

South Korea: Commentary on the Presidential Elections

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KCTU Hopes the New Administration will not Waiver in its Commitment to Create a Society that Respects Workers

The KCTU congratulates Moon Jae-in on his election as president and on the start of the new administration.

A change of ruling party was already expected as a result of the presidential elections, which were brought about by the candlelight uprising. Nonetheless, given all the lowly trickery of the conservative forces, Moon's election has real meaning.

The Moon Jae-in administration begins with widespread support among the Korean people. It is important to remember, however, that the demand of the 17 million-strong candlelight uprising was not merely for a change in ruling party, but for the creation of a new South Korea.

The Moon administration is now faced with the double task of eradicating the structural evils left over from previous administrations and aggressively pursuing fundamental social reform.

The election is over, yet the passionate hopes of the candlelight uprising continue to burn. For this reason, the KCTU states clearly that while we will support the administration if it moves in the right direction, should it fail to do so, we will not hesitate to criticise it and to make it the target of struggle.

In addition, the KCTU acknowledges the great advances made for progressive politics by Sim Sang-jung, who received the greatest number of votes of any progressive presidential candidate to date, and Kim Seon-dong who completed the race despite being shut out by the media.

In spite of attempts to stimulate fears that a vote for a progressive candidate would be a 'void vote', voters were wise in their choices. The votes gained by the two progressive candidates embody the spirit of the candlelight uprising, which sought fundamental social reform and the eradication of the structural evils sewed by the previous administration, and will serve as pressure on the Moon administration to move forward with reform at the right pace and in the right direction.

This means first and foremost reversing the stationing of THAAD, which was pursued by Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn and National Security Chief Kim Kwan-jin.

In addition, the conservatives' attempts to use redbaiting and play on national security fears during the elections to reverse the course of history demonstrate that they are still grasping for power. These elements, who still have attachment to Park Geun-hye and seek to erase the candlelight uprising, must be completely eradicated.

There must be no compromise or cooperation with those who collaborated with the Park Geun-hye government or those who had a hand in its evil policies. Any compromise with these forces would not be an effort towards 'social cohesion'. It would merely be injustice, submission and regression.

An immediate task for the new administration is fundamental reform of the media, police, prosecutor and National Intelligence Service, which are dominated by Park Geun-hye administration collaborators, and the rooting out of corruption among public officials and heads of state-owned enterprises.

The Moon administration must not make the same mistakes as the Participatory Government (Roh Moo-hyun government).

The Participatory Government was unable to control the corruption and greed of the chaebol (corporate) elite, who then came into collaboration with Park Geun-hye. It must also take responsibility for helping to usher in the era of 10 million precarious workers, an issue at the centre of the concept of 'Hell Joseon'.

The negative image of organised labour as a 'labour aristocracy', used by the Park administration to justify the complete denial of trade union rights and pursuit of the regressive labour reforms demanded by chaebols heads, and perpetuated without shame by the conservative candidate Hong Jun Pyo, was actually created during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, along with laws that expand precarious employment.

We take note of President Moon's promise to create a country that respects workers. We will judge the sincerity of his many campaign promises on labour issues by how his labour policies are enacted in the near future. The KCTU and the workers who participated in the candlelight protests must be treated as partners in the creation of a country that respects workers.

Thus, we make the following proposal to the Moon administration: Start by meeting with the KCTU.

Currently, the most urgent labour policy to deal with is that of the minimum wage for 2018, which must be set by the end of June.

There are also many steps to eradicate the negative labour policies of the past administration and carry out positive labour reform that can be taken immediately by administrative authority without legislative procedures.

Furthermore, issues requiring consultation and dialogue with trade unions, such as those related to precarious work, the right to join unions, the guarantee of fundamental labour rights to all workers and the creation of jobs for young people, have accumulated.

If the Moon administration is sincere about carrying on the spirit of the candlelight uprising, it should move quickly in its response to labour issues. In particular, it should begin immediately by opening labour-government negotiations as a demonstration of its sincere will to find positive solutions.

We have not forgotten the painful experience of workers under the 'Participatory Government'.

Furthermore, we note that from the beginning of the struggle for impeachment through to the presidential elections, the Minjoo Party was not always in step with the spirit of the candlelight uprising.

This is the reason our first greeting to the new administration must be strongly worded.

The first six months following the election will be an important period during which the administration will be evaluated on its sincerity and determination to eradicate the problems of the past administration and carrying out social reforms in line with the spirit of the candlelight uprising.

We hope that we will not have to wait long to see the administration's true face. It is up to the Moon administration to decide.

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Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)
