure. “I become soaked with sweat down to my underwear. We don’t even have time to get a drink of water. I work like crazy so that I can take a short break, but my supervisor thinks I’m resting because I don’t have enough to do. He doesn’t see how hard I hustle just so that I can take a ten-minute break.”

“My one wish is to work in a relaxed atmosphere where I can take a leisurely lunch,” someone else wrote, “They say we work so that we can eat, but in the cafeteria, we eat so that we can work. Heartburn and indigestion from eating too quickly are nothing; they happen all the time.”

“We’re not asking for pity,” wrote another, “What we are saying is give us some relief by reducing the intensity of labor. At least give us half the wages of civil servants. We work more than they do, but our wages aren’t even half of theirs....”

South Korean irregular workers on average are paid 54 percent of what their full-time counterparts make, and public school employees are no exception. Irregular workers are denied the annual salary increases that regular employees receive. Consequently, the wage gap between regular and irregular workers intensifies the longer they have been employed, according to the Education Workers Solidarity Division of the Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union (KPTU Ed-sol). In the case of school nutritionists and librarians, the starting salary of irregular workers is 70.5% of that of regular workers, but after ten years of employment, their salary is only 57.1% of that of regular workers, and after twenty years, only 45.6%. Irregular workers in public schools are also denied year-end bonuses, as well as paid holidays and vacations, to which regular workers are entitled.

The workers who led the strike in June say they are fighting for the rights of all working women, but not all women were sympathetic to their cause. National Assemblywoman Lee Eon-ju of the centrist People’s Party referred to the striking women as “mad bitches” in a conversation with a news reporter and said, “They are just middle-aged

neighborhood women who make rice. It's no big thing. Why do they need to be regular workers?" Two striking workers, who confronted Lee at the National Assembly building, accused her of giving a "fake apology after making reckless remarks" and treating them "like dogs and pigs."

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqVS2ZYVKx0>

Lee was forced to issue a public apology the next day, but her comments reflect a widespread belief that is at the root of subpar working conditions for women in South Korea. The patriarchal belief that reproductive labor, such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, is undeserving of formal recognition as essential labor undergirds the growing problem of labor flexibility in women-dominated sectors like service and education support. It also explains why South Korea has the biggest gender pay **gap** of all OECD nations.

Fighting for Gender and Class Equality

Defying such deeply-held societal views to establish a union of irregular and women workers was no easy feat, according to Pak Geum-ja, a cafeteria worker turned labor organizer. "I woke up at the break of dawn to cook and wash my kids' school uniforms before going to work. As soon as I finished work, I would organize in the evenings," she said.

Pak founded the National School Irregular Workers Union in 2010. As a cafeteria worker, Pak was prohibited from using her cell phone while on the job and with no access to a fax machine, thus reaching out to workers in other schools required a double-agent like prowess on her part. "I had to hide in the storage closet to make phone calls," she explained. "A lot of our communication was via fax, but getting access to the school fax machine was impossible. I had to rely on my husband, who worked in the school admissions office. I would tell him when and to where to send the fax. To make sure that supervisors at the receiving end wouldn't see it, I would call the workers in advance and instruct them to wait by the fax machine at the exact time."

To devote herself to organizing, Pak had to first work out an understanding with her family: "One day I sat my husband and children down and said to them, 'All these years, I've lived my life for my family. I didn't have a life of my own. I just want one year to live my own life. So let's divide up the house work.'" Without support from her family, she said, it would have been impossible to organize the union.

The fight of irregular public school employees is part of a long history of struggle by South Korean women standing up for labor rights and gender equality. The very “miracle” of South Korea’s economic expansion during Park Chung-hee’s dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s was achieved on the backs of young women who toiled in export industrial zones that produced textiles, garments, electronics, and chemicals. In their opposition to Park Chung-hee’s Yushin system and in their assertion of their right to organize democratic labor unions, the Chunggye Pibok Garment Makers Union, which represented 20,000 women at Seoul’s Peace Market, and the women of Dongil Textile defied humiliation and intimidation from the police and company-hired goons. Their fight inspired the famous 1985 strike of tens of thousands of women workers at the Kurodong Industrial Estate in solidarity with the striking workers of Daewoo Apparel—which, in turn, led the way for the mass democratic labor uprising that followed two years later. The modern-day labor movement in South Korea stands on the shoulders of countless nameless women workers, who risked their lives to resist labor exploitation and sexual violence at the workplace.



Striking women workers at Dongil Textile in 1978



Striking factory workers in 1970 – “Too hungry to live. Give us food.”



Striking women at Kurodong Industrial Estate in 1985

Although proud of the union's accomplishment, Pak carries guilt for not having been around for her family. At the height of the union organizing drive, she could only go home every two or three weeks. She gets upset when she talks about her daughter, who boiled instant noodles for dinner on the eve of her college entrance exam because she wasn't home. "It's hard trying to build a union while raising children as housewives," she said, "But this is how we all did it."

Pak and her colleagues organized 1,700 irregular public school workers in just forty days and launched the union in October 2010. After repeated rejections, the Labor Department finally recognized them as an official union in 2011. They now boast 50,000 members.

Striking for a Better Future

The strike by 20,000 school workers in June 2017 was a coordinated action by three different unions that organize irregular workers in the public schools—the Education Workers Solidarity Division of the Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union (KPTU EdSol), the National School Irregular Workers Union of the Korean Confederation of Service Workers’ Unions, and the Korean Women’s Trade Union. Regularization of their employment status—i.e., direct employment by the Ministry of Education as opposed to subcontractors—as well as a collective bargaining agreement that guarantees a raise in wages and seniority allowance topped their list of demands.



Striking irregular public school employees in 2015

While South Korea’s corporate media denounced the walk-out for forcing students to go without lunch for a day, many students and parents applauded the striking workers. A junior high school student in Incheon said in a local TV interview on the day of the strike, “I support them. It’s wrong to discriminate against irregular workers, who perform the same work as regular workers.” The cafeteria in her school was adorned with hand-written posters made by students and parents in support of the strike. “Your fight is also for our children’s future,” read one. “Don’t worry about us! Safe travels and stay cool in the heat,” read another.

In Seoul, where the education chief is progressive, the strike has definitely paid off. The Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education announced on August 2 a plan to phase in a set of policies to guarantee job security for and end discrimination against irregular school employees. According to its policy guideline, subcontracted workers, including cooks, security guards, janitors, and call center operators, will be hired directly by the Office of Education and become regular public service employees. Those who work 40 hours or more per week will see their hourly wages increase by 10,000 won (USD 8.85) starting next year. Those who work less than 40 hours will also see their hourly wages increase from average 8,400 won (USD 7.44) to 10,000 won (USD 8.85)—an increase of 24.4%. The Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education says it will also consider ways to expand the collective bargaining table to include all fifty-some different types of occupations that are part of the education support sector for future contract negotiations.

Collective Bargaining at the National Level

Workers in other regions are not so fortunate. Due to the decentralized responses to the workers' demands by the various city/province level offices of education, working conditions vary greatly from region to region.

Daycare workers at elementary schools in Gangwon Province, for example, are still fighting. They rallied outside the provincial education office on August 10 to demand an increase in their paid work hours to reflect the increase in workload. "The school system is constantly introducing new programs that require us to perform more administrative duties on top of caregiving, but we are only paid to work five hours a day," said Jeong Hyeon-mi, the chief of the Gangwon division of the National School Irregular Workers Union, "We have to get to work earlier and leave later to perform all our tasks, but most of us are denied overtime pay."

The workers demand an eight-hour paid work day, but the Gangwon Province Office of Education has so far brushed them off. Buoyed by the momentum of the national strike in June, the caregivers in Gangwon Province are gearing up for a local strike next month.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the national strike in June was the right of irregular public school employees to collectively bargain at the national level directly with the Ministry of Education. If effectively carried out, this would unify working conditions across the country and eliminate the burden of workers at the local level, like the caregivers in Gangwon Province, to fight their battles alone.

The Ministry of Education and the consortium of irregular public school workers unions held their first negotiation on August 18. The workers presented their basic demands, which include a seniority allowance (a salary increase of 50,000 won (USD 44.31) each year after two years of employment) and a regular bonus. The parties agreed to hold a series of talks with the goal of completing the negotiations by late September.

Fighting for Systemic Change and Eradication of Precarious Labor

Irregular workers in the education support sector turned out the largest force in KCTU's social general strike for a higher minimum wage on June 30. "We support the KCTU's main demands—elimination of precarious labor and raising the minimum wage to 10,000 won (USD 8.85)," said a spokesperson for KPTU Ed-Sol.

Soon after his election, President Moon Jae-in pledged to eliminate precarious labor and introduced a [road map](#) to "usher in an era of zero irregular work in the public sector." KPTU Ed-sol says its primary concern is to make sure that the predominantly-women and historically marginalized sector of education support workers are no longer excluded from national policies aimed at improving labor conditions.

Seong Jeong-rim, the head of the Seoul division of the National School Irregular Workers Union, agrees. The task of the "candlelight revolution" that brought together millions last year to oust previous President Park Geun-hye is incomplete, she said: "The most important demand of the 'candlelight revolution' was systemic change, and the biggest systemic failure in South Korean society is class polarization. Since the financial crisis of 1997 and subsequent structural changes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the number of irregular workers has continuously increased and the wage gap between regular and irregular workers has grown."

Seong says her union's plan to fight for broader systemic change includes participating in the political arena and supporting the formation of a new progressive party. "We share the values and goals of the New People's Party," she said, referring to left/progressive forces that are coming back together for the first time since the dissolution of the radical Unified Progressive Party in 2014 by the former Park Geun-hye administration. The party-in-formation has said its top priorities are the eradication of precarious labor, peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula, and the creation of a unified progressive front. It will formally launch as the New People's Party in early September, then join forces with other progressive parties to re-launch with a new name in early October.

Seong says her union plans to work closely with the new party to participate directly in local elections that will take place across the country next year and elect candidates who stand on the side of women, irregular workers and other historically-marginalized people. “Our members want to be part of creating systemic change,” she said. Women irregular workers promise to be a force to be reckoned with in the growing fight to eradicate precarious labor in South Korea.

North Korea's ICBM and South Korea's Confusing Response

By Hyun Lee | July 10, 2017

"It won't happen!" Trump had tweeted earlier this year in response to North Korea's warnings that it was poised to test-launch an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Yet, it happened.



In the early morning hours of July 4, North Korea test-launched the Hwasong 14. Launched at a steep trajectory, the missile [reportedly](#) reached an apogee exceeding 2500 kilometers and flew for 37 minutes. Experts [say](#) if launched on a standard trajectory, the missile should technically be able to reach a distance of more than 6,000 kilometers, which would put the missile in the category of an ICBM.

Trump's policy of maximum pressure is apparently not working. Intensifying sanctions, it seems, has only emboldened North Korea to speed up its missile development. Perhaps it's time to try maximum engagement.

North Korea's ICBM test is a game-changer, not because Washington actually believes that the country will use the missile to attack the United States, as Gregory Elich and Stephen Gowans [point out](#). What makes Washington nervous is North Korea's ability to strike back at the heart of the U.S. Strategic Command in Hawaii if attacked. This changes the strategic balance in the region and hence forces the Pentagon to change its strategic calculus.

In response to North Korea's test, Donald Trump tweeted, "*Perhaps China will put a heavy move on North Korea and end this nonsense once and for all!*" But the nuclear standoff is essentially a problem between the United States and North Korea, thus the solution needs to be worked out between those two parties.

What Each Party Wants from the Standoff

The United States wants complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization, which North Korea has categorically rejected. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un—who presumably noted what happened to Iraq and Libya after they laid down their arms—declared after last week's ICBM test that unless the United States abandons its hostile

policy and nuclear threat against his country, his nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles will never be on the table for negotiation.

Historian Bruce Cumings says U.S.' nuclear threats against North Korea date back to the Korean War when the U.S. Air Force flew B-29 bombers over Korea not long after it dropped atom bombs that annihilated approximately 200,000 people, mostly civilians, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "North Korea is the only country in the world to have been systematically blackmailed by US nuclear weapons going back to the 1950s, when hundreds of nukes were installed in South Korea," Cumings [wrote](#). The United States has also imposed sanctions on North Korea for almost 70 years and conducts annual military exercises that routinely rehearse the collapse of the North Korean regime.

What North Korea wants is an end to the provocative U.S. military exercises, replacing the armistice—a temporary ceasefire signed at the end of the Korean War in 1953—with a permanent peace agreement, and the final withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Korean peninsula in accordance with the armistice. These are out of the question for the United States, which considers South Korea a strategic foothold for its presence in Asia.

Thus, the two countries are locked in a perpetual standoff, with North Korea continuously firing off missiles and the United States piling on sanctions—both sides trying to force the other to capitulate. North Korea has offered a solution to ease the current crisis. It said it will stop testing its nuclear weapons and missiles if the United States stops its military exercises. China and Russia, as well as the new South Korean President Moon Jae-in and a growing number of experts in Washington, including former Defense Secretary William Perry, have all echoed this proposal. What's standing in the way is the U.S. military industrial complex, which needs perpetual war and a bogeyman to continue to sell weapons of mass destruction.

No Legal Basis for US Sanctions

The United States says North Korea's tests are in violation of UN resolutions and urges the UN to pile on more sanctions as punishment. But there is no international law that prohibits countries from testing nuclear and ballistic missile tests. Therefore, there is no legal basis for the UN resolutions that condemn North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. The UN Security Council, in particular the permanent five, which all have nuclear weapons, has no legal or moral authority to dictate who can and can't have nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, North Korea legitimately withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Article X of the NPT says parties have the right to withdraw from the

treaty if “extraordinary events have jeopardized their supreme interests.” In 1993, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States [announced](#) that it was retargeting some of its strategic nuclear weapons away from the former Soviet Union to North Korea. Then, it conducted military exercises near the North Korean border involving tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers as well as B1-B and B-52 bombers and naval vessels with cruise missiles. In 2002, George W. Bush [listed](#) North Korea among seven countries that are potential targets of U.S. preemptive nuclear attack. North Korea determined that these constitute “extraordinary events that jeopardize its supreme interests” and followed the proper procedure as outlined in the NPT to pull out of the treaty.

The United States, on the contrary, is in violation of the NPT, which says parties to the treaty that have nuclear weapons should reduce their arsenal toward complete elimination. The United States [spends](#) billions of dollars each year to modernize its nuclear arsenal.

Most importantly, North Korea has [declared](#) a “no first strike” policy, meaning it will not use its nuclear weapons in a preemptive attack and only use them defensively. The United States, notably, does not have this policy. U.S. war plans in Korea includes plans for a preemptive nuclear attack.

Moon’s Confusing North Korea Policy

New South Korean President Moon Jae-in was elected through mass protests that brought out millions week after week for five months in the dead of winter and ousted the previous president for corruption. His election was a mandate from the South Korean people, who demanded systemic change and a different course in North-South relations. For that reason, it was widely expected that when Moon meets with Trump, South Korea will finally stand up to the United States and reverse the alliance’s policy toward engagement with North Korea.

But that’s not what happened. At a meeting with U.S. senators ahead of his summit with Trump at the end of June, Moon assured them that he was committed to the US-ROK alliance and the THAAD deployment, then said, “South Korea’s candlelight revolution represented the blossoming of the democracy that the US brought to South Korea.” With that he negated the importance of the struggle and sacrifices of the millions of South Koreans, who fought for democracy for decades against U.S.-backed military dictatorships. It was a clear signal that his meeting with Trump would fall short of expectations.

The [joint statement](#) produced through the Moon-Trump summit was all about strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance and appears no different from the alliance’s

posture under the previous conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. It said the allies “do not maintain a hostile policy toward the DPRK,” yet repeatedly denounced North Korea for “provocative, destabilizing actions and rhetoric” and its “accelerating threat” to international peace. It then said the allies are committed to “fully implement existing sanctions and impose new measures designed to apply maximum pressure on the DPRK.” Sanctions are aimed at cutting off trade, isolating the country and choking its economy. If that’s not hostile, what is? The statement also said the two leaders agreed to cooperate on a “conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control,” but they also agreed to strengthen the trilateral cooperation among US, Japan and South Korea, which will inevitably subordinate South Korea as a junior partner in a U.S.-led regional alliance.

Following his summit with Trump, Moon attended the G20 summit in Berlin, where he [proposed](#) a vision for resumption of inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation and called on the North to dismantle its nuclear program. He then proudly announced that both Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping support his initiative to resume dialogue with the North.

This is problematic for several reasons. Moon is putting forward resolution of the nuclear crisis—essentially an issue between the United States and North Korea—as a condition for North-South dialogue. This is no different from the approach of his conservative predecessors. North-South relations need to be decoupled from US-North Korea relations, and inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation should have no preconditions.

The June 15 Joint Declaration, signed in 2000 by Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung, the two leaders of North and South Korea respectively, stated, “The South and the North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country”—i.e. without the intervention of foreign powers. That is the very first clause of the joint statement. When the South Korean people elected Moon—former Chief of Staff for President Roh Moo-hyun, a proponent of unconditional North-South engagement in the spirit of the June 15 Joint Declaration—it was with the expectation that he would resume this spirit. The fact that South Korea turns to China and the United States—to Trump, of all people—for acknowledgment to resume dialogue with the North is in itself a violation of the June 15 spirit.

Moon can’t have it both ways. He can’t strengthen the US-ROK alliance and at the same time hope to improve North-South relations. The US-ROK alliance came about through the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953 in violation of the armistice signed after the Korean

War. Article IV(60) of the armistice stated that within three months of its signing, a political conference should be held “to settle through negotiation the questions of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea and the peaceful settlement of the Korean question.” The armistice also mandated all sides to “cease the introduction into Korea of reinforcing combat aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition.”

The political conference recommended in the armistice never happened. Instead, the United States and South Korea signed the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), which became the basis for the United States to permanently station its troops and introduce weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, in South Korea. If war resumes in Korea, South Korea is bound by the MDT to fight alongside the United States. And the United States, which has wartime operational control, will command South Korean troops. The US-ROK alliance routinely [flies](#) nuclear bombers over the Korean peninsula and [trains](#) special operations teams to take out the North Korean leadership. The US-ROK alliance, by nature, is hostile to North Korea, and strengthening it counters the spirit of peaceful reunification.

True Force for Change

Ahead of the Moon-Trump summit, thousands of people [surrounded](#) the U.S. embassy in Seoul to form a human chain and protest the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea. Marching through the center of Seoul, they held up signs that read ‘Koreans hate THAAD’ and ‘Yes to peace talks,’ as well as banners directed at Trump.

Hope for peace on the Korean peninsula lies in the mass movement that installed Moon Jae-in and continues to call for fundamental change.

The Movement That Ousted Park Geun-hye Must Continue

By Hyun Lee | May 8, 2017 | Originally published in [Zoom in Korea](#)

War threats before a major political election may have been effective in the past in swinging the South Korean electorate to the right, but not this year. The conservative camp is battered and split into two warring parties following the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye. The general public—its collective consciousness heightened through the mass protests that successfully ousted Park—is no longer rallying behind hawkish candidates who fan public paranoia to garner votes.



Barring a last-minute upset, liberal democrat Moon Jae-in will be the next president of South Korea. But does he truly represent the interests of the millions who took to the streets to unseat Park and demand systemic change? And what are the tasks facing the left vis-à-vis the new administration? These are the questions this article will discuss, but first, let's quickly review the field of candidates.

A Brief Run-down of the Candidates

Moon Jae-in

Front-runner Moon Jae-in, of the main opposition Minjoo Party, is the greatest beneficiary of the mass protests that led to Park Geun-hye's impeachment. Widespread discontent against Park and the conservative Saenuri party have catapulted Moon to the front of the pack with a significant lead over the other candidates.

Moon was Chief of Staff for the late former President Roh Moo-hyun, who served from 2003 to 2008 and continued his predecessor Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" of engagement and economic cooperation with North Korea. If elected, Moon is expected to reverse South Korea's policy toward North Korea to one of engagement. He has [pledged](#) to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex—the joint inter-Korean economic project that was the last remaining hallmark of peaceful North-South engagement before it was shut down by the Park administration in 2016.

The question is: if Moon is elected, will the United States be willing to recalibrate its North Korea strategy to allow Moon to lead? And if not, how much will Moon stand up to the United States to chart an independent path?

Ahn Cheol-soo

The runner-up, according to polls, is Ahn Cheol-soo, who defected from the Minjoo Party to establish the centrist People's Party in the lead-up to the 2016 general election. His public branding as a successful entrepreneur and political outsider previously made him wildly popular among young people. But his attempt to court the conservative vote in the aftermath of Park's impeachment has estranged him from his former fans. He promotes not just strengthening South Korea's historic military alliance with the United States but also expanding it, under the banner of a "comprehensive strategic alliance," to include closer cooperation in the areas of politics, economy, and culture.

Hong Jun-pyo

Neck and neck with Ahn is Hong Joon-pyo, the governor of South Gyeongsang Province and the candidate of the Liberty Korea Party, the right-wing faction of the conservative split. Hong has appealed to South Korea's far right by doubling down on his conservative positions and slinging mud at his liberal opponents. He has [said](#) he wants to bring U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea and has blamed gay people for the spread of HIV / AIDS.

Sim Sang-jung

Support for Sim Sang-jung of the left-leaning Justice Party climbed to a record 11.4 percent in the week leading up to the election. Disaffected voters disappointed by Ahn Cheol-soo's rightward shift are turning to Sim whose progressive and principled stance on issues such as LGBT rights appeals to young voters seeking change. After splitting in 2012 from the Unified Progressive Party, which was forcibly dissolved a few years later by Park, the Justice Party has embraced pragmatism over left ideology and rebranded itself as a reformist party to appeal to a broader public. The leaders of the party will likely take official positions in the new liberal democratic administration. Whether the party can consolidate forces on the left to build on the momentum of the mass movement that ousted Park and push for systemic change remains doubtful.

Yoo Seong-min

Trailing far behind the pack is Yoo Seong-min, who represents the moderate, anti-Park faction of the conservative camp. He once served as Park's chief of staff when she was a lawmaker in the National Assembly. His open criticism of her policies resulted in their alienation and his exclusion from the Saenuri Party's nomination process in the 2016 general election. During Park's political scandal, Yoo left the Saenuri Party to help

found the splinter Bareun Party. His strongest base is in the conservative stronghold of Daegu and North Gyeongsang province.

The Mass Movement Cannot Rest

Park Geun-hye's historic impeachment, which created the opportunity for the upcoming election, cannot be credited to the political strength or deft maneuvering of the opposition parties. It was the organized power of millions of ordinary people, who rejected Park's corrupt rule and took to the streets week after week, that pushed the wavering opposition parties into action.

That mass movement has virtually handed the presidency to Moon Jae-in. As a liberal democrat, Moon is far better than Park whose authoritarian rule rolled back decades of gains made by the country's pro-democracy forces. But his party has done little to challenge the previous administration's [labor market reform initiative](#) or block the ongoing [deployment](#) of a controversial U.S. missile defense system in Seongju. South Korean progressives note with bitterness that negotiations on the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, which has led to the disastrous [privatization](#) of public services, such as healthcare, began when Moon was in the Blue House as the chief of staff for then-President Roh Moo-hyun.

Clearly, the mass movement that ousted Park cannot rest after the May 9 snap election if it wants real change. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of this year's historic election is that while people power created a historic opportunity for change, there is no political party that can consolidate that power and build on its momentum to fight for issues that are important to the broad majority of working people.

A decade of conservative rule—from Lee Myung-bak to Park Geun-hye, who jailed many opposition leaders, including [Han Sang-gyun](#), the president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, and forced the [dissolution](#) of the opposition Unified Progressive Party—has battered and fragmented South Korea's organized left. No matter what the outcome of the May 9 election, the left has a lot of ground to regain.

The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Labor Party

The South Korean left's entry into the political arena has its roots in the mass uprisings of 1987, a pivotal year for the country. The decades-long South Korean struggle for democracy culminated in the June people's uprising of 1987 and finally put an end to a succession of U.S.-backed military dictatorships. The following months of [mass labor strikes](#) in industrial manufacturing zones across South Korea laid the groundwork for the eventual formation of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. And for the first

time since the division of Korea in 1945, masses of South Koreans openly called for reconciliation towards peaceful reunification. The formation of the National Council of Student Representatives (Jeondaehyeop) led to South Korean participation in the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students in Pyongyang in 1989 and the historic, defiant crossing of the DMZ by the late Reverend Moon Ik-hwan and then-student activist Lim Su-kyung.

That year, paradoxically, also marked the moment that South Korea's economy, once tightly controlled by an autocratic state, began its transition to a neoliberal market economy modeled after Reaganomics. South Korean political terrain in the wake of 1987 was shaped by a political and economic ruling class that embraced neoliberalism and trampled on the rights of workers in the name of "globalization," on the one hand, and a new democratic force borne out of militant resistance against the system of national division and capitalist exploitation, on the other.

Despite major political differences on questions of strategy, the forces at the helm of the pro-democracy struggle, labor unions, and social movement organizations joined together in 1987 to form the People's Victory 21, which became the foundation for the establishment of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in 2000. The DLP went on to garner 13% of the general vote and gain ten National Assembly seats to become the third largest political party in South Korea in 2004. Its success in 2004 was due in part to a change in election law, which, for the first time, allowed proportional representation. This would not have been possible, however, without disparate political forces reaching beyond their differences to come together in a united front.

For a relatively small party, the DLP played a key role in South Korean politics from 2000 to 2008. Through direct democracy, the party kept itself firmly rooted in the struggles of workers, farmers, and the urban poor, who made up the majority of its membership. Its principled and persuasive positions on behalf of politically marginalized sectors forced the established parties to adopt progressive reforms and had the effect of pulling South Korea's entire political spectrum to the left. Before its forced dissolution in 2014, the DLP's heir, the Unified Progressive Party was the most vocal opponent of Park Geun-hye's policies on a range of issues, from privatization of public services to hostility toward North Korea.

In the last two decades, South Korea's political and economic system has shown signs of faltering. The inter-Korean summits between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il in 2000 and Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il in 2007 shook the very foundation of South Korea's decades-old political system based on national division. South Korea's economy, which once grew rapidly through neoliberal policies that forced its workforce to tighten their belts and endure longer and harsher working conditions, faced persistent crises, and its

core, festering with corrupt collusion between the country's largest conglomerates and the government, has now been laid bare for the entire world to see.

The mass candlelight protests of 2008—which brought out tens of thousands to protest the reversal of a U.S. beef import ban as part of South Korea's free trade negotiations with the United States—and the recent protests to oust Park were the embittered expressions of a populace frustrated with the country's outdated political and economic system and in search of an alternative. The words to their anthem, sung in unison at every candlelight protest, is article one of the Constitution: "The Republic of Korea is a democratic republic. All state authority shall emanate from the people." More than mere expressions of discontent over rotten beef or the president's secret shamanic advisor scandal, the protests raised a fundamental question: the meaning of true sovereignty.

The left, unfortunately, has not provided an answer. Friction due to political differences on questions of strategy led to a split in the DLP in 2008 and created deep rifts within the South Korean left. The year 2008 also marked the beginning of a decade of conservative rule, which systematically eroded the gains made by the pro-democracy forces in the previous decades. The Park administration's transgressions against the people—from its mishandling of the Sewol Tragedy to its [backdoor deal](#) with the Japanese government to silence the former "comfort women" who endured sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial army during WWII—are numerous to list. What cannot be disregarded is the incompetence of the existing opposition parties that have failed to stand up to these overt acts of authoritarianism. The undisguised degeneration of South Korean politics and the rightward shift of the opposition parties are a direct result of the marginalization and isolation of the organized left following the DLP's break-up.

Time to Regain Lost Ground

The South Korean people, who declared "Basta ya!" and gave Park Geun-hye the boot, are still fighting—in the melon fields of [Seongju](#), by the watery grave at [Paengmok Harbor](#), and on picket lines across the country. Whoever wins the election on May 9, the mass movement that ousted Park needs to build on the momentum of its victory and keep the pressure on in a number of fronts.

The most pressing task for the new administration will be to mediate the current crisis between the United States and North Korea. Despite Trump's declared willingness to sit down with Kim Jong-un, no one—not even China—has proven to be up to the task of brokering such a meeting. That has to be the priority of the incoming South Korean leader. To achieve reconciliation with the North and permanent peace on the peninsula,

the South Korean people will need to press the new administration to stand up to the Trump administration and chart an independent path. Demanding the United States end its provocative war exercises in exchange for a freeze of North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in addition to withdrawing its dangerous missile defense system in Seongju is now more urgent than ever.

The fight against the government's labor market reform initiative—aimed at turning South Korea's entire workforce into a disposable labor pool and undermining the power of unions—will intensify even with a liberal democrat in the Blue House. Unless the mass movement continues to press the next administration, the corrupt system exposed through Park's Choi Soon-sil scandal—the cozy back-scratching relationship between South Korea's largest conglomerates and its political leaders—will remain unchanged.

Abolishing the National Security Law—mainly used to punish political opponents, dissolve social organizations and political parties, and suppress progressive voices—is a task that even Moon Jae-in failed to do as Roh Moo-hyun's chief of staff. It will take an organized fight from the left to overturn the archaic law once and for all.

What the movement to impeach Park laid bare is that South Korea's current political and economic system is no longer sustainable. It also showed clearly that state power, which has been wielded to quash the democratic aspirations of the people, can also be pushed back by their organized power. The fissures in the political system exposed by their struggle are openings for the broader left.

But people power does not emerge spontaneously. Only when the people are organized through social movements and have a political party that fights for their interests can they mount effective and sustained resistance to challenge the status quo. A left political party cannot exercise its power in the political arena without the organized social movement of the disenfranchised who make up the party's base. Likewise, without a political party that can fight for their interests in the political arena, social movements can easily be defeated. A unified political party fighting in tandem with a social movement of the organized masses is essential for systemic change.

After May 9, the movement that ousted Park cannot rest, as the South Korean majority seeks, as a matter of survival, a political force that will forge a new path. Creating that force—by building social movements and unifying the left to build political power—should be top on the agenda of everyone on the left. And supporting that effort should be a priority for all those outside Korea who were inspired by the awesome mass protests that toppled Park Geun-hye's regime.

Union-led Popular Protests Push to Oust South Korean President

By Hyun Lee and Gregory Elich | December 8, 2015 | Originally published in [Labor Notes](#)



Photo: Voice of People

Massive protests have rocked South Korea's capital city of Seoul over the past month, as workers demand the ouster of President Park Geun-hye and an end to her plans to make drastic, anti-worker changes to the country's labor laws.

South Korea has historically been one of the United States' strongest allies in the region. Its government, like so many others in the age of corporate globalization, is trying to weaken unions and restrict democratic debate.

But there's a growing resistance—led by organized labor. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) is anchoring a coalition of workers, farmers, the urban poor, and students to oppose President Park's pro-corporate agenda and neo-authoritarian rule. [Tens of thousands faced off against the police](#) on November 14, braving high-pressure cannons and tear gas. Undeterred, they marched again on December 5, donning facemasks in defiance of the president's threats to ban rallies with masks. [A 69-year-old farmer remains in critical condition](#) after being doused at short range by a water cannon.

Police have arrested nine members and officials of the Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union over the past two weeks, and imprisoned five officials of the Korean Construction Workers Union. In the lead-up to the December 5 demonstration, they raided 12 offices of eight KCTU unions and affiliates, copying files and confiscating documents and computer hard drives. And police have surrounded a Buddhist temple where KCTU President Han Sang-gyun has been taking sanctuary since November 14 to avoid arrest. If the government doesn't change course in the coming weeks, Han has called for a general strike.

Four-year Temps

Why are South Korean workers so upset? And why is their government responding with such force?

President Park and her ruling New Frontier party want to introduce a package of laws that would fundamentally change the country's labor market and undermine the power of unions. They would let employers fire workers arbitrarily, increase the use of temporary labor, and extend the contract term for temporary workers from the current two years to four.

"If the reform passes, an employer could hire workers for four years, fire them temporarily, then rehire them for another four years, and they would have no incentive to hire permanent, regular workers," Han warned in [a recent interview](#).

Contract workers are not entitled to the four major types of insurance that South Korean employers must legally provide to permanent workers—health insurance, unemployment insurance, industrial-accident compensation, and social security.

Unions say employers will use this loophole to replace regular workers with contract workers.

Another proposed law would replace the country's seniority-based salary system with a performance-based system, and let employers terminate workers based on subjective assessments of "low performance." (Currently, "low performance" cannot be grounds to fire an employee legally, so employers resort to all manners of harassment and humiliation tactics to force employees to leave their jobs voluntarily.)

Also, if companies want to push workers into early retirement, they are legally required to pay them 30 days or more of average wages for each year of consecutive service as severance pay. This new system "would allow a company to get rid of unwanted workers without spending a dime," Han said.

The new law would also allow employers to change their employment regulations as they please without worker consent. By law, employers of ten workers or more are required to prepare rules of employment, such as payment method of wages and annual paid-leave, etc., and submit them to the Ministry of Labor, as well as post them where workers can have free access to them. A company can alter its employment regulations only with the explicit consent of the labor union, or, if there is no labor union, the majority of its workers.

“This is designed to eliminate all means of resistance by organized labor, and this is precisely the aim of the Park Geun-hye government,” Han said.

The government is also introducing a peak-wage system, in which pay is automatically cut for workers at age 55. The government argues that businesses need to cut the pay of older workers, because they become less productive as they age, and with the money they save, companies can hire more young people and solve the country’s growing youth unemployment. The government is trying to pit the young against the old, but its feigned concern for young people masks the real beneficiaries of the labor reform – companies that stand to reap enormous profits from cutting the wages of older workers and increasing their reliance on temporary labor.

Trouble Started in 1997

At the height of its development in the 1980s, South Korea’s economy was highly export-driven and controlled by a handful of family-owned conglomerates, such as Hyundai and Samsung. Workers at large industrial plants produced steel, automobiles, electronic parts, and textiles for export.

Once a worker was hired by one of these companies, he or she was considered to have a job for life. A worker generally devoted his or her entire career to one company and had an opportunity to climb the ladder, with salaries based on seniority.

The movement for democracy against the military dictatorship during the 1970s and 1980s produced a strong, militant labor movement, based in large industrial unions. At its height in 1996, for example, three million workers shut down auto and ship production, and disrupted hospitals, subways and television broadcast for 4 weeks to oppose newly passed labor laws that would give employers more power to lay off workers.

That all changed after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Foreign investors bought up shares in South Korean companies at bargain prices. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailed out South Korea’s economy—but at a steep price.

It introduced two laws that devastated worker standards. One legalized layoffs for the first time in South Korea, and another legalized the use of dispatch workers through employment agencies and popularized the practice of in-house subcontracting. Almost overnight, workers with decent, well-paying, secure jobs became “precarious workers”—part-timers or temps without benefits or job security. Today, among

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, South Korea ranks number one for the most precarious workforce.

Now the government wants to make workers even more precarious—and is intent on passing its controversial reform before the year is over.

Labor-led United Front

Park, the daughter of a former military dictator, has come under widespread criticism for introducing neo-authoritarian practices that hark back to her father's era.

For instance, since taking power, she has used the outdated [National Security Law](#) to jail an opposition lawmaker and [dissolve an opposition party](#), and has outlawed the Korean Government Employees' Union and the left-leaning Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union. Now she wants to replace all history textbooks in public schools with a [single, government-authored history text](#).

The recent protests are part of a coalition effort. Fifty-two organizations representing various sectors of society came together earlier this year to establish a national coordinating body, with regional chapters across the country.

They're united not only against the labor law changes, but also the rest of Park's pro-corporate agenda and anti-democratic initiatives. Farmers are especially opposed to the series of free trade agreements that her government is pursuing—including the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#), which will further undermine the domestic rice market with a flood of cheap imports and weaken the country's ability to feed itself.

KCTU, the coalition's anchor, is the second largest labor federation in South Korea and by far the most militant. With 626,035 members, it accounts for approximately 40 percent of trade union members in South Korea and has more than 1,200 affiliated enterprise-level trade unions.

The larger and historically more pro-government Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) had pledged earlier this year to not participate in the tripartite negotiations with government and business representatives about the changes to the labor laws. But its leadership did an about-face in the fall of this year and entered the talks, giving legitimacy to the government's push for anti-worker changes to the Labor Standards Acts and other labor laws. Rank and file members of FKTU, especially those in the financial, metal, and public sectors, strongly oppose their leadership's compromise with the government.

KCTU President Han, who boycotted the tripartite committee, considered by many as a rubber-stamping institution, is no stranger to struggle. In 2009, as head of the Ssangyong Motor branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union, he led 900 workers in a 77-day occupation of a SsangYong Motor plant to protest mass layoffs (their slogan: “Layoffs equal murder”), and this earned him a three-year jail sentence.

After he was released from prison, he launched a new protest—occupying an electrical transmission tower, 164 feet in the air, for 171 days, making the SsangYong layoffs a major issue in the 2012 presidential elections.

In 2014 he became KCTU president in the labor federation’s first direct election in which all 600,000 members were eligible to vote.

He ran on a pledge, if elected, to launch a general strike and make KCTU into Park’s “greatest fear.”

Hyun Lee and Gregory Elich are both members of the US-Korea Solidarity Committee for Democracy and Peace. Gregory Elich is also the co-author of Killing Democracy: CIA and Pentagon Operations in the Post-Soviet Period. Lee is a KPI fellow and Elich is on the KPI Advisory Board.

South Korean Labor Strikes Back: Interview with KCTU President Han Sang-gyun

By Hyun Lee | November 12, 2015 | Co-published with *Foreign Policy in Focus*



KCTU president Han Sang-gyun
(Photo: KCTU)

Standing in the way of South Korean President Park Geun-hye's series of [controversial labor market reform initiatives](#) is the Korean Confederation Trade Unions (KCTU). The union confederation has vowed to "stop freight trucks in their tracks" and "immobilize the country" if the government continues to push through its comprehensive reform package.

The proposed reform would increase labor flexibility on a scale that is unprecedented since the country's [adoption of International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)-imposed structural adjustment policies](#) in the late 1990s. Cloaked as a solution to growing youth unemployment, Park and South Korea's ruling conservative party propose to replace the country's seniority-based wage system with a flexible, performance-based system. The reform would start in the public sector and introduce a wage peak system, under which older workers swap an extended retirement age for fixed salaries regardless of their seniority. The reform would also relax conditions for the termination of workers, increase the use of temporary contract workers, reduce job security in all labor sectors, and allow employers to change their employment regulations without worker consent.

The reform initiative comes as South Korea pursues a series of free trade agreements (FTAs) that will further undermine the country's food sovereignty and limit its sovereign sphere by impeding its policy-making powers. The Korea-US FTA, in its third year of implementation, has given foreign corporations the power to control South Korea's domestic policies through the controversial [investor-state dispute system](#), which enables foreign corporations to challenge the country's laws on the grounds that they may interfere with the corporation's ability to make profits. The Park administration is also in the [final stages of completing a trade deal with China](#), which has farmers worried about the flood of cheaper products from China into South Korea's agricultural market. And South Korea has just announced its [intention to join the Trans-](#)

[Pacific Partnership Agreement \(TPP\)](#), the secretly negotiated mega trade deal, the [full text](#) of which was only recently been released.

KCTU is forging a broad united front with farmers and the urban poor not only to oppose the labor market reform but to mount a challenge to Park's broader pro-corporate, pro-free trade agenda. It has called for a mass convergence in Seoul on November 14 to build momentum for a potential general strike in the coming months. But it's a risky fight, since Park has shown that she is willing to take [extraordinary measures to silence her opposition](#).

At the center of it all is a man named Han Sang-gyun, the newly elected KCTU president with seemingly unshakeable resolve, hardened from years of fighting labor struggles in the streets. He served three years in jail for leading the [2009 occupation of a Ssangyong Motors plant](#), in which 900 workers barricaded themselves for 77 days to protest layoffs and which ended in a [violent showdown with the police](#) wielding water cannons and tear gas. After being released from jail, he climbed on top of an electric transmission tower to stage a protest 164 feet up in the air. [His aerial protest](#), which lasted 171 days in the harshest months of winter, forced candidates in the 2012 presidential election to declare their positions on the Ssangyong dispute, which still continues today. In 2014, in KCTU's first direct election with the participation of all 800,000 rank-and-file members, Han ran on a pledge, if elected, to launch a general strike and make KCTU "Park Geun-hye's greatest fear."

Han recently spoke about KCTU's efforts to stop the proposed labor market reform, as well as the impact of IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies and the Korea-US FTA on South Korea's labor market.

Hyun Lee: We first came to know of you in January 2013 when you and other former Ssangyong Motors workers were living on top of an electrical transmission tower 164 feet above ground to protest the unjust layoff of 3,000 workers by Ssangyong Motors back in 2009. Tell us about your personal background – about the Ssangyong fight and what led to your decision to become the president of KCTU.



Ssangyong Motors workers' occupation of their factory in Pyeongtaek in 2009 (Photo: libcom.org)

“Layoffs are akin to murder” – that was the leading slogan of the Ssangyong Motor workers during our 77-day factory occupation to oppose layoffs in the simmering summer of 2009. I was the union representative then, and I still shudder when I think back at the time I spent with comrades who were willing to risk their lives in that fight. The crackdown by the government, which had mobilized all of its might and special weapons, was a gruesome battle between the government, which had defined the workers as its enemy, and the workers, who were left to writhe in agony as they struggled to stay alive. Twenty-eight workers have died so far as a result of the trauma caused by the government violence. I had the unfortunate fate of receiving this tragic news while in jail, and that was incredibly hard to endure.



Han Sang-gyun on top of an electrical supply tower in November 2012 (Photo: The Korea Times)

After spending three years in jail, I wanted to fulfill our vow to live our lives in a world without irregular and precarious work, so I climbed a 124,000-volt electric transmission tower with my comrades. The reality in South Korea, where dismissed workers have to plead to be heard and bring attention to their pitiful and unjust plight, is not changing and in fact becoming more barbaric.

I decided to run for the position of KCTU president in order to change this reality, where workers live in constant fear of dismissal and can be dismissed at any time and where even after they are dismissed, workers blame their own incompetence. I wanted to confront capital and those in power who want to institute a system of modern-day slavery, and fight for the liberation of 10 million irregular workers. I wanted to devote myself to turning this world of low-wage exploitation, where people work themselves to death for less than \$2,000 a month, into a world where workers can live with respect and human dignity through meaningful labor.

Lee: When you ran for office as KCTU president in 2014, you pledged to launch a general strike if elected. Why was this important? And why do you think the KCTU rank and file chose you as the president?

KCTU represents the interest of 20 million workers. To fight for workers, who have their backs against the wall and are attacked from both sides by the government and capital, there is no other path but a general strike.

The KCTU election in 2014 was the first election with the direct participation of all 800,000 members. I think the expectation that I won't simply be complacent in a situation where struggle may be difficult and that I will find a way out is the reason they elected me as KCTU president. What we are about to embark on is a general strike not only to fulfill that expectation but more importantly to stop the Park Geun-hye government's labor market reform, which will turn the entire country into a pool of irregular/precarious workers who can be dismissed at any time without cause.

Lee: You have been confined inside the KCTU office, and the government has issued a warrant for your arrest. Why? And what are your days like?



*Seoul City Hall Plaza, April 24, 2015
(Photo: Solidarity for Peace and Reunification in Korea)*

After I became KCTU president, we called for a [mass demonstration on April 24](#) to oppose the anti-worker laws that the government is pursuing. This was followed by Labor Day on May 1. Workers came out to the streets en masse for legal demonstrations. Lots of people were on the streets, so inevitably, this led to some minor violations of traffic laws and the Law on Assembly and Demonstration. So the prosecutor's office ordered me to report to them for an investigation, and I told them that I would comply. But because we couldn't agree on a date that was convenient for them, they issued an arrest warrant. And since June 23, I have not set foot outside the KCTU building. Outside the building, hundreds of police stand guard day and night on surveillance duty in order to arrest me.

Although I am confined in the office, I am still just as busy. Many KCTU meetings take place at the office, several times a day. People from all regions bring me home-cooked meals. I'm not able to move around a lot, so I'm getting fat, and that worries me a bit. (Laughs) I haven't been home for almost 5 months, but my family comes to visit me often. They haven't abandoned me yet! (Laughs)

Lee: President Park Geun-hye and the ruling conservative New Frontier Party (NFP) are intent on pushing forward a comprehensive labor market reform package. Talk about these reforms and the impact they will have on South Korea's workforce as well as the labor movement.

Article 33 of our constitution guarantees workers the right to form labor unions and exercise independent association, collective bargaining, and collective action to confront

capital and protect our interests. But the government is trying to undermine labor unions through policy directives that trample on the spirit of our constitution.

The most problematic aspects of the proposed labor market reform would enable employers to terminate workers whenever they want without cause and make all workers irregular/precariou workers. There are two proposed laws related to irregular/precariou workers. One would allow the use of dispatch/contract workers in all labor sectors, and the other would extend the contract term of irregular workers from two to four years. If this passes, an employer can hire young workers for four years, fire them temporarily, then rehire them for another four years. This means that they would have no reason to hire permanent, regular workers, and it would simply be a matter of time before the entire labor force in South Korea becomes irregular or precariou.

It is already very easy for employers to lay off workers in our country. A company can lay off workers not only in cases where it is actually financially struggling, but even if it projects that it may run into a deficit in a few years. Currently, white-collar workers in banks and large corporations are forced into early retirement even before they reach the age of 50. At least in their case, they receive some compensation. The proposed law on general dismissal would enable an employer to terminate its workers based on “low performance” and send them away empty-handed. This would allow a company to get rid of unwanted workers without spending a dime.

Also, according to the current law, a company can only change its employment regulations with the explicit consent of the majority of its workers. The labor market reform that the government is pursuing would allow employers to change their employer regulations as they please without worker consent. If this passes, a worker can lose his/her job or have his/her wages docked simply for falling out of favor with his/her employer, and there would be no reason for the employer to listen to the demands of a labor union. This would create a slavery-like work environment where workers constantly have to curry favor with their boss. This is designed to eliminate all means of resistance by organized labor, which is precisely the aim of the Park Geun-hye government.

South Korea already has the highest percentage of irregular/precariou workers and the greatest labor flexibility of all OECD countries. The government’s policy is aimed at making permanent a structure in which workers can work the maximum work hours but still incur rising debts, and this spells disaster. The Park Geun-hye government, which refuses to hold the *chaebols* responsible and instead passes on distress to workers,

is fanning the outrage of workers and the urban poor, and their outrage is about to reach a boiling point.

Lee: KCTU was born on the eve of the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Its general strike to oppose labor law reforms in 1996 and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed structural reforms in 1997 catapulted KCTU to international recognition. Please talk about that history and how the so-called "IMF crisis" of 1997 altered South Korea's economy and conditions for workers.

In 1996, the then-Kim Young-sam government railroaded the legislative process to pass a series of labor laws that would make it easier for employers to lay off workers and hire temporary / contract workers. A **month-long general strike of millions of workers** stopped the government from enforcing the law and boosted the confidence of workers that we can make a better world through our own power. It was that spirit that eventually led to the entry of progressives in South Korea's political arena.



A South Korean worker protesting IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies (Photo: todayboda.net)

But the same law was reintroduced as part of a structural adjustment program imposed by the IMF after the Asian financial crisis in 1997. In the past, if you worked hard, it was possible to raise a family with hope for the future. But the IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies introduced a system for easy layoffs. The Act on the Protection of Dispatched Workers allowed companies to hire temporary workers on short-term contracts.

Immediately after the passage of these laws, the Hyundai Motor Company announced layoffs, even though it was not in any financial hardship. So we understood that these laws are about forcing workers to the edge of a cliff. These laws were not only aimed at laying off workers but at destroying labor unions. If there were workers leading a

struggle to demand their rights at the workplace, the employer could simply evoke this law to dismiss them at any time, undermine their legitimate labor union activity, and uproot the labor union from the workplace.

Back then, we had no idea just how serious the problem of irregular/precarious employment could become. Since then, layoffs and the use of contract workers have turned 10 million workers into irregular/precarious workers. Today, you won't find a single household without at least one irregular worker. The biggest disaster in South Korean society today is income inequality and the lack of decent and secure jobs.

That is why this year, KCTU created a movement center to address head on all the problems related to irregular/precarious employment.

Lee: Compare the KCTU of 20 years ago and the KCTU of today. What is the biggest challenge in carrying out a general strike on a similar scale?

Twenty years ago, the term "worker" or "laborer" was not popular at all in South Korean society. Workers were derogatorily referred to as *gong-soon-yi* (factory girl) or *gong-dol-yi* (factory boy). There were no human rights for workers, who faced rampant exploitation and oppression. Through the [popular democratic uprising of 1987](#) and the mass worker struggle of 1996, we built KCTU and declared workers as owners of society. The movement that faced off against dictatorship and ushered in democracy in South Korea was made possible by the flag raised by workers. And for the first time, there was hope that people can live decent and dignified lives as workers.

Since then, KCTU has failed to address head on the problems of the ever-growing irregular/precarious workers. Until recently, no organization properly represented the 10 million such workers, and this ultimately weakened KCTU's ability to fight.

For some time, capital has pursued its strategy of labor exploitation by reining in those in power and taking control of the police, the prosecutor's office, the national assembly, and the media, which all stand on the side of capital to oppress workers. And they have created fear among workers that struggle can lead to losing everything. Astronomical fines and seizure of property for so-called damages, warrants for imprisonment, termination from employment, destruction of democratic unions – these are the forms of punishment for those who dare to fight.

Despite this, we have no choice but to fight. KCTU is calling for a general strike despite all this because without a fight, what's left of organized labor, the only means to defend

the rights of workers, can ultimately become obsolete. The lives of 20 million workers are on the line.

Lee: It has been three years since the implementation of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), touted as the largest trade deal for the United States since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and which became a model for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a mega-trade deal among 12 Pacific Rim countries. What has been the impact of the Korea-U.S. FTA on South Korea's workers and farmers? And what would be the impact of the TPP if South Korea decides to join?



South Korean farmer protesting the Korea-US FTA (Photo: Voice of People)

Workers and farmers fought hard to stop the Korea-US FTA but ultimately failed. Farming areas have become devastated, and workers have become prime targets of exploitation by transnational capital. The government has basically decided to give up on food sovereignty. Their logic is that we have to give up on agriculture in order to sell semiconductors, ships, and automobiles and that that is the only way for our economy to thrive. So they implemented the FTA by force.

If you go to the rural areas today, you will find no farms that are economically competitive. The youth have abandoned the rural areas and have all gone to the city. But in the city, there are not enough jobs, so they have basically become day laborers who don't even earn the minimum wage and barely eke out a living.

Today in South Korea, there are 9.4 million workers, who, despite working long hours, earn less than \$2,000 month. The Korea-US FTA has made low-wage exploitation a permanent feature of our society, and transnational capital now rules our economy.

The government is now in the final stage of completing the Korea-China FTA and has announced its intention to join the TPP, which will cover a massive economic region. Joining the TPP will inevitably increase competition with Japan, and this is projected to cause damages that will exceed those of the Korea-US FTA. The reason why South Korea has not pursued an FTA with Japan thus far is that Japan is more competitive in many economic sectors.

Experts warn that if Japan has increased access to South Korea's market through the TPP, our economy will quickly become jeopardized and it could lead to mass unemployment. Japan's agricultural products are similar to what South Korea produces, and if they flood our domestic market, it would be the death knell for our agricultural sector and food sovereignty.

Lee: KCTU has called for a mass demonstration on November 14. Please talk about the significance of the November 14 demonstration as well as what's at stake in this broader fight.

KCTU's top demands are to stop the labor market reform, create tougher conditions for termination of workers, and transfer irregular / precarious workers to permanent, regular employment. But we all know that we can't win if we fight our struggles alone. We can't resolve the problems faced by farmers, the urban poor, youth, and workers if we don't fight together.

So in each region, farmers, workers, and the urban poor are working together to organize for November 14. This is unprecedented, and KCTU is taking the lead in forging a united front at the regional level. So it's not about coming together just on November 14 but working together leading up to November 14 and beyond.

There are 11 demands for the November 14 demonstration, and they include: stop the labor market reform; abolish irregular / precarious employment; stop rice imports; stop crackdowns on street vendors; and hold the *chaebols* responsible. But these are simply a compilation of the top demands of the various sectors that are coming together. We know we can't win all of them. More importantly, our unified goal is a fundamental change in a national system that favors the *chaebols* and overlooks the interests of the common people. The November 14 demonstration is an important step in this fight. That's why all are resolved to converge in Seoul in a historically unprecedented scale on November 14.

I've spent many hours worrying about preparations for November 14 while stuck in this windowless building, and these hours have been filled with apprehension and anxiety. But something amazing is unfolding as we speak. At least 50,000 irregular /

precarious workers plan to converge in Seoul. Workers in various industrial sectors have resolved to oppose the labor market reform and also aim to mobilize 50,000 for November 14. Elderly farmers with canes will charter buses to join the mass demonstration. The urban poor, and youth and students, too, are determined to occupy Seoul. I'm only frustrated that many irregular / precarious workers who wish to join the demonstration but can't afford to charter a bus.

In the lead up to November 14, each region has been holding its own rally, and we have sent people on a national bus tour to educate and organize across the country. In Seoul, we are also doing an ad campaign on the city buses. It's very expensive to buy an ad on a city bus, so we're unable to do it on a large scale. But through the ads, we point out what's wrong with the labor market reform and appeal to the general public about our fight to oppose it. And the general public has been applauding our efforts.

We have staked everything on this fight. If the Park Geun-hye government continues to railroad the labor market reform despite our pleas, then we will also be ready for next year's general election in April and the presidential election the year after that. We are more determined than ever to cast a unified ballot in the upcoming elections.

Lee: Lastly, what are the plans for beyond November 14?

I believe when workers from all regions gather in Seoul on November 14, we will regain our confidence, which will be critical as we prepare to strike. If the national assembly pursues the labor market reform and the government issues a directive to enforce the administrative and legislative reforms, we are prepared to launch a general strike. And this time, it will not be a one-day strike. We're talking about stopping production, freight trucks stopping in their tracks, railroad and subway workers on illegal strikes, and paralyzing the country so that the government will feel the outrage of the workers. That's what we're preparing for.

KCTU also opposes the Park Geun-hye government's attempt to [introduce state-authored history textbooks](#). A good president should write new history through his/her actions, but ours simply wants to revise the past. South Koreans have always been critical of Japan's distortion of history, but now the Japanese media is pointing its finger back at us for doing the same thing. This is an embarrassment.



Friendly soccer match between North and South Korean workers on October 29, 2015 (Photo: Yonhap News)

Last month, a KCTU delegation traveled to Pyongyang for a friendly football competition between workers of North and South Korea. Peaceful unification is a long-cherished aspiration of our people, and the workers will demonstrate that the only way out of our current crisis is through reconciliation and economic cooperation between the North and South.

Our spirits are buoyed by the fact that people as faraway as the United States are interested in and cheering on our efforts. I hope the November 14 demonstration will help us regain our confidence to lead a successful general strike so that when we speak again, I can relay news of our victory. Please stand with us in solidarity and be with us in spirit.

In South Korea, Preaching Peace Is Now a Deportable Offense: A Korean American Housewife Confronts South Korea's National Security Law

By Hyun Lee* | January 27, 2015 | Originally published in Foreign Policy in Focus and Asia-Pacific Journal

A Korean American Housewife Confronts South Korea's National Security Law

Shin Eun-mi with a copy of her book

On the 70th anniversary of the division of the Korean peninsula, the Korea Policy Institute, in collaboration with The Asia-Pacific Journal, is pleased to publish a special series, "The 70th Anniversary of the U.S. Division of the Korean Peninsula: A People's History." Multi-sited in geographic range, this series calls attention to the far-reaching repercussions and ongoing legacies of the fateful 1945 American decision, in the immediate wake of U.S. atomic bombings of Japan and with no Korean consultation, to divide Korea in two. Through scholarly essays, policy articles, interviews, journalistic investigation, survivor testimony, and creative performance, this series explores the human costs and ground-level realities of the division of Korea.



On January 10, after detaining her for questioning on charges of violating the National Security Law (NSL), [South Korea deported U.S. citizen Shin Eun-mi](#) and barred her from returning to the country for the next five years.

For the past two months, the Korean American housewife had made daily headlines in South Korea after her speaking tour on her travels to North Korea sparked controversy and became the target of right-wing attacks. At one of the events, the detonation of a homemade bomb forced the evacuation of 200 people.

South Korean authorities interrogated Shin for more than 50 hours before deporting her. They also arrested activist Hwang Sun, who emceed the speaking tour.

“The gap caused by national division runs very deep in South Korean society,” says Shin. Indeed, the deportation of Shin and the arrest of Hwang follow on the heels of South Korea’s dissolution of the opposition Unified Progressive Party and growing concerns about an [intensifying government crackdown on free speech](#). The [South Korean Ministry of Justice recently announced](#) that it will push to strengthen the controversial NSL to allow the Supreme Court to disband organizations it deems “anti-government.”

For now, Shin, the author of *A Korean American Housewife Goes to North Korea*, a Korean-language travel journal, is back home in California. The entire ordeal, she says, has taken a toll on her physical and emotional health. In the following interview, she reflects on her recent speaking tour, the South Korean government’s deportation decision, and the kind of response her saga has received in the United States.

Hyun Lee: Start by talking about your personal background and how this affected your perception of North Korea.

Shin Eun-mi: I grew up in a very conservative Christian family. My grandfather on my mother’s side served three terms as a member of the Constituent Assembly in South Korea during Syngman Rhee’s rule and played a key role in railroading the NSL through the National Assembly in 1948.

My father is from a military background, so I received a very thorough anti-Communist education growing up. My earliest memories of hearing about North Korea were through my father’s stories of how he had led his troops all the way to the northern tip of North Korea during the Korean War to crush the North’s People’s Army, and I remember feeling proud that I was the daughter of a war hero. Naturally, growing up, I believed without question that the North Koreans are our enemy.

In grade school, we had anti-Communist poster contests in art class. The North Koreans I drew always had devil-like red faces with horns and a tail. I wrote in big letters, “Crush all commies!” I won awards in anti-Communist writing and speech-making contests. I imagined North Koreans having no human emotion, always carrying guns and ready to die for their party and country. I imagined children snitching on their parents and their parents being dragged away by the police in the dark.

As a child, I was part of a children’s performance troupe called the Little Angels, which toured the world to project a positive image of South Korea. I studied voice in university, then came to the United States to pursue a doctorate degree at the University

of Minnesota. I taught voice in Seoul until 2002, then settled in the United States, where I am currently a housewife.

My trip to North Korea in 2011 completely changed my thoughts about the people of North Korea. Ironically, I eventually became the victim of the NSL, which my grandfather had helped to establish.

Your first trip to North Korea was in October 2011, and you have been back five more times since then. What made you visit in the first place, and what made you return?

My husband, who loves to travel, was surfing the Internet one day looking for our next vacation destination when he learned that North Korea was open for tourism to people of any nationality except for South Korean citizens. [We realized] that it was even possible for us [to travel there] since we are U.S. citizens.

When my husband decided on North Korea as the next vacation spot, I had no desire to go with him. So at first I refused. But then I started to develop a curiosity about just how different North Koreans really are from us. So I decided to join him.

There, I realized that the North Koreans are not at all different from us. Parents worry about their children's education, housewives worry about the dinner menu, and young women worry about marriage, no differently from us. They were not at all the warmongering and robotic people that I thought they would be. I discovered that the people in North Korea are very pure and innocent. But North Korea was very poor. So in the preface of my book, I described North Korea as "a poor country where beautiful people live."

I adopted the North Korean tour guide on our first trip, Seol-gyeong, as my goddaughter. So I returned many times since then to visit my goddaughter.

Talk about your first trip to North Korea. What was most surprising?

I arrived at the Pyongyang airport full of fear and curiosity. As soon as we met our tour guides and our driver, I was shocked. Seol-gyeong talked about her boyfriend, and another guide worried about his children's education. Such mundane, everyday things — something I never imagined was possible in North Korea. I had imagined that they would be expressionless — certainly not smiling — but Seol-gyeong was so chatty, she reminded me of my own daughter.

On the street, I saw couples holding hands, kids giggling and joking around, women gossiping on their cell phones, a man carrying his child on his shoulders. What would

be just an ordinary street scene anywhere else in the world was the most shocking for me to see in North Korea.

I'm a U.S. citizen of South Korean descent. Since North Korea considers the United States an enemy, I thought the North Koreans would really dislike people from the United States. But that wasn't the case. The North Koreans we met on our trip gave us a warm welcome. They offered us food, beer, and became teary-eyed as they held our hands and said we are the same people. I can't count all the times that I was deeply moved.

How did these experiences change your perception of North Korea and your thoughts on unification?

They changed my thoughts about the people of North Korea — that they are no different from us. We are misinformed about the North Koreans. They are not people who spend all their time wielding their guns and preparing for war. You would know this if you just had a chance to meet them face-to-face. To really know them, we need contact. We need to meet them face-to-face and converse with them. I came to the conclusion that we would have no problems getting along if we were to live together. And that's how I came to think about unification. I started to long for a unified Korea and ending the state of war.

You published a travel journal about your experiences in North Korea, and it became a bestseller in South Korea and even made it onto the recommended reading list published by the Ministry of Culture. Talk about the impetus behind writing the travel journal.

I wasn't planning on writing a travel journal. I didn't think people would be interested in a travel journal about North Korea, and I didn't want people to know that I had been to North Korea. When I told close friends about my trip, one of them suggested that I write about my trip and post it on a South Korean website called [ohmynews](#). When I posted my first entry there, it was read by hundreds of thousands of people. I was shocked and overjoyed at the thought that people still care about North Korea and want unification. So I kept writing. After that, lots of publishing companies approached me about publishing my stories, and eventually, the series of my travel diaries was published as a book.

You did a series of speaking tours in South Korea about your trip to North Korea, but the most recent one sparked controversy and drew allegations from right-wing groups and President Park that your "talk concerts" were "pro-North." Talk about the most recent speaking tour.

The speaking tour was organized by the Southern Committee to Implement the June 15 Joint Declaration and endorsed by many other civic groups.

We started the tour in Seoul on November 19, then went to Gwangju, Daejeon, Daegu, and Iksan. Immediately after the first event in Seoul, there were sensationalized media reports calling the tour a “pro-North concert.” They falsely reported that I had said “North Korea is paradise on earth” and praised North Korea’s “hereditary succession of power,” and they re-broadcast these reports 24/7. It was like McCarthyism in the media.

Right-wing agitators stood outside our events and yelled “Go back to North Korea!” The false media reports continued, and at each stop of our tour, the protests grew more intense. In Daejeon, just two hours before our scheduled event, the owner of the building where we were supposed to hold the event threatened to cut off electricity if we went ahead, so we were forced to cancel the event. But we refused to call off the tour and pushed on. We were also greeted by many supporters, who braved threats from right-wing agitators to fill the lecture halls.

When we arrived at Iksan, in Jeolla Province, the university where we were scheduled to hold the event changed its mind, and we were forced to move the event to a Catholic church at the last minute. This is where the bomb incident occurred and we were forced to cancel the rest of our tour.

A police investigation later revealed that the media reports about me were false. I am currently in the process of filing a lawsuit against those media outlets.

What do you think caused such a backlash?

I really have no idea. I had been to South Korea many times since 2012 and given many lectures about my travels to North Korea. In April last year, just six months before the most recent tour, I had done the same speaking tour, organized by the same people. We stopped at even more cities and I gave about 20 lectures in total without incident. The previous year, in 2013, the Ministry of Unification praised my book and produced a documentary about me. The same media that recently accused me of being “pro-North” had done interviews with me and praised my book.

But suddenly, this time, it was exactly the opposite. *Tongil* (unification) became *jongbuk* (pro-North). I don’t understand why the same lecture became so controversial.

At the event at Iksan on December 10, a high school student set off a homemade incendiary device in the middle of your lecture, and two people were seriously injured. What happened?

A young man stood up in the middle of my presentation and said, “Isn’t it true that you referred to North Korea as ‘paradise on earth?’” Before I even had a chance to respond,

he pulled out a homemade acid bomb from his knapsack and hurled it in my direction. Had a staff person not gotten in the way to block it with his own body, I would have been seriously injured.

The police later found that the assailant had packed other incendiary devices in his knapsack. The police were quick to declare that he had acted alone, but this is doubtful. Several witnesses said they had seen the assailant being dropped off at the church by other people. And when he arrived inside the church, another man, who appeared to have arrived earlier to save a seat for him, got up and gave him his seat, then walked out.

What was strange that day was that when we arrived at the church, I noticed fire trucks lined up by the building. I remember wondering, “What are they doing here?” What shocked me also was that when the bomb went off, an explosives unit was on the scene within minutes. I still wonder if the local authorities had been tipped off in advance about what was about to happen. Prior to that day, the assailant had apparently posted online comments announcing his plan.

There are many unresolved questions about this incident. For example, the police claimed they searched the assailant’s home after the incident. But when organizers of the speaking tour met with the assailant’s parents, they told them that there had been no such search.

What’s even more surprising is that President Park said nothing about the terrorist incident. Instead, she publicly denounced our speaking tour as “pro-North.” The police downgraded the charge against the assailant, then called me in for questioning and raided Hwang Sun’s home. We were the victims of a terrorist act, but the South Korean police and the Ministry of Justice treated us as if we were the criminals.

Talk about your what happened when the South Korean police and the Ministry of Justice took you in for questioning.

The police summoned me three times and the Ministry of Justice once. In total, they interrogated me for over 50 hours. I was scheduled to return to the United States on December 12, but they barred me from leaving the country.

The investigation started based on an allegation that my lectures were in violation of the NSL. But it only took them a few hours to realize that there is nothing to substantiate this allegation. So then they focused their investigation on the content of my book and lectures I had given in the United States — which is absurd. I wrote the book and gave

those lectures in the United States, so why is it the business of the South Korean government?

They asked about every line in my book, from the preface to the very last page and demanded to know what my intentions were behind each sentence. For example, I had written in my book, "Christ tells us to love our neighbors, and I realized the North Koreans are our true neighbors," and they wanted to know, "What is the true meaning behind this sentence?" I wrote about cell phone use in North Korea and printed photographs of my trips in the book, and they wanted to know, "Do you really believe these are real?"

They showed me a copy of an email exchange between me and another person in the United States. The Internet server for our emails is based in the United States, so I have no idea how that was in their possession.

At any rate, they found nothing that I had done that was in violation of their NSL. Ultimately, they deported me based on immigration law, which states that a foreigner who acts against the national interest, disturbs the peace, and /or threatens the safety or security of the country may be deported.

Did the U.S. embassy or the State Department get involved?

As soon as I felt threatened, I contacted the U.S. embassy in Seoul. At first we exchanged emails, but after the bomb incident, I went to the embassy myself and met with a consul there. I explained about my situation, but he already knew my story very well. I requested protection, and his response was, "Go to the South Korean police for protection." I had no communication with the State Department.

You also requested a meeting with President Park, who famously said "Tongil is dae-bak" ("Unification is a jackpot") and claims to be pro-unification. Did you get any response from her to your request to meet? If you were granted a meeting, what would you have said to her?

No response. If she had agreed to meet with me, I was going to tell her, "The people of the South and North are not much different. We share the same history and culture through thousands of years. Please move forward for unification of Korea — for peace and for the people of the Korean peninsula."

Describe what happened when you arrived at the Los Angeles airport upon your return home. How did you think you would be treated within the Korean diaspora community in the United States?

When I arrived at the airport, it was the same scene as in South Korea. People from my church had come to the airport to welcome me home. And on the other side were right-wing people shouting, “Go back to North Korea!” I was focused on getting out of there quickly, so I only learned later that there was a physical confrontation and the police arrested two right-wing agitators for assault.

I realized that the gap due to national division runs deep in our community.

I’m not sure how I will be treated by the Korean American community. I suppose truth will prevail one day. What’s most urgent is reconciliation between North and South Korea — in other words, a return to the [post-June 15 era](#).

Hwang Sun, who appeared with you in the speaking tour, is now under arrest on charges of violating the NSL. The government has taken your book off the recommended list of books and has ordered all libraries to return all copies of the books to the Ministry of Culture. Your thoughts?

Hwang Sun is the mother of two young children. She poses no flight risk. And since the police have already raided her home and taken everything, there’s no risk that she will destroy evidence. I hope they will allow her to go through investigation and stand trial without being detained.

It was the South Korean government that selected my book for its list of recommended books, and it was the same government that rescinded this decision and announced a recall of my books. I don’t know what to say. I never considered the selection of my book for the government’s list as a matter of personal glory, because I’m not a professional writer. But it does raise a question for me. The content of my book hasn’t changed since the time the government saw fit to put it on the list, so what has changed to make it so controversial?

All this follows on the heels of the controversial dissolution of the opposition Unified Progressive Party and the South Korean government’s frequent use of the NSL to stifle free speech. Can you comment generally on the current political climate in South Korea?

I don’t know much about South Korean politics. But I do think the dissolution of a political party should be decided by the voters, not by the government. As for the NSL, it surely hinders freedom of speech and expression, which should be guaranteed in a genuinely democratic country.

What are your future plans and hopes? What do you take away from this whole experience?

I haven't yet thought seriously about my future plans or hopes. For now, I want to take a good rest and recover from mental and physical exhaustion.

The gap caused by division between North and South Korea runs very deep. Without resolving the problem of division, I don't believe we can expect to have true democracy, let alone peace on the Korean peninsula. The most urgent task is national reconciliation and peaceful unification.

Erosion of Democracy in South Korea: The Dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party and the Incarceration of Lee Seok-ki

By Hyun Lee | December 28, 2014 | Originally published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*



Roundtable to Oppose the Dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party and Defend Democracy. (Source: Voice of People)

On December 19, 2014, South Korea's Constitutional Court delivered an unprecedented ruling to dissolve the opposition Unified Progressive Party and disqualify all five of its representatives from the National Assembly.

The ruling was in response to a petition filed by the Park Geun-hye government in November 2013 to

dissolve the party based on allegations that it was under orders from North Korea to subvert the South Korean state through violent revolution. The government filed the petition two months after it arrested UPP lawmaker and National Assembly member, Lee Seok-ki, who is currently behind bars on charges of inciting an insurrection and violating the National Security Law (NSL).

This is the first time South Korea's Constitutional Court has ordered the breakup of a political party since it was founded in 1988. Pro-democracy advocates state that the court's ruling will set a dangerous and undemocratic precedent for state repression of other progressive parties, civil society organizations, and possibly even individual citizens.

According to South Korean public intellectual and long-time reunification activist Kang Jeong-koo, "The UPP has been the only political party fully advocating not only democracy but also the core values of peace, reunification, and social justice." Kang further stated that the dissolution of the UPP will "not only destroy democracy, but also undermine peace, reunification, and social justice." [1]

Indeed, more than simply seek to uproot the UPP, the current South Korean administration, under the cover of anti-communism and anti-North national security concerns, aims broadly to delegitimize all progressive elements and values that it deems to be in opposition to its rule. At this juncture, what is on display in South Korea is the state's erosion of the very democracy that the people of South Korea historically struggled for and continue to defend.

Park Geun-hye's Campaign against Lee Seok-ki and the UPP

On August 28, 2013, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), at the behest of President Park Geun-hye, raided the homes and offices of ten members of the opposition Unified Progressive Party (UPP), including Assemblyman Lee Seok-ki.

Lee was detained and indicted on charges of conspiring to incite an insurrection under criminal law, as well as sympathizing with and praising the enemy and possessing materials aiding the enemy in violation of the National Security Law.[2] Six other UPP members were indicted on similar charges.

The NIS based its accusations on a speech made by Lee at a May 2013 meeting, which it alleged was a secret gathering of an underground subversive organization plotting the overthrow of the government.

Before they could defend themselves in a court of law, Lee and his colleagues were the targets of a sensationalized trial by state-aligned media, which made unfiltered leaks from, and unofficial allegations by, the NIS front-page news for over a month. Lee's alleged connections with North Korea made headlines even as this charge was ultimately dropped by the NIS in the subsequent trial for lack of evidence.

The formidable array of forces lined up against Lee included both ruling and main opposition parties which joined together in common cause, taking measures that effectively preemptively judged Lee to be guilty. The National Assembly, with full cooperation from the main opposition party, New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), stripped Lee of immunity and approved a motion for his arrest.[3] On September 6, 2014, the ruling Saenuri Party sponsored a bill to expel Lee from the National Assembly.

On November 5, 2013, the Park Geun-hye government issued inflammatory charges that Lee and the other UPP members were part of an underground subversive organization with ties to North Korea called RO, or "Revolutionary Organization," which had infiltrated the UPP in order to instigate an insurrection, and filed a formal

petition requesting that the Constitutional Court dissolve the UPP. Ironically, its main argument was that the UPP platform and activities violated the democratic tenets of South Korea's Constitution. In a sweeping move, the Park administration also called for the disqualification of UPP members currently holding seats in the National Assembly.

Critics of the Park administration's draconian maneuvers to silence the UPP charge that the "Lee Seok-ki sedition conspiracy case" has all the trappings of political repression and in this regard recalls the authoritarianism of the military dictatorship period. They add that failure to counter the government's attack on Lee and his party signals not only a major setback to democratic progress but also, more ominously, a return to the politics of fear that ruled South Korea only a few decades ago when government surveillance and unwarranted arrests of citizens were routine.

The 2013 NIS Scandal

As critics have pointed out, the sensationalized arrest of Lee Seok-ki was timed to deflect mounting public scrutiny away from the NIS following revelations of its central involvement in manipulating public opinion against opposition candidates and thus in favor of Park Geun-hye's candidacy during the 2012 presidential election. Bolstering their claims is the fact that Lee was arrested in September 2013, four months after the alleged conspiracy plot came to light—precisely a moment when the NIS needed to deflect public attention away from its own scandal.

Throughout 2013, the NIS faced intensifying public criticism for its role in illegally intervening in the 2012 presidential election. Former NIS Chief Won Sei-hoon, who had ordered an online disinformation campaign against opposition candidates, was indicted in June 2013 for interference in the 2012 presidential election.[4] In January 2014, he was found guilty of graft and received a two-year jail term.[5]

Since its foundation, the NIS, formerly known as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), and the National Security Agency have interfered both directly and indirectly in South Korean politics and civil society. Conservative former president Lee Myung-bak strengthened the NIS by restoring its anti-communist investigation and surveillance functions and by appointing Won, his right-hand man, to its helm in 2009. In this capacity, Won actively encouraged NIS manipulation of public opinion in favor of the ruling party.[6]

In the lead-up to the 2012 presidential election, NIS agents, using aliases, posted 5,333 online comments on 15 public websites. The Prosecutor General's office identified 1,704 of these comments as constituting "political involvement" and 73 comments as directly

intervening in the election.[7] This investigation also revealed that NIS agents used an automation program to retweet millions of comments about the election.[8]

Throughout the summer of 2013, as the public became aware of the extent of NIS interference in the election, the UPP was at the forefront of protests questioning the legitimacy of Park Geun-hye's presidency. In other words, it was within the very juncture in which disclosures of NIS misconduct had significantly eroded public trust in President Park that her government, in a crude face-saving move, saw fit to arrest Lee and other members of the UPP.

In this way shifting attention away from the NIS role in manipulating democracy to its supposed function of safeguarding democracy against communist infiltration, the trial of Lee Seok-ki and other UPP members became the first "sedition conspiracy" trial since South Korea's first democratic election in 1987.

The Trial of Lee Seok-ki and Other UPP members

The government's case against Lee and other UPP members relied exclusively on two related pieces of evidence, the testimony of a government informant and the transcript of his audio recording of the controversial May 2013 meeting.

During the first trial, however, the defense noted and the NIS conceded that a large portion of the original audio transcript was full of errors—272 errors to be exact.[9] The "errors" in the NIS transcript of Lee Seok-ki's speech reveal a pattern of manipulation and distortion that itself calls out for careful scrutiny. Indeed, NIS transcriptions fundamentally altered the meaning of original phrases, discerning a radicality of purpose that far exceeded the actual language: for example, "carry out propaganda" was distorted as "carry out holy war," and "Jeoldusan Catholic Martyrs' Shrine" was ominously rendered as "shrine for decisive war." Similarly, "specific preparation" was interpreted as "war preparation," "Let us prepare specifically" as "Let us prepare war," and "Let us be decisive" as "Let us carry out a decisive war." [10]

Despite such discrepancies, the Suwon District Court found Lee guilty on all counts, sentencing him to 12 years in prison. This ruling was partially overturned in August 2014 when the Seoul High Court acquitted Lee Seok-ki and his co-defendants of the highest and most controversial charge of conspiring to overthrow the government.

The Seoul High Court found no evidence that the attendees of the May 2013 meeting arrived at a consensus to carry out a concrete plan of action, much less made preparations for violence either before or after the meeting. It found no evidence to

substantiate the government's claim that Lee and other UPP members belonged to an underground subversive organization plotting a government overthrow. It furthermore dismissed the testimony of the government's key witness as mere speculation not supported by evidence.[11]

Lee and his co-defendants still remain behind bars, however, on the lesser charge of inciting an insurrection and violating the National Security Law. This is the first time in South Korean history that an "inciting an insurrection" charge has been brought to court. The case is now in the hands of the Supreme Court, which is slated to deliver a final ruling in January 2015.

Dissolution of the UPP

Elaborating on Park Geun-hye's incendiary charges that Lee and the other UPP members were part of RO, the Ministry of Justice alleged that 80-90% of so-called confirmed RO members were part of the UPP and that RO was directly involved in the party's decision-making. The UPP, it insisted, was a political party under orders from North Korea to subvert the South Korean state through violent revolution.

Despite the Seoul High Court's ruling that the prosecution failed to demonstrate that the UPP had any intention to use violent means to overthrow the government or that it had any connection to North Korea—which thereby invalidated the evidentiary basis for the government's petition to dissolve the UPP—the Constitutional Court delivered an 8 to 1 ruling on December 19, 2014 in favor of dissolving the party. The majority of the Constitutional Court found fault with "progressive democracy," as expressed in the UPP's platform, and ruled that progressive democracy coincided with North Korea's aim of fomenting revolution in the South. The court also upheld the government's charge that the UPP aims to install a socialist government through violent means.[12]

The lone dissenting voice was Justice Kim Yi-su, who wrote, "The respondent is a political party in which dues-paying members alone number 30,000. In the process of discerning the majority of its members' political orientation, one must not regard the orientation of a small minority as reflecting the political views of the entire membership." Kim added, "It's hard to deny that the progressive policies proposed by the respondent, from its days as the Democratic Labor Party to the present, have resulted in many changes in our society," and warned that dissolving the party based on the actions of a handful of members would have the effect of stigmatizing all 100,000 of its members as part of an outlaw party. Referring to the dissolution of the Communist Party by the West German Constitutional Court in 1956, he highlighted the undemocratic repercussions of such a draconian action, writing, "From the time the

German Communist Party was dissolved until it reformed, 12,500 Communist Party personnel were investigated, 6000-7000 received criminal punishment and in the process were fired from their jobs or otherwise restricted in their social lives"; he further warned, "There is no guarantee that a similar decision will not produce similar results in our society." [13]

Aftermath of the Ruling

Immediately following the Constitutional Court's ruling, the Park Geun-hye government declared any protests by the UPP against the ruling to be illegal.[14] The Prosecutor General has reportedly opened a criminal investigation based on charges filed by right-wing groups against the entire UPP membership, including Chair Lee Jung-hee, a rival candidate against Park Geun-hye in the 2012 presidential election, for violation of the National Security Law.[15] And a right-wing group calling itself the Freedom Youth League has filed a petition to the Central Board of Election to demand the release of the names of all UPP members. "The reason why we demand the release of the names is to ensure there are no government employees registered as UPP members in the interest of national security," explained a spokesperson for the group at a press conference on December 24, 2014.[16]

The Park government and the ruling Saenuri party appear intent on ending the political careers of all former UPP National Assembly representatives, who have pledged to challenge their disqualification by the Constitutional Court. On December 26, 2014, the Seoul Central District Prosecutor subpoenaed former UPP representatives Lee Sang-kyu and Kim Mi-hee for questioning based on allegations that they received campaign funds from North Korea during the 1995-96 local and general elections.[17] The allegations were made by Kim Young-hwan, a former democracy activist-turned-right-wing human rights activist of the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights, during the Constitutional Court proceedings. Representatives Lee and Kim have filed countercharges against Kim Young-hwan for defamation.

Former UPP representative Oh Byung-yun faces a criminal trial starting January 2015 in the Seoul Central District Court for his alleged role in obstructing the arrest of labor leaders during a railroad workers' strike against privatization in December 2012, a labor issue that garnered wide international solidarity. The court also issued a summary order against former UPP representatives Kim Mi-hee and Kim Jae-yeon, fining both \$3000 each for the same violation.[18] And, in a final *coup de grâce*, the Saenuri Party has stated that it is drafting a bill to bar the disqualified UPP representatives from running in any political election for the next ten years.[19]

Amnesty International's East Asia Research Director, Roseann Rife, has stated that the ruling "raises serious questions as to the authorities' commitment to freedom of expression and association," adding, "The space for freedom of expression has been vastly diminished in recent years. The authorities are using the NSL to suppress dissent and persecute individuals with opposing political views." [20]

Like the sensationalized arrest of Lee Seok-ki, which was timed to cover up exposures of the NIS' illegal meddling in the 2012 presidential election, the government's November 2013 filing of the petition to dismantle the UPP and the recent Constitutional Court ruling seem perfectly timed to deflect attention away from major crises facing the Park administration. When Park's approval rating dipped in the fall of 2013 after her retreat on key campaign pledges regarding pensions and college tuition, her Justice Minister, to some degree, succeeded in diverting public attention by filing the petition against the UPP in the Constitutional Court. [21] In the past month, Park had been embroiled in another crisis after controversial leaks exposed a power struggle among an unofficial group of people, including her own brother, who had been pulling the strings behind her administration. [22] The Constitutional Court's ruling on December 19 helped shift the public spotlight away from the precipitous drop in Park's approval rating to an all-time low of 37%. [23]

We might be reminded that the last time the South Korean government forcibly dissolved an opposition party was during the Syngman Rhee dictatorship, when Rhee charged his political opponent, Cho Bong-am, with espionage and eliminated the Progressive Party. [24] Cho was executed the following year, and Rhee himself was ousted shortly thereafter in the April 19 uprising of 1960.

In the wake of the 1960 uprising, the South Korean constitution was revised to include Article 8 in Chapter I to protect minority opposition parties from government suppression. Article 8 guarantees the freedom to establish political parties and outlines the legal mechanism for the dissolution of parties if their activities pose a clear and urgent threat to the Constitution. [25] The Park Geun-hye government's petition against the UPP was the first invocation of this mechanism since Article 8's inception in 1960. The Constitutional Court's ruling in this case therefore sets an ominous precedent for all opposition parties in the future.

Cold War Legacy of Silencing Political Opposition

South Korea has a long history of wielding anti-communist rhetoric to crack down on progressive political opposition by vilifying the latter as "pro-North Korea" or as North Korean agents.

On the eve of the Korean War, in 1948-49, under the pretext of eliminating “internal enemies,” the South Korean government carried out a scorched-earth campaign, killing an estimated 30,000 people, including women, children, and the elderly, on Jeju Island; in the summer of 1950 in the early stages of the war, it executed an estimated 100,000-200,000 in the Bodo League massacre; and in the course of the war, more than one million people were killed, many of them being innocent civilians massacred for having “communist tendencies.”[26]

Park Chung-hee, the father of the current president Park Geun-hye, ruled the country by military force for 18 years from 1961 to 1979, and established a vast intelligence apparatus primarily aimed at silencing dissent and eliminating political opponents.

Perhaps the most famous victim of such strong-arm politics was the late president Kim Dae-jung, kidnapped by the precursor to the NIS, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, and charged with conspiracy and sedition. In 1973, in a dramatic incident that could be plucked from a movie script, the KCIA kidnapped Kim Dae-jung, the major political rival and most vocal critic of then-president Park Chung-hee. Kim narrowly escaped assassination after they took him, blindfolded, out to sea, where he might have met the fate of countless others who had been silently disappeared by the KCIA had they not been discovered at the eleventh hour by Japanese maritime authorities.[27]

Park Chung-hee’s successor, Chun Doo-hwan, who like his predecessor seized power through a military coup, arrested Kim Dae-jung for his role at the time of the Gwangju people’s uprising in 1980 and charged him with conspiracy to wage insurrection. Sentenced to death, he escaped execution due to international attention and calls for his release from pro-democracy forces, including from Pope John Paul II, who appealed to Chun for clemency.[28] Kim was exonerated 25 years later in a retrial and later went on to serve as the president of South Korea and to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the country’s transition to democracy.

Today, South Korean courts have established greater judicial independence. Judges are no longer penalized for delivering decisions disagreeable to the ruling administration, as was commonly the case under South Korea’s military dictatorship. But South Korea has yet to escape the dark shadow of the National Security Law, which is often used to punish political opponents, including those who simply agitate for social progress and democratic rights.

Enacted on December 1, 1948 by the Syngman Rhee government to crush anti-government forces, the National Security Law gave new life to the infamous Public Order Maintenance Act established by Japanese authorities during the era of Japanese

colonial rule on the Korean peninsula.[29] The NSL was wielded by the Rhee regime to arrest, detain, and even execute thousands of opposition figures and dissolve social organizations and political parties. Subsequent military dictators, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, similarly used the National Security Law to fabricate countless espionage cases to suppress opposition parties.

Even after the ostensible end of military dictatorships and the inauguration of democracy in South Korea, the National Security Law continues to be used as a tool for suppressing progressive voices. It makes a broad spectrum of activities punishable by law. Article 7 of the law makes all activities that sympathize, praise, encourage, and/or promote the positions of North Korea punishable by up to 7 years imprisonment. Simply possessing materials that can be considered “benefiting the enemy” is also punishable. Most people accused of violating this law are punished under Article 7.[30]

The National Security Law directly breaches Article 19 of the International Covenant on Human Rights in so far as it fundamentally denies the right to freedom of thought and expression.[31] For this reason, the UN Human Rights Committee as well as a host of international human rights organizations have repeatedly called on the South Korean government to abolish the National Security Law.

Born Out of the Struggle for Democracy

The UPP was heir to political formations that emerged out of the South Korean people’s struggle for democracy, namely, the People’s Victory 21 of 1987 and the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), founded in 2000.

After the decades-long South Korean struggle for democracy culminated in the June people’s uprising of 1987, thus finally putting an end to a succession of U.S.-backed military dictatorships, the forces at the helm of the democracy struggle, labor unions and social movement organizations, joined together to form the People’s Victory 21. Running its own candidate in the 1987 presidential election, the People’s Victory 21 became the foundation for the establishment of the Democratic Labor Party, which, in 2004, garnered 13% of the general vote and gained ten National Assembly seats to become the third largest political party in South Korea.[32]

Ahead of the 2012 general election, the DLP sought to unify all opposition parties into a coalition as the only viable strategy to defeat the ruling conservative party. But its hasty merger with other progressive and liberal forces to form the UPP was rocky from the start and eventually led to deep rifts from which the South Korean left has yet to recover. The UPP managed to gain 10.3% of the general vote and 13 National Assembly

seats in the 2012 general election, but political infighting led to the defection of half of its National Assembly representatives and many of its party members.

Before the recent Constitutional Court ruling, the UPP held five National Assembly seats and was a membership-driven party with 100,000 dues-paying members, 30,000 of whom paid dues. This self-proclaimed “party for workers, peasants, and the common people” has been the most vocal opponent of Park Geun-hye’s policies on a range of issues, from privatization of public services to her hostile stance towards North Korea.

UPP Chair Lee Jung-Hee, who as a candidate in the 2012 presidential election publicly challenged and humiliated candidate Park in nationally-televised presidential debates, announced that she was running in order to make Park lose the election. Lee furthermore enraged Park by referring to her father, Park Jung-hee, by his adopted Japanese name, Takaki Masao, on national TV to remind the public of his dark past when he collaborated with Japanese colonialists. Many sense an element of revenge in Park’s assault on the UPP.

Lee Seok-ki, the Party’s most vocal critic of Park and the ruling party, has a colorful past like many pro-democracy activists in his generation. He was a student activist during Chun Doo-hwan’s military dictatorship, then served prison time from 2002 to 2003 for his activities in the outlawed People’s Democratic Revolution Party, and was eventually pardoned by former President Roh Moo-hyun. He went on to found a political consulting group, which helped to triple the DLP’s local electoral seats in 2010 and double the UPP’s National Assembly seats from six to thirteen in 2012. His success in helping progressive candidates win elections earned him the second position in the UPP’s party list for proportional representation in the 2012 general election.[33]

As a National Assembly member, Lee was a persistent critic of unequal South Korea-U.S. relations and called for dramatic cuts in South Korean subsidies for U.S. Forces in Korea.[34] When Korea seemed on the brink of war in early 2013, he called for four-party talks among the two Koreas, China, and the United States.[35] Lee also earned Park Geun-hye’s ire for his role in derailing her appointment of Korean American and former Bell Labs president, Kim Jeong-hoon, for the position Minister of Future Creation and Science by exposing his former connection to the CIA.[36]

In the summer of 2013, when the public began to learn about the illegal interference of the NIS in the 2012 presidential election, the UPP was on the streets, marching and organizing candlelight protests. Shortly thereafter, the Park Geun-hye government decided to raid and arrest Lee and other UPP members.

The Ongoing Fight to Defend Democracy

The entry of the Democratic Labor Party (later called UPP) into the National Assembly was heralded as a sign of South Korea's progress as a democracy and a salutary acceptance of a diversity of viewpoints within the political arena. Today's dissolution of the UPP reflects a marked retreat from such progress.

As MIT linguistics professor and political critic Noam Chomsky notes, "The courageous struggle of the Korean people for democracy has been an inspiration worldwide. The assault against the UPP is a serious blight on this record of achievement." [37]

The court ruling was followed by a series of denunciations by labor and civic groups, including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice, Professors for Democracy, Korean Alliance of Progressive Movements, and the Writers Association of Korea.

Under the banner of the "Roundtable to Oppose the Dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party and Defend Democracy," pro-democracy forces that came together in the lead-up to the Constitutional Court ruling held an emergency meeting on December 22. The "Roundtable," composed of leading intellectuals, elected officials, faith leaders, and civic society groups, as well as notable international figures, such as Chomsky and former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, says the dissolution of the UPP will only further galvanize its forces.

"Remember the law of history: the more they trample on our desire for democracy and progress, the more extensively this desire will spread," said UPP Chair Lee Jung-hee on the steps of the Constitutional Court after last week's ruling, adding, "The outdated system of national division, buttressed through red-baiting, is destined to crumble. I am confident that the dream of progressive politics, shared by the UPP and the people, will only grow. Our people will rise up from this bitter moment and march onward." [38]

Pro-democracy forces in South Korea vow to mount a challenge to the current government's assault on democracy. They have also launched an international campaign to [demand the release of Lee and his co-defendants](#), awaiting a final Supreme Court ruling expected in January 2015. Their fight might very well be the most important one in recent South Korean history to defend the basic democratic principles that the South Korean people fought so valiantly to secure.

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A Report from the Field: Defending One Korea at the U20 Women's World Cup

By Hyun Lee and Betsy Yoon | August 22, 2014 | A joint publication of the Korea Policy Institute and *Foreign Policy in Focus*

Korean Americans and Korean Canadians waving unification flags and playing Korean drums at the 2014 FIFA Women's Under-20 World Cup in Toronto. (Photo: Betsy Yoon)



On a Tuesday in early August, North Korea's women's soccer team defeated Finland 2 to 1 in the opening match of the FIFA Women's Under-20 World Cup in Toronto.

Yes, it was just a soccer game. But for those of us who were there to cheer on the North Korean team, the stakes were profound. International soccer fans routinely express their support by adorning themselves in the national colors and symbols of a single country. In our case, however, we came as the supporters of a peacefully reunified Korea.

Ranging in age from 27 to 80, a group of Korean Americans and Korean Canadians converged in Toronto for the game. Armed with flags and wearing t-shirts bearing images of a unified Korea, the group included nearly 50 grandfathers and grandmothers who had come from as far away as Vancouver, Texas, and Kansas. The backside of our t-shirts displayed the text of the 6.15 Joint Declaration, signed in 2000 by the leaders of North and South Korea, declaring their mutual desire for peaceful reunification.

Someone unfamiliar with Korea's history might ask, why would a group of Korean immigrants travel so far to cheer on the North Korean women's soccer team?

Rules of the Game

The Unification Flag had been openly displayed at international sporting events as early as 1991, when athletes from North and South Korea for the first time participated on a single team.

But even though the 6.15 resolution had been agreed to by both Koreas, a FIFA representative informed us during halftime that because Korea is currently recognized by the United Nations as two separate states, promoting the idea of a single Korea on our t-shirts and flags constituted a political statement, which FIFA prohibits at its events. "I understand. I've been to Korea myself," he said over our protests. "But I warn you, if you don't take off the shirts and stop waving the flags, I will have to call on guards to escort all of you out of the stadium."

Fan support for Korean teams at international sporting events under the banner of one Korea was not, however, without precedent. In the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup hosted by the United States, Korean American fans unfurled a giant unification flag that covered an entire section of a Philadelphia stadium, with no admonition from FIFA. North and South Korea memorably marched under the Unification Flag in the 2000 and 2004 Summer Olympics, the 2006 Winter Olympics, and the 2006 Asian Games.



Korean Americans holding small unification flags at the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup. (Photo: Tongkyun Kim)



Korean American fans waving the Unification Flag at the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup in Philadelphia. (Photo: Tongkyun Kim)

Presumably unaware of the use of the flag at past FIFA events, the FIFA official foisted responsibility for the decision onto the ironclad rules of the game, saying that he had no choice but to enforce them.

For those of us supporting North Korea under the banner of a unified Korea, the division of Korea was not just political, but deeply personal. Many of the elderly members of our group were survivors of the Korean War who have been separated from family in the North. They have lived with unhealed wounds that stem from the unresolved war and Korea's enduring division.

The Political is Deeply Personal

Coming to cheer on the North Korean team and to wave the Unification Flag was one way in which Noh Chunhee sought to redress the painful past. During the war, as her family was preparing to flee from the southern city of Daegu, a relative urged her parents to abandon Ms. Noh and her sister, the youngest of her parents' many children. In the end, her parents did not leave the city, but this painful memory remains.

"My sister was three and I was two, and my mother heard my sister saying something to her pillow, hugging it like a baby," recounted Ms. Noh. "My mother leaned in to listen. She heard her saying, 'They're going to throw us away. They're going to throw us away.' Years later, when my older sister hears our mother tell this story, she still cries." Now 64 years old, Ms. Noh, a New York resident, drove all the way to Toronto to see the match.

Cheering on the North Korean team until his voice turned hoarse, Soobok Kim was both haunted and galvanized by his memories of the war. “I was hit here,” he said, pointing to the sole of his foot, “Six years old, hit by a U.S. airstrike. Not only me, two sisters also. And this, even though it looks OK now, I still ache every day when I walk,” added Kim, who is now 70.

Our outraged response to FIFA was not simply a matter of asserting our right to free speech. FIFA’s demand was in effect a de-legitimization of the experiences of Koreans who had lived through the devastation of war and the externally imposed division of our homeland.

Our desire to cheer on the North Korean team under the banner of a peacefully reunified Korea was not “political” in a divisive or provocative sense, as FIFA implied. To the contrary, our actions were a necessary expression of hope for those of us who continue to believe in a resolution to the ongoing war and division, and the urgency of lasting peace in Korea.

Overcoming the Past

The scars of the past were not just present in the audience. When the teams from Finland and North Korea emerged onto the field, the significant height disparity was immediately noticeable: The Finnish team was strikingly tall whereas the North Korean team was uniformly short.

While this might not seem odd to the casual observer who likely carries a bleak vision of North Korean life, we recognized the height disparity as visible scars of a painful recent past. Born between 1995 and 1997, at the height of North Korea’s economic crisis, the North Korean soccer players were survivors of an especially bleak period marked by widespread food shortage, which North Koreans refer to as the “Arduous March.”

With the country’s fuel supply cut off due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist trading bloc, North Korea’s factory production came to an abrupt halt. Its idle tractors were transformed from tools for developing their country into immovable reminders of their changed reality. A series of floods and droughts devastated the country’s annual harvests, and U.S.-imposed sanctions blocked virtually all sources of income for the cash-strapped country. Among the many deprivations suffered by the North Korean people during this time, undernourished mothers were unable to breastfeed and did not have access to infant formula, so children born during that time possess a searing memory of hunger.

It was those children, now grown, who were representing their country on the world stage. If it were a contest based solely on size, the North Koreans would have stood no chance. But when the game opened, they ruled the field. They outran, outfought, and outscored the Finnish opponents who towered over them. In our minds, they became giants, criss-crossing the field with stunning speed and power, gritting their way to pulling off a herculean feat that seemed implausible just moments before.

A Step Toward One Korea

Outraged by FIFA's denial of our right to claim our nation as one and exhilarated by the tough determination of the North Korean team, we chanted the name of the last united Korean kingdom: "Joseon! Joseon!"

With each goal, our chants became more impassioned and our drumbeats even louder, because what we were rooting for was much more than just a soccer team. It was for an underdog, battered by a long history of war and crippling sanctions, and an object of international scorn that overcame impossible odds to stand up, heads held high, to an immeasurably more privileged opponent. Having been forced to put away our flags, we poured our hearts out as we stomped, clapped, and screamed for the tenacious North Korean women.

When the game-ending whistle blew with North Korea as the winner, our group did not simply erupt into triumphant cheers. Someone in the group began singing a well-known reunification song: "Uri-ui sowon-un tong-il..." ("Our dream is for reunification..."). The rest of us spontaneously joined in, as if to reclaim our right to hope for peace and healing.

While this opening match is likely to end up being one brief moment in the World Cup record books, for those of us rooting for North Korea, it brought renewed excitement and great hope. FIFA's ham-fisted demands lent clarity to the tragic fact that much of the world would prefer to keep the human consequences of Korea's division out of sight and out of mind. Yet as we closed out the opening match with a song that expressed our shared desire to see a unified homeland in our lifetime, we established this day as one step in our long path toward unification.

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Lurching Towards War: A Postmortem on Strategic Patience

By Hyun Lee and Christine Hong | February 15, 2013 | Originally published in *Foreign Policy in Focus*

With all eyes on North Korea since its third nuclear test, remarkably little has been said about how we arrived at this crisis point. Inadequately contextualized as North Korea's response to fortified UN sanctions, the latest nuclear test bespeaks the failure of U.S. diplomacy toward its historic enemy.



The commonplace U.S. media framing of North Korea as the region's foremost security threat obscures the disingenuous nature of U.S. President Barack Obama's policy in the region, specifically the identity between what his advisers dub "strategic patience," on the one hand, and his forward-deployed military posture and alliance with regional hawks, on the other. Examining Obama's aggressive North Korea policy and its consequences is crucial to understanding why demonstrations of military might—of politics by other means, to borrow from Carl von Clausewitz—are the only avenues of communication North Korea appears to have with the United States at this juncture.

Remarkably few U.S.-based North Korea watchers have commented on the country's increasingly martial rhetoric. Late last year, a banner on the website of North Korea's official news organ, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), declared a period of "Nationwide Preparation for All-out Great War for National Reunification." In October, according to the South Korean *Chosun Ilbo*, the U.S. government-funded *Radio Free Asia* reported that all North Korean troops had been ordered to sleep in their combat uniforms. Far from business as usual, the intensification of hawkish rhetoric and heightened combat-readiness of North Korean forces reveal strategic patience to be not only a colossal "strategic blunder," but also a perilous pathway to war.

As he enters his second term, Barack Obama must confront the role of strategic patience as a central driver of our current crisis.

War Games and the Ruse of "Strategic Patience"

In the year since Kim Jong Il's death, North Korea has readied itself for a showdown. On August 17 of last year, North Korea's newly minted leader [Kim Jong Un personally visited](#) two of North Korea's southernmost islands along the Northern Limit Line (NLL)

to give on-the-spot guidance to soldiers guarding North Korea's front line. On Mu Island, where in late 2010 soldiers responded to a South Korean artillery drill by shelling Yeonpyeong Island, the young Kim used binoculars to peer across the NLL and [instructed the soldiers](#) to carry out a precise counter-attack should even one enemy-fired artillery shell land on North Korean soil. He instructed the People's Army, in such an event, not only to make the West Sea their enemies' final resting place, but also to seize the opportunity to carry out a [counter-offensive war](#) aimed at national unification. The following week, Kim affirmed his battle plan in a [speech commemorating his father's *songun* leadership](#), advocating "counter provocation with a prompt counterattack."

Far from one-sided, however, the drama unfolding on the other side of the 38th parallel attests to an underreported escalation of military force on the part of the United States and South Korea. In fact, on the very day that Kim visited Mu Island, 80,000 U.S. and South Korean troops were gearing up for the annual [Ulchi Freedom Guardian](#). For the first time in its history, this war exercise included a [simulation of a pre-emptive attack](#) by South Korean artillery units in an all-out war scenario against North Korea. Ostensibly a defensive exercise in preparation for an attack by the north, the joint U.S.-South Korea war games have taken on a decidedly offensive characteristic since Kim Jong Il's death. What's more, a South Korean military official discussing the exercise raised red flags by mentioning the possibility of responding to potential North Korean provocation with [asymmetric retaliation](#), a direct violation of UN rules of engagement in warfare.

The surest sign that the Korean War is not yet over, these costly and provocative annual exercises are seldom recognized in the United States as central to Obama's foreign policy in Northeast Asia. Yet under the guise of "strategic patience," which misleadingly suggests waiting and doing nothing, the United States has dangerously inched closer to war in Korea. In 2012, for the first time, Key Resolve Foal Eagle, the world's largest computerized war simulation exercise, "practiced deploying more than [100,000 South Korean troops into North Korea](#) to stabilize the country in case of regime collapse," according to the *Chosun Ilbo*. Speaking to the paper, a South Korean government official described Kim Jong Il's death as a ripe opportunity to enact a regime-collapse scenario "[because the regime of new leader Kim Jong-un is still unstable.](#)"

In March 2012, combined U.S.-South Korean forces carried out the [largest amphibious landing operation exercise](#) in 20 years, involving 13 naval vessels, 52 amphibious armored vehicles, 40 fighter jets and helicopters, and 9,000 U.S. troops. The following month, South Korea's Defense Department announced a [new cruise missile](#) capable of

launching a precision strike anywhere in North Korea. While North Korea was still mourning the death of Kim Jong-Il and transitioning to the leadership of Kim Jong Un, U.S. and South Korean hawks saw a prime opportunity to intensify pressure on North Korea to bring about what many in the west had been facilitating and anticipating for the past two decades—namely, the collapse of the North Korean regime.

The U.S. Pivot to Asia and the North Korean Quagmire

Addressing the Australian National Assembly in November 2011, Obama confirmed a [shift in U.S. geostrategic priorities](#): “As the world’s fastest-growing region—and home to more than half the global economy—the Asia Pacific is critical to achieving my highest priority [of] creating jobs and opportunity for the American people.” While still entangled in the Middle East, Obama promised that the United States would [increase its presence and leadership role in Asia and the Pacific](#). This same message was reflected in the United States’ 2012 Defense Strategic Guidelines, which outlined plans for rebalancing the U.S. Navy from a 50/50 to 60/40 split between its Pacific and Atlantic fleets.

As part of its “pivot” to secure key trade routes and economic advantage in the vast region, the United States has already begun to [revive a network of old bases](#), including Australia’s Darwin base, Philippine’s Subic Bay, Vietnam’s Can Ranh Bay, and Thailand’s U-Tapao naval and air base, as well as tightening its ties with traditional allies, including South Korea and a remilitarizing Japan. In 2012, the United States and Japan announced a major agreement to deploy a second advanced [missile defense radar system in Japan](#), and for the first time, Japan’s Self Defense Forces and the U.S. Navy carried out combined [landing and island defense exercises](#) in Guam. In Korea, although the United States disavows any interest in a controversial naval base currently under construction in Jeju, critics point out that the base is [designed to accommodate Aegis destroyers](#) that will likely become part of an integrated missile defense system under U.S. command. A June 2012 *Chosun Ilbo* article reported that U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) Commander James Thurman suggested [maintaining the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command](#) even after transferring operational control to South Korea in 2015, thereby ensuring South Korea’s status as a permanent U.S. garrison.

As the United States looks to Asia as its most valuable sphere of influence, North Korea serves as a convenient enemy, justifying a ratcheted-up, regional U.S. military presence. But it also represents a policy quagmire. Not only has North Korea remained in the “cold” since the Soviet bloc collapsed, but it now also possesses two means of producing nuclear weapons and possibly long-range missile delivery technology. Under Obama, the United States has dealt with other quagmires in the Middle East by

toppling uncooperative regimes by force. North Korea, long the subject of regime-change fantasies, has little reason to believe that it is not in U.S. crosshairs.

Dangerously Close to War

USFK Commander [James Thurman](#), formerly the Chief of Operations during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and Special Operations Commander [Eric Wendt](#), the former deputy commanding general in Afghanistan, have brought combat knowledge gleaned from experience in the Middle East to the Korean peninsula. Mine-resistant vehicles used in Iraq and Afghanistan have now been [deployed near the DMZ](#), still littered with mines from the Korean War. And last summer, the Pentagon publicized the completion of precision-guided super bunker busters designed to attack North Korea's nuclear facility. The United States currently seeks to sell four [Global Hawk surveillance drones to South Korea](#), while [increasing South Korea's ballistic range](#) from 300 to 800 kilometers, thus enabling it to strike anywhere in North Korea. Thurman proposed [maintaining the 210th Fires Brigade](#), the core firepower in war scenarios against North Korea, close to the DMZ rather than transfer it to Pyeongtaek as originally planned. With no formal talks with the United States for almost a year, North Korea has good reason to be on edge.

In an [August 2012 Foreign Ministry memo](#), North Korea, having reviewed its history of negotiations with the United States, concluded that it had no choice other than to buttress its nuclear program as a deterrent, not in order to trade it for aid but to counter U.S. regime-change moves. "The principle of simultaneous action steps is not workable," it stated, nullifying the "action for action" agreement reached through Six-Party talks. Rather, U.S. renunciation of its regime-change policy was, it declared, a ["prerequisite for resolving the nuclear issue."](#) Demonstrating that Obama's policy of strategic patience has strained North Korea's patience, [Kim Jong Un declared on August 25](#): "Our patience has limits. We will not remain an onlooker to the enemies' frantic moves for aggression, but will make every possible effort to protect the destiny of the country and the nation." If provoked, he added, North Korea would not only defend itself, but also act decisively to reunify the entire peninsula.

In the highly militarized West Sea, a site of frequent skirmishes between North and South, U.S. agitation for regime collapse and North Korea's hardened stance may inadvertently trigger a war. As Park Geun-hye, daughter of dictator Park Chung Hee, assumes power in South Korea and Obama begins his second term, they should remember that for the 75 million Koreans on both sides of the DMZ as well as those abroad whose roots and loved ones are on the Korean peninsula, an eruption of violence could generate catastrophic consequences. When then-U.S. President Bill Clinton nearly attacked North Korea over its nuclear program in 1994, a Pentagon

computer simulation projected [1 million deaths](#) in the event of war on the peninsula. War is not an option.

Year One of Peace

Two decades ago, Clinton decided against attacking North Korea, and as a security assurance [suspended Team Spirit](#), precursor to Key Resolve, in order to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Negotiations led to the freezing of North Korea's plutonium production until George Bush reneged on U.S. agreements and denounced North Korea as part of an "axis of evil." Since then, neither Bush's policy of aggression nor Obama's so-called strategic patience has succeeded in halting North Korea's nuclear program. On the contrary, Pyongyang has continued to enrich uranium and successfully launched a satellite into orbit. As Leon Sigal points out, the [lesson of U.S. nuclear diplomacy with North Korea](#) is that "in trying to stop proliferation, cooperation worked where coercion failed."

This year marks 60 years, a full life cycle in Korean tradition, since the signing of the Armistice Agreement that brought active fighting to a halt but did not end the Korean War. To mark the passing of a life cycle defined by war, Korean peace activists dubbed 2013 "[Year one of peace](#)." As Obama enters his second term—a juncture when U.S. presidents historically "get vision" on North Korea—assessing the threat North Korea poses as a basis for U.S. policy is insufficient. "We, the people," Obama stated in his [second inaugural address](#), "still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war." Meaningful gestures of cooperation—including suspending provocative war games, abandoning regime collapse scenarios, and returning to the negotiation table—are thus crucial first steps in a new direction.

Genuine peace, not war, is the only durable basis of U.S.-Korea relations, and peace talks to end the Korean War the only way forward.

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