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LABOR INTERVIEW PODCAST

South Korea Declared War on Unions. Workers Are Fighting Back

Saturday 23 September 2023, by [ALVAREZ Maximillian](#), [PARK Ju-Hyun](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2023).

In the face of widespread repression, South Korean workers are rising up for fair pay and labor protections.

Within the past two years, South Korea has seen major labor actions. Hundreds of thousands of workers have mobilized in response to multiple calls for general strikes, and the reactionary government of Yoon Seok Yeol has responded in force. This January, the National Intelligence Service, South Korea's equivalent to the FBI and CIA rolled into one agency, raided the offices of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. In that same time, military and geopolitical tensions in the region have been rapidly intensifying. What is going on? What is the state of organized labor in South Korea, and how have imperialist and capitalist pressures, especially from the US, shaped the terrain upon which working people across the Korean Peninsula are struggling to live and work with dignity? We talk about all of this and more with Ju-Hyun Park, author, organizer, and Engagement Editor at *The Real News Network*.

TRANSCRIPT

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Maximillian Alvarez: Hey everyone, this is your *Working People* host, Maximilian Alvarez.

Ju-Hyun Park: Hey, this is Ju-Hyun Park, back at it again.

Maximillian Alvarez: All right, gang. So we got a real treat for y'all on the main feed today. So if you are a Patreon subscriber and supporter of *Working People*, first of all, thank you so, so much. It's because of you guys that we are able to produce this show every week and we try to keep y'all stocked with great, rich, and interesting bonus episodes every month over on the Patreon feed. So if you aren't a Patreon supporter, please do support us and you'll get access to all of our great bonus episodes that we're publishing every month over there on Patreon. We actually published a really, really killer bonus episode back in March, which was a conversation between Ju-Hyun and myself. I have the honor of working with Ju-Hyun at *The Real News Network* but they are also an accomplished and fiercely dedicated activist, organizer, and thinker.

I brought them on the show in March to talk about an area that we haven't talked about nearly enough on this show, which was the state of organized labor in Korea and how labor and the labor

movement fit into the longer, larger picture of the fight for reunification on the Korean peninsula. Ju-Hyun, to their credit, dealt with my very, very big questions and answered them as rigorously as they possibly could. But we wanted to share this great conversation that Ju-Hyun and I had with our listeners here on the public feed. To commemorate that occasion, we thought it would be nice to check in real quick and give you guys a bit of an update on what's been going on over in Korea since we published that episode back in March. So Ju-Hyun, once again, I'm putting you on the spot, what's been going on over in Korea in the past few months?

Ju-Hyun Park: Yeah, so since March, we have definitely seen an escalation in the labor struggle in South Korea in lots of different ways. So when we checked in last, we were talking a little bit about the trucker strike, which occurred last fall and winter. We spoke a little bit about the history of the labor movement and its role in the political struggle against the Yoon Suk Yeol Administration, who is the current president of South Korea. To catch us up a little bit, the biggest episode that we need to focus on for starters is the death of Yang Hoe-dong, who was a chapter leader of the National Construction Workers Union. He set himself on fire on Mayday in protests of racketeering charges that he was placed under along with several other union leaders at the time. Now, this is part of President Yoon's so-called war on unions which he is prosecuting, mainly targeting them under — the best analogy to US law would be thinking about the RICO Act and things like that. So basically, the charges are that the unions are corrupt, that they are infiltrated with gangsters with the most abhorrent rhetoric.

They'll use the language of North Korean spies and things of that nature. But they've been taking this corruption angle against the unions in particular and the self-emulation that Yang Hoe-dong did, setting himself on fire, was in protest of all of these charges and the general campaign that's being waged against union leaders. Because, of course, these are incredibly trumped-up charges and their purpose is primarily political, right? It's to intimidate the union leadership, it is to restrict their capacity to organize, and it's also an attempt to spoil public opinion away from the union leadership. And also gives the impression that the Yoon administration is doing something to reign in the strikes and labor activity which can be disruptive to society because that is precisely the point. But it's worth pointing out that all of that is happening amidst a huge downturn in the South Korean economy which has seen month after month of trade imbalances and the declining power of the Korean currency.

A lot of that is tied to the Yoon Administration's foreign policy. Specifically to his obsequence to Washington and his going along with the US victims that South Korea and other nations in the Asia Pacific such as Japan, and Taiwan, and others should be cutting off their economic ties with China. Which by this point is the economic powerhouse of the region and a major trading partner with all these countries. So these countries cannot go along with the US plan to isolate them from China without taking a major economic hit. It's important to situate Yoon's war on the labor unions within all of that as part of his attempt to gain political points despite making some very bad political moves, at least from the perspective of what is good for South Korea's economy. Now, getting back to this incident, there's been a huge uproar, particularly in the labor sector, against the Yoon Administration, against the prosecution of union leaders as a result of the death of Yang Hoe-dong.

The workers in the Korean Construction Workers Union have taken the initiative to stage a series of extended rallies and candlelight vigils at City Hall that have lasted for weeks and months. There is a video from the *Real News* regarding that story which I definitely recommend that people check out. This has been used as a moment to galvanize the entire labor movement to also bring other sectors into this political struggle against the Yoon Administration. We've also seen a lot of stellar and very militant labor activity, particularly from the Metal Workers Union. That's spurred a lot of repression from the Yoon government, including some very widely circulated, at least in Korean media, videos of police officers taking down union leaders. Including going as far as to ... There was an incident

where Metal Workers Union occupied a construction site and the police got on a crane to physically beat the union workers who were occupying that high place.

Maximillian Alvarez: Jesus.

Ju-Hyun Park: These are some examples of small episodes that illustrate the way that the labor struggle is intensifying and the way that the militancy of the workers is on display and they are standing firm against the many kinds of oppression that are coming at them, whether it's physical or legal. Now, I could go sector by sector, and talk union by union. That would result in a very long update. But to fast-forward a little bit into what's been happening in the past few weeks, we've been seeing how there's a real coalescing occurring in order to bring labor more full-frontally into this political struggle against the Yoon Administration, often under the banner of the slogan of demanding the resignation of the current president. That's something that's been called forth through many sectors of South Korean society, particularly following the widely internationally recognized incident last Halloween in the district of Itaewon where hundreds of people died in a crowd-crushing incident.

It was later revealed that police were not responding to calls made by party-goers hours ahead of time pointing out that the situation there was very dangerous because they had been diverted to guard the president's office, which had been moved from its traditional place in the government house known as the Blue House, to a location that's very close to the US military base in the same neighborhood. So there's been many, many calls for Yoon's resignation and labor has already been involved in that struggle but has been coming out more in full force. We've been seeing that in the past few weeks. At the end of June, there was an 80,000-strong mobilization, particularly of precarious workers in the Capitol who were demanding a raise to the minimum wage...workers have been seeing a loss in real wages, which you have to also pair with the fact that South Korea like many other countries, is seeing record inflation.

Now, in addition to that, in the last couple of weeks, we've actually seen a general strike in South Korea led by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions which is the umbrella union that includes the Construction Workers Union, and the Metal Workers Union.

Maximillian Alvarez: That's the federation whose offices were raided in January by the same government.

Ju-Hyun Park: Yes, exactly. So in this general strike, we saw about a quarter million people participate in the strike itself: over 100,000 people participating in over 30 street actions and demonstrations. Once again, that's all... There are, of course, economic demands folded into it that are specific to sectors. We did see the Medical Health Workers Union participate in this general strike. So that's tens of thousands of hospital workers and healthcare workers with their own specific demands. But we also see a rising level of political demands, not only including questions around regulations and protections for workers as a whole and the minimum wage, but also around this question of the resignation of the current president. So that's probably the most concise update that can be offered in terms of what has been unfolding in the last few months with the South Korean labor movement.

If we go by the reporting of the union itself, we are seeing a turn in public opinion regarding union activity. Last fall and winter, there was some public opposition to the activities of the trucker strike and the Yoon Administration was also able to successfully leverage its crackdown against them to see a short bump in their approval ratings. But going by the most current polls, public opinion is shifting towards the side of the unions against the Yoon Administration and is becoming more and more supportive of labor action. So these are definitely positive developments. Of course, we have to

wait and see in terms of how this is all going to play out. In the meantime, there are a bunch of military escalations also occurring in Korea that are not unrelated to the struggle that we're seeing in the streets.

Maximillian Alvarez: Hell yeah. Well, this is an intense and important story that we are going to do our best to continue covering. Ju-Hyun themselves are actually getting ready to go to South Korea as well. So when they return, I promise we will have them back on to debrief and get an update on the state of things over there in South Korea. But as they mentioned, you cannot tell this story of the government repression and crackdown on organized labor in South Korea without talking about the increased military activity, the imperialist jockeying for position between the US, and attempts to encircle China to isolate other countries in the region from China, as Ju-Hyun already mentioned. This translates to real hurt for working people and there are a lot of dimensions to that. I hope that everyone listening to this in North America understands that this isn't empty rhetoric coming from US politicians; These are actual policies. This is a foreign policy that is translating to continued commiseration for poor and working people and is giving a license to a reactionary government to crack down on organized labor.

So we all need to be invested in this struggle. In fact, that's a perfect lead into the bonus episode that we're going to play for y'all because Ju-Hyun did an incredible job in that episode of explaining how the military imperialist side of this from North Korea, China, the US, all the big questions about foreign policy and military and economic hegemony connect to the question of labor and worker struggles. So without further ado, we will circle back with Ju-Hyun when they return from South Korea. So let's all send our love and solidarity to them and wish them well and stay safe over there, comrade. When you get back, I am going to force you to come back on the show and talk about what you saw and what you heard. But thank you so much for coming back on, Ju-Hyun. Thank you for laying this out and we'll talk to you when you get back.

In South Korea, the question of the labor movement and justice for workers is very closely intertwined with the question of reunification.

Ju-Hyun Park: Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. Thanks for having me back on, Max.

Hi everyone, my name is Ju-Hyun Park. I am the engagement editor here at *The Real News*. I'm also a member of Nodutdol for Korean Community Development which is an organization of Koreans and our comrades struggling against imperialism in Korea and for national reunification. Thanks for having me on, Max.

Maximillian Alvarez: All right, well welcome everyone to another special bonus episode of *Working People*, a podcast about the lives, jobs, dreams, and struggles of the working class today. Brought to you in partnership with *In These Times* magazine and *The Real News Network*. Produced by Jules Taylor and made possible by the support of beautiful listeners and Patreon subscribers like you.

As y'all heard, we've got a special guest with us today: my comrade and now colleague, Ju-Hyun Park, who is, as they mentioned, the engagement editor at *The Real News Network*. We get to work together every day. They do incredible work as an activist, as an engagement editor, and as a journalist. In fact, that's how I came in contact with Ju-Hyun's work. Back in October of 2021, so Jesus, yeah, it was a year-and-a-half ago, at the *Real News*, I remember seeing a piece, a text article that the great outlet, *Truthout*, had published about half a million South Korean workers getting

ready to walk off the job in a general strike. I was like, whoa, I haven't heard about this.

I read the piece; It was great and it was a piece that Ju-Hyun co-authored with Ji Hong. We were able to republish it at the *Real News* and it took off because no one else was hearing about it either. This was a really, really crucial moment. That's what we're going to talk about for y'all today because a lot has been going on in the labor movement and beyond, over in South Korea. I thought it would be important to give listeners as much context as we can in a short time on a bonus episode. I know that Ju-Hyun's so knowledgeable about this that we could have a five-hour podcast but I'm not going to do that to them.

We're going to do close to a one-hour podcast here. Folks who listen to this show have been, if not seeing the news in the past couple of years about this labor unrest in South Korea, I damn sure know that a lot of our followers saw the news earlier this year, 2023, when South Korea's Intelligence Agency raided the offices of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions in January. This is a really, really dark situation where it seems like this new president is very explicitly pushing through this anti-labor politics. So I wanted to bring Ju-Hyun on to get folks some up-to-date info and essential context. We're going to try to walk you through these two points in time from that general strike that occurred in October 2021 to these raids on organized labor headquarters in January 2023. Before I toss things back to Ju-Hyun, I wanted to read a little passage from that piece in *Truthout* which we republished a year-and-a-half ago because it grounds us. We're going to link to it in the show notes so y'all can read the full thing.

Here's what Ju-Hyun and Ji Hong wrote in that piece. Again, this was from October 2021. "Today, South Korea ranks third in highest annual working hours and as of 2015, it was third in workplace deaths among member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Over 40% of all workers are considered 'irregular workers.' As in the US, many of these irregular workers labor in the gig economy, beholden to tech giants' apps.

"With an economy and society dominated by corporate conglomerates known as..." Ju-Hyun, how do I pronounce this? Is it chaebol?

Ju-Hyun Park: Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez: "Corporate conglomerates known as chaebol, South Korean people face increasingly bleak prospects. The top 10% of earners claimed 45% of total income in 2016, real estate speculation has led to a housing crisis, and privatization in education and health care are expanding disparities. As South Korea undergoes blowback from the effects of COVID-19 on the global economy, these crises have only sharpened.

"Exploitation and unsafe conditions are consistent across industries. Coal miners at Korea Coal, a government-owned coal mining corporation, are suffering health conditions from breathing in coal dust and overwork. One coal miner recounted the plight of irregular workers: 'The government reduced the labor force by half, so our unit now has to do the job of two units. So everyone is ill. There's no one here who is not sick. Our wages need to increase but have stayed the same. We work the same as regular workers, but we don't even get half the pay.'"

So sadly, as anyone who listens to this show knows, you'll hear a lot of striking echoes of the things that workers here in the US and the folks that we've spoken to in the UK, in France ... We're hearing sadly a lot of the same issues that working people are facing across the globe. So that's the essential table setting that I wanted to do here. Again, we're going to link to that great piece from October 2021. We're also going to link to a great piece in *Labor Notes* by Kap Seol about the intelligence raids on the Korean Confederation of Trade Union. So you guys can read up on that after listening to

this episode.

But enough from me. Ju-Hyun, I want to toss it over to you. Again, I don't want to make you write a whole dissertation here. I know that there are a lot of folks who listen to this show who probably know next to nothing about the situation of organized labor, let alone regular working people in South Korea. I wanted to ask if you could talk to us as you would a child. Starting with the general strike in October 2021, what essential context do people need to have about where this worker unrest is coming from, what workers in South Korea are going through, and then how we got from there to these Draconian raids of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions earlier this year?

Ju-Hyun Park: Thanks, Max. This is a pretty extensive historical breadth that we need to cover. Even though it's only been a year and a half, there are many, many different details and factors that we could dive into. I'm going to do my best to keep it at the surface level, to keep it at the most important information possible. This may mean that at times I don't go into detail about some factors but I'll still do my best to try to present as cohesive of a narrative as I can.

As you laid out with the quote from the piece that I wrote a couple of years back with my comrade, Ji Hong, there is a crisis that has been ongoing within South Korea, not only since two years ago but since the 1997 IMF crisis. This is when South Korea was forced to accept IMF loans, along with many other strings attached as IMF loans usually come with, which included changes to its labor laws that have reworked the economic structure of the country in some fundamental ways. I would argue that for a very large strata of South Korea's working class, there has never been a recovery since this period.

The figure that you stated around the number of so-called irregular workers, those are workers that are working without an official contract who are not covered under existing labor laws, their proportion of the workforce has been steadily rising since the 2000s and has been at the level of being about half of the workforce for, it's safe to say, roughly a decade if not more. So this is something that has been building in South Korea for a long, long time. It didn't appear with this general strike a couple of years back. The thing that I would point out about the timing of the general strike in October 2021 was that it was supposed to influence the upcoming presidential elections in May of last year, in 2022.

The purpose, or the strategy of the KCTU, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, was to bring together the most marginalized and oppressed strata of the working masses. That includes the irregular workers, it includes the remaining peasantry in South Korea, it includes organizations for the urban poor as well as the more traditional unions for workers who are considered so-called regular workers: workers who have contracts but still have some protections under the law. The purpose of this was to shake things up and to bring together a working coalition that could push for major changes in South Korea at the time. Something that's important to understand is that South Korea in 2021 was under the administration of a liberal president known as Moon Jae-in. Moon Jae-in is best known to the world for his efforts to move forward with Korean reunification. There were many progressive things that he did on that front, including the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration in 2018, which created something like a roadmap for an eventual process of reunification with North Korea or the DPRK. He also announced the shared intent of both governments to end the Korean War which until this day, has not been formally concluded by a peace treaty.

Now, I bring this up because while Moon Jae-in was progressive in some of these ways, he was ultimately still a representative of the capitalist class. He was brought to power by the Candlelight Revolution in 2016, which deposed former president Park Geun-Hye but he did not come in necessarily as a representative of that movement. The movement did successfully remove the

existing president but it did not bring about a transition of power that was under the control of the movement itself, is what I'm trying to say. So he came in as a representative of the existing political establishment, a representative of existing neoliberalism, the left wing of neoliberalism in South Korea. As in many other countries around the world, particularly in capitalist nations, if there are two parties or some rivalry between political parties, it's often between different strains of neoliberalism that the country will be adopting. The same is true currently in South Korea as well. So under Moon Jae-in, the actual material circumstances of the vast majority of people did not improve. With the particular historical circumstances of COVID-19, we can definitely say that they worsened, in fact.

So what this all led to was last May 2022, there was a bit of an upset victory by a new candidate from the right known as Yoon Suk Yeol. He was actually Moon Jae-in's former prosecutor who helped prosecute the past administration, but then he switched allegiances to the right-wing party and began to push a campaign that was based on a couple of different points: It was a very strong current of anti-China rhetoric, anti-DPRK rhetoric. He very viciously attacked the diplomatic efforts of Moon Jae-in and additionally, he promised that he would reduce taxes and improve the environment for business, and in that process, achieve some trickle-down improvement in conditions for the working class.

Now Yoon Suk Yeol won by less than 1% of the vote. I do want to point that out. This is not a president with a very clear mandate but once he was in office, he set about carrying out a lot of the things that he said he would, which included a much more aggressive stance towards both China and North Korea and a much more pro-US and compliance stance with regard to the US's efforts to build a stronger military alliance in East Asia that is specifically aimed against China and North Korea. This has included increased collaboration with Japan. Now, I realize that we're going a little bit all over the place here. We're talking on the one hand about labor conditions in South Korea, about the material circumstances facing workers. Then, on the other hand, we're talking a lot about all of these foreign policy items. It's essential to do this because I will argue that these two currents are actually very, very closely related.

Now, the point that I want to fast-forward through is that 2022 was a very, very tense year on the Korean peninsula. The DPRK or North Korea launched a record number of rockets and other ballistic missiles. There were also a record number of South Korean and US joint military exercises which are extremely provocative to the situation on the peninsula and definitely not an exercise that promotes any peace or dialogue but sharpens the existing divisions and brings us closer to a situation of war. In the face of this, it was actually the KCTU and a lot of the workers' movements that posed a lot of the political opposition to this military brinkmanship. On August 15, there was the start of a major exercise known as the UJI Freedom Shield exercises between the US and South Korea. The opposition in the streets was coming from the organized labor movement which even went as far as to release a joint statement with the Organization of Trade Unions in the DPRK or North Korea itself. So this was a united statement from organizations of workers' unions across the peninsula opposing the drive towards a renewed war, opposing Yoon Suk Yeol's anti-people, anti-democratic policies.

Maximillian Alvarez: That statement, that's a pretty big fucking deal, right?

Ju-Hyun Park: It's a huge deal. That's entirely appropriate to say. One thing that's very crucial, particularly when we get to talking about these raids, is that in South Korea, there is still what is known as the National Security Law which dates back to before the Korean War. What this law does is that it defines any support for North Korea or the DPRK which it defines as an "anti-state entity" to be illegal activities. So any "anti-state activities," any support for the DPRK or even communism, depending on which administration is in power, is interpreted as essentially an act of treason and can result in prosecution and charges that can and have sent many, many people to prison for years

on end. So this is a very bold move that was taken by the organized labor movement to oppose the enhanced military drills on the peninsula and to oppose the war agenda of Yoon Suk Yeol and President Biden.

Now, coming back to a little bit closer to the present day, as you mentioned in January, there were raids on KCTU offices. There were also a number of arrests made in various peace groups, including the June 15th Committee, which is an organization that exists in both the North and South, as well as amongst overseas Koreans which organizes for reunification and arrests of members of the Korean Peasants League as well. A lot of these charges came back to prosecution under the National Security Law. Many, many of these arrests of people were basically on the pretext that there was some evidence that they had been spying for North Korea. Now that's important because the labor movement has been providing the main organized political opposition to Yoon Suk Yeol's administration throughout his presidency thus far. At the same time, they have not only been organizing within labor for economic concerns but pushing political demands as well; political demands that don't stop at the level of so-called domestic policy but actually extend to international concerns as well.

There are a couple of things happening here: Yoon Suk Yeol is going after these unions in this way and is ramping up charges which I personally believe are fabricated around so-called espionage, conducted by members of the union movement and peace groups, in an effort to undermine their basis within society in an effort to red bait the leaders of the Organized Workers' Movement. And to do what so many right-wing leaders of South Korea have done before which is to use the specter of the DPRK to crush the labor movement, to say that all those who fight for improved working conditions, who try to unionize their workplaces, who try to stand up to the bosses must not only be communists but also be traitors because they're operating for this so-called anti-state entity known as the other government of Korea.

This speaks to how in South Korea, the question of the labor movement and justice for workers is very closely intertwined with the question of reunification. Because so long as the war continues, so long as the division continues, the capitalist class has this cudgel that they can use against workers at any time: that they're not only being disruptive, that they're not only simply being troublemakers but that in fact that they are traitors who deserve to be treated and prosecuted as such. So that's about the shortest summary that I can offer in terms of what's been going on.

From the working conditions to the labor laws to even the shape of the organized labor movement in the US today, all of these have been directly shaped by the anti-communist politics of the 20th century.

Maximillian Alvarez: I was going to say you got minutes to spare. I thought that was beautifully done. Again, I know it probably pained you to gloss over some details but for me, that was incredibly helpful and I know it will be for our listeners as well. I want us to end on that question of reunification and the incredibly volatile state of things right now. But before we get there, I wanted to drill down on how you framed that analysis because it's important and it gives ... It's an object lesson for all of us here in the West. It's safe to say that a lot of folks who are invested in the labor movement here in the US or are part of that movement almost see it as somehow magically unconnected to the tangled mess of geopolitics and international relations, whatever other terms we give for it. It feels like a terrain of struggle that we can actually wrap our heads around and actually do something about.

Whereas the imperialist war machine from the things that are going on from the war in Ukraine to the Korean Peninsula. For most people, they're like, I don't know enough to know what I should feel about this or what's the right path. So there's this knee-jerk tendency to focus on what's in front of us, focus on the things that we can understand, including the labor politics here in the US. What I would say to anyone who thinks that way, as I thought for many, many years of my life even today: the labor conditions that so many workers labor under that we talk about every week on this show, the labor laws that we talk about all the time on this show. When we're talking about how incredibly fucking hard it is in the US to unionize a non-union shop, all the different stages you have to clear, all the ways that labor law is stacked in favor of the bosses. Not only in a unionization campaign but when it comes to things like retaliation there are so many laws that put workers at a disadvantage because the system moves so slowly. It can be exploited so easily by the bosses and the businesses that have the money, resources, and lawyers to do that, whereas workers generally do not.

So from the working conditions to the labor laws to even the shape of the organized labor movement in the US today, all of these have been directly shaped by the anti-communist politics of the 20th century. We've talked about it plenty on the show but you can also go read about it. The mid-century; this was the deal with the devil that the labor movement made was to excommunicate, to buy into the red scare, and to excommunicate communists from the labor movement. Even though those very same communists had been recruited by the labor movement or into the labor movement years prior because they were the best organizers, they were more class-conscious. They played a vital role in the growth of the labor movement around World War II and then the inevitable crackdown on communism in this country because of the geopolitical situation, because of the anti-communist fervor in the capitalist West, and the geopolitical war with the Soviet Union. But this really, really spanned the globe, the challenge that actually existing state socialism posed to the emergent capitalist hegemony of the US, and so on and so forth.

All of this was directly translating to decisions that were made, legislation that was passed, people who were appointed to positions in labor unions, and in legislatures, certain people being picked for those positions over others, and plenty of people's lives being ruined for their affiliation or accused affiliation with the Communist Party. So that's one example of how you may think that our labor struggle here is not connected to the crazy world of geopolitics. It is. It always has been. Like we always say here, it's not from a sense of workers' solidarity because we are all working within and against this global capitalist system. You can hear that in say, the international panel that we posted a couple of weeks ago with rail workers from the US, UK, and France. You can hear that in their stories. But also like Ju-Hyun was describing, there are also very clear ways that you can look at the influence that geopolitics and the different rivalries and imperialist ends or all of that stuff does impact what we do, how we work, how we organize.

I could go on. I got my degree in Mexican radical history. The AFL was essentially like a diplomacy arm of US imperialism in Latin America. It extended its tendrils out into Mexico and other parts of Latin America directly to counteract the influence of the common turn in those same countries. So again, this is everywhere. But Ju-Hyun, I wanted to bring you back in here before I talk too much on that front. I wanted to focus on the sad way that things have gone over the past 20 years. You mentioned the IMF. You mentioned this economic restructuring that we heard about.

And I remember another piece that we published at the *Real News* by Sam Yang last year that was a deep analysis of the show, *Squid Games*, and trying to put some analytical meat behind this show that people were watching. Sam talked about, he's like, what you need to understand is that the plot device of all these people being in debt, that hits different for people in South Korea. Could you talk a little more about working people in the 21st century, the working class in South Korea in the 21st century, what this extended crisis has meant for their working and living conditions?

Ju-Hyun Park: Yeah, absolutely. So the place to start, as I mentioned before, is the real big condition is the casualization of labor. This huge proportion of so-called irregular workers who are not protected by worker laws, who are not protected by contracts, and who are at the disposable whims of their bosses. In the article in *Truthout* which we've mentioned a couple of times, Ji and I, my co-author, did talk about the role of tech giants and their platform apps. But it is so much deeper than the apps. We're not talking about Uber drivers. In many Korean workplaces, you go in and there are workers working side by side, some of them are on contracts and some of them are not. So it's not concentrated within particular industries or sectors. It's a generalized condition that you find in many, many different workplaces.

The overall effect is to bring down the bargaining power of all workers because if some of your colleagues supposedly don't have a contract, supposedly are not covered by labor laws, what that means is that they're not supposed to be organizing with you. You can't organize with them in the same way. The management is using different tactics to create these segments of different workers in order to split the possibility of unified solidarity to fight for better conditions and also for the overthrow of the capitalist system, really. But there are some stats that I do want to share. So the top 10% of earners in South Korea in 2016 claimed 45% of the total income.

As we mentioned before, there's been a runaway real estate and housing crisis that has been going on in South Korea. One thing to understand is that the way that rent laws work in South Korea, you actually don't pay your rent every month; you pay it in a lump sum, often to cover multiple years at a time. What this means for most working people is they end up having to take out loans, so they end up going into debt in order to pay rent. As you can imagine, this creates a vicious cycle among workers. I believe that the average household debt currently, or in the last couple of years, was almost double the annual income of a household.

Maximillian Alvarez: Jesus.

Ju-Hyun Park: Yeah. So you're seeing a situation where most people, they're not financially solvent. Most people are in the red and they're constantly trying to get as close back to even as possible. There's also a very stilted, uneven economy. We talk about these chaebol, these massive conglomerates. When I say this, I'm talking about your Samsungs, your LGs, at this point, household names in many parts of the world. These conglomerates, 64 of them account for 84% of the economic output, and the GDP of all of South Korea, but only provide 10% of the jobs. So that means that about 90% of the economic pie is, on paper, only going to about 10% of the population. Of course, we understand that people working those jobs are not the ones actually taking the lion's share of those profits. Those profits mainly go to the investor class which is not only in South Korea itself. You have these big billionaire oligarch families but then you also have all of the banks, all of the firms mainly in the US, Japan, and Europe that are invested into these conglomerates as well.

So you have this situation where for the vast majority of people, they're employed in these secondary industries, in these sectors of the economy that are dependent upon these monopolies in order to exist and that are therefore very much subject to the whims of the international market to the ups and downs of global capitalism. In the last couple of years, particularly with Covid, but also as a result of the Ukraine War and what that's meant, both in terms of Korea's prospects for trade and this global inflation crisis that we're seeing, most people are facing pretty bleak prospects. Things were not so great prior to the pandemic but these compounding factors are putting a strain upon workers and what that's meant in South Korea is an upswing in workers fighting back. There was a general strike in 2021. Last fall, there was a well-publicized trucker strike as well which ultimately was repressed because the Yoon Suk Yeol government threatened the truckers with jail time. They threatened them with personal fines. They said you'll individually be charged if you continue with this activity, if you continue with this strike.

That's also a factor in what we're seeing in this crackdown on the KCTU using these spurious charges of having violated the National Security Law of being North Korean spies. What they're trying to do is enact harsh labor discipline. They're trying to bring down the hammer so that they can keep the workers from being organized so that they can keep these brutal conditions running. Because, quite frankly, the system is eating itself. As we're seeing around the world, the prospects for continued profits, and continued growth in South Korea are about as bad as it is anywhere else. A lot of what the US is doing to try to maneuver South Korea into its alliances is not helping the situation because South Korea is ultimately a neighbor to Russia, it's a neighbor to China. It had very important trade ties with these countries and is increasingly facing pressure from the US to, on the one hand, cut off those trade ties and on the other to export some of its major industries to the US.

So the prospects for even South Korea's capitalists under this imperialist arrangement are becoming increasingly poor. So the response of the Yoon Administration is to at least get a handle on the workers' movement so that they can keep the gears running for as long as possible. Of course, we know that they're really running up against the physical and political limits of this system. So this isn't a crisis that the Yoon Administration is going to be able to resolve but this is the response that they're taking given all of these conditions coming together.

Maximillian Alvarez: Man. Yeah, I don't know. If you're a country out there, don't be friends with - I don't know what's worse, to be a friend or an enemy of the US because we fuck over both of them. Jesus. Again, I want us to get to that before I have to let you go. But as one more quick context-filling question, and by no means do you have to go into a whole thesis about this if you're uncomfortable, but on the show, on our weekly episodes, people know the basic facts about the state of the organized labor movement in the US. It's not great, as we know. There are really important and vital signs of life, a lot of great new organizing happening, and a lot of rank-and-file energy and reform efforts happening within existing unions.

We're talking after some pretty ground-shaking election results after the United Auto Workers, the UAW, held their first referendums. They held their first leadership elections after last year's referendum passed that would allow UAW membership and retirees to directly elect their international union leadership, which was not the case before. The teamsters do that because the teamsters were forced to do that after all the organized crime and corruption scandals. This was actually like a government decree for the teamsters to have more direct democracy in their union back in the, what was that, the '90s. So the UAW, as you guys know, we talked to Justin Mayhew, UAW member, auto worker in Kansas City a year or two ago, and we talked all about the importance of that referendum, and now the elections that resulted after that referendum happened.

Lo and behold, if you let the rank-and-file directly elect their leadership, maybe their choices will be different from the handpicked successors of the people in that union leadership class. So that's one example of the general context that folks have for the conversations that we have with primarily US-based workers here on the show. But we also know that in general, union density in the US is at a historic low point, barely hovering above 10%, dismal in the private sector. So that's the context that people have on a week-to-week basis when they're hearing the stories of workers on this show. So I wanted to ask again, in broader strokes, if you had any additional points that you wanted to make, Ju-Hyun, about the state of organized labor in South Korea, or any particular nuances about that that folks should understand before we let you go?

Ju-Hyun Park: Yeah, definitely. From the standpoint of the US, South Korean labor looks so organized, and that's because relatively it is much more organized.

Maximillian Alvarez: Not hard.

Ju-Hyun Park: That is a fact and there are some real indicators that help us understand why that is. On the surface, South Korea has umbrella union organizations. That's what the KCTU is: It's the second-largest umbrella union organization. It's the more radical out of the two or three large umbrella organizations that exist. The KCTU alone represents over a million workers. There may be some analogy to that within the US labor movement but there's a difference in the level of politicization and the way that the KCTU has historically pushed for political demands, not just economic ones, throughout its history. A lot of that comes from the different histories of the labor movement, given the different histories of the two countries. South Korea was under authoritarian military fascist rule for roughly 40 years. These, of course, were regimes backed by the US at the same time that it's saying, look at South Korea. It's the beacon of democracy against communist totalitarianism.

But the union movement, the labor movement developed in tandem with the democratic movement in South Korea at the end of the 20th century, leading up to the moment of formal democratization in 1987. Then after that, it continued to expand. It continued to be a political force pushing against the remnants of the past regimes that were still in government, that were still in power in many ways and still pulling the strings of the country's politics. So that is one of the major differences between the two. Because of these different historical trajectories, you end up with different labor movements. Both in terms of how it's organized and in terms of its essence in the sense that these are very different than a lot of the larger union formations that may exist in the US today, in that they have a very long history of involvement in not just economic or workplace struggles, but political struggles in things that cut across industries and that attempt to bring together the workers as a class to struggle for their interests.

That's one of the main differences that I would point out. I don't know how many immediate lessons there are for folks involved in the union movement in the US today from that but I do think it's an important observation. If unions are only ever concerned with what's going on in their shop floor or in their industry without seeking to build broad alliances that cut outside of that, then the scope of what unions are able to accomplish and the scale of power that they can build is always going to be limited. So this is something very important for observers to know.

It's the bosses who are exploiting people. It's the bosses who are finding ways to circumvent safety protocols and steal wages.

Maximillian Alvarez: Yeah, that's beautifully put. I'm not heartened by much these days but I am heartened by that; when I hear and see folks within the labor movement learning that essential lesson. Off the top of my head – since we recorded our *Working People* live show in New York City a couple of weeks back at the People's Forum – You guys heard us talk to this incredible panel of organizers, including Tafadar Sourov from Labor's Local 79, the Construction Workers Union in New York City. When people think of construction worker unions in New York City, as Tafadar says, the stereotype is, what is it, male, pale, and stale? That stereotypical 1970s, '80s, New York construction worker, the negative connotations of that worker being that they feel that they're better than non-union workers.

There is a racist, sexist component. Women aren't welcome into that trade. Non-citizen workers are seen as the enemy. So if you have undocumented workers who are being exploited by anti-union contractors like Alba Demolition in the city, there was a time, and in fact, there still are plenty of parts of the country now where union workers may see those undocumented exploited workers or

workers who are coming back from prison and are having their parole status held hostage, which is why they have to work for these exploitative contractors. So the most exploitable groups of workers who in the past were not the friends of organized labor. A lot of union workforces didn't do anything to reach out to these groups. They in fact saw them as the enemy, the ones undercutting their union jobs and so on and so forth.

All the while, it's the bosses who are the ones who are fucking all of us over. It's the bosses who are exploiting people. It's the bosses who are finding ways to circumvent safety protocols and steal wages, and all that stuff. So it's very heartening to hear a union like Labor's Local 79 learn those lessons from the past. They are actually doing work to correct that. They are reaching out to non-union workers, to the most exploited workers in the construction industry in New York which is a major component of the city's economy. And they're taking a community organizing model that is at least embodying in some sense, those crucial lessons that Ju-Hyun articulated a second ago. The more of us who learn those lessons and put them into practice, the better. That leads us to the final turn here about how the Korean unification, if we're talking about expanding the scope and scale and solidarity of the working class, we're literally talking about a country split down the middle, a people split down the middle, and how that split has been used and weaponized in so many different ways to the detriment of working people on the Korean peninsula.

Ju-Hyun, believe me, this is a topic for a whole other podcast but I wanted to ask again for the people who are listening to this here in the English-speaking West, for folks who ... We've all been hyper-conditioned, living in the imperialist core of the world. When we hear about this, we think, oh, North Korea, bad. That's the evil one. That's the one that the hermit kingdom wants to be cut off, and there must be some reasons for it. South Korea, good. They're more like us. Their economy's more like us, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. This is the official narrative that working people tend to get in this country. It's what I was fed my whole fucking life. There are resonances all over the world of this stuff. Right now, it's dismal but people are seeing in real-time, for the past year or so, we've been talking about, we got to defend Ukraine at all costs, defend Ukraine at all costs. It's like, yeah, Jesus, the working people in Ukraine are going through hell right now.

So naturally, I know a lot of people who listen to the show, they're like, I want to help. I don't want people to go through this. Now, here we are. You got actual legislators, you got lawmakers like Mitt Romney saying the quiet part out loud, where they're like, well, we don't actually want peace brokered between Russia, Ukraine, NATO, whatever. We want to basically keep pushing Ukrainians into the firing line so that it, quote, unquote, wears down the forces of Russia. So we're sending people to be grist for the mill so that we quote, unquote, militarily weaken an adversary? That fucks with your brain when you realize that this is how the geopolitical game is played. I only bring that up, not to drag this conversation into an area where it doesn't belong but to try to give listeners another example that they can latch onto if you're hearing the powers that be frame the narrative for you about Korean unification, maybe pump the brakes for a second.

Ju-Hyun, I wanted to ask if we could round this out after this incredible discussion for regular working folks here who need to understand and need to cut through the bullshit that they're hearing from the media and politicians. What would the reunification of Korea actually mean in this situation? How can folks, regular working folks, support that and support their fellow workers across the world in Korea?

Ju-Hyun Park: Thanks for that question, Max. I see you've thrown me another softball [both laugh].

Maximillian Alvarez: Sorry, in five minutes or less.

Ju-Hyun Park: All right. So to keep it very, very short, the thing to understand is that Korea was

united for over 1000 years. The Korean War occurred within living memory. The division of Korea occurred within living memory. It tore apart about one in three Korean families which is probably a low estimate. So there are people alive today who have not seen their parents, haven't seen their children, haven't seen their siblings for pretty much their entire lives, or close to a century, who have no idea what happened to them. This is a reality for many and for many of our people. So this is a very personal thing when we talk about reunification. We're not talking about some pie in the sky, a political idea. For many people, it means, I want to see my family again. I want to know what happened to my family. I want to see my home. I want to go home. So that's the most human level at which I can communicate it.

Politically, what it means is removing and finally ending this war. It means across the peninsula, committing to the fact of a shared destiny, which is inevitable. You can't pick up South Korea and put it in Ohio. You can't pick up North Korea and put it on the moon. We live on the same peninsula and we have a shared destiny as one country because that's what Korea is. It is one country. It always has been. The political question of how unification happens is a little bit more complicated but what I can say is that it's something that Koreans have been thinking about for many, many generations. Even when there are differences in ideology and economic systems, there is a shared commitment and agreement, including from the government of the DPRK, from North Korea, to abide by a system wherein the threat of war could be removed. The possibility of living together could once again come into the picture and where it wouldn't necessarily be about imposing one system upon the other. It would be about coming together again as a nation, coming together again to build a shared destiny through a democratic gradual generational process.

This idea that reunification is somehow uniquely impossible, that the differences are too great, that once the DMZ comes down then people will begin slaughtering each other or something, is a narrative that entirely serves the US, that entirely serves those interests that want to keep Korea divided. Now, when we get back to this question of what does solidarity look like, what can people do? One of the most important things actually is to unite the labor movement with the anti-war movement in this country. The US is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. That is Dr. King's quote from over half a century ago. It is still true today. What we're seeing in Ukraine right now is a dress rehearsal for what interests in the Pentagon and on Wall Street ultimately want to do to China. So Taiwan is a major flashpoint that could become another Ukraine but so is Korea.

When we talk about these wars between these massive powers, these are not going to be small affairs. These are nuclear-armed powers that would essentially fight a battlefield over most of the surface of the planet. China and the US are connected by the Pacific Ocean. The last time the US went to direct war with a power that could be described as having the same level of military capabilities, which was Japan, that was a war that was essentially fought across all of Asia, across the entire Pacific. I don't think that any direct confrontation with China would be any different. I know that oftentimes in the US it can feel like, oh, well, we don't know enough about these situations abroad. It's confusing. There are always people trying to tell us different things that we need to do. Even if you are confused personally, even if you feel like you don't know enough, what every person can know is that war is not good for the planet. War is not good for people. War is not good for workers.

Who does war benefit? It benefits profiteers from war and only profiteers from war. It benefits those who have a business interest or a political interest in advancing war. Those are not the working class. Those are not the workers of the US. It is essential to find ways to politicize the workers' movement in the US because that is the thing that is going to provide any internal possible block from within the US in addition to other progressive movements that also exist here as well.

To end on a final note, a lot of what I'm talking about in terms of a confrontation in the Pacific is in

motion. Next month, Yoon Suk Yeol is going to visit the US. The president of South Korea is going to come here for a summit with Biden. A lot of what this is all geared towards is building a new alliance between Japan, South Korea, and the US. Japan was Korea's colonizer for the last 70-odd years. There has been a conflict even between South Korea and Japan over this legacy, this colonial legacy. What Yoon Suk Yeol is now trying to do is to put all these matters to rest in order to lay the path for South Korea to join more formal military alliances with both the US and Japan that feed into the project of encircling China.

Now, the reason why this is important is because all the chess pieces are already moving. The US is already orchestrating many, many different maneuvers that are building its political and military capacity within East Asia. The object is entirely for the purposes of confrontation with China that will come about in some form or another. This is something that to decision-makers in Washington is not an if, but a when. Workers in the US and organizers in the US also need to be looking at it that way because if we're talking about this cataclysmic confrontation, there is no way that doesn't touch every single part of our lives. I'm not only talking about for folks in the US but the entire planet.

We know already that we are standing at the precipice and at a turning point, not just in history, but for our species when it comes to the question of climate change, and now also with the question of nuclear war. So I would say that it's all out right now. It's socialism or barbarism, it's extinction or survival. Even when things can feel complicated, when it can feel overwhelming, it is essential to understand that there is no option to not pick a side. It is essential. It is important for all movements in the US that want to be working towards justice to come together, to combat imperialism as the primary contradiction that we're facing today in the world. Because it's only with a people's victory on that front that we're going to be able to ensure our capacity to have much of a future anyway. So we're all in this together or we're all going down with the ship.

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Ju-Hyun's [Twitter](#) page
- Nodutdol [Twitter](#) page
- Jia Hong & Ju-Hyun Park, *Truthout* / The Real News Network, "[Half a Million South Korean Workers Walk Off Jobs in General Strike](#)"
- Dongmin Yang, The Real News Network, "'The President Forced Our Comrade to Die' — South Korea's Workers Confront Yoon Seok Yeol's Labor Crackdown"
- Joonseok, *Left Voice*, "[South Korea: Building a Powerful General Strike Is Urgent to Fight Against the Right-Wing Government's Attacks](#)"
- Tim Shorrock, The Shorrock Files / The Real News Network, "[South Korea's Yoon Launches Vicious Attack on Unions, Peace Groups](#)"
- Ju-Hyun Park, The Real News Network, "[Biden Needs to Accept That the US Can't Intimidate North Korea](#)"
- Kap Seol, *Labor Notes*, "[South Korea: Intelligence Agency Raids Top Union Confederation](#)"
- Sam Yang, The Real News Network, "[Squid Game and the Long Shadow of American Empire](#)"

P.S.

• IN THESE TIMES. SEPTEMBER 20, 2023:

<https://inthesetimes.com/article/working-people-south-korean-worker-militancy>