Review Essay

Rethinking Working-Class Formation in South Korea: *A Reflective Essay*

Hagen KOO

In the 1980s when I started to work on labor issues in Korea, very few people in America were interested in the topic. That was the time when South Korea and other East Asian newly industrializing economies were achieving spectacular economic development, and the scholarly and policy communities in the world were almost exclusively occupied with explaining this East Asian miracle. In fact, I was also primarily working in this area at the time, trying to explain South Korea's economic success from a sociological, rather than economic, perspective.

But from the very beginning of my career as a sociologist, I have always been interested in class issues. I wrote my dissertation on small business people, the petite bourgeoisie, in the context of rapid urbanization in South Korea. After dissertation, I also wrote several articles trying to conceptualize

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Hagen Koo is a Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, HI, USA. E-mail: hagenkoo@hawaii.edu

the newly emerging class structure in Korea in the process of rapid industrialization. But I did not have any particular interest in labor issues per se at that time, largely because I was not fully aware of the seriousness of labor problems in Korea at that time.

But, sometime in the mid-1980s when I was doing a field research in Seoul, I discovered several books containing factory workers' personal essays and diaries. They were mostly written by female workers who attended night schools organized by progressive church organizations. These writings were then compiled and published by underground publishing houses. When I read these essays, I was really struck by the incredible amount of suffering and injustice going on in the industrial arena and the workers' courageous struggles to resist such injustices. I was so touched by their writings that I could not even sleep the first night when I read them. Their essays described not only their suffering and agonies but also their suppressed desires and dreams, their yearning for a better world, and their keen sense of unfairness. I realized that I must do something to let their stories be known to the world. So, my embarking on a labor study had a largely humanistic motive, arising from my sympathy with the suffering workers, rather than from a firm Marxist conviction that the working class is, or ought to be, a principle agent of revolutionary change.

If I had another motivation, it was my own academic aspiration, formed much earlier when I was a graduate student at Northwestern University in the early 1970s. In a seminar on social stratification, we were assigned E.P. Thompson's book, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Like most students of labor, I was deeply impressed by this masterful book. At the time, my theoretical understanding was not sufficiently developed to appreciate the full significance of Thompson's theory, but I was able to see how profound and brilliant his analysis was and how beautifully the book was written. As I read, I wondered whether I would ever be able to write this kind of deeply engaged book when I became a mature sociologist. That was my dream, implanted in my mind early on and always pushing me to strive for a profound scholarship.

I began to write a few pieces on Korean labor from the mid-1980s and, luckily, was able to publish my first serious article on labor, titled "From Farm to Factory," in the *American Sociological Review* in 1990. So, academically, I had an auspicious beginning. But my writing process was slow and difficult, partly because I had to spend much time gathering data, and partly because I was thinking and rethinking many issues. Finally, my book, *Korean Workers: Culture and Politics of Class Formation*, came out in 2001. That means I took at least ten years to complete this book. But, in retrospect, I am very glad I took such a long time on the project, because my understanding and my writing style continuously evolved for the better during that period. Had I hurried to finish it more quickly, the end result might have been far less satisfactory.

Themes of Korean Workers

Now, let me talk about what I tried to present in my book and what further thoughts I have come to have after watching the way the Korean working-class movement has evolved since I finished the book. From the beginning of the project, I decided to focus on the working class formation process rather than the labor movement. I thought a study of working class formation would be far more challenging and sociologically interesting than just a careful descriptive analysis of the labor movement. Fortunately, by the late 1980s, a large amount of valuable data had become available for serious research on how Korean industrial workers had slowly transformed from mere factory laborers into a new social subject with a certain degree of collective identity and class consciousness. Scarcely used in academic research but most valuable, I thought, was the wealth of writings produced by workers, union leaders, and activist intellectuals.

While analyzing these data, my main concern was to identify what might be the most distinct and theoretically challenging aspects of working class formation in Korea in comparison with other societies. Given the fact that most of the theoretical ideas in the field were based on early European

or American experiences, it was necessary to compare the Korean case with these prototype cases. Also, because the patterns of Korean labor struggles were sufficiently different from those in other newly industrializing East Asian economies, I thought it was important to compare the Korean experience with that of the neighboring countries. Of course, my study was not a comparative study, but putting the Korean experience in a comparative perspective helped me to raise many interesting questions that I would not have done had I focused only on the Korean case.

After some initial analyses and preliminary writings, I thought I could make my analysis and writing more interesting and powerful by focusing on two broad concepts, culture and the state, as the overriding themes or analytic concepts of my study. It is the orthodox Marxist premise that classes emerge fundamentally out of the capitalist relations of production between capital and labor. While not denying that premise, Thompson's constructivist theory stresses that classes are not made automatically by production relations but emerge out of complex human experiences. How people perceive and interpret their material condition and how they react against it, as he argues, are influenced by cultural factors "embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms." I think this understanding is particularly useful if we want to examine any country's working-class experience from a comparative perspective. Obviously, Korea possesses its own unique cultural tradition, value system, and institutions, and so it is important to recognize that Korea's industrial labor was born in a historical and cultural context sufficiently different from those of the early industrializers in Europe or America. Korea's industrial order during the 1970s and the 1980s did not represent a real bourgeois order but was permeated by traditional cultural elements and oppressive state ideologies. Therefore, workers' lived experiences were not simply determined by the capitalistic logic of surplus appropriation but also by the complex interplay of cultural, symbolic, and political factors.

Korea's cultural tradition includes many elements, including Confucian cultural values, patriarchy, nationalism, anti-Communism, militaristic culture, and the like. Of all of them, the Confucian value system has had

the most enduring effect on Korea's labor relations. Especially important was its effect on defining manual labor as a low and menial status and justifing society's demeaning attitude toward factory workers. Such an attitude was well reflected in the popular labels attached to factory laborers, like *gongsuni* (female factory worker) and *gongdoli* (male factory worker). Both terms evoke the image of a servant in the old days, only placed in the modern-day factory setting. Thus, it was not just their wretched working conditions that troubled the workers. They were more tormented by what they called "inhumane treatment" and the contemptuous attitude of society. Therefore, the cultural dimension of labor oppression has been a powerful source of worker resentment and labor activism. Korean factory workers, in other words, were not just economically exploited but also culturally and symbolically oppressed and humiliated. And this is an important factor to understand why workers' protests in the earlier years of export-oriented industrialization often involved a great deal of violence.

However, the state is no less important than culture for understanding the industrial system and working-class experiences in Korea. The state's role was not so prominent in the early industrializers, but it is vitally important in the newly industrialized economies of East Asia. As we well know, the Korean state has intervened deeply in the industrial system and has played a vigilant role in maintaining labor control and passivity. But the state's blatant pro-capital and anti-labor stance led to deep resentment toward state power, and, ironically, became a powerful source of the growing class consciousness and militant mobilization of the workers in the long run.

Having adopted culture and state power as the two dominant themes of my analysis, I took a Marxist dialectic approach in analyzing how these two factors have played out in the Korean working-class formation process. What I found most interesting was that both culture and the state produced complex, often contradictory, effects in shaping industrial experiences in Korea. On the one hand, Confucian culture and the authoritarian state worked to keep the workers docile, passive, and hard-working, but on the other hand, they also produced bitter resentment and sharp awareness of the inequality and injustice that were protected by state power and

traditional culture. Repressive state power also produced alliances between labor and democracy movement activists outside the industrial arena. Thus, the central theme of my book was the contradictory roles of culture and power in simultaneously suppressing and facilitating Korea's working-class movement.

Now, let me briefly go over some of the most important arguments of the substantive chapters of my book.

Proletarianization and Factory Work

The starting point of my class analysis was an analysis of the capitalist relations of production.[1] In that sense, I regard myself as a good old-fashioned Marxist. Although I emphasized the roles of culture and the state, I believed that the essential element in determining classes was the nature of production relations. So, I started to examine how the new generation of factory workers had been generated in the process of export-led industrialization beginning in the early 1960s. This is the process called "proletarianization." South Korea's proletarianization involved certain distinctive features: a massive rural-to-urban—or farm to factory—migration, the geographic concentration of factories in a few urban areas, and the unlikeliness of these workers returning to their rural homes.[2] These features of Korean proletarianization differed from those found in countries like Taiwan where factories were dispersed in urban and rural areas, and migrant workers did not need to commit to factory work completely. Thus, unlike many temporary or part-time proletariat in Taiwan, Korean factory workers constituted a full-time proletariat. That meant they had to continue as factory workers and try to improve their economic situation within the factory system.

1. Which I presented in chapters 2 and 3 (Koo 2001).
2. Due to rural poverty.

Then, I turned my attention to the work relations in the factory setting. Needless to say, factory work at the early stage of Korean industrialization was extremely hard and abusive, involving long hours of work, no regular holidays, hazardous conditions, low wages, and the like. An industrial job meant devoting practically one's whole life to wretched work in exchange for less than a subsistence wage. Factory workers often considered themselves worse off than machines or cows because, as they used to say, cows at least can sleep at night and machines can rest when they need repair. In addition to the material conditions, industrial relations at the factory were extremely authoritative, patriarchal, and despotic. Workers were treated not as sellers of their labor with certain contractual rights but as if they were children or traditional servants. The essential nature of patriarchal authority in Korean industry was more despotic than paternalistic.

Thus, the factory workers during the early stage of Korean industrialization often expressed their greatest desire in the language of "humane treatment." What would they have meant by humane treatment? Though not easy to specify it clearly, it must have meant being treated like a human being, not like a machine or an animal, but as a person who requires a minimum amount of rest and leisure time. It also meant being treated as a free and autonomous being, as a self-respecting person who is entitled to a minimum degree of human dignity and respect from others. But, obviously, factory employment at that time almost completely denied such a basic human desire.

The 1970s: Unionization Struggles Led by Women Workers

In many ways, South Korea's contemporary labor movement started in the 1970s. And it started with a big bang: the momentous event of Chun Tai Il's self-immolation. The words he shouted while his body was in flames clearly spoke to the cruelty of inhumane treatment in the factory: "We are not machines!; "Let us rest on Sunday!; "Don't exploit workers!; "Abide by the Labor Standard Laws!"

Chun's heroic, tragic death was a turning point for the Korean labor movement and working-class formation. It sowed the spirit of resistance and rebellion in the minds of millions of workers, and provided a powerful symbol for the working class in a society that until then had no sacred symbol that could inspire and mobilize workers for a collective goal. It was also the first event to bring society's attention to the problems of labor and the dark side of Korea's economic development.

One important difference between early European and Korean working class traditions was the absence of an artisan culture and organizations in Korea. Scholars of the nineteenth-century working-class movement in Europe emphasize that it was the artisans, not the ordinary factory workers, who played a key role by providing the leadership, organizational resources, and language for worker struggles. They also argue that the artisans reacted against the factory system less for economic reasons than to protest the loss of their dignity, pride, and autonomy in the process of proletarianization. Unfortunately, Korea had neither an artisan culture of this sort nor any respectable group that could play a leading role in the working-class movement. In this cultural context, Chun Tae Il provided a truly important symbolic leadership to the Korean working-class movement.

The most interesting aspect of union struggles in the 1970s, as we all know, was that they were led by young female workers employed in the labor-intensive export industries. This is a very interesting and unique feature of the Korean labor movement. Of course, Korea is not the only country where women workers participated actively in labor struggles. But it is rare in the world that women workers did not simply participate but actually led the unionization struggles in the most formative stage of the labor movement. The fact is that the absolute majority of labor disputes involving unionization in the 1970s were led by female workers in the textile, garment, electronics, and other female-dominant export industries. Even in a very few cases where the unionization movement was led by male workers, female workers were the main warriors in the struggle. Female workers' struggles also demonstrated stronger resistance, determination, solidarity, and resilience than male workers'.

An obvious question we need to answer, then, is why and how Korean female factory workers could have played such a pioneering role in the grassroots union movement. The answer could be simple. These women workers were more exploited than male workers in terms of wages and work assignments and they were subjected to widespread physical and sexual abuse. Furthermore, they were more homogeneous than male workers in terms of age, marital status, and family background. But these cannot be sufficient reasons, because these conditions apply to female workers in other developing economies where we find no similar result. So, we need to look for additional reasons to explain the exceptional role played by the Korean female workers. Another answer lies, as most Korean labor scholars would agree, in the active role played by progressive church organizations and activist students in assisting women workers' struggles in the 1970s. In my book, I describe in detail the motives of these church organizations, what activities they organized to promote workers' critical consciousness toward their workplaces, and how workers appealed to outside groups for assistance in their struggles. Given their structural and social weaknesses, female workers in the 1970s constantly sought help from the religious and intellectual communities by making a moral and symbolic appeal to them.

The 1980s: The Student-Worker Alliance

In the 1980s, South Korea produced another very interesting and unique form of labor movement. It involved the large-scale involvement of students. Some thirty thousand students dropped out of college and entered the industrial arena as factory workers. Although the participation of intellectuals in working-class movements is nothing new, the scale and intensity of student involvement in the Korean labor movement seems unprecedented in the world's labor history.

How and why it happened on this scale is an important question. The story is pretty well known among those interested in the Korean labor movement. Students have long played a very active role in Korea's modern

political history, and during the three decades of military rule that began in 1961, they became the most active and politicized element in South Korean society. But their penetration into the industrial arena in such large numbers was due to their changing strategies in the struggle for democracy. After a series of political events from President Park Chung Hee's assassination in 1979 and the sudden political opening[3] to the infamous Gwangju massacre in May 1980 followed by the re-establishment of military rule, the students realized that they could not bring down the military regime alone. They also realized that the most potent social force in Korea was the newly emerged working class. But they believed that most workers had not yet acquired the necessary class consciousness and that it was the students' responsibility to assist the workers in acquiring necessary class consciousness and to channel the workers' economic struggles toward larger political goals. Their new strategy therefore became *nohak yondae* (labor-student alliance). A large number of students carried their political convictions into the factories in the first half of the 1980s. These students-turned-workers, who were called "disguised workers" by the government, made tremendous sacrifices—if detected by the police, they were expelled from their schools and usually blacklisted for future employment; many of them were tortured and imprisoned; and worst of all, they caused their parents deep disappointment and agony. But, amazingly, that was the dominant student culture during the Chun Doo-Hwan era in the 1980s.

This aspect of the Korean labor movement in the past decades seems most interesting and impressive to foreign readers of my book. In 2010, I was invited to give lectures at Beijing and Tsinghua Universities. Interestingly, the organization that invited me to Beijing University was the Marxist Students' Association. There I gave the most memorable lecture in my life to an audience of some 200 students. Labor unrest was starting to occur in China at that time, and I could see how much these students were agonizing about what they ought to do. Obviously, they were very much inspired by what the Korean students had done during the 1980s. Not

3. The so-called "Spring of 1980."

surprisingly, we began to find a growing Chinese student involvement in the grassroots union movement in recent years. In November 2018, for example, a Chinese newspaper reported about a severe police crackdown on student activists who were involved in the unionization struggles in Shenzhen, many of whom are graduates or current students of Chinese elite universities.

Back to Korea, the 1980s was also the period of the *minjung* movement. As is well understood, the *minjung* movement was a broad-front social movement, containing social, political, and cultural elements in it. *Minjung* comprises diverse segments of the population, including peasants, workers, urban lower classes, and dissident intellectuals, but *minjung* activists regarded the industrial working class as the core of this movement. The *minjung* movement thus facilitated close linkages among politically and economically alienated sectors, especially between the labor movement and the student movement. The concept of *minjung* was too broad and ambiguous to serve as a basis for working-class identity and solidarity; nonetheless, it helped workers overcome their culturally induced inferiority complex and the state-imposed security ideology.

Thus, one of the most distinct aspects of the South Korean labor movement is the intimate linkages that developed between grassroots labor struggles and the political struggle for democracy led by students and intellectuals. This is, I believe, the most important reason that Korea has developed a much more active labor movement than the other East Asian tigers have. But what precisely enabled the interconnection of these two levels of struggle in Korea? The answer, I believe, must be sought in the nature and the role of the state. Several aspects of state policy toward labor in Korea are relevant. The most important is the fact that both the Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan governments took a consistently crude and repressive approach to the control of labor and civil society, alienating both of them and pushing them closer to each other, with radical intellectuals serving as the bridge between them. Korea's authoritarian state relied heavily on security agencies and police violence to control labor agitation and student activism. An unintended consequence of these crude methods of control was ever-expanding subterranean networks of labor

and political activists. In this way, the Korean state's extremely repressive approach produced an ironic consequence of simultaneously suppressing and facilitating labor struggles.

All these developments led Korean society to become highly politicized, combative, and contentious in the 1980s. Here, my earlier concept of the "contentious society" is relevant. This is a concept I developed in an essay entitled, "Strong State and Contentious Society" (published in 1993's *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, which I edited), to describe the unique features of Korea's state-society relations. In the world's political history, it is the norm for a country ruled by a strong state to have a weak and underdeveloped civil society. But, interestingly enough, despite the unusual strength and pervasive presence of the state in Korea, its civil society has never been completely stifled but has always demonstrated a subversive and combative character. Maintaining the asymmetrical relationship between the state and society has required extra vigilance and shows of coercive power on the part of the state, and, many times in modern Korean history, this vertical relationship has been overturned by sudden eruptions of societal forces. How Korea has developed such an atypical state-society relationship cannot be explained here, but what I can say is that by the mid-1980s, Korea had become a hyper contentious society triggered by many social and political contradictions produced in the process of state-led rapid industrial development.

1987–1990s: The Great Labor Upsurge

Indeed, the contentious society of Korea erupted again in 1987, followed by labor strikes on a gigantic scale. The opportunity for this labor uprising was not created by the workers themselves but arose from the students' incessant struggles against the authoritarian regime. In any event, the explosion of labor unrest in 1987 clearly marked a watershed in the Korean working-class struggle and changed the terrain of the labor movement with the new actors. The center of labor conflicts shifted from the small-scale,

light manufacturing sectors to the heavy and chemical industries, and it brought the semi-skilled male workers in the auto, ship building, steel, and petrochemical industries as the new principal actors of the South Korean labor movement.

The working class identity seemed to be firmly established during and immediately after the Great Worker Struggle of 1987. Organizational advances and empowerment enabled the working class to move out from under the umbrella of the *minjung* movement and forge their own class identity. The dominant discourse during this period was "Labor Liberation." Nowhere in the labor literature do we find a precise definition of this concept. But what seems clear is that it expressed the workers' strong desire to be liberated from the capitalist exploitation, social injustice, and political oppression they had been experiencing all along. Their main slogan at that time read: "Create a society where workers are the masters." Despite considerable vagueness, the discourse of "Labor Liberation" clearly indicated the rising level of workers' self-awareness and self-esteem, and workers' desire to present themselves as a moral force fighting for social democracy in society.

It is important to notice that the working-class identity that emerged in the post-1987 period was a masculine and militant identity. It contained a strong ethos of opposition to the oppressive power of the state and capital. This identity was most clearly represented at a violent strike at the Hyundai shipyard in 1990, called the Goliat strike. The strike began over a relatively minor incident of a hostile company action toward the militant union leadership. In this strike, 78 protesters climbed up a huge crane, 82 meters high, to carry out a hunger strike, while thousands of workers fought with massive police forces on the ground. The incident triggered a large-scale solidarity struggle involving a large number of workers in the southwest region and many student sympathizers. Although the strike was easily defeated by the mighty police force, the Goliat warriors came to symbolize labor defiance against state repression. As strikers claimed at the time, it was "a major fight with the dictatorial regime with the trust and pride of twenty-five million workers at stake." The pride and fidelity (*ûili*) of the working

class were the overriding themes that the Hyundai strikers attached to their collective action, which had broad appeal to the working class.

One important change that occurred after the 1987 labor uprising was the quick marginalization of women workers from the union movement. This was partly due to the fact that the Great Worker Struggle was led by male workers in the heavy-chemical industries in southern cities, while women workers in the Gyungin area-near Seoul-were relatively quiet. Once the male workers captured the center stage of labor struggles in 1987, women workers were quickly pushed aside. The new union leadership at both local and national levels was made up of the militant male workers who had led the violent strikes during the Great Worker Struggle. The marginalization of women occurred not only in their exclusion from union leadership, but also in the way their earlier labor struggles were appreciated. In many writings on the pre-1987 labor movement, there was a definite tendency to downgrade the significance of the women-led union movement in the 1970s, as being spontaneous, economistic, passive, and lacking class consciousness. Some writers even suggested that the 1987 Great Worker Struggle had little continuity with the pre-1987 labor struggles. I agreed with several feminist scholars that such a view clearly reflected a gender bias, but I also argued that it meant more than that—it involved a lack of historical and dialectic understanding of how labor struggles and worker consciousness have developed in Korea, or in any society. In opposition to such an ahistorical or myopic view of Korean labor history over the past half century, I wrote the following in the book:

> It is through the many lone and bitter struggles waged by courageous workers in the earlier period that Korean workers acquired a growing sense of their rights and collective identity, and became aware of the importance of solidarity and the role of genuine representative unions. The militancy and class solidarity demonstrated in the 1987 Great Struggle did not occur accidentally, but was the outcome of accumulated past struggles, a few victories and many defeats, in which workers' class awareness and political consciousness grew continuously. This gradual

> change in workers' consciousness, largely hidden beneath the surface, prepared the fertile ground for the volcanic eruption in 1987. (p. 187)

In retrospect, I am glad I made this point emphatically. I think I was absolutely right in this reading of Korean labor history, and fortunately, I found several labor scholars commenting that I made an important contribution to Korean labor scholarship by highlighting the historical role of the female-led union movement in the 1970s.

Observing all these changes, I came to the conclusion that by the mid-1990s, the Korean working class was definitely in the process of making a class of its own. But I was hesitant to say that the formation of a working class had been achieved by the time I was finishing my book, which was near the end of the 1990s. In fact, I was more concerned with many troubling signs of change occurring in the Korean industrial structure. Job insecurity was growing and the previously homogeneous working class was becoming slowly fragmented along divisions of regular and irregular workers and by firm size. So, rather than any jubilant statement about the making of the Korean working class, I ended my study with the following description:

> Despite its world-renowned militancy and combativeness, the Korean working class is still a weak and vulnerable class—organizationally, politically, and ideologically. It is a class with relatively shallow and ambivalent class consciousness, with no strong political organization or party support, with no clear vision of an alternative social structure, and with only incipient forms of class-based community life and cultural patterns. It is nonetheless a class possessing a strong spirit of resistance, a keen sense of class inequality and social injustice, strong sentiments of solidarity, and a growing sense of political efficacy. It is a fresh-made class whose identity and political character are to be molded and remolded in the continuous evolution of the capitalist system. (p. 217)

The Post-1990s: The Unmaking of the Working Class?

Many changes have occurred in the Korean labor movement since the 1990s. Unfortunately, most of these changes have betrayed our hope of seeing the Korean working class grow into a strong and mature class that can play an effective role in promoting justice, equality, and democracy in society. Although organized labor became greatly empowered after the 1987 labor uprising, its organizational base has become smaller and narrower, and its ability to represent the entire working class has greatly dwindled. Union density, which had increased to 20 percent of the active labor force by around 1990, has since continuously declined to reach 10 percent in recent years. Not only does unionism represent a tiny fraction of the working class, but it has now come to represent a particular category of workers who enjoy more job security and higher wages than others—primarily the regularly employed workers at large firms. The absolute majority of those employed at small- to medium-sized firms and those who are employed as non-standard or irregular workers remain unorganized. Only 3.5 percent of workers in smaller firms (hiring 30–99 workers) belongs to unions, while 55.1 percent of the workers hired by large firms (with 300 or more workers) is unionized in 2016. This situation raises a serious question about the representativeness of Korean unionism today. Moreover, local unions at large conglomerate firms have pursued a narrow trade unionist approach, preoccupied with the interests of their own members and not seriously concerning themselves with the broader issues affecting the entire working population. Despite some recent progress in organizing industry-wide unions, Korean unions still exist basically as enterprise unions, and industrial federations have little binding power in collective wage negotiations. Thus, the higher goal of building a broadly engaged, social-reform-oriented unionism has largely disappeared from the current picture. So, today's Korean union movement has, by and large, lost the public support and moral leadership that it once enjoyed when it emerged as a powerful new working-class movement in the late 1980s.

These changes have made me wonder whether it is still meaningful to talk about working-class formation in Korea today. Those who study

working-class formation, like myself, start with a presumption that working-class formation is a good thing, especially in a society where workers are extremely exploited and abused with no right to defend themselves. The only way they can protect themselves against enormous injustice is to organize into unions backed by a high level of class consciousness. This is what the Korean workers had achieved by the early 1990s. Therefore, I looked at their progress with a great deal of admiration for their courage and a great deal of hope that Korea's empowered labor could provide a counter balance to the power of capital and offer an alternative vision of a good society. At the time of completing my book in the mid-1990s, labor scholars like myself were generally in an optimistic mood about the future progress of the Korean labor movement, although many troubling signs of labor decline had already begun to appear.

Sadly, the way the Korean labor movement has evolved over the past two decades is a big disappointment. Why has the Korean labor movement failed to become a more effective, truly representative, and socially constructive movement? I think this is the most serious question facing Korean labor scholars today. Obviously, the answer is not simple. We need to consider many factors that have shaped the post-1987 Korean labor movement, including economic, political, cultural, institutional, and other factors. Unfortunately, I have not done any systematic research on this question. But I wish to offer a few thoughts of mine on the possible causes of the disappointing development of the Korean working-class movement during the past two decades.

The first thing I would like to mention is the unfortunate historical timing in which Korean labor finally emerged as a powerful social force. Korea's strong union movement was born in the age of neoliberalism and globalization. This is a very difficult environment even for the old, well-established unions in the advanced industrial societies but far more so for a nascent union movement. Even worse, the Korean economy was attacked by the Asian financial crisis in the formative period of the new labor movement. Such a huge economic crisis would bring difficulties to even a mature labor movement, but it was too much of a challenge for a freshly

born unionism that had had little time to consolidate its organizational and ideological foundation. Korean labor leaders were simply not ready to deal with the many complex problems brought about by the financial crisis. They were accustomed to fighting with militancy against obvious forms of labor exploitation and state oppression, but had had few opportunities to deal with complex policy agenda in a skillful manner.

The most critical task faced by the union leadership during the financial crisis was how to respond to the strong push from capital and the state to carry out a neoliberal labor market reform. Immediately after the crisis, the Kim Dae Jung government created a labor-capital-state tripartite committee to obtain labor's consent to labor market reform. In this committee, the heavily pressured labor representatives accepted a clause allowing mass layoffs in exchange for several labor rights, including legal status for the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the right of labor organizations to participate in political activities. Immediately afterwards, firms felt freer to lay off a large number of redundant workers and carry out a flexibilization strategy of reducing the number of regular workers and replacing them with nonstandard or irregular workers. This incident triggered much distrust toward the national union leadership and factional divisions within organized labor. It also encouraged large unions at chaebol firms to pursue a self-protective approach, focusing on the narrow interests of their own members.

The second important factor is South Korea's dualistic or polarized industrial structure, with its large disparity between large conglomerate firms and other, medium- to small-sized firms. These two types of firms are linked to each other not through horizontal and reciprocal relations but vertically, and largely exploitative, subcontract relationships. The globalization of the South Korean economy, which has accelerated since the 1997 financial crisis, has widened the gaps between conglomerate firms and smaller firms. In the global business environment, many chaebol groups have improved their capital and technological capacity and become truly multinational corporations, while medium-sized and smaller firms have been fighting hard to survive in competition with low-wage economies

in China and Southeast Asia. As South Korea's trade dependence on the Chinese economy has grown, the vulnerability of Korea's smaller enterprises has greatly worsened. This has made the medium- to small-sized firms increasingly inhospitable for union organization.

On the other hand, Korea's economically prosperous large firms have become less obstinate to union formation, and instead have adopted a new strategy of coopting workers by offering higher wages and other benefits. Unions at these large firms, especially those belonging to several chaebol groups, have been willing to offer labor peace in exchange for job security and higher wages. They have succeeded in substantially increasing the salaries and job security of their own members, producing what the Korean media is fond to call, "labor aristocracy." In doing so, they sacrificed a larger working-class solidarity for the sake of their selfish economic interests.

The existence of huge-scale local unions based in several top chaebol groups has another significant implication for the Korean union structure. Several of them, most notably, Hyundai unions, possess a bigger budget than the national union, KCTU or Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), and exercise a disproportionate amount of influence in the union movement. One recent achievement of the Korean union movement was the formation in the past decade of some dozen industry unions to combat the problems of enterprise unions. But given such a huge disparity in job market conditions between chaebol firms and smaller firms, industry unions remain incapable of implementing any serious solidarity actions. Chaebol-firm unions are simply too strong and self-interested to follow a decision made at the level of industry unions or the national headquarters. Thus, even if the national leaders are sincerely interested in promoting a broader social agenda, they are powerless because they cannot persuade the powerful local unions to follow them. Again, this problem is ultimately rooted in the polarized industrial structure dominated by chaebol conglomerate groups, more than just in the formal structure of unions, be they enterprise- or industry-based unions.

The third important fact that can explain the weakness of the Korean working-class movement today is the lack of support received from political

parties. In order for any class to become an effective social force, it must be politically organized. In Europe, it is a commonplace that most powerful labor movements produced strong labor parties. But the political climate in South Korea has been unconducive to such a development. Although there was some notable success in organizing a labor party and securing 10 seats in the national assembly in 2004, the party could not maintain its position because of an internal ideological split and a lack of enduring popular support. Meanwhile, organized labor has not developed any systematic linkages with other major political parties. Hence, labor interests are unrepresented in the political arena, and therefore have little influence on policy-making processes. Thus, as Choi (2002) argues, South Korea's political system after democratization represents at best a "democracy without labor."

The unfortunate consequence of this situation is well demonstrated in Lee's (2011) comparative study of Korean and Taiwanese labor politics. Although Korean unions have been far stronger and more aggressive than their Taiwanese counterparts and have engaged in many militant strikes, what Korea's organized labor has achieved in the policy arena pales in comparison with the many policy gains achieved by Taiwanese workers. Yoonkyung Lee explains this interesting consequence in terms of the closer labor-party alliance in Taiwan compared to Korea. What she suggests is that labor militancy without adequate party support can produce few tangible outcomes for the working class, which has been the case for Korean labor. The lack of labor-party linkages in Korea, she further argues, has encouraged Korean unions' propensity for militant mobilizations and confrontations.

A related phenomenon we need to consider is the separation of the labor movement and civil society movements. I argued in my book that the Korean labor movement in the 1980s did not represent a social-movement unionism, as it did in the cases of Brazil and South Africa.[4] But, as we have seen, the Korean labor movement in the earlier days had developed in close alliance with social and political movements outside the industrial arena.

4. As shown in Seidman (1994).

It is also true that the new progressive unions that emerged after the 1987 Great Worker Struggle consciously tried to address larger social agenda and broad welfare issues. Nonetheless, the rise of the middle-class-led civil society movements since the 1990s, and their distancing of themselves from the labor movement, has created a gulf. Voluntarily or involuntarily, the labor movement has become increasingly focused on narrow trade union issues while abandoning larger social issues to the civil society movements.

The last factor I would like to discuss, which may be more important than all the other factors, concerns Korean workers' class consciousness. The post-1987 development of the Korean working-class movement made me wonder whether Korean industrial workers really possessed genuine, and deeply held, class consciousness in the late 1980s or afterwards. Of course, class consciousness, as many class theorists recognize, is a complex concept and, at any given moment, an individual worker's class consciousness contains inconsistent elements. In my book, I described Korean workers' class consciousness in the 1990s as being rather shallow and transient. It was based on deep resentment over inhumane treatment at the workplace and society's contemptuous attitude toward factory laborers. The strong sense of solidarity among Korean workers in the past was the product of these feelings of anger and resentment rather than being based on any rationally constructed vision. Because of the strength of the emotional element, this resistant identity could best be maintained when there existed a clear and obvious enemy, which used to be managerial despotism supported by repressive state power. In the pre-1987 period, all factory workers, regardless of the industry or the size of the firm that employed them, suffered more or less equally from the same sources.

But, as we have seen, many changes have occurred since the 1987 democratic transition. Both managerial despotism and state repression of organized labor have been weakened, but meanwhile working-class lives have become wildly unstable and deeply insecure by the onslaught of the Asian financial crisis and the subsequent neoliberal labor market reform. The industrial working class, which used to be highly homogeneous in terms of wages and job situations, became diversified and fragmented along

several axes of labor market division, the most important of which are the divisions between regular and irregular workers and between employees of large and smaller firms. Consequently, the old structural basis of working-class solidarity no longer exists today. In such a situation, a strong union movement could have chosen to fight against the structural sources of job insecurity and job market fragmentation by mobilizing broad class solidarity across different sectors of the working class. But that is not an easy task for a nascent working class. As mentioned above, the Korean labor movement did not have enough time to develop a strong class organization or concerted educational program, let alone a convincing and workable socialistic vision with which to confront neoliberal hegemony. Furthermore, widespread job market insecurity has made workers increasingly conservative and egoistic, easily abandoning class solidarity in favor of their own security and welfare.

What replaced working-class consciousness was a strong middle-class orientation, more specifically, the desire for upward mobility into the middle class among better situated workers. Korean workers have always been highly status conscious. Their great frustration and resentment during the earlier period of industrialization stemmed partly from their being denied middle-class membership. But economic changes during the past two decades and the corporate strategy of co-opting workers opened the door to a significant minority of industrial workers to climb up and enjoy middle-class status. So, by the 2010s, skilled workers employed at conglomerate firms in southern industrial towns have indeed moved up to the middle class. But they must pay for their middle-class membership, which means they must participate in middle-class consumption habits and participate in the ubiquitous struggle for higher education for their children. Being widely blamed for having become "labor aristocracy," they nonetheless seem unwilling to sacrifice their own selfish interest for the sake of larger working-class solidarity. This is truly an unfortunate development, especially because their unions are so powerful in determining the trajectory of the whole Korean labor movement.

In short, the Korean working class was born with a shallow and incomplete class consciousness. What the Korean working class really

needed was a strong "culture of solidarity" that could bind the entire working class together. But there was little time to nurture any such class-wide solidarity before it faced the powerful divisive forces brought about by neoliberal globalization. That is very unfortunate for Korean workers and for Korean society, because in this era of tremendous job insecurity and growing economic inequality, we need a genuinely strong, broadly-based, and constructive union movement more than ever before.

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