

After Park's ouster, South Korean pseudo-left orients to pro-US opposition

By Ben McGrath
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South Korea's pseudo-left group Workers' Solidarity (WS) is responding to the impeachment and removal of former President Park Geun-hye by deepening its orientation to US imperialism. It is trying to line up workers behind maneuvers of the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) to replace Park with a president pledged to support the US-led war drive against North Korea and China.

WS published a statement on March 10, the day of Park's removal, entitled "Happiness! Park Geun-hye removed from office: Now let's eliminate Park's legacy."

WS writes, "This is only the start of the work to change and renovate an unequal and unjust society that was worsened by Park Geun-hye. Even if the Park administration leaves office through a presidential election, we must wait 60 days. Taking advantage of this, textbooks glorifying dictatorship are still circulating and US weapons of mass destruction such as THAAD are quickly coming. Pain and attacks on labor rights have not been completely stopped."

While there is undoubtedly popular jubilation at the ouster of a right-wing president, the daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee, certain truths must be told. Park's ouster was a reaction to escalating fears of war and outrage with South Korea's corporate conglomerates or *chaebol* in the working class, as job cuts and youth unemployment mount. However, she was not toppled by the working class, but by the courts and sections of the South Korean ruling class working with the support of US imperialism.

In contrast to the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, when Washington and the CIA initially protected Hosni Mubarak as he slaughtered workers in a desperate attempt to keep him in power, at no point did Washington attempt to defend Park. Instead, it tacitly endorsed her removal. On December 9, as the National Assembly impeached

Park, State Department spokesman Mark Toner gave Washington's blessing, saying the US "is there with Korea as it undergoes this political change and transition."

Why does WS tell its readers to "wait 60 days" before political opposition to the South Korean ruling class can proceed? This is because WS is waiting for the 60-day period for new presidential elections that are set to bring a DPK president to office. That is, WS is orienting to bringing to power a government that would maintain the military alliance with Washington, continue attacks on the working class, and oppose all attempts to mobilize broader international opposition in the working class to the danger of war in Asia.

While US imperialism may prefer the conservatives, which led a string of US-backed South Korean military dictatorships in the 20th century, both Washington and WS know that the Democrats will carry out pro-militarist and pro-austerity policies.

The DPK administrations of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Noh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) both enforced US demands, sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. They were deeply discredited among workers by their imposition of IMF austerity measures after the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis—which ultimately allowed Park and the conservatives Lee Myung-bak and then Park Geun-hye to return to power.

DPK presidential candidate Moon Jae-in, who leads the polls by a wide margin, is assuring Washington that he will not oppose its agenda—telling the *New York Times* that he is "America's friend" and that the US-South Korea military alliance is "a pillar of our diplomacy." WS endorsed Moon, Noh's former chief of staff, when he ran for president against Park in 2012.

Moon is now dancing around the issue of US deployments of THAAD anti-ballistic missile systems to South Korea, indicating that he might support

delaying—though not canceling—their installation. This is a cynical attempt to appeal to mass opposition to US militarism in South Korea, while signaling that he will not disturb Seoul’s support for the US “pivot to Asia.”

WS propaganda is entirely directed to promoting illusions in the Democrats, their trade union supporters in the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and more broadly the middle class milieu that led the so-called pro-democracy movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

In a November 19 article WS wrote, “The method (for intensifying the anti-Park movement) is to encourage the movements that are demanding the retraction of the so-called labor reforms pushed by Park—the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions’ (KCTU) strike to stop labor reform, the struggle to repeal the state-authored history textbooks, the Sewol ferry truth investigation movement, the movement to retract the THAAD deployment—and to unite them with the (Park) resignation movement.”

In a February 7 article, WS approvingly quoted from the KCTU as it called for escalating the attempts to respond to growing working class anger by installing a DPK president. The KCTU wrote, “Opposition parties should think straight—we cannot be complacent and just talk about [a] presidential election when Park is fighting tooth and nail against the impeachment.”

This propaganda reflects WS own origins in political movements hostile to Trotskyism and to the working class. Established in 1990 from forces drawn from the democracy movement, WS based itself on the anti-communism espoused by the Democrats and their supporters, taking a state-capitalist position denouncing the former Soviet Union and China as imperialist countries. WS is allied to the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Great Britain.

WS hailed the KCTU as an alternative for workers, joining the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in 1999, the political wing of the KCTU at the time. WS left the DLP when it became the Unified Progressive Party, which was disbanded in 2014 by the same court that removed Park.

In fact, the KCTU and its political orientation to the Democrats proved to be a historical deadend. The KCTU has isolated strikes, most notably during the 2009 Ssangyong auto plant occupation, as well as during the 2013 railway workers’ strike, which was conducted so as to limit the impact on the economy and then shut down after union offices were raided by police.

These bankrupt, anti-working class organizations can

and will only produce disasters faced with the real and escalating danger of a Second Korean War and an all-out war between the United States and China. To the extent that WS addresses the US military build-up in East Asia at all, it falsely denounces China as an imperialist power no different than Washington.

Commenting on Chinese anger against THAAD on March 3, WS wrote: “The THAAD deployment while exacerbating the competition between imperialism is further destabilizing the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, Korea may even take on the cost of the deployment. In a recent speech to Congress, Trump strongly demanded that allies take on additional military costs.”

The US war drive against China is not a competition between imperialist powers, but a policy to prop up its rapidly fading global hegemony by a reckless and aggressive assertion of US military might. By dismissing China as one imperialist power among many, WS is backing Washington's propaganda claims that Beijing is the aggressor in the East and South China Seas.

To the extent that WS criticizes the THAAD deployment, it is from the standpoint of privileged layers of South Korean society for which it speaks. It has tactical differences with Washington over how to proceed against China and, very importantly from the WS standpoint, how much of the bill for the war drive the South Korean bourgeoisie will pay. However, these flow from the strategic and profit interests of the political and corporate establishment in South Korea, now the world’s 11th largest economy, not from opposition to war among workers and youth.

Mass disillusionment with Park and the *chaebol*, like the US-led war drive in Asia, are the product of a deep crisis of capitalism. It will not be resolved by new elections and the installation of a new representative of South Korean capital in *Cheongwadae* or the presidential Blue House, but a politically independent movement of the working class in America and in Asia against war from a revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective. WS would face such a movement not as an ally, but as determined enemy.

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