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The global uprising of labour?: the Korean labour movement and neoliberal social corporatism

The role of organised labour in resisting neoliberal globalisation has attracted increasing scholarly interest. A number of writers have argued that the global attack on organised labour resulting both from neoliberal structural adjustment in the South and the end of Keynesian welfarism in the North has led to a more independent and oppositional stance from labour, and that new forms of labour organisation have the potential to challenge neoliberal globalisation. Furthermore, with the end of the Cold War and the constraints it placed on international labour solidarity, it is argued that there has now emerged an environment in which organised labour is better positioned to overcome the tradition of bureaucratic national unionism and to transform itself into a global labour movement. However, whilst it is argued that neoliberal globalisation elicits such responses in both the North and South, it is movements of the industrialising semiperiphery that are held to be the most proactive in forging new strategies and new transnational linkages as part of a broader global uprising of labour.

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine the argument that the labour movements of the semiperiphery are at the forefront of a nascent global labour movement. Such a view fails to distinguish between manifesto-like statements on how organised labour should be reacting to neoliberal globalisation, and empirical analyses on the actual

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relationship between labour and globalisation. Accounts of a “global uprising of labour” are based upon cursory, celebratory and instrumental accounts of what are considered to the more dynamic and militant union movements of the semiperiphery.

Through an examination of the Korean labour movement, I argue that the recent experience of labour movements in the semi-periphery may run counter to the hypothesis of increasing militancy in the face of global neoliberal restructuring. Korea’s transition to democracy in the late 1980s opened a space for a militant and radical working class movement with grievances pent up through years of harsh authoritarianism. However, since the early 1990s, one of the principle effects of the transition to late-democratisation and neoliberalisation has been the institutionalisation and to some degree the co-optation of the labour movement by successive neoliberal governments. Central to this process has been the dissemination of norms associated with the new capitalist democracy. Social corporatist institutions have been the most concrete manifestation of the contradictory effects of the transition to democracy and neoliberalism and have played a central role in preventing labour from adopting a coherent strategy vis-à-vis neoliberal restructuring.

On the basis of this analysis, the paper then raises problems with the “global uprising of labour” literature, and therefore argues that full attention must be given to national state-society formations and their location in the uneven development of global capitalism.

*The global uprising of labour?*
A characteristic of the burgeoning literature on labour and globalisation is the opaque boundary between normative concerns and empirical analysis. An increasing number of writers have accepted the premise that “Rapidly globalizing capital obviously call forth the need for a global labour movement … The necessity is so obvious that is barely needs stating” (Nash 1998, see also Wills 1998, Radice 2001). Substantive analyses thus have tended revolve around the degree to which such a global labour movement may be said to be emerging. A specifically global labour movement is understood as involving forms of activism which transgress national boundaries, through transnational solidarity (Gorden and Turner 2000; Herod 2001), through engagement with international institutions (O’Brien et al. 2000), or international waves of protest against neoliberal globalisation. Thus, the French strikes of 1995, the Korean strikes of early 1997, and organised labour’s participation in the Seattle protests of 1999 have all been taken as evidence of a nascent global uprising. As Kim Moody (1997:208) argues:

“As the twenty-first century approached … a rebellion against capitalist globalization, its structures, and its effects had begun. The rebellion took shape on both sides of the North-South economic divide and, in varying degrees, within all three of the major Triad regions … Its explosive force in some places surprised friends and foes alike. At the center of the rebellion were the working class and its most basic organization, the trade union.”

Despite the alleged global uprising of labour, it is the national labour movements of the semiperiphery that are given special prominence. The cases of South Africa, Brazil, the
Philippines and Korea are in particular taken as examples of movements that are taking a qualitatively different approach to the problems of the poor and dispossessed, represent an “autonomous, militant, class conscious unionism which sees the situation of the unionized workers as being intimately connected with the situation of working people throughout their country” (Scipes 1992). The Korean labour movement, for example, has been portrayed as a case of the “newest social movement unionism” (Moody 1997:207) and as one that practices grassroots “shop-floor” internationalism (Waterman 1998:120). Its leadership “has displayed a remarkable self-confidence, independence, and will to resist” (Lambert 1998:75), and has developed alternatives to neoliberalism despite government and business repression (Ranald 2002). Much of the wider interest in the allegedly dynamic and militant “new unionism” of the semiperiphery has been driven by attempts to devise a model of “social (movement) unionism” for the labour movements of the North (Waterman 1993; Moody 1997; Lambert 1998; Lopez 2000). As Moody argues, “An international current is needed to promote the ideas and practices of social-movement unionism. The current is already at had in unions such as those in South Korea, South Africa, Brazil, and other newer unions in Asia” (Moody 1997:289). Interest in these labour movements may also been seen as resulting from the greater theoretical likelihood that transformative social movements may emerge in the semiperiphery or global South (Chase-Dunn 1990:2; Amin 1980; Cox 1987:382-387).

The normative strategic question of whether labour unions must transform themselves into a “global labour movement” is beyond the scope of this paper.² It should be pointed

² However, for examples of writers who take issue with this view, see Castree (2000) and Wood (1998).
out, however, that the theoretical basis for these analyses is implicitly underpinned by what David Held et al. (1999:3-4) have referred to as a “hyperglobalist” conception of globalisation, which holds that economic globalisation is bringing about a denationalisation of economies through the establishment of production, trade and finance. Consequently, for analyses of labour and globalisation, the state is no longer a site of contestation. A consequence of such a view is that it disregards the specificity of national state-society formations in their historical contexts. This literature thus collates a number of disparate “moments” of resistance by labour, de-contextualises and de-historicises them, and assembles them into the above picture of a global anti-neoliberal uprising of labour. In the process, a somewhat questionable treatment of Southern labour movements is given. As Ronaldo Munck (2005) argues, we must be careful of an instrumental use of labour and social movements of the global South, as a truly global perspective cannot really be derived from a brief acquaintance with a few countries of the South.

The readiness to accept hyperglobalist conceptions of globalisations is surprising given that there has been no shortage of writers who sought to criticise popular representations of globalization as inexorable, all-encompassing and as representing a fundamental discontinuity with the past. It has been argued that previous eras of “globalisation” have surpassed the contemporary one in terms of international trade (Hirst and Thompson 1999), and that the alleged decline of the state amidst “globalisation” has been exaggerated, and that the state can and still does exert a degree of autonomy from the forces of international capital (Boyer and Drache 1996). Indeed, the state has been argued
to be one of the chief agents of globalization, and under neoliberal restructuring, business has come to rely on the state more than ever (Wood 1998). Thus, a greater sensitivity to the transformations of national state-society formations in the context of global neoliberal restructuring and their implications for labour would seem necessary to provide a more historically-informed account of labour and globalisation.

Specifically, views of the potential for resistance from labour neglect an important development in the semiperiphery, namely late-democratisation (Korzeniewicz and Awbrey 1992). This wave of democratisation has been part of wider “double transition” towards both democratisation and neoliberal globalisation (Gills and Gills 1999:200). Although democratisation itself had its immediate origins in domestic popular struggles, the almost universal adoption of neoliberal ideology by the new democracies can be viewed as part of a broader shift in US foreign policy. The threat to military authoritarianism posed by the popular struggles of the 1980s and 1990s led the United States to shift its support from increasingly illegitimate anticommunist authoritarianism to these new emerging formally democratic political systems. Yet, US backing of post-authoritarian regimes remained conditional upon those nations not pursuing nationalistic economic programmes aimed at raising the standard of living for ordinary workers and achieving greater social equality (Robinson 1996). In order to facilitate the extended reach of global capital, the governments of the semiperipheral countries still retain their coercive function and capacity to repress social forces, in particular the working class, in order to legitimise themselves from the point of view of international, and to a lesser extent, domestic capital. The democratic status of the neoliberal state serves to obfuscate
the reality of continued authoritarianism, repression and engrained conservatism. The
difference with overt authoritarianism is that the neoliberal state’s status as a formal
democracy allows it to better legitimise the subjugation of the national economy to the
global economy (Gills et al. 1993).

Thus, late-democratisation is an inherently contradictory phenomenon. Whilst it
theoretically allows previously marginalised social forces to organise political challenges
through formal politics, one of its key tendencies has been the obfuscation of its
continuities with authoritarianism and the role of the state in facilitating neoliberal
restructuring, and can facilitate the co-optation by government and business of previously
restive mass social movements such as labour. Given the extent of neoliberal
restructuring and the semiperipheral nature of the countries concerned, this has been
achieved not through the extension of socio-economic rights in general, but through the
material co-optation of minority core workforce. Thus, a key feature of the double
transition is the deepening of dualistic labour market structures and the expansion of the
irregular labour force outside the protection of social welfare programmes and outside of
the constituency of the labour movement. In the Korean case, the labour unions have
been drawn into the new capitalist democracy through social corporatist institutions.
Whilst such institutions have failed to produce genuine tripartite social agreements, they
have been successful in achieving a degree of social control over labour. In this sense,
they represent the contradictory combination of both danger and opportunity inherent in
Korea’s double transition to democracy and neoliberalism, and thus deserve special
analysis.
In line with the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the formal institutional pattern of Korea’s industrial relations have undergone a transition from state corporatism, through a period of institutional breakdown and militant labour struggle towards a system of social corporatism. Schmitter (1974:104) distinguishes between state corporatism and societal corporatism, the former referring to a form of interest representation characterised by government coercion, eradication of competing interest-based organisations, compulsory arbitration, and direct controls over leadership selection, as commonly found in authoritarian states. The latter refers to that which is based upon voluntaristic agreements arrived at more freely, as is more commonly found in liberal democracies. The former represents the kind of institutional arrangements established in Korea in the early 1960s in which independent unionism was repressed and the only national-level labour organisation allowed was the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). Korean state corporatism failed to forestall the emergence of a grassroots independent labour movement during the 1970s and 1980s. The transition to formal democracy in June 1987 was followed by the largest mass strike in Korean history, and represented a full-scale assault on the state corporatist system of industrial relations.

The rise of militant labour in Korea provoked a counter-mobilisation by economic and political elites. The government repressed the National Council of Trade Unions (NCTU), which had been established in January 1990 as an independent alternative to the FKTU.
The government also mobilised an ideological offensive in which labour was portrayed as simply one of many “interest groups” whose selfish actions were likely to have negative consequences for the well being of the “competitiveness” of the national economy. This offensive was also directed at the working class itself. The “theory of worker responsibility in economic crisis” and “globalisation and international competitiveness” were all aimed primarily at rank and file workers and were deployed in order to politically isolate militant unionism (Kim Jin Kyoong 1996). Business also adopted new managerial strategies, which included the increasing use of (non-unionised) flexible labour, an end to the harsh authoritarian management techniques and adoption of company paternalism, and a tacit acceptance of labour unions but enforcement of the “no work no pay” rule alongside law suits for damages incurred during industrial action (Koo 2001:191-193). Furthermore, the workers’ struggles and accompanying wage increases of the late 1980s undermined the basis for Korea’s low-wage export economy, and Korea’s large conglomerates began to relocate production overseas, thus provoking a hollowing out of the labour-intensive manufacturing sector.

This counter-offensive brought about a decline in union density, declining numbers of unions (which did not reflect mergers), and a decline in the number of disputes (see table one). These declines occurred in the context of a shift towards more conciliatory strategies by union leaderships, particularly amongst the most powerful unions based in the large conglomerates (An Sûngch’ôn 2002:121-122). This shift occurred in the context of significant government overtures towards labour unions that proved themselves to be
“responsible”, and thus, participation of unions in policymaking became a possibility (Sun Hak Tae 2002:64).

<Table One near here>

The simultaneous repression of labour alongside what were perceived to be new opportunities for the institutionalisation of the labour movement provoked a debate surrounding the perceived “crisis of labour” (nodong wuigiron). The question was posed of how the labour movement could extricate itself from its organisation decline. In short, the structural causes of the crisis and the role of government and business repression were considered to be secondary to the failure of the movement itself to adapt to the changed external conditions. Specifically, the crisis was argued to be one caused by outdated adherence to militant unionism (Choi Jang-Jip 1992; Pak Sûngok 1992), and the “empty vacant militant minjung solidarity”3 that had allegedly contributed to the alienation of the labour movement from the working class and the public in general (Kim Hyônggi 1997:330-333). As a remedy, labour’s solidarity with the new civic movements and the middle class was viewed as crucial for the long-term development of the labour movement (Choi Jang-jip 1992:245-246; Chông Sûnggûk 1992:293). Furthermore, it was argued that the opportunity to pursue the public interest rather than “narrow sectoral interests” was presented in the form of the new opportunities for participation in government policy-making forums (Im Hyuk-baek 1991:20-21).

3 Minjung means to “the people,” and refers the popular movement that emerged in the 1980s, based on the worker, student, urban poor and farmers’ movements.
This debate had an important influence on the establishment of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in November 1995 (Yu Bômsang 2005:353-375). The KCTU sought to differentiate itself from its predecessor the NCTU, and adopted a reformist platform aimed at the legalisation and institutionalisation of the labour movement, such as through a transition from enterprise to industrial-level unions, the building of political party, and formal participation in social corporatist policy-making forums (Kim Se-Kyun 2002:36-38). One of the key issues that the KCTU wished to address through such forums was the reform of Korea’s still authoritarian labour laws. Whilst the democratic transition in 1987 had made the establishment of enterprise unions easier, restrictions remained in place on third-party intervention, political activities by unions, and unionisation by teachers and civil servants. The continued ban on multiple unionism at all levels meant that even the KCTU itself was “illegal.” The Presidential Committee for Industrial Relations Reform (PCIRR) was established in April 1996 to address such issues. However, the tensions surrounding the PCIRR were a microcosm of the wider contradiction inherent in the double transition towards democracy and neoliberalism. Widely divergent expectations of labour law reform made the achievement of a quid pro quo agreement particularly difficult to achieve. For both the ruling party and business, labour’s demands for its own legal recognition were not to be conceded without significant neoliberalisation of the labour market. However, such a concession would further undermine the organisational basis of the labour movement. As a result of the irreconcilable nature of the two sets of demands, the PCIRR failed to make any proposals.
The ruling party resorted to “railroading” a set of highly restrictive labour laws through the National Assembly in the early hours of December 26th with no opposition lawmakers present. The KCTU responded by launching the biggest general strike in Korean history, gaining the participation of civic organisations and the middle class, who were also worried about the effect the laws might have on job security. After three weeks of strikes and initial intransigence, the government finally relented on January 17th, and agreed to work with the opposition parties to revise the labour laws again (Sonn Hochul 1997:123-126). This historic mobilisation by the Korean labour movement was both widely reported on in the international media, and as mentioned above, was taken as key evidence of a “global uprising of labour.” However, the strike was also evidence of labour’s weakness in influencing policymaking. The KCTU’s decision to call a strike was a reactive action that had not been adopted until it had become unequivocally clear the government and business were not offering anything to labour in return for the flexibilisation of the labour market (Lim Young-Il 1997:61-62). Furthermore, by calling off the strike and handing the reform of the labour laws over to the ruling and opposition parties, the KCTU further isolated itself from the policymaking process, as reflected in the disappointing outcome of the revised laws in March 1997, which simply postponed layoffs until 1999 (Sun Hak Tae 2002:199-201). Impressive as the 1996/97 mobilisation was, it did little to vindicate the KCTU’s mainstream People’s Faction’s (kungminp’a) somewhat contradictory strategy of “negotiation and struggle.” Mass mobilisation proved to be not a tap that could be switched on and off at will to influence the process of negotiations.
Paradoxically, it was the increasing instability associated with neoliberal globalisation that led to Korea’s first major social agreement, which was in effect the KCTU’s capitulation to the same flexibilisation measures it had opposed during the 1996/97 general strike. The outbreak of the economic and financial crisis in late 1997 led to the signing of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout agreement by the Korean government. As it became clear that crisis management would involve the legalisation of layoffs and of dispatch labour, the KCTU was faced with the dilemma of whether to resist neoliberal restructuring through militant mobilisation, or to pursue national unity with government and business to overcome the crisis. The KCTU initially adopted the former approach, largely because it was felt amongst the leadership that there was simply “no choice.”

At the KCTU’s request, established the social corporatist Tripartite Commission, and after three weeks of negotiations, the First Tripartite Accord was signed on 6 February, 1998. This Accord provided for the legal recognition of KCTU and the expansion of social welfare, in exchange for the immediate introduction of the layoffs and the introduction of a labour dispatch system.

The rationale behind the Accord was that the improved coverage of social welfare programmes would help to compensate for the increasingly flexibilised labour markets. Indeed, the KCTU continued to pursue welfare reform through a number of policymaking forums outside of the Tripartite Commission, and played a key role in the reform and expansion of the health insurance and pension schemes along more redistributive lines. In practice, however, it has not been possible to compensate commodifying labour market

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reforms with decommodifying social welfare policies. Seeing its most rapid growth under the Kim Young-Sam government (1993-1997), the irregular labour force reached a peak of 51% in March 1999 (Kim Yusŏn 2004). Yet, Korean social welfare programmes retain a distinctly neoliberal “workfare” character, and remain ineffective in protecting workers from the insecurity associated with neoliberal restructuring (Kang and Sŏng 2001:30-31).

Welfare programmes are organised along the principle of social insurance based not upon social need but on the ability to make continuous contributions into the fund. Participants receive protection according to the premium paid or their own personal risk level (Cho Yŏnghun 2001:243-247). Consequently, they tend to discriminate against irregular workers often fail to make the long-term contributions to receive adequate protection.

Furthermore, the expansion of social welfare that was offered to labour in return for the flexibilisation measures had negligible benefits for the irregular workers themselves. In August 2002, only 23.2%, 21.6% and 24.9% of irregular workers are covered by the Employment Insurance Scheme, the National Pension Scheme and the National Health Insurance respectively (Yi and Kim 2003:329). The strongly neoliberal nature of Korean welfare programmes is evidenced in the government’s chronically low social expenditure. In 1997, at the outset of the economic and financial crisis, public social expenditure as a percentage of GDP was only 5.1%, the lowest out of all OECD countries including Mexico and Turkey (OECD 2000). Although government expenditures rose by 70% between 1997 and 2000, as a proportion of total expenditures (i.e. including employers’ and employees’ contributions), government expenditure has actually dropped from 31.2% to 29.5%, meaning that the relative burden on the insured has risen. Much of this was
related to the sudden rise in unemployment and social hardship, and so this rise in expenditure occurred not despite, but because of neoliberal restructuring (Cho Yonghun 2001:244-249). Indeed, similar rises in social expenditure occurred during the early years of the neoliberal Thatcher government in the UK (Gough 1983:149-154).

The significance of the Accord was therefore the KCTU’s agreement to the flexibilisation of the labour force, and the increasing dualism this provoked between regular and irregular workers. The KCTU’s participation in policymaking forums has taken place within a constrained neoliberal paradigm. The division between organised regular workers and unorganised irregular workers is deepening at all levels. This has included the destruction of solidarity between regular and irregular workers, with irregular worker being excluded from enterprise unions and being viewed as an expendable buffer labour force by regular workers. This has been demonstrated most clearly by the persistent attempts of Hyundai Motor’s regular workers to prevent irregular workers from forming their own union. It has been argued therefore that the labour movement, regardless of intentions, is being reduced to “half a labour movement” (panjjok nodongundong), that of representing the shrinking core of regular workers (Shim Chang-Hack 2004:17). However, neoliberal restructuring has brought forth new forms of class struggles beyond what were originally the traditionally militant and unionised sectors (Chang and Chae 2004:440). These new struggles manifest themselves in the suicide of labour activists who have along with their families been burdened with crushing debts as a result of legal

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5 Han’guk Kyongje [Korean Economy] (9/7/2006), “No-no kaldûng sa 2 chunggyosôp ‘pisang’ . pijônggeuyuk no jo sae kaldûng pulshi” [New friction emerges over irregular workers’ union].
actions taken by employers (Jang Sang-Hwan 2004), or in the spectacle of long-term labour disputes that take place outside a legal code that is not designed to deal with the new phenomena of subcontracted labour.\footnote{Hangyoreh (28/5/2005) “Chojông ômnûn nosagaldûng kûgdan ch’udannûnda [Labour disputes with no prospect of intervention on the rise].”}

The issue of participation in social corporatist institutions has been fiercely contested. Indeed, the First Tripartite Accord was rejected by KCTU delegates, particularly as the layoff measures would affect the KCTU’s principle constituency of workers in large enterprises (Sun Hak Tae 2002:275). The leadership accordingly resigned and a new left-wing leadership was elected in March 1998 which launched a campaign against both the Tripartite Accord and against neoliberal restructuring in general. However, as Lim Sang-Hoon (2004:12-13) argues, despite the rejection of the First Tripartite Accord by delegates and the withdrawal of the KCTU from the Tripartite Commission, the Accord did not “break down.” In reality, the KCTU continued to exert pressure on the government through negotiations, street demonstrations, conferences with other social actors including the Korean Employers’ Federation, and formal and informal workshops by the Commission. Indeed, this rather reflects the manner in which the Accord was highly skewed towards the interests of business. Since the KCTU leadership had already given its consent to flexibilisation measures in the Accord, there was no question of labour withdrawing its “consent,” since the Accord required no continued commitment from labour, such as through wage restraint. Thus, the KCTU maintained \textit{de facto} support...
for the Accord in terms of seeking to ensure the government delivered on its social welfare reform promises.

Indeed, by July 1998, the KCTU’s new left-wing leadership had already reversed its position of non-participation in the Tripartite Commission and had decided to re-enter negotiations with the government, although at the same time, this u-turn had the effect of isolating grassroots anti-restructuring struggles taking place at Hyundai Motors and Mando Machinery. This erratic relationship with social corporatist institutions has not been resolved, and internal tensions within the KCTU were as deep as ever in 2005, and resulted in violent confrontation between the mainstream moderate faction and the minority militant faction who opposed the Tripartite Commission. This opposition to social corporatism found its expression further afield in a joint letter to the KCTU by a group of 58 university professors, arguing that a return to social corporatist institutions would put the KCTU in danger of becoming just another “mouthpiece union.” They called for the KCTU to revive the great tradition of struggle against the exploitation and oppression and warn against being reduced to the role of junior partner to government and capital and that of helping the neoliberal order run smoothly.

Such tensions are an expression of the wider contradiction between democratisation and neoliberalism, is having a particularly damaging effect on the labour movement. This point was made by the Progressive Politics Institute of the Korean Democratic Labor Party itself, who, issued a joint statement arguing that the mainstream labour movement,
based upon the regular workers in large enterprises was one of the principle causes of the crisis of Korean society:

“The labour union movement has completely failed to contribute to a genuine democracy that seeks to extend the socio-economic rights of ordinary people. With cases of every kind of corruption and factional infighting, and labour movement’s importance has diminished, and its social base has eroded.”

Given the dilemma which labour is faced with, it can be argued that social corporatist institutions do not rely upon the actual formation and implementation of policy. Their real efficacy is in limiting debates to dichotomous questions of participation or non-participation. This has been a source of constant tension within the labour movement, and it has prevented a repeat of the unified resistance demonstrated against neoliberal restructuring during the general strike of 1996/97.

Social Corporatism and the Semiperiphery

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7 “Taehanmin’guk wuigi chubŏm TOP 10 mit chinboundong wuigiūi 5tae kŭnwŏn [The 10 offenders in Korea’s crisis and the five causes of crisis in the progressive movement]” on the Progressive Policy Institute’s website. Available: http://policy.kdlp.org/ Accessed (31/1/06). There were several corruption scandals involving high-level union leaders in 2005. One case in particular involved a top-level leader of the KCTU, and resulted in the resignation of the entire leadership.
Why has participation in social corporatist institutions been such a failure for the labour movement in Korea? Historically, social corporatism has been built on several prerequisites, which include: a high level of union density; unity of the organisational structure of the labour movement; the role and power of labour confederations in collective bargaining; the scope of collective bargaining; worker’s participation in decision making; and crucially, the existence of a powerful political party able to represent labour’s interests (Cameron 1984:164-165). What these prerequisites basically point to is that the success of social corporatism depends on a strong labour movement. However, if the Korean industrial relations system is considered, what is striking is the institutional weakness of labour in every respect mentioned above (see table two). Indeed, the Korean case would appear to be the least likely case for the emergence of a system of social corporatism.

<Table Two near here>

However, it has been argued that a wave of social-pact making in countries such as Ireland and Italy refute theories of corporatism that emphasise structural prerequisites. Social-pact making, it is argued, is essentially a political process, where the hierarchy and coercion normally associated with corporatism can in fact be replaced by “democracy and discussion.” Both the Irish and Italian cases heavily relied on democratic decision making procedures, and the role of union ratification of agreements, and such agreements have generally been followed by economic growth (Baccaro 2003). However, Baccaro and Lim (2006) ascribe the ultimate failure of the social pact in Korea as being due to the
manoeuvring of “radicals” within the labour movement, whose dominance itself is attributed towards a lack of democratic procedures through which the benefits of the social pact can be adequately explained to the rank and file. This analysis, however, takes that “radical” opposition itself to be a determining factor, and takes the class harmony pretensions of social corporatism at its word. In Korea, where four decades of anti-labour authoritarianism were followed directly by neoliberal conservative rule, Panitch’s (1977) question of the class nature of the social corporatist institutions seems particularly apt. In contrast with the European cases, the Korean labour movement failed to exert much influence on the policymaking process, and this was reflected in the highly unequal terms of the agreement which heavily lent towards the interests of business.

Nonetheless, Korean social corporatism has been highly successful in regulating and weakening organised labour. The resistance displayed during the 1996/97 general strike had seemingly demonstrated that the labour movement would meet any attempt at labour market flexibilisation with mass resistance. However, the Tripartite Commission succeeded where the PCIRR had failed. Why then, given the lack of objective preconditions for social corporatism in Korea, has it managed to feature so prominently in labour’s own strategies? Robert Cox has argued that in addition to the objective prerequisites, there are also several subjective preconditions for social corporatism (Cox 1987:74-78). Social corporatism requires that government be viewed as both an instrument of civil society, and as an agent for harmonising civil society’s divergent interests. In the Korean case, democratisation, in general, and the coming to power of Kim Dae-Jung in late 1997, in particular, went a long way to help portray the Korean
state as being an instrument of civil society. Kim Dae-Jung had deliberately reached out
to civil society to overcome his weak position as the first democratically-elected
President from the opposition camp. By making election promises to minimise the pain of
restructuring, large sections of the working class believed that Kim Dae-Jung’s
government would be an opportunity to advance the interests of Korea’s workers (Koo
2000:245). In addition, Cox argues that another subjective prerequisite is that the
capitalist mode of production should be recognised as legitimate by labour. As argued
above, this has been a tendency within the ideological development of the labour
movement since the early 1990s. The rise of the moderate mainstream has been matched
by the decline of left wing and socialist tendencies within the movement that professed as
their objective the achievement of an alternative to capitalism. Thus, the state has
increasingly been viewed not as the “management of the affairs of the bourgeoisie,” but
as a neutral arbitrator of society’s divergent interests.

It has also been argued that the diffusion of foreign ideologies and institutional practices
can also “over determine” the emergence of social corporatism (Schmitter 1974:108). In
response to the KCTU delegates’ rejection of the Tripartite Accord, prominent figures
within the movement criticised calls militant resistance to the government’s neoliberal
restructuring programme. Drawing on the Confederation of South African Trade Unions’
(COSATU), September Commission Report,⁸ former policy chief of the KCTU Kim
Yusôn called for a strategy of “social unionism” (sahoejôk chohapjuûi) as an alternative

to militant unionism. “Social unionism,” it is argued, seeks to protect the rights and livelihood of weak social classes, including workers in small and medium enterprise and irregular workers. It is an approach that proposes an alternative by developing long-term strategic policy proposals and participation in tripartite forums and management (Kim Yusôn 1998).

This latter stress on participation in social corporatist institutions to some extent distinguishes South African and Korean social unionism from “social movement unionism” as written upon by Waterman (1993), Moody (1997), and others. Furthermore, social unionism in the Korean context is arguably more problematic than in the South African case. The Confederation of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) approached trilateral institutions in the context of the Tripartite Alliance with the South African Communist Party and the ruling African National Congress. Korean labour, however, is in a much weaker position vis-à-vis its neoliberal negotiating partners, thus raising questions as to whether a South African strategy can be transferred to the Korean context. Kim Yôngsu (1998) argues that the call for social unionism in Korea is based on a very superficial understanding of the South African case. It relies on a single paragraph from a single union document, without examining the internal politics of Cosatu or the wider historical context of the class struggle in South Africa. This is an approach labelled by Kim Yôngsu (1998) as a form of “neo-colonial utilitarianism”:

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9 However, critiques have been made of Cosatu’s participation in social corporatist institutions which bare similarities with the Korean case (see Gray 2008:153-159).
“we have to move on from the staged scholarship which simply chooses foreign cases which are better than our own case, and takes simply glimpses of this case and makes them colourful and beautiful.”

This ahistorical pseudo-comparativism was deployed not only by labour unions in their attempts to devise new strategies more appropriate to the democratic era, but was the underlying framework for the whole social corporatist project in Korea. As Noh Joong-ki has argued, there has been a “growth industry” in studies of corporatism within government research institutes and academia, where an almost religious fetishism of the “social agreement” is passed off as comparative analysis (Noh Joong-ki 2002). This ideological project no doubt contributed to the abundance of subjective preconditions amidst paucity of objective preconditions for social corporatism. Labour’s position vis-à-vis these institutions can be understood as one of partial co-optation, understood as a specific characteristic of the double transition towards democratisation and neoliberalism. This co-optation is necessarily partial because in the semiperiphery the material conditions for a genuine incorporation of organised labour do not exist, and very little has been offered to the labour movement in return for neoliberal restructuring, save for the movement’s own institutionalisation.

This ideological co-optation of labour is nonetheless underpinned by the repressive capabilities of the state. Social corporatist institutions form a key component of the government’s dual strategy towards labour: that of enforcing a strict division of roles in
which unions are for purely “economic” struggles, and the Tripartite Commission for “political” struggles. The government channels political dissent into the highly unequal forum of the Tripartite Commission, thereby declaring that neoliberal restructuring can be a matter of “discussion” but never a matter of “struggle.” Strikes aimed at resisting neoliberal restructuring are “illegal,” and often repressed both physically and though civil court cases to recuperate financial losses. It is this combination of coercion and consent exercised by government and business which has made the formulation of alternative strategies particularly problematic. Whilst the “social agreements” produced by such institutions are in many ways dysfunctional and fall far short of their purported aims, the mainstream of the KCTU has viewed the problem as one of the form of social agreement or the insufficient stature of the Tripartite Commission within the government policy making process, but nonetheless as the principle means by which labour can exercise its influence on policymaking despite all evidence to the contrary.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has shown that whilst authoritarianism in the industrialising semiperiphery led to the emergence of dynamic and militant labour movements, those movements have since the double transition to neoliberalism and democracy entered into a state of crisis. The labour movement has become symptomatic of the increasing dualism brought by neoliberalism by becoming increasingly representative of the relatively privileged male regular workers in large enterprises. It is more likely now that signs of a militant labour struggles are to be found at the margins of organised labour amongst
irregular workers, and thus the mainstream labour movement has quickly become irrelevant to the plight of the vast majority of Korean workers. Central to this crisis of labour has been the role of social corporatism, which can be interpreted as a form of hegemonic ideology specific to countries undergoing both democratisation and neoliberal restructuring. It has been pursued by government and business as a means of obtaining labour’s acquiescence to labour market flexibilisation measures and of isolating militant tendencies, and has been pursued by a labour ostensible as a means of reforming the legal framework to place organised labour in a more advantageous position. However, Korea’s semiperipheral status means that there has been no genuine social pact, and the agreements made have in fact deepened and extended the double transition to democracy and neoliberalism.

This crisis of labour in Korea has bee explained with reference to Korea’s double transition, rather than any factors specific to Korea per se. This raises the question of whether it is inevitable that globalisation provokes the crisis of labour in the semiperiphery. There are no doubt strong tendencies in this direction, in that neoliberal restructuring undermines the organisational basis of labour. Yet, this alone would seem insufficient to provoke a crisis. There has been more continuity between neoliberal and authoritarian labour systems than is commonly recognised. The modern Korean labour movement itself emerged in the 1970s in context of sweatshop working conditions and a fierce repression of independent unionism. The contemporary crisis has rather been the result of a political process in which elites adopted a hegemonic strategy of formal democratisation as a means of forestalling more radical social change. Understood as a
class project, neoliberalism has sought to redress the emergence of labour as a powerful social force. Whilst this counter-movement does involve physical repression, this should be understood as part of a wider ideological project to co-opt organised labour and isolate militant unionism. The norms of capitalist democracy provide the means by which this can be achieved: the separation of politics and economics, with purely “economic” roles conferred on unions; social corporatist institutions which formally recognise labour’s junior role in participating and legitimising the promotion of the (neoliberal) “national interest.”

If the crisis of labour under neoliberal globalisation is not inevitable, then there clearly is scope for devising new analytical frameworks and ultimately for devising new labour strategies. Whilst the latter task is outside of the present author’s expertise, it is hoped that the present paper has made some preliminary contribution to this task by highlighting the poverty of contemporary analyses of labour and globalisation. It has been argued that ahistorical pseudo-comparativist methodologies justified the introduction of social corporatist strategies in Korea. This critique must also be extended the “global uprising of labour” literature. As Karl von Holdt has argued with reference to South Africa, the labour movement there responded to the advent of democracy by choosing to adopt strategies and policies that have been developed by labour movements in the Northern social democratic states. It is therefore somewhat ironic that the “declining” labour movements of the North have shown an increasing interest in social movement unionism in the global South (von Holdt 2002:295). Similarly, the mainstream of the Korean independent labour movement has also held a favourable attitude towards the European
institutions of social corporatism, and has justified this by reference to the “progressive” example of Cosatu in South Africa despite obvious contextual differences. In the same way, the “neo-colonial utilitarianism” (Kim Yôngsu 1998) inherent in views of Korean and South African labour movements as a form of militant “social movement unionism” stem from a failure to pay attention to such nuances and to analyse these movements within their specific historical and national contexts.

Clearly, at the heart of this matter are competing conceptions of globalisation. In denying the uneven character and homogenising effect of globalisation and by denying the continued relevance of the state as a site of contestation, these approaches reproduce the ontological assumptions of neoliberal globalism. The discourse of internationalism mobilised by bureaucratic national union centres and isolated moments of cross-border solidarity are analytically reified out of all proportion, thereby ignoring some of the most crucial questions facing labour movements confronted with unfamiliar “democratic” institutions. Thus, in seeking to unravel the relationship between labour and globalisation, there needs to be more historical analysis of national contexts, and of processes of national-level politics. Whilst the international level of analysis may be valuable for determining whether a new politics of labour is emerging, it should not be assumed that this level represents the contradictions of labour under globalisation in its most essential or abstract form. The role of national state-society configurations in their historical contexts is still crucial to substantive analyses. New subjectivities and militancy may be reducible to the global neoliberalism in the final analysis, but they also need to be
understood in the wider context of transformations in industrial relations systems and in national-level political processes.
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Table 1: Union density, number of unions, and number of disputes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Union Density</th>
<th>No. of Unions</th>
<th>No. of Disputes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>16.9</td>
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<td>276</td>
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<td>1987</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>6,164</td>
<td>1,873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>7,883</td>
<td>1,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>7,698</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>17.2</td>
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<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>14.5</td>
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<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
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<td>6,606</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>6,424</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
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<td>129</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6,212</td>
<td>320</td>
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</table>

Sources = Korean International Labor Foundation, Ministry of Labor.
Table 2: Union centralization and representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Union Density (/total employed)</th>
<th>Number of Unions</th>
<th>Average members per union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
<td>510,000</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>18,554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>115.1%</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>22,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>9,165</td>
<td>627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9,203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>70,821</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>5,733</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>8,222</td>
<td>1,538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>57.8%</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>14,378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>108.5%</td>
<td>67</td>
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</tr>
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<td>42.2%</td>
<td>3,714</td>
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<td>UK</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
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<td>35,457</td>
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