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KOREAN LABOUR MOVEMENT: THE BIRTH, RISE AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE DEMOCRATIC TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

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Introduction

This chapter aims to identify the place of the labour movement in contemporary Korea by tracing the transformation of the Korean labour movement. After being suppressed by the colonial and authoritarian state for several decades, workers began to build independent unions through militant struggles against the state and state-controlled official trade unions from the 1970s. Young women workers in the textile and garment industry gave birth to what is now called the democratic trade union movement, which pursued democratisation against both the authoritarian state and male-dominated official unions at work. The Great Workers Struggle in 1987 and the subsequent establishment of thousands of independent unions across the country shook the authoritarian control over labour. Despite continued authoritarian suppression, newly created democratic unions enjoyed their heyday and established the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in 1995. The South Korean labour movement became a significant social force that managed to reformulate labour relations in favour of labour during the heyday. However, the heyday was short-lived. After the economic crisis in the late 1990s, the democratic trade union movement faced new challenges. Neo-liberalism facilitated divisions within the working class and created a large number of irregular workers with little job security and few benefits. While the KCTU was busy defending its members in large-scale enterprises from mass lay-offs and structural adjustment, irregular employment expanded outside the comfort zone of the union movement, creating a crisis of representation. Another challenge came from the consolidation of liberal democracy, after which democratic trade unions could no longer harmonise the interest of their members and broader public desire for socio-economic democratisation. Democratisation also allowed internal ideological differences between unions to surface, as democracy no longer functioned as a common goal that covers differences. Two conservative governments led by Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017)

tried to take advantage of the weakness of the labour movement and resumed authoritarian assault on the movement. The KCTU was able to defend itself by actively participating in the candlelight protests against Park's regime between 2016 and 2017. However, its survival does not mean the rejuvenation of the labour movement, as new challenges are yet to be addressed. The chapter argues that the successful revitalisation of the movement depends upon whether or not the existing democratic unions can build a more inclusive labour movement together with the newly emerging agency of marginalised segments of the Korean working class such as migrant, irregular and women workers.

The making of the democratic trade union movement

The origin of the South Korean labour movement

The year 1987 was certainly a turning point for the South Korean labour movement. Between 1977 and 1986, there were an average of 174 labour disputes per year, while in the period from 1987 to 1996, the number was 846 per year (Koo, 2000: 231). This change resulted from the Great Workers Struggle from July to September 1987 following the June Democratic Uprising that restored direct presidential elections. Although the official history of Korea's democratisation tends to describe the Great Workers Struggle as a by-product of political democratisation led by students and the middle class, and the working class as a bystander at the Uprising, workers actively participated in the June Uprising (Bae et al., 2008; Kim, 1999). Furthermore, if the June Uprising caused the transition to political democracy, it was the Great Workers Struggle that shook the basis of the early capitalist development in Korea and initiated more subtle social transformation. The Struggle led to a sea change in labour relations in Korea. Between 1986 and 1989, the number of unions increased from 2,658 to 7,883 and individual members from 1,036,000 to 1,932,000 (Koo, 2000: 231). Korea's union density increased from 12.3 per cent to 18.6 per cent during the same period, opening the heyday of the democratic trade union movement in Korea.

The origin of the movement can be traced back to the strong anti-colonial labour movement that emerged out of the plight of the colonial workforce during the Japanese occupation of Korea. The first generation of the Korean working class, being secondary citizens of the Japanese Empire, were not protected by any labour law (Park, 1999: 154). They were hardly 'free labourers' but often personally bound to employers through semi-feudalistic labour contracts (Kang, 2011: 48). They earned meagre wages, the average of which was less than half that of Japanese workers in Korea. The colonial state directly intervened in labour relations, utilising imperial police and military. Nonetheless, labour conflicts emerged in industrialising areas throughout the 1920s. The Wŏnsan General Strike in 1929, for instance, was the largest regional general strike under Japanese occupation, inspiring anti-Japanese action by spreading nationalist and anti-imperialist ideas. The Korean Labourers' Mutual Aid Association was established in 1920 as the first labour organisation in the Korean peninsula. In 1924, the more radical Chosŏn General Federation of Labour was created to promote class struggles against Japanese imperialism and capitalists. This early labour movement developed hand in hand with the socialist and nationalist independence movement, which formed various organisations and political parties.

Japan's war effort in the 1930s soon made it impossible for labour organisations to operate openly. They went underground and organised secret circles. Well-organised workers and peasant movements resurfaced after liberation. Once Korea was occupied by the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), militant trade unions re-emerged

and established the Korean National Council of Trade Unions (*Chŏnp'yŏng*) in 1945 with half a million members in 16 industrial unions. The US authority in the South, as in post-war Japan and Germany, was initially not too hostile to trade unions. However, facing the growing tension around the Korean peninsula, the US began to conceive of the existence of socialist-influenced unions as a critical obstacle to the US hegemony in East Asia. Later in 1947, the authority illegalised the left-wing *Chŏnp'yŏng*. By the end of the 1940s, the right-wing trade union federation, the Korean Labour Federation for Independence Promotion (KLFIP), managed to overpower radicals. The revived labour movement was soon destroyed in the civil war. It was not until the 1970s that the Korean labour movement began to emerge again.

The birth of the democratic trade union movement

Post-war South Korea was ruled by strong anti-communist regimes, which blindly pursued economic growth to outcompete the rival communist state in the North and, in doing so, regarded trade unions as a threat to national security. After a short period of liberalisation following the 19 April student revolution that toppled Syngman Rhee's government (1948–1960) in 1960, the labour movement again entered a dark period under the rule of the military government led by Park Chung-hee (1961–1979), who tightened the state's control over labour through super-constitutional decrees. Under the auspices of the state, employers exercised almost unlimited authority at the workplace, while the state-created Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) policed labour relations in enterprises. Nonetheless, a new labour movement emerged from the textile and garment industry, where a new generation of the Korean proletariat worked long hours under hazardous working conditions. This new generation of wage workers included many young women who migrated from rural villages to urban industrial areas. In the garment industry, the share of women workers increased from 42.2 per cent in 1960 to 69.1 per cent in 1970, and 76.7 per cent in 1980 (Kim, 2011: 414). Women workers' jobs were temporary – most of them worked until their mid-twenties and returned home to get married and fulfil the domestic 'duties' imposed upon them by patriarchal social norms. The unlimited supply and abundant reserve of female labour became the primary condition of the unilateral labour relations within which women workers endured low wages and excessively long working hours. Paternalistic discipline and hierarchy as well as state surveillance helped the maintenance of such relations. However, this does not mean that women workers were docile. Instead, they became the forerunners of the democratic trade union movement (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2011).

The movement began with individual protests, such as the self-immolation in 1970 of a young textile worker, Chun Tae-il, who for the first time publicised the exploitation of young female workers (Koo, 2001: 69–72). Later, workers' protest took more collective and militant forms, to either take over existing male-dominated trade unions, as in the Dongil Textile workers' strike, or establish and defend new unions, as in the *Ch'ŏnggye* Garment workers' struggle. The growing women workers' struggle began to collide with the authoritarian state as well as existing male-dominated trade unions. The National Textile Trade Union, affiliated to the FKTU, sabotaged women workers' attempt to build independent unions in the 1970s. It was this time that Korea's independent trade unions began to identify themselves as 'democratic' unions in two senses. They were democratic in the sense that the movement pursued democratisation against the authoritarian state. On the other hand, they were democratic because these unions were run democratically by representing their members in the workplace (Choi, 2018:176).

The women workers' movement culminated in the YH workers' strike in 1979, during which the riot police attacked women workers occupying the headquarters of the first opposition

party, the New Korean Democratic Party, beating workers and leaders of the party and eventually killing a 21-year-old woman worker. The violence incited riots in Masan and Pusan, the stronghold of the party (Ogle, 1990: 92). President Park was finally killed by his closest associate, Kim Jae-kyu, who later claimed that 'he did it to save the nation from a blood bath that Park intended to rain down upon Masan and Pusan' (Cumings, 1987: 79; Ogle, 1990: 92). After the collapse of Park's regime, rallies demanding democratisation were held across the nation. From January to May 1980, over 900 strikes were organised by workers (Katsiaficas, 2012: 156). Even though this wave of protests was pacified by a new military regime led by Chun Doo-hwan after the bloody suppression of the democratisation movement in Kwangju in 1980, the democratic union movement developed further in alliance with the democratisation movement, especially with the student movement (Koo, 2000: 100–125).

The heyday of democratic trade unionism from 1987 to 1997

The advance of the democratic trade union movement

New unions created through the Great Workers Struggle significantly improved working conditions for Korean workers. Wages in manufacturing increased by 10.4 per cent in 1987, 16.4 per cent in 1988, 20 per cent in 1989 and 16.8 per cent in 1990 (Chang, 2002: 18). This quantitative change was based on a qualitative transformation of labour relations on the shop floor. New unions penetrated the once unilateral managerial decision-making process through collective bargaining and other grievance-handling mechanisms. This change was not welcomed by employers, who began to face increasing competition in the export market after China and Southeast Asia joined export-oriented industrialisation. Korean exporters tried to recover their control over the shop floor by introducing new human resource management that could isolate newly established unions. It was at this time that *chaebŏl* began to replace the seniority-based wage and promotion system with merit-based systems (Chang, 2009: 125).

Meanwhile, the state wanted to tighten control over labour. Although the June Uprising succeeded in reintroducing direct presidential elections in Korea, democratisation did not lead to a regime change, nor did it lead to labour-friendly institutional reforms. Rather, two consecutive presidential elections ended with victories by the ruling party. Roh Tae-woo, Chun Doo-hwan's close associate, came into power in 1988 by taking advantage of the split between two opposition leaders, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam. Kim Young-sam succeeded Roh in 1993 only after merging his party with the ruling Democratic Justice Party. These election victories helped the ruling elite minimise the impact of political democratisation and handle the emerging labour movement heavy-handedly. Militant industrial actions were suppressed by the state deploying riot police in military-style disperse operations. Roh's government (1988–1992) set up a 'national security investigation headquarters', whose principal objective was to pacify labour disputes (Yu, 2001: 200). President Roh also vetoed the revised labour law passed by the National Assembly, which was anticipated to remove notorious articles in labour laws that banned third party intervention in labour disputes, unions' political activity, and the unionisation of public sector workers.

Nevertheless, the state could not pacify emerging labour disputes as effectively as before. The state's authoritarian responses encouraged democratic unions to become not less but more militant. Furthermore, newly created democratic unions began to build regional and national alliances. Starting with the 'Council of Unions in Masan and Changwon', a total of 11 regional trade union councils were organised by the end of 1989. In addition, 13 occupational leagues were organised by non-manufacturing workers in the health service, media, banks, schools,

public utilities, publication, construction, and universities, comprising 173,000 members (Yu, 2001: 174). Later, 14 regional councils and 2 occupational leagues (publication and construction) established the Council of Korean Trade Unions (CKTU) in January 1990. The CKTU had 602 enterprise unions and 193,258 members (Kim, 2005: 440) and represented the most radical segment of the democratic trade union movement under the slogan of 'labour liberation' and 'equal world'.

While the CKTU represented workers mostly in small and medium-sized manufacturers, workers in *chaebŏl* established their own associations, such as the General Federation of Hyundai Company Trade Unions and the Council of Large Companies Trade Unions. Likewise, 12 occupational leagues representing white-collar workers came together to create the National Conference of Occupational Trade Unions (NCOTU) in May 1990. Meanwhile, workers in state-owned enterprises organised the National Conference for Public Sector Trade Union Representatives in 1994. Finally, democratic unions in manufacturing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), *chaebŏl*, public enterprises and non-manufacturing sectors all came together to establish the KCTU in 1995. The KCTU's Korean name, *Minju Noch'ong* (literally The Confederation of Democratic Trade Unions) showed that the KCTU was the successor of the democratic trade union movement.

Democratic trade unions and 'uneven' neo-liberalisation of Korea

From the perspective of Korea's ruling elite, the advance of democratic unions was alarming in the context of the deepening economic downturn in the mid-1990s. Korean firms were struggling to survive heated export competition by diversifying export products and investing in new means of production. In so doing, they relied on short-term foreign loans provided through various private financial institutions. In 1995, the international fall in the price of semi-conductors, which accounted for 17.7 per cent of total exports in 1995, increased the pressure on the Korean economy (Bernard, 1999: 197). In response, the Kim Young-sam government announced the 'New Thought on Industrial Relations for Leaping into the First-Class Nation in the 21st Century' in April 1996 and created 'the Commission for Reform of Industrial Relations', which was the first tripartite institution allowing democratic trade unions to participate. The discussion about labour law reform in the Commission focused on the '*exchange*' between the relaxed restriction on trade unions (for example, removing the restriction on multiple trade unions, unionisation of teachers and public servants, and political activity of unions) and a more flexible labour market. However, in the early morning of 26 December, the ruling party ignored on-going discussions in the Commission and passed a new labour law in a secret session at the National Assembly in the absence of members of the opposition parties.

The new labour law allowed redundancy dismissal, labour dispatch, substitute labour during industrial conflicts and flexible working hours arrangements to enhance the flexibility of the labour market while giving only minor concessions to democratic trade unions. The law postponed the legalisation of the KCTU until 2000 while denying the right for teachers and public servants to unionise (Koo, 2000: 239). This labour law revision provoked the first nationwide coordinated general strike in Korea since 1948. After the KCTU called for a general strike on 26 December 1996, tens of thousands of workers walked out and joined their supporters in protest rallies across the country. Even the FKTU joined the general strike, organising a walkout by 156,000 workers at 486 workplaces (Chang, 2009: 131). This strike continued until 10 March 1997. As a result, the labour law was returned to the National Assembly and amended, this time partly reflecting the negotiations in the Commission. The revised law allowed multiple trade unions at national and industrial level (thereby recognising

the KCTU and its industrial affiliates). However, the law did not lift the ban on the unionisation of teachers and public servants. More importantly, the revision legalised flexible working hours arrangements, redundancy dismissals with a 2-year moratorium and deployment of substitute workers during labour disputes.

It is undeniable that the labour movement in Korea became a significant social force, and Korean labour relations were reformulated in favour of labour during the heyday. In many senses, it was Korea's unique experience, as trade unions in most advanced capitalist economies suffered crises with decreasing membership and social influence due to the neo-liberal offensive from the early 1980s. Meanwhile, Korean corporations' survival relied increasingly on foreign loans offered through the liberalised financial market. In this sense, Korean development during this period could be marked as 'uneven' neo-liberalisation in which a strong labour movement and a volatile financial market developed at the same time. The state and capital needed a more dramatic turning point to complete the neo-liberal transformation of Korea. It was the Asian economic crisis in 1997 that offered momentum.

Neo-liberal offensive and the crisis of the labour movement

Emerging divergence in the democratic trade union movement after political democratisation

After the economic crisis, Korea's labour movement faced new challenges. One obvious challenge was the advance of neo-liberalism, which facilitated divisions within the working class and offered more freedom to capital. Ironically, another challenge was the consolidation of liberal democracy, which had been pursued by the labour movement. In the past, the democratic trade union movement had been a natural part of Korea's broader pro-democracy movement, because democratisation was a common goal that united Korea's social movements. Democratic trade unions could combine their pursuit of the interest of their members and broader public desire for democratisation, as it was unavoidable for the struggle to improve working conditions in the workplace to confront the authoritarian state. In so doing, the democratic trade union movement at the time could present itself as a universal social movement for Korean people. Core 'values' of the democratic labour movement included universal human values, such as a sense of dignity, equality, social justice, freedom, independence and democracy.

Inside the democratic union movement, unions did not share a single ideological ground. Nonetheless, internal differences did not undermine the advance of the democratic labour movement, as unions were united under the common goal of democratisation. The CKTU could exercise its moral leadership over democratic trade unions through its uncompromising militancy against the authoritarian state. Regarding the social transformation after democratisation, however, each faction had a different view. The radicals such as unionists in the CKTU were inspired by and pursued socialism. In contrast, the moderate majority in the General Federation of Hyundai Company Trade Unions and the NCOTU preferred reforms toward social democracy. The former aimed to overcome capitalism itself, while the latter wanted to normalise Korea's authoritarian capitalism with more democracy and social welfare. Accordingly, their views on the trade union movement differed. The radicals pursued transformative unionism, while the moderates were leaning toward social corporatism. As Korea's liberal democracy was increasingly consolidating, these differences underneath the common goal of democratisation began to erupt. Democracy no longer functioned as a universal value that covered differences.

Social democratic prospects and social corporatism soon became the mainstream within the KCTU. This transformation of the democratic trade union movement was anticipated from the debate in the process of building the KCTU in 1995, in which the radical CKTU was blamed for its 'anachronistic' militancy (Gray, 2008: 488). Although the main debate was about the CKTU's 'excessive' militancy, it was the radical socialist perspective of the CKTU that other factions questioned. The first leadership of the KCTU pledged 'the labour movement with people of the nation' and 'struggle for social reform', showing a shift of the ultimate goal of the movement from the working class-driven socialist transformation to citizen-driven reform and social democracy (Yu, 2005: 469–472). This change signalled a significant modification in the direction of the democratic trade union movement. It was, then, the attitude of the KCTU leadership toward tripartite negotiation and social pacts during the economic crisis in 1997 that finally confirmed the changing direction. The immediate reaction of the KCTU leadership to the emerging economic crisis was a 'saving the nation campaign'. The KCTU proposed tripartite dialogue to discuss united efforts to save the national economy. The newly elected government of a long-time democrat Kim Dae-jung responded to the proposal with a corporatist initiative, the Tripartite Commission. The KCTU leadership signed a social pact in February 1998. This 'February Agreement' was basically an exchange between the legal recognition of the KCTU and its affiliates and relaxation of regulation over redundancy dismissal and irregular employment (Chang, 2009: 142). Although KCTU delegates later rejected the Agreement and distrusted the first leadership of the KCTU in a general assembly, the revision of labour laws went ahead, allowing a greater degree of flexibility in the Korean labour market.

Neo-liberal offensive and divided working class

The divisions within the democratic trade union movement were exacerbated by the divisions within the working class precipitated by a full-scale neo-liberal reform pushed by the Kim Dae-jung government under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Shin, 2010: 212). Neo-liberal reforms included commodity and financial market liberalisation and privatisation of the public sector. While large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) such as Korea Telecom and KT&G were subjected to privatisation, the in-and-out flow of finance and commodities was liberalised by lifting restrictive measures and signing free trade agreements with multiple countries. Consequently, the market became the principal coordinating mechanism for the circulation of goods, services and finance. This principle was also applied to labour. The application of the market principle to labour led to a dramatic increase in various irregular forms of employment.

Although irregular employment had been growing throughout the 1990s, it was the economic crisis that made it a permanent feature of the Korean economy. As short-term labour contracts became a norm, temporary and daily contracted workers outnumbered permanent workers soon after the crisis. Various indirect forms of employment were also introduced. Large-scale manufacturing firms began to use subcontract firms and work agencies that provides their assembly lines with cheaper workers. Also increased were workers in 'special employment' (*T'ŭksu koyong*), which refers to workers who are legally self-employed despite their labour being supervised by managerial authorities. After the Act on the Protection of Fixed Term and Part-time Employees was introduced in 2006 to encourage employers to turn temporary workers into permanent employees after 2 years of continuous service, a new term, 'permanent-contracted employment', emerged. Although the majority of temporary workers were terminated just before the end of their 2-year service, about a third of temporary workers

have been made permanent employees after working for the employers for 2 years but without sharing the benefits for regular workers (Kim, 2015: 134).

The size of irregular employment reached its highest point by 2002, with about 56.6 per cent of total wage workers having irregular jobs (Kim, 2019). Since 2003, the number has been slowly decreasing, and the irregular workforce as a proportion of the total waged workforce has fallen below 50 per cent since 2011.[1] As of 2019, irregular workers accounted for 41.6 per cent of 20.559 million wage workers in Korea (Kim, 2019: 3). However, this recovery has been gendered. As of 2019, female irregular workers accounted for more than half (50.8 percent) of total female workers in Korea, whereas irregular workers made up only 34.3 percent of total male wage workers (Kim, 2019: 6). The wage gap between regular and irregular workers has not narrowed. The average monthly income of irregular workers was about 51.8 per cent of that of regular workers in 2019 compared with 53.7 per cent in 2000 (Kim, 2019: 14). As shown in Table 10.1, the majority of irregular workers are not covered by a pension, workplace health insurance or employment insurance.[2]

Indeed, it was the irregularisation of labour that disempowered the democratic trade union movement, which had been relying on the strong enterprise unions of regular workers in large-scale enterprises (Yang, 2007). After the crisis, the KCTU affiliates staged militant protests against the neo-liberal restructuring of the labour market. The main goal was to stop the lay-offs of regular workers and structural adjustment at the firm level. From Hyundai's anti-lay-offs strike in 1998 and Daewoo Motors' strike against mass lay-offs in 2002 to the 77-day factory occupation of SsangYong Motors unionists in 2009, strong enterprise unions have been confronting redundancy dismissal. In the public sector, the KCTU affiliates protested against privatisation. In 2002, the KCTU's three major SOE unions, the Korea Power Plant Industry Union, the Korean Railway Workers Union and the Korea Water Resources Corporation Union, launched a coordinated strike against the government's plan for privatisation.

While the KCTU was busy defending its heartland from mass lay-offs and structural adjustment, irregular employment expanded outside the comfort zone of the union movement, creating internal divisions within the constituency of the democratic trade union movement. Large unions in *chaebŏl* began to openly focus on the economic interest of members and relied upon a much narrower constituency. For them, democratic trade unionism was about representing members' financial interests in collective bargaining and providing services. As they continued to utilise militant tactics to win better wages and benefits from *chaebŏl*, this behaviour of unions in large enterprises began to be called 'militant economism' (Nam, 2017). The increasing number of workers dispatched through in-company subcontractors in *chaebŏl*-owned manufacturers began to create confrontation between regular and irregular workers. As existing unions did not pay attention to this newly created workforce, trade unions faced a crisis of representativeness for the working class as a whole and began to be seen as a 'league of their own' (Yang, 2007). For enterprise unions representing the upper segments of the working

Table 10.1 Social Insurance Coverage for Regular and Irregular Workers in Korea

	Regular	*Irregular*
National Pension	94.9%	33.8%
Health Insurance	98.8%	43.3%
Employment Insurance	84.0%	40.2%

Source: Kim, 2019: 25.

population, the pursuit of members' interests was no longer compatible either with the universal interest of the working class or with that of the general population.

Newly emerging agency of marginalised labour

Emerging irregular workers' unions

It was not until the 2000s that irregular workers started building power from the margins (Chun, 2009; Lee, 2016). Initially, irregular workers' struggles had to deal with regular workers who were reluctant to recognise irregular workers as their colleagues. Hyundai automobile canteen workers' struggle against lay-offs in 1998, the 290-day strike of Korea Telecom Contracted Workers Union in 2000 and Career In-Company-Subcontract Workers Union's struggle in 2001 were all marked by hostile attitudes from trade unions affiliated to the KCTU (Chang, 2009: 154–155; Cho, 2011: 55; Chun, 2009: 90–97). Since then, irregular workers' enterprise unions in large manufacturing firms such as Hyundai Motors, Kia Motors and GM Daewoo have chosen to be affiliated to industrial or regional umbrella unions rather than regular workers' unions in the workplaces and operate as branches of those umbrella unions.

Organising irregular workers required more innovative organising tactics. General unions began to emerge in the early 2000s to recruit and provide legal advice to irregular workers in petty-scale enterprises, construction workers, cleaners, domestic service providers and part-time shopkeepers. The most common general unions were regional unions. By 2010, more than 50 regional unions had been established in major cities and provinces. There are also general unions organising workers with specific genders, age groups and occupations. Women's general unions such as the Korean Women's Trade Union were established to represent women workers in labour disputes involving gender discrimination and sexual harassment. The National Union of Irregular School Workers (est. 2011) organises and represents about 40,000 irregular school workers such as cleaners and canteen workers in schools (Cheon, 2015). In 2010, a new general union emerged to address specific issues related to the underrepresented working poor aged from 15 to 39.

Also, workers in special employment or 'disguised freelancers' began to organise their unions despite being considered freelancers. Tutors working for Jeneung Education held a month-long strike to organise Jeneung Education Teachers' Labour Union in 1999. The union later established the National Home-Study Industry Union in 2000. Lorry drivers founded an association of cargo transportation workers (*Hwamul yŏndae*) in 2002. Through nationwide strikes in 2003, 2006 and 2008, the association gained the right to organise a trade union and turned itself into the cargo transportation branch of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU), affiliated to the KCTU. Platform workers, who account for about 2 per cent of total wage workers (Kim, 2020: 306), also organised their first trade union in 2019. The Seoul Riders Union represents motorbike delivery workers working for on-line delivery platforms. Meanwhile, there have been attempts to build a nationwide alliance among irregular trade unions and activist organisations. The National Alliance for Removing Insecure Labour was established in 2002 by civil society organisations concerned about increasing irregularisation. In 2005, about 50 irregular workers' unions with 40,000 members came together to create the National Solidarity Council of Irregular Workers. In 2006, the National Council of Regional and Occupational General Unions was created by general unions across the country.

It is no exaggeration to say that the emerging irregular workers' movement has been driving Korea's democratic trade union movement since the 2000s (Cho, 2011; Lee, 2016; Shin, 2010). This shift made the KCTU realise the urgency of organising irregular workers. The KCTU

included 'elimination of discrimination against irregular workers' in its main demands in 2000 for the first time (Cho, 2011: 56). However, organising irregular workers was still secondary to defending regular workers in the early 2000s. In 2005, the KCTU announced a plan to organise irregular workers with an ambitious training and fundraising programme. In 2006, the KCTU finally launched a 3-year strategic organising campaign for irregular workers by appointing 24 specially trained organisers in its industrial federations. As most irregular workers joined the KCTU rather than the FKTU, about 32 per cent of the KCTU members are now irregular workers. However, as of 2019, only 2.5 per cent of irregular workers were organised, compared with 19.3 per cent union density for regular workers (Kim, 2019: 30). Meanwhile, the barrier between regular and irregular workers has become a persistent feature of the democratic trade union movement as regular workers' protectionism continues to develop. Large and influential KCTU affiliates, such as Hyundai Motor Workers Union and Kia Motors Workers Union, refused to accept irregular workers in in-company subcontractors as their members despite the KCTU's strategy to unify regular and irregular workers unions in the metal industry (Kim, 2017).

Migrant workers' movement

In Korea, about a million migrant workers account for a significant portion of irregular workers despite not being included in official statistics of irregular workers. Migrant workers are a vital workforce in small-scale manufacturing, construction, agriculture and fishery. Korea introduced the 'Foreign Industrial Trainee Programme' (FITP) in 1993 to ease the labour shortage in SMEs. The scheme excluded migrant workers from many rights to which citizens-workers are formally entitled. Under the FITP, migrant workers had to endure having no freedom to change workplaces, extremely short contract periods, verbal abuse, physical punishment, forced overtime and wage arrears. Being criticised as modern-day slavery, the FITP was replaced by the Employment Permit System (EPS) by 2007. The new programme allowed migrant workers to change employers and extended the maximum contract period from 36 months to 58 months (Kong et al., 2010: 681). In 2012, the government also introduced a new scheme that allows employers to renew the 58-month contracts once more with 'exemplary' workers. The Korean government signed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) for this programme with 15 developing countries in Asia. Since 1993, the number of migrant workers has risen more than tenfold, reaching approximately 884,400 by 2018 (Statistics Korea, 2018).

The EPS, however, did not eliminate abuses and discrimination against migrant workers. The EPS requires migrant workers to get their employer's consent to change jobs. As abusive employers tend not to give consent, migrant workers leave them without permission and become undocumented. Once undocumented, workers face the infamous manhunt-style seasonal campaigns to arrest and deport undocumented workers by the border agency. Undocumented workers and their families cannot access public healthcare. Schools are reluctant to accept children of migrant workers. As a result, migrant workers are experiencing what Lee (2010) calls 'multiple disconnections'. First, the maximum contract period for migrant workers is 2 months short of the minimum duration of stay for permanent residency in Korea. Knowing that they are temporary visitors, migrant workers live in 'a virtual island that is segregated from their surroundings' (Lee, 2010: 190). Second, no matter how long they work in Korea, they cannot live with their family. The Korean state as a 'racial state' creates and maintains these disconnections (Lee, 2010: 188), insisting on the conception of Korea as an ethnically homogeneous nation.

The migrant workers' movement challenges these disconnections. The movement was initiated as a desperate attempt by industrial trainees to secure basic human rights at their workplaces. The movement became visible after the sit-in strike of 13 Nepalese industrial trainees in Myeong-dong Cathedral in 1995. Slogans of the striking migrant workers, such as 'We are not slaves' and 'Don't beat us please', resulted in Korean civil society building solidarity with migrant workers. Thirty-eight Korean organisations created the Joint Committee for Migrants in Korea (JCMK) to assist the emerging migrant workers' movement (Kim, 2012: 682). In the following years, the migrant workers' movement strove to abolish the FITP. Migrant workers, together with Korean labour activists, founded a migrant branch in the Seoul-Gyeonggi Equal Trade Union in 2001 and, finally, the Migrant Trade Union (MTU) in 2005. The democratic labour movement began to show genuine interest in organising migrant workers. From 2005, the KCTU hosted the MTU in the KCTU's Seoul office. In 2010, the KCTU allowed the MTU to be presented in the general congress of the KCTU. While the KCTU was trying to embrace the migrant workers' movement, the KCTU's affiliates also began to recruit migrant workers in the construction and manufacturing sector (KCTU, 2014). The MTU has been outlawed since its establishment in 2005. Almost all MTU leaders have been arrested and deported by the border agency. It took 10 years and 4 months for the MTU to be legally recognised. Nevertheless, the migrant workers' labour movement in Korea has become an integral part of the Korean labour movement.

The return of the authoritarian state and the Korean labour movement

The democratic trade union movement versus the authoritarian state

After two consecutive liberal administrations, the old-fashioned Korean conservatives managed to produce two conservative governments, led by Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017). The rise of the conservatives resulted largely from the neo-liberal reforms pursued by the two liberal governments after the economic crisis. While political democracy was advancing with President Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the accelerated neo-liberalisation of the economy frustrated ordinary working people. Neo-liberal labour reforms reduced the labour share of national income by degrading the quality of jobs, as discussed earlier. Labour's share in total added value has been declining since the economic crisis. The share dropped from 60.04 per cent in 1996 to 53.97 per cent in 2010 (Joo, 2018: 77). In contrast, large-scale corporations increased their share by taking advantage of deregulated markets, inducing severe social polarisation. The Gini Coefficient rose from a record low of 0.257 in 1992 to 0.321 in 2008 (Park and Mah, 2011: 251). The portion of household assets owned by the top 20 per cent has been increasing since the economic crisis, reaching approximately 71 per cent of total household assets by 2007 (Kim, 2009). It was at this time that 'the high growth Park Chung-hee years have become, for many, an object of nostalgia' (Doucette, 2016: 344). In the 2007 presidential election, Lee Myung-bak, a former CEO of construction *chaebŏl* Hyundai Engineering and Construction, who promised high investment, high growth and trickle-down, was the people's choice.

Lee's regime began its term by violently pacifying the outcry of millions of protesters against the US–Korea FTA in 2008. Following this, the regime deployed an old-fashioned, heavy-handed approach to the labour movement. The military-style manhunt operation against the hundreds of striking workers in SsangYong Motors in May 2009 was emblematic of the return of the authoritarian state (Goldner, 2009), imprisoning 64 workers and dismissing hundreds of strikers. The Lee administration could not keep its promises of economic growth, and labour's

share of national income continued to decrease. Pursuing neo-liberal development with little to offer to workers, Korea's conservative elites relied increasingly on a nostalgic aspiration for the 'good old days' of the military rule. In this environment, Park Geun-hye, the daughter of Park Chung-hee, managed to become a central political figure (Doucette, 2017: 851) and won the presidential election in December 2012.

As soon as Park Geun-hye came into power, the government initiated its assault on the democratic union movement. Park's regime outlawed the Korean Teachers Union (KTU) in October 2013. Unions responded with militant action a month later. The Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU) called a strike against the plan to divide the state-owned Korean Railroad Corporation (KORAIL) in preparation for privatisation. The Park regime denounced the strike as an illegal action and a burden on the national economy. The National Prosecution Office quickly issued arrest warrants against 35 leaders of the KRWU. The KCTU threatened a general strike to support the KRWU. In so doing, the KCTU claimed that it was fighting against an 'illegitimate' regime that had taken power through the illegal on-line smear campaign of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) against the opposition candidate (KCTU, 2013a).[3] The Park regime's response to the KCTU was a clear reminder of the authoritarian rule of the 1970s. Claiming that the leaders of the KRWU were hiding in the KCTU office, the authorities deployed 5,000 riot police to storm the KCTU's central office building in downtown Seoul on 22 December 2013. It was this incident that caused the KCTU to begin an open-ended anti-regime protest to 'finish the era of barbarism and dictatorship' (KCTU, 2013b).

The democratic trade union movement and candlelight protests

The KCTU mobilised several general strikes between December 2013 and February 2014. However, the KCTU's protest did not earn much public support. It was the *Sewol* ferry incident killing 304 passengers on 16 April 2014 that transformed public opinion of Park's administration. Park's popularity quickly declined after subsequent investigations revealed that the government had not only failed to rescue the victims but also fabricated information about its botched rescue operation and contributed to the disaster by deregulating the maritime industry. Although the state pacified the protest by the victims' families through an orchestrated campaign of intimidation and marginalisation, President Park's approval rating dropped below 50 per cent after the incident and never recovered (Lee et al., 2017: 19). The *Sewol* incident offered Korean civil society an opportunity to work together in a coordinated effort to reclaim democracy.

Park's regime could only remain in power by tightening its control over civil society, strengthening surveillance and censorship, and launching an ideological battle over Korea's authoritarian past. The Park regime blacklisted over 9,000 artists critical of the regime. In 2015, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced a plan to reintroduce a state-issued history textbook, claiming that existing textbooks were biased and presented Korean history too negatively. The government formed a secret committee to write a new state-issued textbook that would highlight the important role played by the authoritarian regime of Park's father in Korean economic development.

While the committee was drafting the textbook, Park's regime was entering a crisis. The mass rally titled 'Korean People's First Uprising' on 14 November 2015 marked the beginning of the rapid descent of the authoritarian state. Organised by the Central Committee for Korean People's Uprising, an alliance of 53 social movement organisations spearheaded by the KCTU, the protest attracted over 130,000 participants. It brought together the *Sewol* victims' families,

the KCTU affiliates, history teachers and scholars, and farmers. During the protest, a 68-year-old farmer, Baek Nam-gi, was fatally injured by police water cannon and died in September 2016 after being in a coma for 317 days. The regime tried to silence criticism of its violence by imprisoning the KCTU president Han Sang-gyun in December 2015 for plotting violent riots on 14 November. However, it did not stop the deepening legitimacy crisis of Park's regime. Scandals about a mysterious civilian figure, Choi Soon-sil, behind President Park began to be disclosed by the media from mid-2016. Later, it was revealed that President Park had offered various favours to *chaebŏl* in exchange for their investment in unknown foundations run by Choi. Choi had free access to classified government documents, edited Park's public speeches and coached her secretaries, without any official position. President Park gave a 90-second apology on live TV on 25 October, admitting her improper relationship with Choi. Another apology followed a week later. However, her apologies could not dissuade the public from questioning the legitimacy of the regime.

The Central Committee for Korean People's Uprising hosted the first candlelight protest campaigning for President Park's resignation on 29 October 2016. The second candlelight protest on 5 November attracted about 300,000 participants.[4] In response to overwhelming support, the Committee expanded. The People's Action for the Immediate Resignation of President Park was launched on 9 November, incorporating over 1,500 civil organisations across the country, including the Coalition 416 on the Sewol Ferry Disaster, the KCTU, the FKTU and People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy. Altogether, People's Action organised 23 nationwide candlelight protests between October 2016 and April 2017, participated in by a total of 16,894,280 protesters. The National Assembly passed the motion for impeachment on 9 December 2016. The Constitutional Court ruled unanimously in favour of the impeachment of President Park on 10 March 2017. After Park Geun-hye and her 15 accomplices were imprisoned, Moon Jae-in was elected as the 19th President of Korea on 10 May 2017.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the democratic trade union movement has contributed to democratisation and the subsequent improvement of people's welfare in Korea. After the Great Workers Struggle in 1987, the labour movement reached out to protect vulnerable workers in Korea. Nonetheless, the current Korean democratic union movement represented by the KCTU seems less influential than it used to be. Indeed, this does not necessarily mean that the movement is less militant than before. Militancy is still a common feature in labour struggles in Korea. However, the reasons for labour disputes to take militant forms have been diversified. Irregular workers take militant actions for the recognition of their rights and social inclusion, whereas large unions in *chaebŏl* tend to do so for their members' financial gains. Therefore, militancy per se can no longer explain the diversity within the Korean labour movement. The decreasing influence of the labour movement in Korean society can perhaps be explained by 'democracy without labour', which refers to the uniqueness of Korean democratisation, which failed to extend its citizenship beyond the political realm. This unique feature of Korean democracy has been revealed in the current COVID-19 crisis. During the crisis, the Korean state demonstrated a great degree of accountability to its citizens. The state has saved the lives of many citizens by finding, testing and treating those infected by the virus. However, when a citizen is taken as a worker, it is a different story. The state continues to allow a thousand workers every year to be killed in occupational accidents. The excellent response of the Korean state to the Corona crisis and the death of 38 construction workers killed by an explosion in a construction site on 29 April 2020 demonstrate this discrepancy very well. It seems as if Koreans leave their citizenship

at home when they go to work. However, this incomplete nature of Korea's democratisation explains only part of the yet-to-be improved status of workers in Korea. It is undeniable that the labour movement has been incapable of deepening democracy for workers. Perhaps the answer to this problem lies in the success of the movement in the past. During its heyday, the democratic trade union movement could harmonise its pursuit of members' interests and broader desire of the public for socio-economic democratisation through uncompromising struggles for democratisation. It was during the neo-liberal transition that the labour movement lost its capacity to do so. The good news is that the labour movement does not have to start from scratch to rejuvenate itself. The recent rise of the agency of marginalised labour in Korea shows where the labour movement should start to rejuvenate itself.

Notes

1 The Korean government counts all workers with contract duration of more than a year as regular workers. Therefore, without regard to the form of employment, part-timers and atypical workers with such contracts are counted as regular. Permanent temporary workers are counted as regular too. Altogether, about 10 per cent of waged workers are added to the number of regular workers in official statistics (Kim, 2015: 27–28). Insofar as irregular labour is defined in contrast to regular jobs with employment security and benefits, those workers should be regarded as irregular rather than regular. Here, I follow Kim (2019), whose calculation of the irregular workforce in Korea is based on trade unions' understanding of the irregular workforce.

2 Those who are not covered by workplace health insurance can be covered by regional health insurance in Korea. However, insurance fees for regional health insurance are often much higher than workplace health insurance.

3 Later, a thorough investigation revealed that the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and the army's intelligence unit had conducted online operations to denounce the opposition presidential candidate Moon Jae-in during the election campaign in 2012. The head of the NIS was sentenced to jail. However, President Park was not investigated for this while she was in power.

4 The numbers are estimated by the People's Action for the Immediate Resignation of President Park.

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