The History of The Labour Movement in South Korea 1947-1997: The Role of Blue Collar and White Collar Workers

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Abstrak


Keywords: labour movement, democratization, political-economy, neoliberalism

1 This article is resulted from literature studies in LIPI in 2009 under research topic “The Industrial Relation in Korea: Analysis on the Implementation of Employment Permit System”.
INTRODUCTION

The labour movement in South Korea stood in the front line in the political struggle for democratization (Subono 2007). That struggle could force the authoritarian regime to step down in 1960 and 1980 although this was not followed directly by the formation of a democratic regime. We know that the general strike in 1960 contributed significantly to the end of President Syngman Rhee and the demonstration of labour-students-intellectuals-churches to pressure President Park Chung Hee. It points out that the bargaining position of labour against the government is relatively higher than in their counterparts in developed countries.

I would like to describe and explain the conflictuous relations between the labour movement and the national government in South Korea throughout in line with the history of transition to democracy in that country. My assumption is that what the labour unions have achieved contemporary South Korea, particularly in 1987 and 1997, has roots in the political history of Korea as they are part of civil society; especially the pro-democratic movement. Generally speaking, the question of this paper is to what extent the labour movement in South Korea related to the democratic reform, and how the role’s changes from blue collar to white collar.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The issue of the labour union movement in this paper is laid down under the perspective of civil society and state relations. Referring to Max Weber (1978) in *Economics and Society*, political systems in the world in the 20th century indicate that democratic practices have spread widely to give people the right of citizenship to constitutionally choose their political leaders through democratic procedures. However, in reality, such democratic practices, which are embedded in the democratic political system, need a long social and political process to become entrenched. This means that civil society elements with pro democratic movements will fight against authoritarian political regimes either peacefully or violently, since no authoritarian regime would give their power to the people voluntarily.
The relation between democracy and strong civil society has been explained by Schumpeter (1950, in Political Sociology 2009), in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. He refutes the idea that democracy is addressed to enlarge the power of the members of society to organize themselves in the field of politics. So, the pro-democratic movement could be understood as an expression of class struggle. It could be a manifestation of the bourgeois class in fighting against the feudalist and aristocratic groups or of the working class against the bourgeoisie. It is common for the first conflict to occur in a political condition that liberal democracy introduced in a market economy (ibid). Additionally, the second stage happens when there is transformation from a market economy to social democracy. It means that social democracy based on the idea that the dominant idea of governance including economic reform is the idea of the majority of the people including the labouring class.

We know from the experiences of South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Indonesia that democracy results from a long and bloody struggle of the people. Dictatorial regimes in those countries did not only give slowly the right to vote, but also prevented the people from organizing themselves, and imposed violence to repress pro-democratic movements. Valenzuela (1988) mentions that labours occupied special place among the forces of civil society which react with heighten mobilization to the possible initiation of transition to democracy. The heightened labour mobilization together with other social sector may step up democratization. However, refer to Brazil case, Payne (1991) reminds that the gradual transition to democracy may strengthen the big business to increase their bargaining in the process of negotiation among labour, new regime, and business. The study of Barret (2001) on Chile labour movement shows that the new democratic regime cooperate with the big business to weaken labour movement as well as to limit the democratization.

The relation between democratization and labour movement in Taiwan and Indonesia are different from Korea. The democratization in Taiwan came from the middle and upper classes since the rule of the second government or after President Chiang Kai Shek. Labour have role in this democratization process, but they did not take leadership in the movement. Meanwhile, labour in Indonesia has risen since the end of the 1980s when the economic policy was
export oriented. Such a policy needs the exploitation of labour from
the surplus of labour in the market

Schumpeter (2009) also says that the failure of labour based
revolutionary movements in advanced capitalist countries and political
systems resulting from Communist countries, encouraged a revision
of political doctrines such as of Euro Communism, Dictatorship
of the proletariat, and Leninism as universal demands for political
actions (ibid). It is a part of the revision of Marxist theories in the
contemporary period that the economy is not the only determining
factor of social changes. As a result, democracy has been an objective
of the labour movement and has been accepted broadly as an
instrument of class struggle (ibid). But a further question is what the
role of labour in the democratization process is?

William Liddle, Professor of Politics from USA, in his interview
stated that labour and students in South Korea have a significant role
in the democratization process (Liddle 1997). The labour movements
were supported by the wider civil society including the student
movement after the Kwangju Massacre in 1979. The civil society was
angry with the military because of that incident, so they made a big
alliance between labour, students, and other civil society elements in
South Korea. The Study of Minn (2001) describes that the conflict
between the labour and government attracted the popular support in
between 1979 and 1987. A survey conducted in 1987 demonstrated
that the most people in South Korea believe that the big business
(56.9%) and the government (18.7%).

LABOUR UNIONS IN SOUTH KOREA

The structure of unions in Korea is relatively simple, since the
state did not permit multiple unions until recently, and enterprise
unions were the basic unit of national organization. Although the
Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) was the only national
centre which had official status, another group established the
Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in 1995, which was
recognized by the government as a legal organization in 1996 (ibid).
Song (1999) also mentions that the labour unions at company levels
(enterprise unions) had stronger affiliations with industrial federations
than with the national centre. According to him, although the
national centre regulates both industrial unions and enterprise unions,
labour unions at workplaces tend to follow the industrial federation as their supreme organization. For example, relations between the industrial federation and enterprise unions are stronger in industries such as textiles and metals, which have had industry-wide collective bargaining for a long time.2

The growth of unions in South Korea can be measured by the number of industrial unions, local unions, membership of both of them and the organization rate of such unions as follows (Song 1999). The number of industrial unions in the period of 1967 until 1987 was around 16-17. However, in the period of 1987-1998 it was around 21-26. The trend is no different from the growth of local unions which in the period of 1963-1987 was around 2,150 – 2,742, and in the period of 1988-1997 achieved the number of 6,146 – 6,424 unions. The number of workers joining unions, in the first period (1963-1987), was from 224,420 workers to 1,088,061 workers with the peak in 1979. However, in the second period the number of workers was 1,932,415 with the peak in 1989.

The different number of unions and members of labour unions in different periods is related to structural conditions forged by the politics of labour implemented by every regime of South Korea. The fewer number of unions and their members in the period before 1987 is related to the policies of authoritarian regimes that restricted the labour union movement. In contrast, the greater number of unions after 1987 point to the open policies of transition governments in accommodating labour aspirations and democratization generally. Refers to Valenzuela (1989) explanation, the labour unions will be stronger and developed in the democratization period due to the government give is forced to give more space for civil society organizations.

First, five industrial federations were set up in 1987 by splitting the existing federations and establishing a new labour union for white collar labour. The new federations have a progressive orientation in relation to the FKTU, representing journalists, hospital workers, university employees, maintenance workers, researchers, professionals and technicians. Second, local unions grew during the 1970s, reaching 5,000 at the end of the decade, but then dropping sharply to 2,000

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2 Another labor federation for white collar workers was set up in 1987. In addition, there were 12 independent labour federations established by the Korean Congress of Independent Industrial Trade Union Federations (KCIIF) in 1990 (Ho Keun Song 1999).
in the 1980s. Chun Do Hwan’s administration was unfavourable to union growth, but the labour dispute of 1987 precipitated an explosion of new activity and almost 1,500 unions rose within six months. Third, the proportion of organized workers culminated at 23.3 per cent in 1989 due to prolonged political opportunities, falling back to 13.5 per cent in 1997. It is important to note that the trends for male and female workers crossed in the mid1980s, when more men were joining unions but fewer women. This cross over was associated with the transformation of Korean industry from labour intensive to technology and capital intensive production.

**Table 1. The Growth of Unions in South Korea**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Industrial Union</th>
<th>Local Union</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Organizing Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,150</td>
<td>224,420</td>
<td>20.8 18.5 20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,634</td>
<td>301,522</td>
<td>23.5 19.1 22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3,482</td>
<td>473,259</td>
<td>20.1 19.7 20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3,507</td>
<td>497,221</td>
<td>20.1 18.4 19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3,391</td>
<td>515,292</td>
<td>20.3 19.7 20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3,268</td>
<td>548,054</td>
<td>20.3 20.0 20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3,784</td>
<td>655,785</td>
<td>21.3 22.9 22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4,073</td>
<td>750,235</td>
<td>21.4 26.6 23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4,371</td>
<td>845,630</td>
<td>21.6 26.4 23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4,580</td>
<td>954,727</td>
<td>22.6 27.9 24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4,857</td>
<td>1,054,608</td>
<td>22.7 26.2 24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4,947</td>
<td>1,088,061</td>
<td>22.7 25.0 23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,618</td>
<td>948,134</td>
<td>18.5 23.3 20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,141</td>
<td>966,738</td>
<td>18.5 21.6 19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,194</td>
<td>984,136</td>
<td>18.1 21.2 19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,365</td>
<td>1,010,522</td>
<td>16.5 17.2 16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,534</td>
<td>1,004,398</td>
<td>15.9 15.2 15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,658</td>
<td>1,035,890</td>
<td>16.2 14.2 15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,742</td>
<td>1,050,201</td>
<td>15.6 12.9 14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4,103</td>
<td>1,267,457</td>
<td>18.5 15.0 17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6,164</td>
<td>1,707,456</td>
<td>23.9 18.1 22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7,883</td>
<td>1,932,415</td>
<td>25.8 18.5 23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7,698</td>
<td>1,886,884</td>
<td>24.4 16.3 21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7,527</td>
<td>1,734,598</td>
<td>21.9 12.2 18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7,147</td>
<td>1,667,373</td>
<td>20.5 11.3 17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7,025</td>
<td>1,659,011</td>
<td>19.9 10.0 16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6,606</td>
<td>1,614,800</td>
<td>18.7 9.3 15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6,424</td>
<td>1,598,558</td>
<td>18.4 8.4 14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17.5 7.0 13.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Korea Labour Institute, KLI Labour Statistics
The History of the Labour Movement in South Korea

Theoretically, the strong civil society movement is a product of the weakness of the authoritarian state. We see in South Korea that the strong labour movements are the result of the process of the weakening of the authoritarian government that achieved its peak in 1989.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Political regime</th>
<th>Historical events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>After the Korean War (1592-1598) until Japan's imperialism</td>
<td>Feudal system</td>
<td>Introduction of the market system and waged workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Japan’s imperialism (1910-1945)</td>
<td>Japan’s governor generals</td>
<td>Establishment of Chosun Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CCWP) in 1924 and the Chosun Communist Party (CPP) in 1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The first authoritarian regime until the democratic revolution (1945-1960)</td>
<td>President Syngman Rhee</td>
<td>Korean independence, Establishment of AKLU (All Korea Labour Union) and the SKLP (South Korean Labour Party), Establishment of the FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions), Korean war, Strike in Pushan Democratic revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The third authoritarian regime and the rule of (1980-1987)</td>
<td>President Chun Do Kwan</td>
<td>Transition to Democracy 1987, Political liberalization, Rise of many labour unions and federations,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The democratic regime (since 1987)</td>
<td>President Roh Tae Woo, President Kim Yong Sam</td>
<td>Beginning of migrant workers and Returning Korean Diaspora, Establishment of KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions) in 1995, General strike in 1996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kim Younkon (processed)

It can be observed that after President Chun Doo Hwan opened political liberalization and democratization on 29 June 1987, South Korean workers went into powerful collective action (Koo 2007). The
liberalization in politics encouraged workers to raise their problems and aspirations openly with the enterprises and the government.  

However, the democratic transition in Korea since 1987 has renewed the Korean labour movements when they became stronger and became the major social force for political liberalization and democratization, as mentioned before (ibid). In this paper, I do not mean to answer specifically whether the labour movement encourages the democratization process or vice versa. But, the fact is that labour unions and the student movement together with other elements of civil society contributed significantly to the fight against the authoritarian regime that culminated in the transition to democracy in 1987. Indeed, union membership increased from 1,004,000 in 1985 to 1,932,000 in 1989 or from 12.4 per cent of the labour force to 19.8 per cent (ibid). According to Kim Yongkon, historically there are six stages of capitalist development in Korea as shown in Table 2.

**Labour Movement under the Feudalism and Authoritarianism Regimes 1924 - 1987**

At the first stage, capitalism and waged workers as part of the economic system were introduced in the Korean peninsula at the beginning of 17th century. At that time, the peasants went from farming to becoming workers in fields such as mining, manual work, transportation, etc. Then, they started to organize themselves into cooperatives as a united instrument to fight against the feudal system and the imperial invasion of China (ibid). The amount of Korean employed in industry within Korea in 1932-1943 can be seen in the table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>384,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>594,739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>702,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>1,321,713</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Minns in Labor History, No. 81 (Nov, 2001), pp. 175-195

3 He says that from July to September 1987, more than three thousand labour conflicts occurred, exceeding the total number of labour disputes that occurred during the two preceding decades. Based on those phenomena, the labour struggle in 1987 often is regarded as a milestone in the struggle of the Korean labour movement (Koo 2007 ibid).
Meanwhile, the second stage was under the Japanese imperial system (1910-1945) during the War with China and the Pacific War. As a consequence, the labour movement formed their objectives to liberate Korea from Japanese colonialism and the feudal system.\(^4\) It can be called a dual function of the labour unions that the enemy was both an internal and an external power. This function proves that labour unions in South Korea are rooted in the national struggle against colonialism and imperialism long before Korean independence.\(^5\)

The third stage was from 15 August 1945 to 19 April 1960. In this era, the Korean people launched the struggle for independence, the division of the Korean peninsula, the Korean War and the democratic revolution (ibid). Korean workers immediately after independence established the AKLU (All Korea Labour Union) and the SKLP (South Korean Labour Party) to fight against American rule in South Korea. Generally speaking, the existence of the AKLU was not suited to the political conditions indicated by the political conflict between North and South Korea. In response to the AKLU and the SKLP, President Syngman Rhee founded the pro government FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions) in 1946 (ibid).

During the Korean War (1950-1953), workers launched a strike in Pusan harbour in demand for new labour laws (1953) (ibid). During that period, American capitalism started to develop well and it changed South Korea into an authoritarian-capitalist state. The presence of the USA in South Korea was needed by the Korean people at that time to defend their country against North Korea. However, it continued to place South Korea under the authoritarian government of President Syngman Rhee who had been in power since 1945. Finally, the Korean people forced President Rhee down and set up a democratic government, but it immediately fell due to the 16 May 1960 military coup.

\(^4\) The Japanese military began the Pacific War and mobilized people through compulsory slavery including 4 million people representing 13% of all Koreans, So workers and peasants organized underground movements and fought against Japanese imperialism with arms in Manchuria (Kim Youngkon, 2005 ibid.)

\(^5\) During that time, Korean workers had set up labour unions that had leftist political orientations. During that period, there was a historical moment for labour unions due to the Chosun Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CCWP) which was set up in 1924 and the Chosun Communist Party (CPP) which was founded in 1925 (Youngkon 2005, ibid.).
After the coup in 1960 in South Korea, there were many agreements between South Korea and Japan as well as USA. After 1965, the direct investment of American and Japanese business increased (ibid). Referring to Dependency theory (Selligson 1988) claims that the South Korean economy became peripheral to the world system of capitalism. However, we are always reappraising it by calling the economy of South Korea as of the New Industrializing Countries starting in 1970s.

The 4th and 5th stages occurred during the periods of the governments of President Park Chung Hee (1961-1979) and President Chun Do Kwan (1980-1987) (ibid). Although economically, South Korea is not underdeveloped countries, but these government regimes were basically no different from that of other underdeveloped countries, as an implication of the capitalist development model under authoritarian regimes; workers were oppressed, so they started to resist in the early 1970s (Delahanty 2007). Almost like Taiwan and Indonesia, South Korea implemented Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI) through developing its industrialization process based on a comparative advantage. This was no different from their Asian counterparts when their comparative advantage was cheap labour although in different period. As a consequence, the South Korean government under President Park Chung-Hee determined labour policies as follows (ibid): First, paying workers low wages in the textile and shoe industries ranging from 1,500 won to 3,000 won per month; second, the typical working day averaged 15 hours, from 8 am until 11 pm.

This policy resulted in the suffering of South Korean workers (ibid), who, for example, only had 2 days off per month. If there was a lot of work, their companies forced them to work through the night by giving those amphetamines. At that time the majority (83%) of the workforce in textile factories was women of 14-20 years of age (ibid). This deep labour exploitation and the greatness of human suffering encouraged the need for the labour force to organize and to improve the conditions in the workplace at the factory level. Such suffering stimulated the emergence of the labour movement supported by other elements of the civil society such as the student movement and churches.

The trigger that encouraged the labour movement in South Korea at the 4th stage was the death of Chon Tae-II who led the
struggle of workers in 1970 (Youngkon 2005). It is often said that the first historical moment in the history of South Korea’s labour movement happened on November 13, 1970 in the garment district of Pyunghwa Market (Delahanty 2007) when some young workers demanding an improvement in their working conditions set up a demonstration under Chon Tae-II (ibid). While the police used force to dissolve the demonstration, Chon disappeared for a few minutes then returned with a can of gasoline and burnt his body (ibid). The History of Labour in South Korea notes that until his body was completely burned by the flames, he held a copy of the Labour Standard Laws in his hand and shouted: ‘We are not machines!’ ‘Let us rest on Sundays!’ ‘Abide by the Labour Standard Laws!’ ‘Don’t exploit workers!’ (Koo 2007).

The incident touched the hearts of the Korean people including students, as brutal and negative implications of an authoritarian regime. His dramatic death played an instrumental role in bringing students and intellectuals to assist the grassroots labour movement (ibid). During that time, we can find that the grassroots union movement generally was dominated by young female workers employed in labour intensive light manufacturing sector, especially in the textile, garment and electronic industries (ibid). The way they launched demonstrations was inspired by Chon Tae-II. They stood naked to prevent the police from approaching them, threatened to commit collective suicide with broken bottles and occupied the Opposition Party headquarters to get a safer place to continue their strike (ibid).

If we trace this further, the labour movement in South Korea started in the middle of the 1970s when South Koreans started to realize the importance of a more systematic and collective strategy to change oppressive conditions in their workplaces. I would like to give examples of where workers deposed their union leaders in factories and at local levels as manifestations of the labour movement. For example, the unions that existed before the union coups at Wonpoong and Dongil were under the rule of the textile companies (Delahanty 2007). The main objectives of the textile workers were to set up a new independent union and to transform company unions into representative unions, so that women workers at Wonpoong and Dongil launched a coup to take control of the company union (ibid).
They took over labour unions by legal and democratic ways, that is, through the election of floor delegates of the unions. The floor delegates function as a legislative body and select the leader of the factory unions. This is seen in the story of the labour movement in Wonpoong Textiles when (ibid) women workers elicited new union president through their domination of the floor delegates. With the help of Bang Yong-Suk, one of the few men who had the courage to participate in the women-dominated 1970s union movement, they developed the strongest company labour union at Wonpoong Textiles (ibid). Meanwhile the union movement at Dongil Textiles was led by a cadre of women workers who were active participants in small group activities (ibid). They launched a program to choose the first woman president in South Korea in 1972 (ibid).

Responding to the change of labour union leaders in Dongil and Wonpoong, the military government of South Korea started to see that these independent unions, under new women leaders, were a threat to the labour laws, economic growth and the power of the government (ibid). As a result, the South Korean government implemented all possible means to block workers from setting up independent unions by organizing male workers to destroy the female dominated independent unions (ibid).

Most of the members of the labour unions in the 1970s period were young women, and they fought for better working conditions and democracy (Youngkon 2005). Besides the labour protests, other lower class people in South Korea also launched demonstrations against the government in Seongnam, Pusan, and Masan city (1979) against poverty (ibid). The long and continuous protest of the labour movement and other riots contributed to the fall of the government of Park Chung Hee in 1979. Generally speaking, the labour movement inspired by the hero of Korean workers, Chon Tae-II, contributed significantly at the grassroots level gathering other elements of civil society to dethrone the authoritarian regime. However, it resulted in the rise of another military government, of General Chun Doo Kwan.

It is important to note that the power of the people involved not only labour but also churches and students. For example, The Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) and the Young Catholic Workers (JOC), two church organizations, provided a variety of educational programs to workers and defended them from police prosecutions in
the 1970s (Koo 2007). As a result of political education, the labour
movement became more politicized in line with student activists
entering the industrial arena in the 1980s. I think this is one factor
for why the labour movement in South Korea is different from its
counterparts in underdeveloped countries. For example, labour union
in Indonesia as well as in Taiwan does not have larger support from
student movement, although there is cooperation between them in
a certain degree. As stated above, we know that Korean labour was
born from the struggle of the Korean people against imperial power
and feudalism. It is relatively different from other labour movement
in Asia that labour movement in Korea take the leadership in national
struggle.

The government of Park Chung Hee labelled the labour movement
as similar to Communism both in discourse and practice. Before
the 1980s, we can see that the labour movement in South Korea
was identified with Communism, and the word class was prohibited
due to several factors (Sonn 1997): (1) The exceptionally narrow
ideological terrain resulting from the Korean War and the division
of the nation; (2) State repression and ‘state corporatist’ control of
labour unions; (3) The decentralization of the working class by the
organization of industry predominantly in small factories; (4) High
social mobility due to the strong nationwide passion for education
and the consequent the strengthening of working class.

But it changed step by step in the early 1980s after the fall of
Park’s government. The Kwangju massacre in 1980 when the military
officially killed about two hundred civilians after the assassination of
President Park revived the radicalism among democratic movements
in South Korea (ibid). We can understand that such tragedies as
the death of Chon Tae-Il could increase and bind the solidarity of
workers and other oppressed groups of people including intellectuals
and churches. One of the significant results was the raising of political
discourse of Marxism and radical movements, particularly among the
students movements. We can say that this incident is a milestone of
awakening political consciousness of intellectuals, mainly students, to
become involved more deeply in the problems of injustices suffered
by labour.

In other words, the Kwangju massacre in 1980 made the students
realize that they could not bring down the military dictatorship
without becoming allied with labour. As a consequence, they began to
make political alliance with the labour movement in giving political education. After that, *the nohak yeondae*, the labour student alliance, was implemented with a large number of dropped out students becoming factory workers to raise political consciousness (Koo 2007). However, these movements penetrated slowly into the newly emerging working class produced by the heavy industrialization of the 1970s (Sonn 1997). The industrial structure in South Korea changed in the early 1980s indicated by the appearance of highly educated workers with strategic power but undergoing oppressive industrial relations (ibid). In other words, I would like to say that there is a new class of labour resulting from heavy industrialization since the 1970s that is more educated and skilled.

The 5th stage consisted of developments following the Spring of Seoul and Workers in the Kwang Ju People’s Riot. It also includes the Great Struggle of Workers in 1987 and the labour movement under President Roh Tae Woo (Youngkon 2005). Different from the period 1970-1980, the characteristics of labour in South Korea in the 1980s changed in line with the changes in the industrial structure. As I mentioned before, the male workers became the mainstream of the working class and led the Great Struggle in 1987. It happened since a large number of labour activists emerged both inside and outside the factories in the mid 1980s (Koo 2007). It does not mean that male workers contribute to militancy but male workers took leadership and initiative in labour movement. We can see that it extended beyond the Seoul-Inchon region to the southern coastal industrial towns where heavy and chemical industries were concentrated (ibid).

However, after the Kwangju massacre, the second military government of President Chun Do Kwan suppressed the labour movements. I would like to describe one example in the YH Trading Company where workers were laid off without any compensation (Delahanty 2007). In August 1979, young female textile workers held a sit-down strike after YH lost its place in the wig market and closed its factory, dormitories and mess halls (ibid). Then, police intervened by brutal action against protesters that resulted in the eviction of 170 women from the dormitories. In January 1981, entering the 1980s, much of the progress of the labour movement achieved in the early 1970s were rolled back by police force and administrative decree.

In line with the weakness of the authoritarian government, industrial workers repeated their activities when opportunities
opened up in 1987 to take collective action to demand humane treatment and economic justice in their workplaces. The significance of the 1987 labour movement was the entry of new actors into the South Korean labour movement, that is, middle class workers as I mentioned before. One factor of this change was the shift in the structure of labour unions, dominated by educated and skilled labour in the heavy industry sectors. We can see that skilled and educated male workers in heavy and chemical industries emerged suddenly as the main actors in the South Korean labour movement, pushing aside women workers who had played an active role in the grassroots movements in the 1970s (Koo 2007). From 1980 on, the industrial structure began to change from light manufacturing into large scale, such as engineering, car manufacture, shipbuilding, and steel making. The new plants were larger than before and the workers are predominantly male.

Labour Movement under Democratic Regime 1987-1997

After the transition into democracy in 1987, the local unions began to unite among themselves at the national level instead of in the same federation based on a specific sector. Workers recognized the effectiveness and usefulness of regional cooperation among unions that had only depended on industrial union federation (Sonn 1997). As a result, some illegal democratic unions set up the Council of National Democratic Unions in 1989, a region-based organization to resist police repression (ibid). It was needed at that time to get more bargaining power against the state power and to strengthen civil society in dealing with political liberalization and democratization.

The labour movement in South Korea is often related with the existence of the Communist movement at the international level although there was no link between Communism and the labour movement. Although radical movements suffered as the Soviet Union began to fall in 1987, its effects in South Korea were insignificant. The collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to eliminate the spirit of labour in South Korea that had been dominated by radical political movements which tried to build an underground Marxist party (ibid). However, it did not destroy the militancy of the labour unions due to the spirit of the labour movement based on the conditions of Korean capitalism (ibid).
In the period 1987-1997 the labour movement consolidated of its power in the midst of a transition to democracy. If this consolidation failed, this the democratization process would have been endangered. In spite of domination by capital and the new democratic government, the Korean labour movement after 1987 expanded its influence in key industries (ibid). Finally in 1995, the South Korean workers founded the KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions) in opposition to the pro government union federation of FKTU, with a platform to build a democratic society in South Korea (ibid). We can find that the KCTU consisted of many powerful unions in the automobile, shipbuilding, health care and telecommunications industries, as well as in education and various service sectors (Koo 2007).

The last part or the 6th stage consisted of the labour movement under President Kim Young Sam, the 1996-97 strike against Neo liberalism, and the labour movement against IMF conditions (Youngkon 2005). There has been a contradictory influence of democratization and globalization on the labour movement in South Korea after 1997. However in other cases, globalization of ideas also supports the idea of democratization in developed countries. If democratization opened the political space for the labour movement, globalization has made the labour unions weaker due to the imposition of a flexible labour force (Koo 2007). The problem is both of them came in the same period so that they disturbed and intervened indirectly in the labour movement. The spread and practices of neo-liberal fundamentalism, as impact of globalization, contributed to the weakening of deepened democratization.

At that time, Korean workers had their representatives in the national parliament to struggle against the national government through state institutions. This condition was different from that in the previous period when the Korean workers only fought through street protests. Currently, South Korean workers also fight for their rights through parliamentary ways. They have the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) that was set up in 2000 and was the third largest party in the National Assembly in the 2004 General Elections (Youngkon 2005). The common problem that often appears in the movement is the emergence of different orientations between the leaders and the masses, because of the bureaucratization of the movement. Referring to Robert Michels, there always is a distance between the masses and the elite in political organizations (Marger 1987).
Nowadays, the irregular workers who represent more than half of all South Korean workers together with peasants and poor urban dwellers resist the capital power that is accompanying the emergence of a democratic government (ibid). It is a paradox since most of the regular workers united in formal labour unions have forgotten the solidarity with the poor that have no access to legal organizations. It points out that the working class is not monolithic but plural in ideology and movements. Nevertheless, the spirit of the labour movement is still well preserved by some of the dominant groups such as the KCTU. This union involved in demonstrations although the authoritarian regimes have fallen particularly in fighting against the deepening the neo-liberal economy in South Korea.

Entering 1997, the labour conditions were disturbed by the government influenced by the interests of capital owners. The Kim Young-Sam government passed controversial labour laws in the National Assembly session on December 26, 1996 (Koo 2007). In January 1997, controversial labour laws were passed giving employers more power to lay off workers and to hire temporary workers and to forbid the formation of other unions in a workplace (Delahanty 2007). The law disturbed job stability among Korean workers which became the main focus among labour activists and led to the great strike mobilizing millions of workers over three weeks in January 1997 to campaign for it, when South Korean people experienced job instability.⁶

The general strike consisting of 3 million workers closed production in the automobile, shipbuilding and other major industries for three weeks (Delahanty 2007). Finally, the protest ended in late January 1997 when the government agreed to revise the new labour law. Even though this general strike achieved only minimal concessions, it lifted awareness of labour militancy in South Korea.⁷ Historians call the general strike a victory of the labour movement in the 1990s period before the economic crisis.

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⁶ The two biggest centres of unions in South Korea, The KCTU and FKTU, cooperated, based on the same issue, that is, job stability to set up the greatest general strike in South Korean history (Koo 2007, op cit.).
⁷ The strike also encouraged the raising of international attention to change labour relationships in South Korea according to labour union aspirations in the 1990s period signaled by a normal working day of 8 hours, overtime compensated for, and wages not set unilaterally by employers (Amy Delahanty 2007, op cit.).
One of its implications of the strike is that the KCTU was not only the de facto but also the de jure representative of the Korean working class. The leaders of the KCTU withdrew the plan for continuing strike action after the President’s promise (Sonn 1997). However, they also planned another strike as a threat if the re-amended labour law failed to satisfy the workers. Nevertheless, the final law was disappointing for the labour side (ibid). Political changes and the situation formed by the bankruptcy of a major conglomerate and the political defection of top ranking North Korean officials, forced the KCTU to withdraw its plan to strike (ibid).

The 1997 general strike is very important since for the first time in Korean history, the Korean labour class succeeded in defeating the powerful forces of big capital and the national government (ibid). This victory is more significant when we consider that it was achieved in a country where the labour movement has been extremely weak (ibid). The general strike has proven that the South Korean worker struggles were able to challenge the dominant opinion that national struggles are ineffective in the age of globalization (ibid).

Then, the labour movement decreased gradually after the Korean economy was knocked by the financial crisis in 1997 (Koo 2007). In order to overcome the crisis, President Kim Dae-Jung proposed to form a labour-management-government tripartite body. In February 1998, the Tripartite Commission produced a Tripartite Accord that allowed employers to implement redundancy layoffs in case of business failures (ibid). Although it was welcomed as a historical compromise, the rank members of the KCTU were upset by the result and forced the union leadership to resign. Subsequently, the KCTU withdrew from the Tripartite Commission (ibid). We can understand that such a compromise may well have been the best resolution for South Korean industry to avoid collapse. However, we also understand the KCTU decision since the unions keep to the spirit of the labour movement rooted deeply in the history of Korea long before the transition to democracy.

Generally speaking, the KCTU is still the representative of labour unions. At the time of the general strike, the KCTU had about half a million members from almost a thousand trade unions, while the FKTU had 1.2 million members (Sonn 1997). However, the KCTU had total control over the three vital industries in Korea such as the automobile, shipbuilding and heavy industries, as well as over
public transportation and key white collar workers such as those in hospitals, mass media and research institutes (ibid). In the next part, I would like to trace the analysis of the political economy of the labour movement in South Korea.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY CONTEXT

Historically, the significance of the labour movement in South Korea in the political liberalization and democratization process that achieved its peak in 1987 can be seen from the number of political prisoners in South Korea during 1974-1985. Chulhee (2002) mentions, that workers and peasants make up the second largest number of political prisoners after students and youth in the period 1974-1985. The labour movement cooperated with the students and youth, priests, teachers, politicians, businessmen, reporters and writers, teachers, members of religious and movement groups and some civil servants who became political prisoners in South Korea during the authoritarian regime.

I consider political economy context of the labour movement to answer the question: Why were labour unions in South Korea after the 1980s relatively stronger compared to their counterparts in Asia? Tracing this in more detail, South Korean workers’ historical struggle in the 1980s and 1990s changed the workers’ class, status and identity (Mappiase 2009). According to Mappiasse, this was not because South Korean workers have an aggressive role in development or there has been little attention given to the labour issues in East Asian countries (ibid). However, I think that it is problematic since the South Korean workers basically are the main pillars of development. So the question is: how do we define development?

According to Mappiasse, Koo says that workers’ experiences of severe aggravation and excessive humiliation give rise to class consciousness (ibid). Mappiasse also explains that a repressive state that was in line with the rapid economic growth for the interest of the capitalists and politicians to control the majority of the resources in South Korea caused social resentment and depression both in working places and in the public sphere (ibid). The interaction between students and workers has changed the issue from the humanitarian to the democratic and political issues to obtain better life chances for South Korean citizens (ibid). This is why the labour
movement in South Korea obtained a higher level of strength and quality compared to other countries in Asia. However, of course, we could not compare directly the labour movements between South Korean labour and their counterparts without tracking their historical and social backgrounds and stages of capitalism under colonization.

### Table 4. Number of Political prisoners by Occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students and youths</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers and peasants</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of religious groups</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters and writers</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessmen and researchers</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soldiers and Public servants</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers and self-employed</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor people</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of movement groups</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Chulhee 2002: 240

If we trace this further, social movements in South Korea have acquired different goals and historical consciousness since the transition to democratization in 1987. We can differentiate between moderate and radical movements in the history of South Korea (Hyun 2007). The dominant social movements called the civil society movement (simin sahoe undong), distinguished themselves from the previous peoples’ movements (minjung). In the former, the fight was to reform society gradually, through legal and constitutional ways, the latter aimed to set up a new state and economy that would protect the rights of the subordinated people. The next question is: To what extent do they differ in political practices in fighting against the authoritarian government?

The dominant movement groups habitually request legal reforms, legislation of new laws and abolishment of repressive old ones (ibid). Meanwhile, the Minjung movement refused the social order under the authoritarian state and capitalist economy led by conglomerates and engaged primarily in street protests. The subjects of the two movements are also different (ibid). The former identify themselves as an NGO movement, in which citizens lead the expansion of civil
society; obtaining relative autonomy from state intervention, while the latter are based on class and popular subjects as their constituents.

Changes in 1987 signalled a new phase for the economic and cultural globalization of South Korea where the raising of overseas investment and production needed the rise of labour in the production process. In 2004, about 400,000 foreign workers were hired in response to the shortage in the low wage employment sectors called 3D work (dirty, dangerous, and physically demanding) (ibid). After 1987, South Korean economic growth attracted new attention from the Korean Diaspora and migrant workers. After the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, the migrant workers came to Korea and fought to keep their rights after 1995 (Youngkon 2005).

The improvement in the economy of South Korea in the late 1980s needed more significant amounts of labour. The campaign for economic globalization by South Korea has transformed the Korean nation into an open state for migrants in whom the Korean Chinese community receives a greater priority than Korean Russians or Korean Japanese.8 This can be understood since they are able to communicate in Korean and their facial features resemble those of South Koreans. Hyun Ok Park (2004) says that migration from the Korean Diaspora and migrant workers into South Korea can be explained in these ways (ibid): The first is the supply and demand thesis that examines the ways that developing countries meet the demand for cheap labour in developed countries. The second is the thesis of the international flow of capital and labour to develop the ways that overseas capital investment attracts migrant workers.

Park (2004) also explains that during the economic miracle period from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, the production of manufactured goods used labour power as the main sources for capital accumulation (ibid). However, in the late 1980s, this type of production met its limits and raised the cost of production. Then, economic reforms in late 1980s used foreign investment, overseas production and the adoption of flexible measures to adapt to the world market. For example is subcontracting and replacing permanent full time employment with part time jobs. The use of

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8 Korean Chinese are privileged by employers in South Korea for jobs in construction, restaurants, and domestic service while jobs in small factories are given to migrant workers (Hyun, Ok Park 2004, op cit.)
subcontract workers by big business has also expanded into small factories and resulted in labour shortage (ibid).

Lee Byoung Hoon (2008) says that under the present system of enterprise unionism, a majority of small firms and non regular workers remains unorganized and the large firm labour unions exclusively focus on their own welfare which has deepened the fragmentation of the labour market (Hoon 2008). He claims that labour unions in large firms whether pursuing militant activism or a cooperative line, have come to acquiesce to take all business practices of their employers as the exploitation of subcontractors and the non regular workforce. I think there is a change in orientation of labour unions in Korea if what Lee says is right.9

### Table 5. Trends of Industrial Disputes: 1966-1993

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Disputes</th>
<th>Participation (1,000 persons)</th>
<th>Work days lost (1,000 days)</th>
<th>Disputes by type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sabotage Rally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>49  54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>98  251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>108 157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>3,749</td>
<td>1,262</td>
<td>6,947</td>
<td>1,226 2,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>4,487</td>
<td>261 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td>142  2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The next question is: What is the real meaning of political liberalization and democratization in South Korea for the workers? Kim Kyong Dong and Lee On Jook (2003) state that democratization and liberalization for labour unions mean unlimited claims for rights without responsibilities. It means that democratization also has negative effect that causing violence in industrial relations. We know that after democratization in 1987, the labour movement instigated collective action of workers demanding a popular labour union movement and an increase in salaries in compensation for

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9 Lee (2008) also mentions that the democratic government has served as another external factor that has worsened labour market dichotomy. According to him, they have not only been deprived of tools and enforcement capacity to regulate the monopolistic economic system dominated by the conglomerates, but also have been immersed in a policy discourse focused on economic growth rather than undertaking democratic reforms needed to attain peoples’ welfare (Lee Byoung Hoon 2008, ibid.).
past exploitation. But, widespread industrial disputes ensued, often entailing severe violence so many industries with strong radical labour unions began to bleed and some of them closed down. The trends of industrial disputes in South Korea in the period of 1966-1993 can be seen in the Table 5.

From the Table 5 we can see that the highest number of disputes was in the year 1987 coinciding with the milestone of transition to democracy. It is in line with the participants of industrial relation disputes involving 1,262,000 workers and working days lost of as many as 6,947,000 hours. The disputes were manifested by 1,222 strikes and 2,516 protests in the streets. It may be common in a new period of transition signalled by political liberalization by an authoritarian regime. Six years after that, the disputes decreased dramatically to 144 and the number of participants also declined to 109,000 workers with 1,308,000 working days lost.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist class</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Middle class</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Middle class</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Middle class</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban lower class</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed class</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural lower class</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dong and Jook 2002: 147.

I have a strong supposition that the strength of the labour movement in South Korea can be explained well by the changing class structure that experienced dramatic changes in 1987 as explained by Dong and Jook (2002):10. The first, the most drastic change, took place in rural areas, diminished by one quarter over the span of a half century. The second was accompanied by increasing

10 According to them, the new middle class is composed of the professional-technical, managerial, and clerical occupations. If the old-middle class is self-employed professionals and owners, the working class is the production workers.
the new middle class (5 times), capitalist class (4.7), working class (4 times), and old middle class (2.9). Dong and Jook (2002) say that it points out that class structure has become more plural and open to the process of industrialization being signalled by the growth of significant middle and working classes. They also mention that it indicated the growing basis of civil society that was supposed to provide the ground for the democratic movement in 1987. The above explanation of change in class structure can be seen in the Table 6.

CONCLUSION

The high growth of the economy and in industrialization made the bargaining position of labour also high. The orientation to the industrial sector impacted on the concentration of labour and trade unions in the industrial sector in which the workers became skilled labour. So, structurally, labour’s position in South Korea is high relatively and less dependent on the government. This is the answer why labour movement in South Korea is stronger than their counterpart from other developed countries such as Indonesia and Taiwan. If it is traced in detail, the key success of the pro democracy movement in South Korea comes from a big coalition among labour, students and the middle class. Finally, let us cast a critical reflection to answer the main question of this paper.

The first is the strength and militancy of the labour movements in South Korea when compared with their counterparts in Asia rooted deeply in their history of power relations between the state and civil society. We can see that the first labour unions in South Korea addressed their objective to liberate Korean people from both feudalism and Japanese colonialism. However, the military coup on 16 May 1960 brought the capitalist development model based on export orientation industry with the condition of low wages for workers and political stability. The death of Chon Tae-II was a milestone that encouraged the awakening of the labour movement in South Korea that had alliance with student movements and churches. The transition to democracy in 1987 was a significant moment and one of the results that prolonged the labour movement since the 1970s although it has many changed characteristics.

Second, the political economic context of the labour movements in Korea basically could not be separated from changes in structural
conditions that are class and modernization, advanced economic development, and globalization. As we know, the success of the capitalist model of development has reduced the composition of the rural people and creates the rising of middle class. However, it is not a causal relation since there is another social process influencing the transition to democracy. For example, there is a strong alliance between labour, students and churches which has increased the bargaining power of the civil society against the national government and big business. Political democratization has strengthened the institutionalization of the labour movements, but globalization of ideas and practices of market fundamentalism tends to make them weak. In the future, the practices of market fundamentalism may threaten the labour movement as well as the whole civil society.

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