

South Korea

To Defend Democratic Rights,

Mass protest in Seoul, December 4. Below: Yoon Suk-yeol with South Korean and U.S. military officers.



U.S. Forces Korea; KCTU



Break the U.S. Alliance!

The attempt to impose martial law has been pushed back, but South Korea's crisis is far from over. Millions are protesting to demand the ouster of right-wing president Yoon Suk-yeol, making clear that they do not want a return to the days of the military dictatorship. But a successful fight to defend democratic rights in South Korea requires understanding what lies behind the drive to repression and reaction. The root cause propelling the country toward disaster is the alliance with U.S. imperialism.

For more than 75 years, South Korea has served the U.S. as an anti-communist bastion in East Asia. As the Cold War wound down in the late 1980s, and amid widespread protests against the U.S.-backed dictatorship, Washington decided that the chokehold on the masses could be loosened without endangering private property and the *chaebol* capitalist conglomerates that dominate the economy. Adopting a democratic façade, South Korea was fully integrated into the liberal world order. It became a major beneficiary of capitalist globalization

while remaining dependent on and oppressed by imperialism, as shown by the 1997 and 2008 economic crises.

Now, however, the U.S. world order is unraveling. To reverse this, the U.S. has embarked on a course of confronting its chief rival, China, as well as Russia. As a key frontline state, South Korea is being squeezed more and more. On the military side, this has meant the deployment of advanced U.S. weaponry against China, South Korean military equipment sent to Ukraine, stepped-up war games against North Korea and demands for ever-higher military spending. Economically, pressure from Washington has led South Korea to greatly reduce trade with China, leading to a record \$18 billion deficit, while the already fragile economy will be hit even harder by Trump's protectionism. The U.S. drive against China is the central factor pushing the contradictions of South Korean capitalism toward a breaking point.

The Biden administration criticized Yoon's martial law declaration, concerned that he had overreached and was destabilizing

a crucial ally. But this should not blind anyone to the underlying dynamic. The circumstances that allowed for South Korea's period of economic growth and democratization have come to an end, and the pressures toward a reactionary crackdown can only heighten. The return of Trump means that the screws will be turned ever tighter, and the South Korean capitalists will be impelled to launch deeper attacks on democratic rights as well as the militant trade-union movement.

What Way Forward?

The anti-Yoon protests have prominently included strikes by the KCTU union federation as well as youth born well after the end of the previous military dictatorship. Yes, Yoon must be brought down. But the removal of one particularly right-wing president cannot address the social catastrophe facing South Korea. The problem is that the main force that the protests look to as an alternative is itself tied to the U.S. alliance which is fueling the drive to reaction.

The KCTU and other protest leaders are pushing for Yoon's People Power Party (PPP) to be replaced by South Korea's other major capitalist party, the Democratic Party (DPK). The DPK's fealty to U.S. imperialism was shown clearly when Moon Jae-in welcomed the addition of American Thaad anti-missile launchers against China during his term as president. As for the labor movement, leaders of the KCTU were arrested and imprisoned under the DPK, just as under the PPP today.

Resolving the crisis in the interests of the working masses requires a *political break* with the DPK and the smaller liberal and populist parties that serve as its satellites. They cannot solve the social and economic disaster facing the country because, like the right wing, they are beholden to the South Korean capitalists and their U.S. imperialist overlords.

The fight to defend democratic rights and advance the interests of South Korea's workers and poor requires forging a proletarian anti-imperialist front that connects the struggle against the domestic exploiters with that against the U.S. imperialists who ultimately call the shots. It was the U.S. that divided the Korean nation at the cost of over three million killed before and during the 1950-53 Korean War. Seven decades later, nearly 30,000 American troops remain on the peninsula, and the U.S. has ultimate operational command over the South Korean military.

To fight reaction in South Korea and throughout the region, it is necessary to unite the working class in struggle. The starting point must be opposition to the U.S.-led offensive against the workers states in China and North Korea. At the same time, it is necessary to oppose the Stalinist bureaucracies that rule in Beijing and Pyongyang, whose nationalist program undermines the fight for the revolutionary reunification of Korea and for international socialist revolution.

Various groups on South Korea's socialist left oppose support to the Democratic Party and criticize the KCTU leaders

for forming alliances with this or other bourgeois forces. But they do not connect this to the question of the U.S. alliance, which has always shaped political and economic developments in South Korea and is now driving them toward ruin. Far from opposing the U.S. offensive against China, some of them falsely equate China with the U.S., claiming both are imperialist. Some even argue that raising anti-imperialism in the South Korean context represents a capitulation to the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie and the Stalinist rulers in China and North Korea. These positions are false to the core and can only mislead the working class.

How can workers be broken from illusions in the liberal wing of South Korean capitalism? This will never happen through abstract slogans or schemas which ignore the global developments driving what is happening in the country. Martial law was the symptom; the underlying illness is the U.S. drive against China which is dragging South Korea toward disaster. A fight to break the alliance with the U.S. is necessary to defend even the most basic democratic rights and other gains wrested through struggle over the past four decades. The urgent task for socialists is to bring this central question to the fore, to ask pointblank to all the forces that claim to defend democracy: which side are you on, the U.S. or the working class?

- **Break the U.S. alliance! All U.S. troops and bases out!**
- **Oppose the U.S.-led drive against China and North Korea!**
- **Down with Yoon Suk-yeol and the PPP, no support to the Democratic Party!**
- **Build a proletarian anti-imperialist front against U.S. imperialism and South Korean capitalism!**



No. 69, August 2024 • spartacist.org/en/69



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