

South Korean “progressives” line-up behind the Democrats

By Ben McGrath
15 December 2012

In the campaign for the December 19 South Korean presidential election, self-proclaimed progressives and “left” organisations have fallen in behind the main bourgeois opposition candidate—Moon Jae-in of the Democratic United Party (DUP). They are portraying him as the “lesser evil” compared to Park Geun-hye, the candidate from the right-wing Saenuri Party of outgoing President Lee Myung-bak.

The political line-up was on full display during the first presidential debate between Moon, Park and United Progressive Party (UPP) candidate Lee Jung-hee. Lee made it clear that her purpose in the campaign was to see Moon elected president.

The UPP, which characterizes itself as “left-wing,” is intent on harnessing workers to vote for the DUP. In the past, the UPP has collaborated with the Democrats, most recently during the April general election, which revealed widespread discontent with the two major parties. Despite the public hostility toward President Lee’s administration, the DUP was unable to take control of the National Assembly.

Lee Jung-hee, who was UPP co-chairperson before becoming the party’s presidential candidate, joined the party’s forerunner, the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), in 2007 and was elected to the National Assembly the following year. The DLP is the political arm of the Korean Co-federation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Her platform is based on a mixture of nationalism, protectionism and posturing as an opponent of the Korean conglomerates, known as chaebol. Lee has called for the dissolution of the chaebol, the abolition of the Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement that was signed last year, and higher taxes on the wealthy to fund welfare programs. Like the DUP, Lee advocates taking a more conciliatory approach to North Korea.

There is nothing progressive, let alone socialist, in the

UPP’s platform—which is almost identical that of the DUP. The UPP’s opposition to the free trade agreement, like its criticisms of the chaebols, reflects the interests of less competitive sections of South Korean business and sections of the middle class.

By contrast, the Saenuri Party—the party of the former US-backed military dictatorship—has close ties with the chaebol. It has adopted a confrontational stance against North Korea and sought to align more closely with the US efforts to militarily and strategically encircle China, North Korea’s ally.

During the debate, Lee focused her attacks on the conservative Park, attempting to depict the Saenuri Party as solely responsible for the deteriorating economic conditions that workers face. “We must never allow the Saenuri Party that caused the tragedy of the past five years to seize the administration again,” she stated. Among the issues that Lee blamed the Saenuri Party for was the increasing casualisation of the labor force and the mass layoffs at Ssangyong Motors in 2009.

This reveals the hypocrisy and dishonesty of Lee and the UPP. The number of irregular workers has expanded to one third of the workforce under President Lee Myung-bak since 2008. But it was under the previous Democrat administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, who Moon served as chief-of-staff, that casualisation began to develop rapidly to meet the demands of big business for cheaper labor following the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis.

Kim Dae-jung opened the door for casual labor in the major corporations in 1998 by legislating to abandon the previous life-long employment system. He was only able to do so because the KCTU, using its reputation of militant unionism under the previous military dictatorships, sabotaged the struggles of

workers against the law. The proportion of low-paid contract and casual labor in the workforce is now one of the highest among industrialized countries.

The KCTU, which was illegal in the 1980s, has been increasingly integrated into the corporate and political establishment as was exposed in its betrayal of the Ssangyong auto struggle. The union isolated the auto workers, who were engaged in a protracted strike and plant occupation, ultimately paving the way for police and company thugs to violently suppress the struggle. Following the violence against Ssangyong workers, the KCTU formally ended the strike. At that time, Lee was representing the DLP, the KCTU's political wing, in the National Assembly.

Questioned by Park on why she was attending the debate while at the same time seeking a merger with Moon's campaign, Lee replied: "If you remember one thing, remember this. I intend to bring down Park Geun-hye. I want to replace [the Saenuri Party] with a progressive administration." By "progressive" administration, Lee meant one led by Moon.

Lee's campaign seeks to tie the working class behind the big business politics of the DUP. She had made it known before the debate that she was anxious to work with the Democrats. "I know the UPP has been considered a group that is difficult to work with by liberals," she said. "But I would like to emphasize that we have put our utmost efforts since then to create a situation where all liberals can cooperate."

The UPP is not the only self-proclaimed "left" party backing Moon. Following a vote-rigging scandal during this year's general election and other internal strife, a faction broke away from the UPP to form the Progressive Justice Party (PJP). The KCTU also withdrew its support from the UPP. However, like Lee, the PJP and the KCTU are attempting to sow illusions that by preventing Park from winning the presidency, workers can improve their conditions.

PJP candidate, Sim Sang-jung, who dropped out of the race in order to back Moon, stated in October: "A progressive party will save labor. You need to bear in mind that during the Lee Myung-bak government, the conglomerates have run out of control, further marginalizing blue-collar workers." In announcing her decision to withdraw, Sim called for a vote for Moon because he was "effectively representing the liberal opposition camp."

Similarly, the KCTU has swung behind Moon. KCTU acting chairman Jeong Ui-hyeon stated at a rally last month: "If the capitalist dictatorship of Lee Myeong-bak's administration is not thrown out, it will be difficult for both the pending workplace struggles and any organization's struggle for an improvement in the system." He called on workers to wage "a forceful struggle" to ensure that candidates kept their election promises.

The KCTU, the UPP and PJP are perpetrating a monstrous fraud against the working class. The reality is that both presidential candidates, Moon and Park, are committed to ruthlessly implement austerity measures against the working class on behalf of the financial oligarchy they serve.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>