

Effects of the Intellectuals on the Labor Movement in Korea

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INTRODUCTION

Learned people, in Korea, have had a strong influence on the society, as Koreans tend to have a high regard on them. From the colonial times most of the learned people in Korea who had studied in Japan were more inclined toward socialism and Marxism. It is understandable, as most of the Japanese scholars who were under the dictatorship of the Fascist regime and in the aftermath of the Great Depression had found it a comfortable fit with Marxism. (Shirai, 2000: 39-40)

There was influence from North Korea, as well. After foundation of North Korean government in 1948, the communist regime propagated itself as a paradise of working people. During the period of Korean War (1950-1953), many communists, including intellectuals¹, went to North Korea with a belief of a workers' paradise in the North. By the influence of propaganda and activities of spies from the North, even many intellectuals remained in South Korea had something of an inferiority complex, which seemed justified in light of the North's seemingly better performance in the economy for the first decade or two after the Liberation.² They were also dismayed by the thinking that whereas North Korea had kept foreigners at bay, South Korea was peppered with American army bases, including one in the middle of the capital city. Furthermore, founders of the North seemed to be anti-Japanese freedom fighters; whereas the rulers of the South were army officers who had been trained in the Japanese Army.

With the learned people having strong affection toward Marxism and North Korea, the government of the South, mindful of national security and social peace needed for economic growth, had augmented the control over union activities up to 1987. The stipulations added in the labor laws for the purpose are: disapproval of the right to collective action in the Enterprises owned by foreigners; compelling the unions to accept the mediation of the administration; prohibiting strikes at the workplaces in the

¹ In this paper, intellectuals is used to denote left-leaning persons educated in universities.

² For instance, Joan Robinson, "Korea, 1964: Economic miracle", Monthly Labor Review, 1965.

public sector, etc. (Park, 2006: 287-290)

The government's oppression of trade unions poured oil on the flames of anti-government movement of the intellectuals augmented since the 1970s. By constructing footholds in the unions and forming solidarity with the labor movement, they had had deep and longstanding influence on the union activities thenceforth.

THEORETICAL BASIS OF INTELLECTUALS' ACTIVITIES

From the rational individual's point of view, it is hard to understand why the well-off intellectuals were so keen to the labor movement. In the case of Korea, theoretical background of the intellectuals' participation to the labor movement comes from the Lenin's view on the labor movement and revolutions. According to Lenin, for the labor movement to advance, the scientific guidance of men schooled in the laws of history is necessary. On the subject, he wrote as follows:

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between the workers and employers. The sphere, from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge, is the sphere of relationships of all classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all classes... ...To bring political knowledge to the workers, the Social-Democrats must go among all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army in all directions. (Lenin, 1902)

ACTIVITIES OF THE INTELLECTUALS

Before the 1990s

Church-mediated activities. The intellectuals' contact with the workers started in the churches. From the late 1950s, church-going college students began to meet workers via the activities of two church organizations, the Urban-Industrial Missionaries (UIM) of the Protestant; and the Young Christian Workers (JOC) of the Catholic churches. In the beginning, the intellectuals were engaged in teaching gospel, officially at least, as the pastors were interested in preaching the gospel among workers and employers. However, their major activities progressed to help the workers organize trade unions and file complaints against the authoritarian employers in the 1970s, when a dressmaker called Jun Taeil committed suicide crying for the employers' observance of

the labor standards act.

In the late 1970s, they were deeply involved in many of the union activities in the industrial sites in southern Seoul area. As so many companies with union influenced by the UIM had suffered from the strike activities and had to close down, eventually, the phrase, "If the UIM comes, the company will go bankrupt," was widespread at the time. (Jung, 1988: 179-80)³ In 1979, the workers who were affected by the missionaries and were supported by student activists went on strikes in the YH Corporation, which led to mass demonstrations against the government in the southern region.

Night classes for workers. From the early 1970s, some university students and graduates opened unofficial night schools in the urban area of big cities. Using the classrooms of the official schools at night, they offered courses for young workers in the area, who could not afford to go to official school. The courses provided at the night schools were same as those taught in official schools. It was to help the young workers obtain a graduate equivalent degree of middle-school and, later, high-school. However, a part of the teaching was dedicated to making them aware of the problems of the capitalist system and to enlightening them on their rights at the workplace. In addition to this, the Christian Academy run by a Protestant pastor and Institute of Labor Studies at the Korea University, most of the lecturers of the night schools were students and young graduates of the time, had played an important role for educating grass-root labor leaders by offering courses concerning the issues of trade union and labor standards.

In terms of government regulations, there were a kind of balance with double disproportion in the labor policies: overly worker-protecting the labor standards act which were beyond the capacity of most of the employers and heavy control over trade unions up to 1987. (Park, 2006: 286-291) In this circumstance, the awakening of sensitive young workers by the intellectuals ignited a fire of protests by making them resent employers who were not only violating the regulations, but more likely to be arrogant and authoritarian to workers. (Koo, 2001: 61-68)

Students-turned-workers. From the early 1970s, a large number of university students was actively engaged in the student movement to overthrow the Park government. Comprehending the limits of student's power, some of them tried to build liaisons with workers' organization. In the process, some of the students tried to

³ Incidentally, the Korean acronym for the UIM is pronounced similar to the Korean word for bankruptcy.

propagate communist ideas to the workers. (Ahn and Lee, 2008: 37-48)

For this, they even resorted to going to workplaces disguised as manual workers to engage in the underground labor movement. Anticipating big rewards in the social movement of the times, they helped ambitious workers organize informal study group by opening an education site, giving lectures on socialist ideology and the workers' rights stipulated in the labor laws. Some of them even had promoted themselves to union leaders.

Having been greatly disappointed by the emergence of another non-democratic regime after the assassination of President Park in 1979, more and more student activists planned to, and actually succeeded to turn into workers. The number of students-turned-workers reached 1,000 in Incheon, located near the capital city. The number of students-turned-workers in the entire country was estimated to be 3,000 from 1995 to 1996 including the activists who quit the universities to devote themselves to the labor movement.

Son Hackgyu is an example. He is a student-activist-turned-politician to be ex-leader of Korea's main opposition party, and was reportedly saying, "When I was young, I was interested only in the labor movement. I planned to enter the Korea Electric Power Corporation to successfully organize a strike, and interrupt electric supply that could provoke the entire city of Seoul blackout" (chosun.com, 2005. 7. 15)

There were two opposing trends in the students-turned-workers' activities in those days. One was the 'small-group movement' approach, which stressed the importance of fostering working-class capacity in the industrial area by lifting class-consciousness among the rank-and-file workers and producing nucleuses of advanced activists, who would lead the class struggle in the future. The other was 'area-based labor movement' approach, which stressed organizing the 'explosive energy of the masses of workers' at the level of industrial area for developing political organizations that could coordinate and guide class struggles at the regional level. While the former put emphasis on educating to workers, the latter focused on large-scale political mobilization of workers. (Koo, 2001:106-107) However, both approaches had a common goal of socialist revolution in Korea.

The intellectuals that adopted the first approach would organize secret parties to systemically infiltrate into masses of workers. Sometimes with the help and guidance of agents from North Korea, reportedly, they recruited workers to the party, clandestinely, and tried to educate workers to mobilize them at the critical moment of political movement. Among several of the parties, the so-called 'Scientific Socialist Party' revealed in 1980 was the exemplary one. Among the suspected members of the

party were four students-turned-workers who had been working for more than 10 years in factory. One of them had even succeeded to be a leader of a trade union in a manufacturing company in Seoul.

From the group that adopted the second approach, there were several offensive upheavals including attempt of general strikes on the regional level in the late 1980s. (Lee, 2007; Kim, 1999) Most notable of them is the big push in Ulsan, industrial city located in the southeastern region of Korea. It was progressed as follows.

On 18, August 1987, workers from various companies of Hyundai conglomerate in Ulsan gathered at the grounds of Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI hereafter) to have a demonstration. About forty thousand workers and some twenty thousand family members of them, reportedly, joined the demonstration. They set out toward the City Hall led by the leaders in various heavy vehicles such as dump trucks, forklifts, sandblasters, etc. The police gave up trying to dismiss them, as they had found they were outnumbered by and ill equipped than the workers. Even though the demonstrators went back home after the Deputy Minister of Labor who flew to Ulsan to compel the employers and the workers to negotiate, announced the acceptance of almost all the workers' demands, including a significant wage increase and the recognition of independent union at HHI, they could have, nearly, seized the city.

The background of the charismatic leader, Kwon Young-Mog, during the upheaval labor movement shows influence of the intellectuals. Working at Hyundai Engine as a high-school graduate as he was, he had developed the sense of injustice toward despotic management practices at the workplace. Then, through the contact with dissident intellectuals and reading of the Marxist literature, he raised the level of working-class consciousness. From the early 1980s, he turned a small leisure-activity group he was leading into a study group on labor laws and Marxist ideology. In 1986, Mr. Kwon and his colleagues succeed in transforming management-controlled labor-management council to a worker-representative one.⁴ (Koo, 2001:163-164)

After the 1990s

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s and especially after the succession of Kim Jong-il as the leader of North Korea in 1994, the number of left-leaning intellectuals has dropped because many people began to see the reality of socialist system and self-styled socialist regime in the North, in particular. It was then, when North Korea was revealed to be a failed monarchy that could not supply basic foodstuff

⁴ Similar small group activities proceeded in other firms of Hyundai conglomerate in Ulsan.

to the people. Sales of Korean version of *Das Kapital* declined sharply, to about 700 per year in the mid-1990s from more than 3000 copies in the early 1990s. Naturally, the number of students-turned-workers plummeted.

However, the influence of the intellectuals remains in different form. First of all, many of the scholars teaching history are prone to be nationalists-cum-socialists. As the ministry of education had identified in 2008, many passages in high-school modern history textbooks were too sympathetic towards communist North, for instance on issues like the origin of the Korean War. As most of leftists in Korea believed the North-South rift had been sparked by American enthusiasm for the US-educated first president, Syngman Rhee, they argued that his confrontational and robustly anti-communist style wrecked hopes of political consensus, leading to the Korean War. Furthermore, they negated Korea's economic development on the ground of widening rift between the haves and have nots in Korea, which, they argue, was caused by the government's negligence of distribution of income and wealth.

These views have influenced various sectors in Korea, not only pupils being educated in high-schools but also reporters and producers in the media, and politicians, by which public opinion militates against the establishment. Reflecting these views, for instance, ex-president Roh has told in a ceremonial speech that "We have distorted modern-and-contemporary history of failed justice, and opportunists rose to power, notwithstanding the noble sacrifice of our forefathers."

Other area of intellectuals' activity worthy of close attention is an unofficial online college providing lectures on Marxist ideology to workers. To make full use of modern information technology to mass education, around 300 intellectuals inaugurated the college in 2000. The college was, arguably, founded to bring up activists for the labor movement, not as a movement for economic well being, but as a social movement for opposing neo-liberalism and for promoting emancipation of mankind. Since its inauguration, about 3,300 students have enrolled. Presently, some 250 intellectuals including those who were once students-turned-workers and who are professors of universities are delivering lectures. (<http://www.junnodae.org/>)

EFFECTS ON THE LABOR MOVEMENT

Many leaders of trade unions, especially of those affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU hereafter), the hard-liner of the Korea's union federations, are disciples of the intellectuals in one way or another. As effects of the intellectuals I would point out the following three features in Korea's trade unions.

The first is union leaders are scarcely willing to come to an agreement with a compromise. It is well expressed in a phrase "better get one by a struggle than two by a compromise," popular among the Korean trade unionists. This attitude seems to be originated from the left-leaning intellectuals like Christians, 'believe' their cause to be right because charismatic personalities have purportedly demonstrated its rightness. (Moses, 1990: 2)

The second is a bitter rivalry among diverse sectors of big unions. In the KCTU and most of big unions affiliated to it, there are several informal groups divided by its ideological focus. For instance, there are at least three informal groups in the KCTU: The People's Group is focusing on the movement for supporting North Korea's position and unification of Korea; the Central Group is emphasizing on 'emancipation' of workers from capitalist class; the Workplace Group prioritizes winning a victory in struggles at workplaces. The obsession of the KCTU's leaders with the unrealistic issues, as to consider such activities like anti-US and pro-North Korea campaigns as major activities, must have originated from the activities of the intellectuals who had taught the ideology to workers.

The third is militancy of unions' activities in pursuing the target, especially when they are engaged in collective bargaining. When strikes break out in a big company, the strikers almost always have occupied the factory by sit-in, and sometimes have gone as far as destroying the facilities. The militancy of Korean trade unions is well known that the New York Times Magazine described their violent ways of movement as 'striking to death (New York Times Magazine, 2003.9.8).' This kind of militancy came from the impression of the intellectuals as 'heroes' sacrificing themselves to become manual workers by dropping out of university.

PROSPECTS

From the intellectuals' point of view, the prospects of activities and their influence seem not so promising. As the reasons, I present the following three points. First is the unpromising political climate of Korea, which has enormous influence as the intellectuals had emphasized the political target of the labor movement. After ten years seizure of power by left-leaning government, right-leaning government came into power in 2008. In the general election in 2008, the right-wing parties won 62 percent of parliamentary seats in 2008, from the minority of 42 percent at the previous election in 2004. This change in political climates is unfavorable to the intellectuals' activities

Second is the unpromising prospect of socialist parties around the world. After the

collapse of the Berlin Wall, which had devastating impact to Korea's intellectuals, many socialist parties failed to rethink their economic strategy. With recent global financial crisis and economic recession, leaders of socialist parties and trade unions are keen to make the most of the moment. However, their efforts would have only limited effects, as they are based on the anachronistic ideology which failed to answer workers' concern of preserving their jobs and income. Even if some socialist parties succeed to become ruling parties, they will have little influence on Korea's intellectuals. It is because many of them are nationalists obsessed with the activities of anti-globalization and supporting North Korea.

Third is the probability of meeting poor results from online teaching. As students-turned-workers have stopped entering companies since the mid 1990s, large scale face-to-face teaching to workers is impossible. Although, they adopted the online college as the only alternative way of teaching, Marxism is not only a theory but also a philosophical viewpoint, which is hard to teach via online mass education. Small classes that emphasize hands-on, interactive, collaborative learning are necessary for teaching ideologies.

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