

South Korean Progressives Launch New Party to Complete ‘Candlelight Revolution’

Interview, Part 1

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“The people who were at the forefront of the candlelight revolution that ousted Park Geun-hye need to be the driving force of South Korean politics, and for that reason, we need a new party,” said Kim Jong-hoon, an independent South Korean National Assembly member, in a recent interview with Zoom in Korea.

Kim is part of a new movement to re-consolidate progressive forces in South Korea to build a new progressive party tasked with following through on the demands for fundamental systemic change put forth by the candlelight revolution. The preparatory committee of the New People’s Party (*Sae-minjung-jeong-dang*)-a working title that may change after merging with other existing progressive parties-represents a broad united front of diverse sectors, most notably the Korean Peasants League and sections of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. It plans to launch the new party in late September.



Formerly a member of the Democratic Labor Party and the Unified Progressive Party, Kim currently serves in the National Assembly as an independent and is the standing representative of the New People’s Party (tentative name). He represents the district of Ulsan, South Korea’s industrial powerhouse and home to the world’s largest automobile assembly plant operated by the Hyundai Motor Company and the world’s largest shipyard operated by Hyundai Heavy Industries. As a student activist, he participated in the series of militant labor strikes that later came to be known as the Great Workers’ Struggle of 1987, a milestone in the fight for democratic labor unions in South Korea.

Zoom in Korea asked Kim to discuss the impetus behind the formation of the new progressive party, as well as the role of South Korean progressives vis a vis the liberal Moon Jae-in administration and the intensifying war threats on the Korean peninsula. The following is Part 1 of the interview:

ZoominKorea: Congratulations on the formation of the New People’s Party (tentative name). Please tell us about the new party. What forces are coming together to form this party? Why form this party at this particular moment?

Kim: The South Korean people have ousted the previous Park Geun-hye administration through people power and laid the groundwork for creating a new society. The people who were at the forefront of the candlelight revolution need to be the driving force of South Korean politics. For that to happen, we need a new party. All who share this belief-the

Korean Peasants League (KPL), Korean Alliance of Progressive Movements (KAPM), and the Korean Youth Alliance, among others—came together on July 9 to launch the preparatory committee of the New People’s Party (tentative name).

ZoominKorea: How does this new progressive party distinguish itself from not only the liberal democratic party (The Minjoo Party) but also other progressive parties already in existence?

Kim: The existing political parties are solely focused on partisan politics based on their own party interests. The aim of the New People’s Party (tentative name) is to serve the broader interests of the people and create a new political force to fundamentally transform the political order of South Korean society. “Toward a society that respects workers” is our slogan, and as such, our goal is to liquidate inequality and fight for self-determination, peace and reunification of the Korean peninsula, the world’s only divided country under constant threat of war. We will demonstrate that the most competent political leaders are the people themselves.

ZoominKorea: You had said in a previous interview elsewhere that you were deeply affected by the death of farmer Baek Nam-gi as you identified with his life and struggle. Tell us about your personal background and how you became involved in politics.

Kim: When Farmer Baek Nam-gi passed away, I went to his hospital bed every night even though it was in the middle of the national audit season. Baek was hit by a water cannon during a people power demonstration in 2015 and was in a coma for a year before finally passing. This seventy-year old man got up at the break of dawn and traveled all the way from Boseong, South Jeolla Province to Seoul to demand a raise in the price of rice. It broke my heart to think about what must have been going through his mind that day. A world where workers and farmers have to risk their lives just to survive — don’t you think it’s cruel?

It’s been thirty-odd years since I first vowed to work for a better world for workers and farmers. I attended university in Ulsan and became a student activist. I was imprisoned for supporting the 128-day labor strike at Hyundai Heavy Industries in 1989. When a worker I met through that struggle said to me, “Won’t your politics change after you graduate and become successful?” I said, “No, I will always fight on the side of workers.” My current political work is part of my effort to honor that pledge.

In 1990, I became the representative of a workers’ cultural organization in Ulsan Dong-gu. The following year, I became the cultural secretary of the Hyundai Group Labor Unions Alliance. In 2002 — after the formation of the Democratic Labor Party in 2000 — I was elected a member of the Ulsan City Council, and I became active in legislative politics for the first time. In 2011, I was elected the Commissioner of the Ulsan Dong-gu district, where I gained administrative experience. Then in the 2016 general election, I was elected into the National Assembly, where I currently fight for the rights of workers, the urban poor, and the socially-disenfranchised.

ZoominKorea: You represent the district of Ulsan, where Hyundai Heavy Industries is based. Tell us about the history of labor and democracy movements in Ulsan. How is your personal story tied to this history?

Kim: In 1987, from July to September, South Korean workers, demanding the right to

organize democratic labor unions and improvements in wages and working conditions, carried out a militant mass struggle for democracy — now known as the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987.

The first sparks of the Great Workers' Struggle started at the Hyundai Group Labor Union Alliance, then spread like wildfire throughout Masan and the huge industrial plants in Changwon, as well as Busan and Geoje. On August 17-18, 30,000 workers of the Hyundai Group Labor Union Alliance in Ulsan took to the streets and turned the entire city into a liberated zone. My heart still pounds when I think back on the militant spirit of the workers, who chanted, "Let us live with dignity," and the sight of endless rows of workers as they marched over Nammok Hill in Dong-gu and headed towards Ulsan City Hall. This year, on July 5, we held a commemoration to mark the 30th anniversary of the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987 in Ulsan. That was also the day that workers at Hyundai Engine formed their union thirty years ago.

ZoominKorea: What are the living/working conditions of working-class people in your district today? Tell us about your efforts to improve their conditions.

Kim: The primary demands of the workers during the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987 were: an 8-hour work day, revision of unjust labor laws, guarantee of basic labor rights, right to freely organize labor unions, elimination of blacklists, and improvement of working conditions and wages. Thirty years later, these are still the basic demands of workers. We have a long way to go to achieve democratization of the economy and the workplace.



Former President of ROK Park Geun-hye

I represent Ulsan Dong-gu, where workers are struggling due to the massive restructuring of the shipbuilding industry by the previous Park Geun-hye administration. Shifting the burden of poor corporate management by the primary contractor to workers has caused serious problems, such as mass layoffs and backwages.

Therefore, I have called on the Ministry of Employment and Labor as well as the Fair Trade Commission to make systemic changes to root out unfair contracts and practices in the subcontracting system, and I continue to support the workers at Hyundai Heavy Industries in their struggle to defend their jobs.

I am also fighting to increase the national minimum wage to 10,000 won, abolish unjust labor laws and make systemic changes to create a society that respects the dignity of workers. As a member of the Trade, Industry and Energy Committee of the National Assembly, I also advocate worker-centered industrial policies.

ZoominKorea: The South Korean people recently ousted the former president through people power. What lessons do you draw from the mass candlelight protests and how will the new party build on that movement?

Kim: The main lesson of the candlelight revolution is that people demand direct democracy. Through direct action, the people, who are the true sovereigns of this nation, challenged a system in which electoral democracy is actually distorting and constraining true democracy. The candlelight revolution demonstrated that Article 1 of the South Korean constitution, which states, "All state authority shall emanate from the people," should be reinterpreted as, "All state authority shall emanate from the *struggling* people."

The New People's Party (tentative name) will carry forward the spirit of the candlelight revolution to advance direct and participatory democracy. Through people power, we can uproot corruption and follow through on the systemic change that was demanded by the candlelight revolution. And this will be the main task of the new party.

ZoominKorea: It has been thirty years since the pro-democracy uprising of 1987, which marked the end of decades-old military dictatorship in South Korea and the entry of progressives in the political arena. The historic formation of the Democratic Labor Party in 2000 was a milestone that brought together progressives in a united front for political power. That era came to an end with the forced dissolution of the Unified Progressive Party by former President Park Geun-hye. What lessons do you draw from this experience, and how will this inform the politics/practice of the new party?

Kim: The Democratic Labor Party stood for national sovereignty, democracy, peaceful reunification and a world based on equality determined by the people. The experience of the past thirty years of progressive participation in the political arena confirmed that workers, farmers, and the urban poor are the main forces for social progress and should be the main protagonists in South Korea's politics. What we learned, more than anything, is that there can be no democracy without sovereignty, and the party cannot progress without progress in mass organization.

The New People's Party (tentative name) will be a party that advocates sovereignty and equality and is led by the people-workers, farmers, and the urban poor. Our aim is nothing less than the fundamental transformation of South Korean society.

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