

South Korea Will See a Massive Labor Uprising on January 15

Monday 17 January 2022, by [BAE Minju](#), [HEEJUNG Nam](#), [SEOK Yang Jeong](#), [TAEK-GEUN Yoon](#), [YEUNG-CHAN Choi](#)
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Workers, farmers and the urban poor, battered by the pandemic, are demanding labor protections and structural reforms.

On January 15, a coalition of workers across South Korea — rural farmers, the urban poor and laborers — will gather in downtown Seoul for a National All-People’s Mobilization, in a protest expected to reach large numbers. Since October, workers have [mobilized](#) to demand better conditions, broader labor protections and policies, and structural reforms ahead of the forthcoming presidential and local elections of 2022 (in March and June respectively).

The South Korean government has used pandemic restrictions to regulate and limit the right to public assembly, claiming without sufficient evidence that such mobilizations increase Covid-19 infection rates. Labor leaders say more than 100 labor organizers are under investigation since the [October](#) general strike, and many have been arrested, including [Yang Kyung-soo](#), the chairperson of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the largest labor confederation of independent unions in South Korea, with 1.1 million members. On November 25, his sentence [was suspended](#), but labor leaders are expecting that more arrests will occur in the coming months.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has exacerbated already exploitative work conditions. Delivery workers, for example, are unpaid for sorting parcels and loading them into their vehicles before the deliveries begin, an injustice that predates the pandemic, but has grown more severe over the past two years. With increased demands for delivery, courier workers are [dying](#) on the job.

January 15 will not be the first time this coalition of Korean working people will come together. In the 1980s, when the U.S.-backed military dictatorship in Korea repressed dissent from the Left, workers, peasants and the urban poor mobilized together. During the 2016 to 2017 [Candlelight](#) Revolution, millions of Korean people came out to oust President Park Geun-Hye. Labor unions, facing [extraordinary](#) repression, hoped for [better](#) labor policies and protections under new leadership. But the current liberal Moon Jae-In government has largely failed to fulfill promises for working people.

The January 15 mobilization is the culmination of a year-long struggle of strikes, sit-ins and protests to shift the political agenda in the forthcoming elections. Amid the media spectacle surrounding the March presidential election, working people are bringing together five leftist opposition parties to back a [unified](#) platform and candidate to rebuild a worker-centered political Left.

As workers in Korea are gearing up for the January 15 mobilization, U.S.-based readers must not see these demonstrations as distant events. Exploitative work conditions are not specific to Korea. Rather, violence against workers under capitalism is a global crisis. The United States, furthermore, has a history of coercive lending practices, free-trade [agreements](#), security alliances, and military occupation in Korea.

For this article, I worked with members of [Nodutdol](#), an anti-imperialist organization of diasporic Koreans and comrades, to correspond with labor organizers who are playing a lead role in the January 15 mobilizations:

- Yoon Taek-geun is the senior vice chair of KCTU. In the 1990s, he was a rank-and-file railroad worker before getting laid off for participating in a railroad and subway workers' strike.
- Nam Heejung is the Seoul branch officer of the National Parcel Delivery Workers' Solidarity Union and was previously an active member of the Central Committee of the Democratic Labor Party, and served as a member of the Central Committee of the Unified Progressive Party.
- Yang Jeong Seok is the secretary-general of the Korean Peasants League (KPL). He previously served as the secretary-general of the Kyungnam-Busan Alliance of KPL. He currently farms strawberries in Sancheong County.
- Choi Yeong-chan is the co-representative of Action Solidarity for Liberation of the Poor, and he is currently the chair of Korea Democratic Street Vendors Confederation, where he previously served as the Seogang Branch Officer.

The following interviews have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Minju Bae: Can you describe your work, conditions and the mission of your organization?

Choi Yeong-chan: After the June uprising in 1987 and ahead of the 1988 Olympics, the government carried out a massive crackdown on street vendors, in the name of re-development, to obscure poverty and blight from foreign visitors. The Korea Democratic Street Vendors Confederation was established as the first independent mass organization of street vendors, in the aftermath of a major sit-in. Street vendors from around the country gathered and successfully forced the government to suspend its repressive tactics. Through this organization, street vendors organize to address issues beyond just those faced by the urban poor, highlighting the interconnectedness of social movements. This organization also played a leading role in the establishment of the Action Solidarity for Liberation of the Poor, an association of organizations of the urban poor. The Korea Democratic Street Vendors Confederation currently has more than 5,000 street vendors across the country. Our mission is not only to achieve the right to life for street vendors (the right to demand that the state provide the conditions for people to maintain a minimum standard of living), but also to pursue a vision for an independent and equal country, a unified Korea.

Yang Jeong Seok: Farmers in Korea make up around 4% of the total population, and the reality is that the average age of farmers is getting older too rapidly. Nearly 50% of farmers are over the age of 65. This is really worrisome. In addition, income disparity is a problem. The difference between the income of the top 20% and the bottom 20% is more than 12 times. More than 10% of farmers earn less than \$8,400 per year. In addition, the price of agricultural products is not guaranteed. A farmer has to work long hours and cover more than double the area compared to the past. Because there are too few people to work the fields, Southeast Asian migrant farmers came to take the place. Now, with the Covid-19 pandemic, they are not coming to work in Korea, and the labor cost has more than doubled.

Nam Heejung: The National Parcel Delivery Workers' Solidarity Union was established on January 8, 2017. Starting small with only 108 members, it is now a publicly recognized representative union for the parcel delivery industry and currently has more than 7,000 members. Our union may seem young, but it has enabled special employment workers to organize for legal recognition as workers protected by current labor laws. I believe that the union has contributed to the development of the Korean labor movement.

Minju Bae: With the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become commonplace for consumers to get

goods, medicines, and foods shipped and delivered. Can you tell us about how this has affected courier workers in Korea?

Nam Heejung: Courier workers have been suffering from excessive workload, as the volume of parcels has increased by nearly 50 percent during the pandemic. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the working hours of courier workers per week exceeded 70 hours.

As soon as Covid-19 started, the union predicted that the overwork problem of courier workers would become more serious and demanded countermeasures from the government and courier companies. However, the government and courier companies ignored this crisis. The government only agreed to form the Agency for Social Consensus for Measures to Prevent Deaths from Overwork after 16 courier workers died from overwork last year. After about six months of discussions, we reached an agreement on our demands.

Minju Bae: There is a surge of irregular work (or precarious work) through sub-contracting and special work statuses, with conditions made worse by the pandemic. What are some of the demands of workers who are laboring under these conditions?

Yoon Taek-geun: The first is to abolish irregular work and guarantee jobs for all workers. Second, a just economic transition in the context of the climate crisis and digital transformation of industries. Third, to guarantee public housing, education, healthcare, child and elder care, and transportation.

The reality for laborers in South Korea is that almost half of all workers are irregular workers. All industries and workplaces are demanding the abolition of the precarious labor system itself and the elimination of discrimination against irregular workers. In addition, all industrial unions demand that labor rights are guaranteed to “specially-employed” workers, such as insurance and courier workers and cargo construction engineers, who are sub-contractors. Workers in the automobile industry face job insecurity as industries shift to respond to climate change. Workers are also demanding a just transition, which means guaranteed employment and collective decisions made jointly by labor and management in future economic restructuring.

Increasing public education, healthcare, child and elder care, and transportation are major demands of the teachers’ union, the healthcare workers’ union and the service workers’ federation. Strengthening public healthcare is a particularly important social task as South Korea’s population rapidly ages and the Covid-19 pandemic continues.

Choi Yeong-chan: Stop making street vending illegal, stop governmental crackdowns on street vendors, and recognize that street vendors are critical to the economy and society!

Yang Jeong Seok: With the absence of agricultural policies from the government, the income gap between urban and rural areas is widening to more than 60%. For industrial workers, there are basic minimum wages for workers and set hours for daily labor. On the other hand, farmers have no guarantee to cover the basic minimum cost of production, and we need to worry about living regardless of bountiful and poor years. In addition to the severe natural disasters caused by the climate crisis, the lives of those who work in the agricultural sector are very precarious, and insurance does not properly function to protect our livelihoods.

Korean farmers demand controlled prices for agricultural products to cover minimum production costs; the institution of the Agricultural and Fishery Disaster Insurance Act to protect us from natural disasters; land reforms so that farmers can own their own farmlands; abolition of unfair free trade agreements; and the realization of food sovereignty.

Minju Bae: What has been the U.S. role in Korea's political economy, and how has that affected working people?

Yang Jeong Seok: The United States is the main actor that created the division of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea is being used as a geopolitical outpost of the United States to counter North Korea, China and Russia. It has also accelerated division and subjugation through military dictatorship. For example, the [THAAD](#) missile base was unilaterally installed in [Seongju](#) consulting the Korean people, and the United States is the main culprit that unintentionally caused conflict between China and Korea.

The [U.S.-Korea Status of Forces Agreement](#) is the worst evil that allows the United States to establish bases anywhere in Korea. If the United States were a true ally, it would not violate our country's sovereignty by having operational command of South Korea's military. On top of that, the United States shamelessly demands [cost-sharing](#) for the U.S. military presence in Korea and openly threatens to increase costs. The conscientious and progressive people in the United States should challenge their government to change its colonial treatment of Korea and its hegemonic practices in the region.

Today, almost all the roots of inequality in Korean society are due to the neoliberal economic policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund in 1997. With policies that rely on irregular workers, the enforcement of the free trade system, the opening of stock and financial markets, and the revitalization of mergers and acquisitions, now we are witnessing the collapse of agriculture, the increase and discrimination of irregular workers, and the outflow of wealth through the foreign ownership of Korean stocks and assets, which became common in Korean society.

Minju Bae is a labor historian and member of Nodutdol.

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