

Korean Workers

*The Culture and Politics
of Class Formation*

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firms. Workers were expected to be completely obedient and respectful toward their managers, but managers were bound to no reciprocal obligation to provide adequate care and personal concern for their workers. Thus, the essential nature of patriarchal authority in Korean industry was more despotic than paternalistic. Although paternalistic rhetoric has been used constantly in Korean firms, there is little evidence that either the capitalists or the government made any serious effort to give substance to these words.

The labor unrest that began in the early 1970s derived from the experiences of Korean workers in this highly exploitative and abusive system of industrial production. While workers' frustration and anger kept growing, they were denied legitimate outlets to air their grievances and seek remedies. Given the predominant role of the state in maintaining labor discipline, and given the long period of favorable labor market condition, Korean employers felt no strong need to cultivate a satisfied and committed workforce. Under the façade of a "family-like factory system," a highly despotic and abusive authority was exercised in Korean industry, producing the deeply resentful labor force. It is this bitter experience of labor in Korean factories that provided a springboard for the later explosions of labor militancy.

4 A Martyr, Women Workers, and Churches

We fought in order to free ourselves from oppression. We struggled in order to live like human beings. Oh, where is the equality God has bestowed upon us? Oh, the world, do you see our pains?

(A workers' song, in Suk Jung-nam 1984, 168)

On the afternoon of November 13, 1970, a small protest occurred in a garment district, known as Pyunghwa Market, located in the western section of Seoul. A dozen young workers shouted slogans demanding the improvement of working conditions for Pyunghwa garment workers. But shortly after they gathered, the police and market security rushed in and tried to break up their protest. The protesters refused to budge. They had been planning this protest for some time and were determined to make their voices heard. This was not their first attempt to demonstrate. Previous attempts had been aborted by false promises from the government that it would comply with their demands and force employers to improve working conditions. These protesters were the members of a small labor group, called *Samdonghoi*, composed of a dozen young tailors working in the sweatshop district of Pyunghwa Market. The man who organized the group and also the demonstration was a 22-year-old tailor named Chun Tae-il.

Chun Tae-il had been deeply concerned about the wretched working conditions in the garment district and had devoted a great deal of his time

and effort to seeking ways to improve the working conditions for some 20,000 workers. He had written petition letters to the Bureau of Labor, to newspapers, and even to the president, pleading for their attention to the human suffering that was going on in the garment district. He even conducted a survey, with the help from the *Samdong* group members, to present to the authorities with hard evidence of the inhumane working conditions that existed in Pyunghwa Market, but all to no avail. His pleas were simply disregarded, ridiculed, or responded to with false promises. Finally, Chun Tae-il came to the grim conclusion that there was no other recourse than an extreme act of protest. As he prepared for the demonstration on November 13, Chun secretly prepared to sacrifice himself for the cause of labor struggle.

While scuffles were going on between the protesters and the police and market security, Chun disappeared for a few minutes. When he returned, he was holding a can of gasoline in his hand. Suddenly he poured gasoline over his body and set himself on fire. His body was instantly wrapped in shooting flames. The stunned crowd heard Chun shouting from within the flames: "We are not machines!"; "Let us rest on Sunday!"; "Abide by the Labor Standard Laws!"; "Don't exploit workers!" People saw he was holding up a booklet of the Labor Standard Laws. This was the booklet he had been delighted to discover a couple of years earlier at a used book store because he found, to his surprise, that the nation's labor laws prescribed favorable working conditions and worker compensation. He had studied these labor laws diligently and had pinned his hopes on them. He had written many letters to government authorities, hoping they would make employers abide by these laws, and ultimately realized that neither the government nor employers paid any attention to these laws. When his fellow workers finally managed to extinguish the fire, his body had already been burned dark. Semi-conscious, he pleaded with them, "Please do not waste my life!" He was taken to hospital, where his final words were to his beloved mother, Lee So-sun: "Mom, please accomplish the work which I haven't succeeded in accomplishing." Then, breathing his last, he again told his mother, "Mom, I . . . am hungry" (Cho Young-rae 1991, 281-292).

In many ways, Chun's self-immolation marked the beginning of South Korea's working-class formation. It sowed the spirit of resistance and rebellion in the minds of millions of workers and provided a powerful symbol for the working class in a society that had thus far had no sacred symbol or venerable tradition to inspire and mobilize workers for a collective goal. This incident also indicated that the industrial problems generated by the rapid process of export-oriented industrialization (EOI) were not going to remain hidden in the industrial arena, but were going to be a volatile source of tension and social conflicts. Industrial workers had entered the

stage of history as a critical force of social contention and social transformation in South Korea.

The Pyunghwa Market was a one-block-long, four-story-high maze of small garment factories interspersed with clothing shops, employing some twenty thousand young workers, about 90 percent of whom were women, between the ages of 14 and 20. They worked in small cubicles with no more than four- or five-foot-high ceilings, and with no sunshine and no ventilation. They were forced to work, on average, 14 hours a day and received less than \$30 a month in wages (at the 1970 exchange rate). Apprentices constituted more than one-third of the workforce and they received one-fifth (3,000 won a month) of the regular stitchers' wages. The average age of the apprentices was 15 years, and with this low wage they could not even feed themselves adequately (Cho Young-rae 1991, 99-112).

Chun Tae-il began his labor struggle out of his deep humanistic concern with the plight of these young women apprentices. One day, he wrote to a friend, "We usually start work at 8:30 in the morning and finish at 10 or 11:30 at night. What do you think about it? Don't you think it's too grueling? Fourteen hours a day! How can these young apprentices bear such long hours of work?" (Chun Tae-il 1988, 122). He continued, "Although they are denied an affluent environment, aren't they also human beings with human frailty? Dear Won-sup, as a tailor I must spend a whole day with them. That's too painful for me. At the age of fourteen, they are only children, but they must toil the whole day doing such difficult work, and then they often get scolded by the tailor for not finishing their jobs on time, and during lunch time, they eat their tiny packed lunch box they brought from home, just like an elephant eating biscuits" (123). He was also deeply concerned about the inequality in society. His diary, letters to friends, and the draft of a novel he wrote, all demonstrate how much he was tormented by the sufferings of young factory girls and by all the social injustices surrounding him. "While employers spend 200 won on their lunch," he lamented, "young workers spend 50 won for their three meals—this is an inhumane thing. . . . Why must these pure and unspoiled young girls become manure for the dirty and greedy rich people? Is this the reality of society? The rule of the rich and the poor?" (Cho Young-rae 1991, 207).

The unabated labor exploitation and the enormous amount of human suffering Chun Tae-il protested against were the prevailing conditions for a growing number of factory workers employed in the labor-intensive export manufacturing sector in the 1970s. Yet the groans of the suffering workers were not heard by the mainstream society. In the 1970s, the success of EOI strategy was visible, with booming export industries and rapid growth in GNP and living standards. The nation's leaders were content with the way the economy was going and were preoccupied with quicken-

ing the pace of economic growth. Workers' complaints or protests were treated simply as a temporary nuisance, something that could be solved only by the nation's economic pie growing bigger. Both political leaders and the majority of the middle class did not really have a sense of what was happening on the factory floor to produce this economic growth.

Chun Tae-il's self-immolation sent a shock wave across society. In particular, it awakened the intellectual community to the dark side of export-oriented industrialization, to the problems of the millions of workers who were suffering under the façade of the economic miracle. Significantly, it provided the first critical moment in which students began to realize the serious dimensions of labor problems and that they must broaden their political struggles to encompass the issue of economic justice. Many students attended Chun Tae-il's funeral, and students at several major colleges in Seoul staged demonstrations or held memorial services for Chun on campus. Chun Tae-il's tragic death thus provided a critical interlinkage between labor struggles and the students' political struggles for democracy.

However, the 1970s was too early for the development of a well-organized labor movement. The number of factory workers employed in the export manufacturing sector increased rapidly, but these were predominantly neophyte industrial workers freshly recruited from the countryside. They were preoccupied with adapting to the new work environment and took the hardships of work more or less as normal. When the exploitation and abuse reached an extreme level, the accumulated pain and anger of the workers burst into violent acts of protest, many times in violent and emotional individualistic actions. After Chun Tae-il's self-immolation, several other workers attempted suicide in protest against mistreatment at work. In fact, attempted self-immolation became a recurring theme in the Korean working-class struggles in the 1970s and the 1980s (Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyŏpuihoe 1984, 85). Sometimes, a group of workers spontaneously got together to demand delayed or unpaid wages or to denounce physical or verbal abuse by managers. In some cases, protesting workers actually turned into an angry mob, as at the Hyundai shipyard in 1974, where three thousand angry workers, outraged by the company's introduction of a new subcontracting system, destroyed company buildings and set fire to managers' cars and other company property. These spontaneous and individualistic forms of protest had little effect in bringing the desired change to the industries. They generated only a short period of public sympathy, and usually ended in great individual sacrifice.

Struggle for Independent Unions

Gradually, however, another stream of labor activism began in the second half of the 1970s as workers began to realize the importance of more

systematic and collective efforts to improve their lot. Union consciousness slowly crept into the minds of a small vanguard of workers employed in the light manufacturing industries and workers began to realize that representative unions were the most effective means of improving their situation. The majority of the workers in the export manufacturing sectors in the 1970s were unorganized, and where unions existed they were most likely to be controlled by the company (Choi Jang Jip 1989, 146-72; Cho Seung-hyok 1988).

The unionization struggle that began in the 1970s was, therefore, aimed either at creating new independent unions or capturing control of company unions (*ŏyong chohap*) and transforming them into genuine representative unions. The first major attempt to organize an independent union occurred at none other than the place where Chun Tae-il sacrificed himself for the cause of the working-class movement. Two days after Chun's funeral on November 18, 1970, his fellow workers in Pyunghwa Market organized a districtwide union, called the Chunggye Textile Union, representing more than 20,000 garment workers employed in the district.¹ The highly sympathetic atmosphere created by Chun's death made the establishment of this maverick, area-based union organization possible. At the time of its formation, it had an active membership of five hundred workers. Given the nature of this industrial district, the majority of its members were female workers employed in small garment factories, while the leadership was held by male tailors. Although its foundation was relatively smooth, the path of this union was thorny and tortuous. The union was under constant surveillance; its leaders were continuously harassed, beaten, and imprisoned; and ultimately the union was forcibly closed down in 1980. However, born from Chun Tae-il's spirit, Chunggye union members never succumbed to pressure and intimidation, waging spirited battles to reopen the union in the 1980s. In many ways, the Chunggye union played a leadership role for the grassroots labor movement during the 1970s and through the mid-1980s. Lee So-sun, Chun Tae-il's mother, in accordance with her son's last wish, played an important role throughout the Chunggye struggle as a symbolic leader, and as a "mother of all workers."

Following the lead of the Chunggye Textile Union, several major struggles to establish independent unions occurred in the 1970s. Interestingly, the clear majority of these unionization struggles were led by women. Two of the best-known cases during this period occurred in 1972 at two large textile companies, Wonpoong and Dongil. At both companies, women workers staged a coup to take control of the company union. Unionists at Wonpoong built the strongest union established in the 1970s, presenting an exemplary case of the independent union movement. After several

1. Chunggye is a broader area of garment factories encompassing Pyunghwa Market.

showdowns with the company and the male-dominated company union leadership, they succeeded in 1972 in electing their own (male) candidate to union presidentship and ousted the corrupt union officers. In the same year, women workers at Dongil Textiles staged an electoral revolt at the union election and elected the first woman union president along with a majority of women floor delegates. Similar unionization struggles occurred in the mid-1970s at several other light manufacturing firms where women workers were in the majority, including Bando Trading Co., Pangrim Textiles, Y. H. Trading Co., Tongkwang Textiles, Crown Electronics, Signetics, and Control Data.

Churches and the Grassroots Union Movement

The most distinctive feature of this early stage of union activism, apart from the fact that it was led by women workers, was the close association between union activists and church organizations. Almost without exception, the women union activists had been actively involved in small-circle activities or workers' night schools, organized under the auspices of progressive church leaders. Here they obtained an awareness of the importance of unions and received a basic education in how to organize and run unions. Furthermore, once the struggles began, invariably provoking tremendous retaliatory and repressive action from management, the core activists were those who had been involved in church-sponsored consciousness-raising activities. Even where the unionists had no prior linkages with progressive church organizations, their unionization struggles often led them to develop close relationships with them. The fact that the grassroots union movement in the 1970s, led by women employed in small to medium industries, occurred mainly in the Seoul-Inchon region, is closely related to the concentration of labor-oriented church activities in this region.

Two church organizations played critical roles in this 1970s democratic union movement: the Catholic organization *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (JOC or Young Catholic Workers) and the Protestant group *Urban Industrial Missions* (UIM). Both were organized in the late 1950s, under the auspices of their international organizations, and began labor-oriented mission work in the early 1960s (see Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyôpuihoe 1984, 94-107; Cho Wha Soon 1988; Ogle 1990, 87). Inspired by the example of the worker-priests in Belgium and France during World War II, a small number of Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian clergy took up their ministry among the people who were toiling in the factories and dockyards. Some of them worked as laborers in factories and after a period of field experience they became "factory pastors." The UIM pastors set up their ministries in industrial towns and worked devotedly for workers or poor

residents in the area.² The JOC recruited young people (workers, students, and other Catholics) to work at or near industrial sites to help improve the working conditions of the wage laborers. In the 1970s when both organizations were most active and received considerable social attention, their activities were more or less concentrated in the industrial areas surrounding Seoul and Inchon, although the JOC's activities were a little more widely distributed outside this region.³

Although the pastors were interested initially in preaching the Christian gospel among industrial workers and employers, their factory experiences opened their eyes to the hollowness of the individual spiritual approach and to the necessity of workers' collective struggle to improve their conditions in the factory. Thus, from the late 1960s, JOC and UIM leaders oriented their activities to assisting workers to organize unions. They conducted educational programs on labor laws and union organization, and sponsored a variety of cultural and social activities to promote social consciousness among industrial workers. The principal goal of these activities was to produce a small cadre of labor activists who would lead the grassroots independent union movement (Cho Wha Soon 1988; Ogle 1990; Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyôpuihoe 1984).

The most important vehicle for fostering worker solidarity and consciousness sponsored by these church organizations was the small-group (or small-circle) activities. An average of six to eight workers recruited from neighborhood factories formed small informal groups, giving the groups names such as "morning star," "pine tree," "young club," "victory," "diamond," or "cow birth-cohort." The members met regularly under the guidance of the pastors or their staff (many of whom were college students) to engage in a variety of recreational and cultural activities, as well as to discuss their daily lives and the problems they faced at work. Some of these small groups remained primarily friendship or recreational groups, but most of them eventually turned into loci where workers acquired a sharper class awareness and learned about the importance of unions. Much of the union consciousness that gave rise to the grassroots union movement in the 1970s was largely the product of these small-group activities. As Dongil Textile workers wrote, "The small-group movement and the educational programs that these organizations [UIM and JOC] conducted helped develop a sense of solidarity among workers laboring at the same plant and a new awareness that workers can improve their social and economic status through labor unions" (Dongil pangjik pokjik tujaeng

2. Ogle, who was himself a factory pastor during this period, reports that the total number of clergy who worked in the factories and at the docks did not exceed twenty-five in the 1960s (1990, p. 87).

3. In the mid-1970s, the JOC had several hundred members nationwide (see Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyôpuihoe 1984, 255).

wiwonhoe 1985, 33). Similarly, Wonpoong workers wrote, "Small group activity is a means of strengthening the union, and its goal was to teach the workers that unions are an essential organization for achieving a society where liberty and freedom are realized and where workers can live like human beings" (Wonpoong Mobang haeko nodongja 1988, 163).

The well-publicized union struggles at the Wonpoong and Dongil textile companies are most illustrative of the struggle for independent unions. Women workers at Wonpoong Textiles (located in Seoul) began their struggle in 1972 with the formation of the Committee for the Union Normalization Struggle at Han'guk Mobang (Wonpoong's previous name). Those who played a key role in organizing this rebellion were women workers who had been involved in small-group activities in close association with a Catholic church during the previous year. A few of them had taken a public oath to become "warriors" and provide leadership for the bitter struggle that was to follow. Their first challenge was to replace the present union leadership with their own members. Through well-organized planning, they achieved a surprising victory at the 1972 union election. Of the forty-two floor delegates elected, twenty-nine were women. They also succeeded in electing a male president (Chi Dong-jin), whom they supported in opposition to the pro-management candidate. The newly born independent union faced tremendous obstacles in the following years, but the highly committed and disciplined union officers, under the leadership of the second union president, Bang Yong-suk, one of the few men who had the courage to participate in the women-dominated 1970s union movement, developed probably the strongest and most well-organized grassroots union at Wonpoong Textile.⁴ The assertive union at Wonpoong was destroyed in 1982 by the severe repression of the military government of Chun Doo Hwan and the divisive tactics of management of pitting male workers against female workers.

The democratic union movement at Dongil Textile (at its Inchon factory) was similarly led by a cadre of women workers who had been actively participating in small-group activities at the UIM Inchon office under the guidance of Reverend Cho Wha-soon, a dedicated woman worker-priest, who had briefly worked as a laborer at Dongil in 1966. The group skillfully maneuvered events to elect the first woman union president in South Korea, Chu Kil-ja, in 1972 and replace corrupt union officers with activist women representatives. Bitter struggles ensued between male and female unionists in the following years, but the women nevertheless succeeded in electing a woman president three times in the following years.

4. See Yu Dong-wu (1984) for another remarkable story of a male worker who initiated and led a struggle to organize a union in a women-dominated company, Samwon Textile, during the 1970s.

Whether or not union organizers had previous contact with church leaders, their struggles often led them to seek external help from church organizations or intellectual communities. For example, when workers at Crown Electronics organized a union and filed an application for union approval with the Office of Labor Affairs in 1972, the company exerted pressure on workers and forced many of them to withdraw their membership applications. The Office of Labor Affairs then disapproved the union application, citing these withdrawals. Not only was the workers' attempt at union organization blocked, the rejection letter included a stern insulting warning: "Under the national emergency, it is very regrettable that you violate laws and engage in activities that cause social instability, so please make sure that similar things do not happen again" (Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyôpuihoe 1984, 159). Faced with these obstacles, Crown workers decided to seek external help. They wrote a letter to the UIM:

We would like to thank you, many ministers and priests who work for the realization of social justice and industrial peace and work so hard to protect the rights of the working people. Thousands of workers experience unfair treatment but out of fear we cannot even complain about it to anyone. In this miserable situation, we are asking for your help.

We are helpless, we have no power or money. We have organized a workers' own organization, a union, but it was disapproved by the Office of Labor Affairs and by the company under the pretense that our action was illegal and would cause social instability. Please heed this absurd situation and help us to receive fair treatment under Korean law, since we after all are Korean citizens too. (159)

Why then did workers turn to church organizations for help? The answer is simply because they had nowhere else to turn (see Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyôpuihoe 1984, 453). The official unions within the FKTU had abandoned their ostensible role of representing workers and degenerated into nothing more than a vehicle of the state's corporatist control of labor under the dictatorial *yushin* regime.⁵ Also, the government's Bureau of Labor, which was supposed to enforce the labor standard laws, was more interested in preventing labor unrest. On the other hand, Korean factory workers in the 1970s were too feeble to resist the extremely exploitative and abusive practices on the shop floor on their own. They needed outside help. Consequently, industrial workers, especially women who were employed in the many small, light manufacturing industries, sought external

5. Some industrial unions within the FKTU did work to protect workers in the 1960s and the early 1970s, and some independent unions were formed in the 1970s under the auspices of the Textile Union. But after the establishment of the *yushin* regime in 1972, the FKTU and industrial unions became no more than government puppet organizations (Cho Seung-hyok 1988).

help to stand up against management and found two groups sympathetic to their problems: intellectuals and Christian church organizations. (Students did not pay much attention to labor issues until near the end of the 1970s.)

Unlike the intellectuals who were highly sympathetic to workers' problems but organizationally weak, the church organizations were in a stronger position to render support to the workers because of their international networks and internal organizational structure. Furthermore, the Christian churches, thanks to the international standing of Christianity, were more secure than the intellectuals or political dissidents from the state's ideological persecution using red-baiting. Although Christian church leaders were not immune to ideological accusations by security forces—they were actually the main targets of ideological attacks, and many of the JOC and UIM leaders were arrested, tortured, and jailed during the 1970s—church organizations were nevertheless in a far stronger position to resist ideological persecution than other groups. The active involvement of progressive churches in the grassroots union movement necessarily caused animosity between the FKTU and church groups, the church groups severely criticizing the official union leadership for having sold out to the government.⁶

Union Struggle at Dongil Textile

Needless to say, the environment surrounding the new grassroots union movement in the 1970s was extremely hostile. Employers were not ready to accept independent unions, especially those suspected of being linked to outside organizations. They employed all possible means—harassment, threats, bribes, and help from the government-controlled industrial unions—to block attempts to organize independent unions or to reform the management-controlled unions. When they failed to block the formation of an independent union, their next strategy was to transform it into a company union. The favorite strategy to achieve this was to mobilize male workers to destroy the female-dominated independent union. The demo-

6. For example, the Protestant and Catholic Collaborative Council on Labor Issues, a group of progressive Christian leaders, issued a statement in 1974 denouncing the official union structure in severe language: "If they are not working to protect the basic rights of the workers, the FKTU and the National Textile Union must immediately dissolve themselves and apologize to the four million workers and to all citizens for having become a second organization that exploits the workers." In response, the FKTU issued its own strong denouncement of the church leaders: "We urge serious self-reflection among that small minority of religious leaders who penetrate our labor organizations and try to distort the right direction of the labor movement and cause organizational division and labor unrest by agitating innocent workers, and we warn them in the name of 600,000 organized workers that if they continue to behave in this way we will punish them by mobilizing all of our organizational power" (Wonpoong Mobang haeko nodongja 1988, 97–98).



Figure 3. Dongil Textile workers with a male supervisor in the late 1970s. (Provided by Suk Jung-nam)

cratic union movement in the 1970s was, therefore, characterized by bitter struggles between male and female workers. Among several important cases of union struggles in the 1970s, the most dramatic and illustrative was Dongil Textile factory located in Inchon. Women workers' struggles at other women-dominated factories in the labor-intensive export industries, such as at Wonpoong, Pangrim, Tongkwang, Samwon, Bando, Crown, Signetic, Control Data,⁷ were equally significant, but due to space constraints, I focus here on the Dongil case. (This account is based primarily on Dongil pangjik pokjik tujaeng wiwonhoe 1985; Suk Jung-nam 1984; Cho Wha Soon 1988.)

As previously mentioned, the union leadership at Dongil Textile was won in 1972 by women who had participated in small-group activities at the UIM Inchon office. But the road to a democratic union was a tortuous path. Union activists had to overcome tremendous harassment, mistreat-

7. Union activists at all these companies published records of their unionization struggles, but the most useful and accessible sources are Han'guk kidokkyo kyohoe hyŏpuihoe (1984) and Lee Tae-ho (1986a).

ment, and attempts at bribery by management. They were given extra work, transferred to the most arduous and menial posts, subjected to sexual harassment, and reprimanded severely for every minor mistake. They were also tempted with promises of promotion and extra bonuses if they withdrew from union activities.

Harassment was only a preliminary method used by Dongil management to attempt to force workers to withdraw from union activities or from UIM small-group activities. Faced with stubborn resistance from the female workers, the company introduced a more vicious tactic: male workers were mobilized to break up the female-dominated union leadership and to turn the union back into a company union. In July 1976, when a new union election was scheduled, a group of male workers, with the full financial and organizational backing from the company, bribed other male workers and attempted to scare the more passive female workers in order to oust the incumbent union leadership. Ko Doo-young, the leader of this group, used a legal maneuver, having the then president (Lee Young-sook) and secretary of the union arrested on charges of misconduct and instigating workers to strike. On July 23, in the absence of the top union leaders and excluding the twenty-three women floor delegates, twenty-four pro-management delegates met hastily to elect Ko as the new union president. While this fraudulent election was going on, the company had locked their women workers inside the dormitory and nailed the doors shut from the outside. But the enraged workers broke the doors open and jumped out of broken windows to pour into the union hall. Some two hundred workers participated in a sit-in strike on the first day. The number of participants increased to eight hundred the next day, and three hundred more participated in the strike outside the factory gate because they had been barred from entering. The company cut off electricity and water, locked the toilets, and allowed no food to be brought in. Despite this, the workers did not waver, continuing their strike and demanding the release of their union leaders and the nullification of the illegal election.

On the third day, July 25, Dongil workers staged an extremely surprising and dramatic form of resistance, probably unique in world labor history. That afternoon, a few hundred riot police were brought into the factory. The appearance of these policemen in dark blue uniforms and with fully equipped combat gear was frightening (fig. 4). Some women cried out in fear. As the combat police began to approach the workers, the striking women began to undress and stood half-naked in front of the armed police. Later, workers reported that they took this action at the suggestion of a worker who had whispered in that panicky moment, "Men cannot touch undressed women, even if they are police" (Suk Jung-nam 1984, 49). Some 500–800 naked women held each other tightly and sang union songs, surrounded by stunned police and male workers. One worker, Suk Jung-nam



Figure 4. The dreadful riot police. (From Sahoe sajin yǒnguso [social photography institute] 1989, 153)

later described the scene beautifully: "In the face of such an enormous threat of violence, it was our ultimate resistance, an action spontaneously taken, with no shame or fear. Under siege by the armed police and male workers, we hung tightly together in our nakedness. Can steel be stronger and harder than this? Who dares to touch these people? That was like one huge rock. It was like a time bomb ready to explode at the slightest touch" (1984, 49). Faced with this incredible scene, the police were momentarily dumbfounded, but not for long. They moved in and began to break up the protesters, hitting the women with bats, pulling screaming women by their hair, throwing them onto the ground, and dumping them into police vans. While battling with the police, many women were completely exposed, but, as they wrote later, they felt no shame, but had only resentful tears, anger, and strong feelings of comradeship. The police arrested seventy-two women, but two hundred other women tried to block the cars with their naked bodies and some followed the cars on foot to the police station. Several women were hospitalized with severe bruises, and two women later developed mental disorders.

The enormous sacrifice by these workers did not bring immediate victory, but it at least prevented the coopted male workers from taking over the union. The management continued its divisive tactics of separating union activists from the rank-and-file and tried to drive the union into a state of paralysis. In order to fight this, the workers requested help from the

national union, the National Textile Union. To the dismay of women workers, the Textile Union turned out to be a fox: the representative of the Textile Union (a man) made a secret deal with management behind the women's backs, recommending that the union include nonmanual workers in its membership. This was ostensibly to allow the conciliation of the two opposing groups of manual workers, but in reality it was a clever tactic to bring in male supervisors to control the union.

The union leaders then realized that they were powerless by themselves to fight against the allied forces of the government and management. Their strategy, commonly adopted by Korean workers in the 1970s, was to publicize the injustices they had suffered, in the hope of bringing pressure to bear on management. In February 1977, the Dongil workers organized a public disclosure meeting to be held at the Cultural Center of Myungdong Cathedral in downtown Seoul. They called their plan the Surgery Performance of the Dongil Incident, and sent invitations to the mass media and to civic organizations. Listed as sponsors on the invitations were twelve Christian organizations, including the UIM, JOC, Christian Women's Organization, National Council of Churches (KNCC), and Commission for Justice and Peace. In their attached statement, the workers wrote:

Please listen to the desperate cry of our poor workers, who are struggling to live like (respectable) human beings despite society's cold treatment and neglect and under the employers' whippings. . . . We want to live like human beings, and although we are poor and uneducated, we have learned about justice and democracy through our union. Are we wrong to engage in our desperate struggle in order to keep our conscience alive and not to surrender to injustices? We want to hear your honorable judgment. Please give us your generous encouragement. (Dongil pangjik pokjik tujaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 73-74)

This time, the workers won. Two days before the scheduled Surgery Performance, the police released the arrested union leaders, and the Office of Labor Affairs told the company to allow a new election. In the new election on March 31, 1977, Lee Chong-kak, a woman, was elected president. It was a sweet victory for the women workers who had fought so hard to defend their representative union. However, they were not allowed to enjoy their victory for long. Their opponents stepped up their attacks to destroy the new union leadership. The management used all means to force workers to withdraw from union membership, while continually harassing union activists. And when these tactics proved ineffective, they used a more vicious method—painting the activist union leaders as acting

as the puppets of pro-communist organizations. In February 1978 the company distributed a booklet to workers, entitled "What Is the UIM Looking For?" The book alleged that the UIM, under the façade of a religious organization, was actually run with funds from international communist organizations and that the UIM's typical forms of activity clearly mirrored those of communist organizations. As labor conflicts grew steadily after the mid-1970s, the state intensified its attacks on labor-oriented religious and intellectual organizations. In addition to indoctrinating workers with anti-UIM messages, security agencies arrested several UIM officers, including Reverend Cho Wha-soon, on charges of pro-communist activities. The KCIA also broke into the offices of the Christian Academy and the Labor Institute of Korea University, both of which played important roles in training unionists and sponsoring pro-labor research, and arrested several researchers on charges of propagating communist ideology.

This ideological campaign provided a convenient vehicle for management to attack union leaders and to divide the workers. The coopted workers, predominantly men but also joined by a couple of women, claimed they were the saviors of the company's union and that their goal was to create a genuine independent union. "At the present time when an autonomous, independent, and practical labor movement is greatly called for," a flyer distributed by a woman who ran for the presidency on behalf of pro-management male workers in 1978 asked, "why don't we solve our problems on our own . . . [instead of being] manipulated by impure outside forces?" The flyer criticized the UIM for sowing mistrust among workers and inciting them to create instability in the workplace. "We are born into poor families, and so we have received little education and must work at the factory to earn money from an age when other people are attending school" (Dongil pangjik pokjik tujaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 97). Her flyer continues, "But I believe that we possess as pure and beautiful a mind as anyone can have. Why, then, does our mind turn into that of a hungry wolf whenever we listen to the preaching of the UIM? . . . They taught us many songs. They are lots of fun, but let's examine the lyrics of these songs carefully. They are all agitating and impure contents. What are they really aiming at?" Clearly, red-baiting was not simply a mechanism of the state to maintain ideological control of civil society but also a handy weapon of management in their attack on the independent union movement.

However, these vicious ideological attacks had no visible effect in alienating Dongil's rank-and-file workers from the activist union leadership or in severing the ties of the union leadership from outside dissident communities. Union membership remained high and worker solidarity was strong. When slander did not work, the self-appointed protectors of the independent union attempted to destroy the union by force.

On December 21, an election was to be held to select new members of the union's executive committee. Before election day, an anti-union group had attempted to postpone the election date and to change certain procedures for their own advantage. When they failed in this, they physically attacked the voters. In the early morning of February 21, as night-shift workers finished their work and entered the election booths, several men sprang out of the toilet area carrying buckets filled with human excrement. These men, assisted by two women, threw the human excrement at the women and rubbed it on their faces and even inside their brassieres. The shocked women tried to run away, screaming for help. But no one came to their aid. Later, women workers reported that some policemen and election watchers sent by the National Textile Union were present but that they did not bother to intervene.⁸

As soon as this shocking story came out, several hundred angry female workers gathered in front of the union hall, which was now occupied by several dozen male workers. The women tried to reoccupy the office, but they were no match for the physical power of their male opponents. The men were reinforced by several "action men" sent by the Textile Union, all highly trained in the martial arts. The women later said that they feared these men the most, more than the police or the hostile male workers. The men inside the union office put up placards: "Drove out UIM!"; "Step Down Lee Chong-kak!"; "Slaughter Cho Wha-soon!" (Reverend Cho was regarded as the chief sponsor and agitator behind the UIM-linked women activists.)

Why did the male workers behave in this way? Suk Jung-nam writes:

Those so-called opponent male workers must have some reasons to become opponents. Either because the incumbent executive board is not performing its duty adequately or the current president is incompetent . . . but they don't seem to have any particular reason or justification. They don't have any dream, ideal, or a sense of right or wrong. They must behave that way simply because it's a lot easier than working, and because the company lets them loaf, treats them with good drink and food, and compliments them for their behavior. (1984, 98)

But, of course, there were deeper reasons than just being bribed by the company. As one man who was sympathetic to the women unionists confessed, it was because of "male pride" that men were unwilling to support the women-dominated union leadership (Dongil pangjik pokjik tjaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 102). The few men who were supportive of women union-

8. According to the workers' report, one policeman rebuffed the women's cries for help, saying, "You, f--- women, shut up! I will do something later" (Dongil pangjik pokjik tjaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 100).

ists were ostracized by their male coworkers and had to withdraw from union activities or eventually betray the trust of the women workers. A deep-seated gender ideology was clearly the main obstacle.⁹

At this time, the Textile Union, led by Kim Young-tae, a notorious anti-labor president, stepped in. In the name of a "smooth solution," it rubbed salt in the wounds of the worker activists by proposing that the union be considered temporarily defunct for allegedly causing too much trouble and be put into receivership. When Lee Young-sook, the president of the union, and other women representatives refused to accept this proposal, the national union dismissed Lee and three other officers from their positions, charging them with committing an "anti-organization act." The workers protested vehemently, but they could not save their leaders from being dismissed.

Externalization of the Workers' Struggle

The democratic union movement of the 1970s spearheaded by women workers, as we have seen in the case of the Dongil workers' struggle, was characterized by the amazing spirit of resistance among workers in the face of a formidable alliance between state and capital. In the 1970s, however, this spirited resistance occurred only in a very small number of factories located in the Seoul and Inchon areas. The majority of the manufacturing labor force during this period remained submissive and passive, and the level of labor consciousness was quite low even among active union members; in fact, union activists had little knowledge of how to run an independent union. (The Christian Academy and the Institute of Labor Studies at Korea University played a very important role in preparing the grassroots union leaders by offering courses on unions.) At this inchoate stage of the democratic union movement, therefore, the workers required outside help, especially given the completely coopted nature of the official union structure during the *yushin* period.

Thus, as the grassroots union movement intensified in the second half of the 1970s, workers' resistance became increasingly externalized and politicized, which in turn invited further repression from the state. From the state's point of view, the main problem was the growing ties between labor

9. This gender ideology was strengthened by the gendered nature of work organization in South Korea. Typically, men were given more authority and responsibility and became more loyal to the company. At most light manufacturing industries where women constituted the majority of the workforce, men were more likely to be in the skilled and technical positions with a possibility of promotion to a supervisory position, whereas women were employed in the dead-end, semi-skilled jobs. Apparently, many men who were anxious to be promoted felt that the women activists were going to destroy their chances. Their gender-based bias against the women activists was thus often mixed with profound hostility (see Dongil pangjik pokjik tjaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 45).

and political dissident communities, but ironically it was the state's ultra-repressive labor policy that drove labor activists from the industrial arena, thereby forcing them to develop closer ties with dissident political communities. We can see this interesting development in the continuing saga of the Dongil workers' struggles.

Despite their tenacious struggles to protect their union, the Dongil workers saw their hard-built union paralyzed by the collaboration of management and the national union. Dongil union activists decided to continue their fight outside the factory. On the morning of March 10, 1978, seventy-six Dongil women workers sneaked into Changchoon Stadium where government leaders, including the prime minister and other dignitaries and national union leaders, had gathered to celebrate Labor Day.¹⁰ The ceremony was being broadcast live on television. At the moment when the president of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions came up the podium to deliver his speech, the Dongil workers stood up and shouted: "Solve Dongil Company problems!"; "We cannot live on human excrement!"; "Step down Kim Young-tae." Protesters quickly opened their placards and threw leaflets into the audience.

During the few minutes in which this took place, the live television coverage was halted and police and security rushed in to remove the intruders from the scene. The protesters were badly beaten, kicked, thrown onto the pavement, and taken to the police station. The protest sadly brought no positive outcome for the workers. At the Dongil factory, men continued to occupy the union office and stepped up their accusations against the "ignorant women" who had been hypnotized and manipulated by pro-communist organizations.

Union members had to devise another strategy. A few days later, forty-one workers traveled fifty miles from Incheon to Seoul and began a hunger strike at Myungdong Cathedral. Another hunger strike was simultaneously held in the basement of the UIM Incheon church, joined by Reverend Cho Wha-soon. Many other workers participated in the protest by being absent from work or by conducting a work slowdown at the plant.

There was clearly a strategic calculation behind the Dongil workers' decision to stage a hunger strike at Myungdong Cathedral. In addition to publicizing their problems, they hoped that national Christian leaders would intervene to defend the UIM and JOC organizations, and the workers themselves, from malicious ideological accusations. Now their demands were broader than in their previous protests: "Guarantee labor's three basic rights!"; "Step down, Kim Young-tae"; "Solve Dongil's problems!"; "Stop the oppression of religion." This strategy proved more effective than

10. The South Korean government purposely celebrated Labor Day on March 10, not on May 1, to dissociate itself from the international labor movement.

the previous ones. The Dongil workers' hunger strike generated broad support from the churches, intellectuals, and students. Prayers for the Suffering Dongil Workers were held at many churches, and a number of church leaders, professors, writers, and journalists joined together to organize the Committee to Solve the Problems at Dongil. But the public media turned a blind eye to this incident. Although this incident was covered in several foreign newspapers, none of South Korean newspapers, radio stations, or TV stations mentioned the strike.

The Dongil workers ended their 9-day hunger strike when three of the nation's top Christian leaders—Cardinal Kim Soo Hwan, Reverend Kang Won-yong (an influential Protestant leader and the founder of the Christian Academy), and Reverend Kim Kwan-suk (the secretary of the Korean NCC)—met with government authorities and obtained a verbal promise that everything at Dongil would be returned to the situation prior to February 21 (the human-excrement incident), that workers would be allowed to hold a new election, and that no protesters would be penalized by the company.

The protesters were exhilarated by their victory and came back to Incheon on a chartered bus provided by the church. Alas, what they found in Incheon the next day was exactly the opposite of what had been promised; both the workers and the nation's top Christian leaders had been completely fooled by the government. Not only were the protesters forbidden to return to their union, they were dismissed from their jobs. The company, with the approval of the Bureau of Labor, fired 126 workers who had participated in the hunger strike in Seoul and Incheon for being absent for more than three days without the company's permission and for having damaged the public image of the company.

The workers thus lost everything—their jobs, their hard-built union, many of their coworkers who had caved in, and their trust in their church leaders. What they did not lose was the strong bond they had developed with each other and their strong determination to fight back. The immediate goal of the Dongil workers' struggle was now no longer to revive the independent union, but to regain the strikers' lost jobs, and they had to wage this struggle outside the factory compound.

On March 26, 1978, another surprise workers' protest disrupted a grand public ceremony that was being telecast on television and radio. It was a huge Thanksgiving service, attended by one-half million Christians in Seoul's grand Yeouido Square. Suddenly in the middle of the service, a minister's prayer was halted as six women jumped onto the stage, snatched the microphone from him, and shouted: "Guarantee Laborers' three rights!"; "We cannot live on human excrement!"; "Solve Dongil Company Problem!"; "Pay Pangrim's (delayed) wages!" (Dongil pangjik pokjik tujaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 123). In less than five minutes they were quickly removed

from the stage by security agents. These invaders of the solemn religious gathering were not all Dongil workers. The six protesters were from diverse textile companies where democratic union movements had developed and been severely suppressed, including Dongil, Wonpoong, Pangrim, Namyong Nilon, and Samwon Textiles. These six women had met through a church-sponsored activity and decided to do something to shake up the placidity of mainstream Christians by exposing how the peace, love, and freedom preached at churches every week were so blatantly disregarded in the factory. They were equally angry at the media, which had given no attention to their struggle. Their surprise protest was, in a sense, a desperate attempt to capture a few minutes of media attention, to let the society know of the incredible injustice suffered by millions of workers who toiled day and night to produce the affluence the society was enjoying. Again, however, these protesters failed to capture the media's attention; the little that was reported by the media focused on the violent actions of the workers and insinuated that there was an external influence behind the protests.

This seemingly futile protest was significant in that it portended an emerging pattern of labor struggles in South Korea—interfirm solidarity struggles, which were to become a major trend in the 1980s. Growing workers' consciousness, the close linkage of the workers with democratic forces, and the government's repressive and exclusionary approach to labor control worked together to push the labor struggles outside the industrial arena and to facilitate close ties among labor activists. Interfirm linkages between labor activists began to occur more frequently toward the end of the 1970s as the independent union movement led by women workers intensified and became politicized, and as many of activists were dismissed from their jobs and continued the struggle from the outside their places of employment. The close proximity of the factories, concentrated mostly in industrial areas in the vicinity of Seoul, was of course the critical ecological factor facilitating the close interfirm linkages.

As time passed, Dongil's dismissed workers waged an increasingly isolated battle to return to work. Outside help was only temporary, while the repression became more vicious. Ten days after their dismissal, the president of the Textile Union sent out an official memorandum to all local unions and to the many textile and garment factories: "Attached is a list of the workers who were fired from Dongil Textiles because they had left their jobs and were engaged in violent behavior under the direction of external forces. So, please take proper precautions" (Dongil pangjik pokjik tujaeng wiwonhoe 1985, 126). This blacklist followed the workers wherever they went. Those who tried to obtain employment at other factories were usually detected during their job interviews and were denied employment. Those who avoided detection and obtained jobs were caught

later on and forced to resign. The workers were often told by the managers that they were not personally against them, but that they could not help because of instructions from the government (Suk Jung-nam 1984, 155).

The Dongil workers continued their struggle for several years. In many ways, the Dongil workers' struggle was no less important in the workers' tenacious attempts to return to their jobs than in their initial union struggles. If their early struggle represented an effort to improve their work conditions by establishing a representative union, their post-dismissal actions contributed to the growing underground network of the democratic union movement because it occurred outside a single workplace. The Dongil worker struggle, therefore, contributed greatly to the growing ties between the labor movement and the democratization movement of students and dissident intellectuals. By expelling the labor activists from the industrial arena, the Park regime actually facilitated the process it had been so intent on preventing—the alliance of the anti-regime political movement with the growing labor movement.

The Y. H. Worker Protest

A major labor struggle of the late 1970s that best demonstrates this growing tendency of externalization and politicization is the Y. H. struggle. (This account is based primarily on Chŏn Y. H. *nodong chohap* and Han'guk nodongja pokjik hyŏpuihoe 1984.) The Y. H. Trading Company, established in 1966, was a major wig exporter to the United States. Its founder, Y. H. Chang, emigrated to the United States in 1970 and established another trading company, leaving the management of the Korean wig factory in the hands of his brother-in-law. Instead of concentrating on the wig business, the new manager diverted profits from the Y. H. Company to buy a new shipping company. A third manager also made side investments in electronics and film production companies. This continuous outflow of capital drained the Y. H. Company, because, in addition, the world wig market was declining in the 1970s. The total number of employees decreased from 4,000 to 1,800 in the late 1970s. In March 1979, the management announced a plan to close the plant, which triggered a strong reaction from the union, one of the new breed of independent unions formed in 1975.

A series of sit-in demonstrations followed in protest. As the conflict between management and the union escalated, several outside organizations became involved. The Y. H. union meetings were attended not only by religious leaders and intellectuals, but by representatives from the democratic unions at Wonpoong, Dongil, Control Data, Bando Trading, and Tongkwang Textile companies. The Y. H. workers' strike intensified as the announced date of plant closure approached. The police was called in and

was ready to break the strike by force. Facing an imminent police attack, the strikers decided to move to a safer place to continue their struggle. The place they chose was, surprisingly, the headquarters of the opposition party, the New Democratic Party (NDP) in downtown Seoul. The decision to stage a protest at the opposition party headquarters was made at the advice of several Christian dissident intellectuals. According to Y. H. workers' own report later, they maintained close contact with these outside supporters during the strike, although they had had no prior links with the UIM or JOC. On the evening of August 9, several "young Christian men" met secretly and discussed another site for the Y. H. workers' protest. They reportedly considered Choheung Bank, the U.S. Embassy, and the NDP headquarters, but concluded that "the NDP is the place where workers can escalate their economic struggle to a political struggle, and therefore, regardless of the success or failure of the struggle, it will make a great impact on the entire society." At dawn on August 9, these men visited the dormitory and reported the result of their discussion. "Having heard of their report, union members sensed the urgency of the situation, and after some discussion over a second location for their strike, they decided on the NDP headquarters, considering the likely impact it would make both inside and outside the country and the relative easiness of entering the place." In the meantime, three well-known dissident Christian intellectuals (Ko Un, a poet; Reverend Moon Dong-hwan; and Professor Yi Moon-young) met with Kim Young Sam, the NDP president (and later the South Korean president), and asked for his help (see Chŏn Y. H. *nodong chohap* and *Han'guk nodongja pokjik hyŏpuihoe* 1984, 186-87).

On the morning of August 9, 1979, 187 Y. H. workers stormed into the NDP building and occupied the fourth floor of the building as their new site of demonstration. The NDP headquarters was immediately surrounded by police and tension arose as Kim Young Sam declared his support for the striking workers. This highly emotional, tense confrontation between strikers and police lasted through the next day. But at dawn on the third day (August 11), some one thousand riot policemen broke into the building. They smashed windows, overturned furniture, and violently attacked NDP party members, opposition congressmen, and newspaper reporters, as well as the desperately resisting Y. H. workers, indiscriminantly. In the midst of this police violence, one worker, Kim Kyŏng-sook, fell from the fourth floor and died.¹¹ Kim Young Sam was taken away by force.

The Y. H. workers' struggle thus ended in the same way as the Dongil workers' struggle—the battle was lost due to state repression. Four union leaders went to prison, and 233 workers were sent home to rural areas by

11. The cause of the death is still uncertain. Police claimed that it was a suicide, whereas workers argued that she was killed by the police. Several protesters, including Kim, did in fact attempt to commit suicide with broken glass when the police poured into the building.



Figure 5. Y. H. protesters carried away by police from the NDP headquarters. (Provided by *JoongAng Daily*)

the police. Several Christian leaders were arrested and interrogated. But, again, the Y. H. workers' struggle also made a tremendous contribution to laying the foundation for the ever-expanding working-class movement. In particular, the Y. H. struggle contributed to externalizing and politicizing labor struggles and to the fusion of labor struggles and pro-democracy political struggles.

In fact, the Y. H. incident had a greater impact on the political movement than on the labor movement. The NDP, which had been more or less aloof from the labor movement thus far, suddenly became accidentally involved. Party politics plunged into a crisis when the ruling party ousted Kim Young Sam from his congressional seat, charging him with inciting violence and social instability. Mass demonstrations occurred in Pusan, Kim's congressional district, and spread to the neighboring industrial city of Masan. Participants in the street demonstrations included not just students but also workers, the unemployed, and ordinary citizens who had become deeply disaffected with the Park government's authoritarian practices. The reces-

sionary state of the Korean economy during this period helped escalate the political unrest. As political protests intensified and spread across country, a crack began to occur within the ruling group and serious rivalries developed among Park's aids, which eventually led to Park Chung Hee's assassination by his own CIA chief on October 26, 1979. With his sudden death, one phase of South Korean authoritarianism came to an end, and so did the formative stage of the Korean democratic labor movement.

Sources of Female Workers' Union Activism

Labor struggles at Wonpoong, Dongil, Y. H. Company, and several other textile and electronics factories during the 1970s demonstrated the amazing spirit of resistance among Korean female workers against oppression, despite all the odds against them. To a great extent, it is the pioneering role of these courageous women workers that provided the basis for the democratic union movement and formation of the working class in South Korea. Of course, the role of the male workers in the 1970s must not be ignored. After all, it was Chun Tae-il, a male tailor, who initiated the strong labor resistance by burning himself to death, and it was his colleagues, the male tailors at Pyunghwa Market, who organized the first independent union and showed the way toward the grassroots independent union movement. Other male workers, such as Yu Dong-wu (at Samwon Textile) and Bang Yong-suk (at Wonpoong Textile), played a leading role in the grassroots union movement in the 1970s. It was, however, the female workers who carried the torch of the democratic union movement during this time. The absolute majority of labor disputes involving unionization struggles in the 1970s were led by female workers in the textile, garment, electronics, and other female-dominated export industries. Even where the independent union movement was led by male workers, female workers were the main participants in the struggle, demonstrating stronger resistance, determination, solidarity, and resilience than male workers (see Yu Dong-woo 1984, 126–30).

The Korean case of women workers' activism is, therefore, at odds with the usual characterization of female workers in export industries. The literature on female workers in export-processing zones stresses the extent to which they are (super-)exploited by international capital and suffer from low wages, market vulnerability, and sexual oppression (Elson and Pearson 1981; Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Kung 1976; Linda Lim 1978; Safa 1981). The dominant image of Asian female factory workers is one of docility, passivity, transitory commitment to industrial work, and lack of interest in union activism. Dubbed "factory daughters" or "filial workers," these young female workers in the export sector are described as being controlled not only by the capitalist system but also by the patriarchal traditional cul-

ture that had been reproduced in the industrial organization (Salaff 1981; Wolf 1992). Similarly, the women-dominated light manufacturing sector in developing countries is characterized as having a high rate of job turnover, weak unionism, and largely timid and ineffective labor actions (Deyo 1989, 187–96).

Recently, a new perspective has emerged to counter this image of docile female workers in the internationalized production system. It has been recognized that female workers are not merely victims of capitalism and patriarchy—they also resist and protest against the oppressive structure as active agents (Ong 1987, 1991; Milkman 1993; Chhachhi and Pittin 1996). As Amrita Chhacchi and Renee Pittin argue, "women workers have organized to defend and extend their rights and improve their situation, even in the unorganized sector and free trade zones often seen as unorganisable" (1996, 24). It is thus necessary to understand, as Jeong-lim Nam argues, "the dual nature of Asian women's experience at workplaces: both oppression and resistance" (1996, 328). The new literature on female workers thus seeks to move away from "the 'victimology' which has too often coloured studies on women workers" (Chhacchi and Pittin 1996, 24).

What we have seen in this chapter definitely supports a shift of focus from the victimization of female workers to their resistance and organizational activities. Korean female workers were far more active and aggressive in the union movement than female workers in other developing countries. They did not only resist in sporadic protests or in subtle everyday forms of resistance, but participated in and led the grassroots union movement in direct confrontation with harsh authoritarianism.

What caused them to become a leading force in the early stage of the South Korean labor movement? In one of a few studies that considers this question directly, Nam suggests three reasons for the Korean female workers' union activism in the 1970s. The first concerns the structural conditions: "The concentration of women in a few industries and their constant exposure to gender discrimination provided a basis for raising collective consciousness among the workers. Young women from the same school or region, living closely together in dormitories, could develop shared understandings and a sense of sisterhood" (Nam 1996, 331). The second reason is "the relatively low cost of participation in labor struggles," because "under these conditions, young, single women did not have much to lose from participation in labor struggles." The third reason is the availability of "few opportunities to serve their (female workers') economic interests through individual effort." In contrast, Nam argues, "Korean male workers were given opportunities for promotion and raises through individual effort, which offered incentives for cooperation with management" (332).

While helpful in understanding why women participated in labor protests, these three reasons are insufficient in explaining why Korean fe-

male workers played the unique role of leading the grassroots union movement in the 1970s because all these factors could equally apply to female workers in other developing countries. Also problematic is that some of Nam's factors could work in the opposite way. For example, the fact that women retired from the workforce at an early age (i.e., did not have much to lose) was just as likely to make them less interested in the long-term improvement of their conditions through collective action, especially when it involved much personal risk. (In addition, female workers had quite a bit to lose in terms of personal and family security.) As for the third factor, it must be recognized that opportunities for promotion in the Korean factory were extremely limited not only for female workers but also for male workers. It is also questionable whether women were less likely to pursue individualist means of upward mobility than men because of their position in the job market. In fact, a more common view is that women sought upward mobility through marriage (although reality most often belies this view).

What then is the critical factor that accounts for the Korean female workers' exceptional role in the labor movement in the 1970s and early 1980s? I believe that the answer lies in the close linkages that developed between female workers in light manufacturing industries and the progressive church organizations. As we have seen, almost all union struggles in the 1970s were linked to and assisted by church organizations. Even when unionists were not directly linked to these organizations initially, as was the case with Y. H. workers,¹² protesters sought assistance from intellectual and religious communities in the course of their struggles. UIM and JOC activities were concentrated in the women-dominated light manufacturing industries in the Seoul and Incheon areas, and female union activists of the 1970s were closely associated with their industrial missions. The fact that the 1970s union movement was concentrated in Seoul-Incheon area coincided with the industrial mission by church organizations being concentrated in this area. Whether women would have played such an important role in the Korean labor movement had the church organizations not been involved in the labor arena is an interesting question to ask. My guess is probably not.

Union activists of the 1970s, whom I interviewed, agree with this view. Suk Jung-nam, who wrote a beautiful documentary of Dongil workers' struggle, said: "The outsiders' [church leaders' and intellectuals'] role was essential. Our struggle was not really spontaneous or made by ourselves. Without their help, downtrodden workers would not have entered the

12. The history of the Y. H. union written by the previous Y. H. workers states that the "Y. H. union, as reported in this book, had no relationship with the UIM whatsoever, and none of our union members belonged to the UIM" (Chŏn Y.H. nodong chohap and Han'guk nodongja pokjik hyŏpuihoe 1984, 255).

labor movement on their own. It was because they showed deep human concern toward us and gave us encouragement that we could have done that. They provided an outlet for us" (interview, March 29, 2000). Another 1970s unionist, Kim Ji-sun,¹³ who staged the 1978 surprise protest at the national Thanksgiving service at Yeouido Square with five other workers, also acknowledged the crucial role of church groups and intellectuals at the early stage of their struggle: "When nobody in society looked at us as deserving human beings, they showed us genuine concern and treated us as respectable human beings. That meant a tremendous thing to us. We had deep trust and appreciation toward the people who genuinely cared about us and helped us with affection. We had a feeling that everything would be fine if we followed them" (interview, June 2000).

Both Suk's and Kim's comments provide a hint of why female workers, not male workers, developed a special relationship with church organizations. First of all, church groups showed more interest in the female workers because they were the most exploited and oppressed. As Reverend Cho Wha Soon stated, female factory workers were "the most alienated and oppressed of all" (1988, 135). It was natural that the industrial mission be targeted at the workers who were most severely exploited and most helpless. Intellectuals also had, to a certain degree, this paternalistic attitude toward young women workers, as people who were fragile and vulnerable and therefore must be protected. A second relevant factor is that the light manufacturing sector was relatively easier for the industrial mission to enter; it was far more difficult to gain access to the large-scale heavy industrial plants. For these reasons, a majority of the labor-oriented missionary activity was concentrated in the industrial sectors where women workers constituted the majority of the workforce.

More important, however, may be the difference in openness to church-group activities by female and male workers. First of all, female workers were more likely to attend church than male workers. More important, female workers were more interested in participating in small-group activities organized by church leaders—the main vehicle of the church-labor linkage was the small-group activities rather than regular church attendance. Why were women more interested in participating in these activities? We can think of several reasons: compared to men, women workers suffered greater psychological and emotional hardship in the factories and therefore had a greater psychological need for spiritual comfort; they had a greater desire for educational and cultural experiences to compensate for their damaged self-identity as factory workers; and they enjoyed less freedom to engage in diverse leisure-time activities. But Kim Ji-sun has

13. Kim Ji-sun used to be called Kim Bok-ja because she used a relative's name when she was first hired at Samwon Textile to hide that she was under the legal age of employment.

pointed out to me yet another factor—that women are generally more open and flexible in human relationships than men, so that they had fewer inhibitions about participating in unfamiliar social activities with strangers at the church, especially if they were not Christians. In contrast, male workers, in her view, were “more rigid and hierarchical” in human relationships and were more uncomfortable in participating in small-group activities or in any activities organized by church unless they themselves are Christians (interview, June 2000).

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that a good number of female workers in Seoul-Inchon area participated in small-groups activities organized by church groups and students, and, through these activities, they developed a strong solidarity among themselves and a sharper awareness of the injustices in their workplace. Gradually, this new awareness developed into union consciousness and a collective resolve to solve their problems by their own effort by establishing an independent union.

Gender Issues in the 1970s Labor Movement

Given that women workers were the main actors in the South Korean labor movement in the 1970s and the early 1980s, it is interesting to see how important feminist issues were in their struggles. Various sources suggest that they were not important at that time; in fact, feminist issues had been mute in virtually all labor disputes until the mid-1980s. Even in several well-organized and rather militant labor strikes led by women workers, such as at Wonpoong, Dongil, and Y. H. Trading companies, women strikers did not raise any gender-related issues as a major point of labor dispute. A minor exception was at Control Data, where women workers fought to obtain maternity leave and fairer promotion opportunities for women from their foreign employer in the late 1970s (Shin In-ryung 1988, 322–34). In virtually all labor conflicts of the 1970s, the main contention was over humane conditions for the entire working class, men and women, and over organizing independent unions to secure such a condition.

This was, of course, not because women workers were not concerned about the tremendous sexual inequality and oppression they experienced in their everyday life. We have seen in this and previous chapters that Korean women workers suffered an incredible amount of labor exploitation and patriarchal domination as well as sexual violence. Yet in the 1970s and until the second part of the 1980s, the majority of Korean women workers did not possess a proper interpretive framework or language to understand their experiences in terms of dominant gender relations. As Kim Ji-sun told me, “Of course, there were so many unfair things we, women workers, had to suffer. But at that time, we did not think that those were gender issues because the problems we faced at that time, both men and

women, were so overwhelming that we thought only in terms of one whole working class. Now we can see that there were serious feminist issues” (interview, March 2000). My interviews with other early female activists also confirmed that until the mid-1980s women labor activists did not have a high level of feminist consciousness. Kim Ji-sun, Han Myung-hee (at Control Data), and Suk Jung-nam all told me that what bothered them the most at that time was the fact that women unionists had to leave the labor movement when they married; this handicap, they said, made them aware of patriarchy and gender inequality as a serious problem apart from class inequality.

But, as in other societies, gender consciousness deeply embedded in patriarchy was the slowest to change among Korean women. Based on her analysis of women workers’ essays, Chung Hyun-baek observed, “What changed the slowest in their overall consciousness was gender consciousness. Especially difficult to overcome was their traditional conception about marriage. Nowhere in their essays can we find a statement that participation in the labor movement and contribution to society through these activities were as important as marriage for women” (1985, 156). It was, however, not just workers; the intellectuals who assisted women’s labor movement revealed a similarly low level of feminist consciousness. Reverend Cho Wha Soon, in her recollection of her activities in the late 1970s, wrote, “In retrospect, I recall numerous experiences of sexism. However, then I was not conscious. When the awareness is raised, the same reality takes on a different face. Now I have crossed the bridge of no return” (1988, 138).

Furthermore, the movement circles in the 1970s and into the first half of the 1980s actively discouraged stressing gender issues apart from class issues; the two issues were regarded separate and potentially competing rather than interconnected. As Shin In-ryung, a highly respected female labor expert and professor of law, argues, “It is very important not to confuse a primary objective with a secondary one. Selecting a wrong ‘primary objective’ involves a serious mistake of obscuring the essential contradictions [in society] and stressing secondary problems. To caution against taking women’s issues as a ‘primary objective’ also means to warn against a reformist feminist movement” (1988, 333–34).

Slighting gender issues in favor of class issues continued in the 1980s even among student labor activists. As Seung-kyung Kim observed in the late 1980s, “Despite their daily experiences with discrimination based on gender, women student activists saw gender issues as of secondary importance compared to class. They complained among themselves about the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the student movement, but they rarely discussed their grievances with men, and women who did bring up gender problems were generally dismissed by male students as not taking class issues seriously enough. In spite of sharing experiences of sexual sub-

ordination with the workers they organized, these commonalities were seldom noted by female labor activists" (1997, 141).

Conclusion

Both the Korean government and employers continuously claimed that labor unrest in the 1970s and afterward was primarily due to agitation by "impure outside elements." There is some truth to their claims in that almost all union struggles in the 1970s were linked to and assisted by church organizations or dissident intellectuals. It seems sure that had there been no involvement by the religious and intellectual communities, the labor scene in the 1970s would have been quite different.

But this claim denies the real truth about the 1970s labor struggles. What caused the labor protests in the 1970s and the 1980s was not really outside agitation but the existential reality that Korean industrial workers experienced in their daily working lives. It was the dreadful conditions of work, poor wages, and, above all, unfair and unjust treatment by management, in short "inhumane conditions," that were unquestionably the real source of the labor struggle of the 1970s. As we have seen in chapter 3, production relations in Korean industries, especially in the women-dominated light manufacturing industries, exacted physical and emotional sacrifices beyond human endurance. Furthermore, the contemptuous attitude of management toward manual workers, and especially toward female workers, caused deep psychological wounds and resentment, providing a volatile source of labor protest.

Labor exploitation combined with gender-based oppression made the conditions of women workers much worse than those of men. Young inexperienced women workers, recruited fresh from the countryside, were prime objects of labor exploitation in the labor-intensive export industries. It was, however, not just the exploitative work conditions that encouraged women to become involved in labor struggles; probably more important was the rampant symbolic and physical abuse they experienced at work. They were constantly shouted at or beaten if they refused to behave submissively, they frequently became objects of sexual harassment, and they were frequently called "ignorant girls" and treated as if they were unworthy human beings. It was natural that under such circumstances women workers cried out for humane treatment more desperately than did men.

Ultimately, these material and symbolic conditions in the workplace triggered collective actions among a new generation of the Korean proletariat in the 1970s. When these collective responses began to emerge, however, the Korean industrial system allowed no legitimate channels for airing these grievances and seeking remedies. As we have seen, the exclu-

sionary state corporatist system of labor control in the 1970s forced workers to find outlets outside the official union structure. At that point, a small group of Christian leaders and dissident intellectuals were willing to render assistance despite the risk of repression from the state.

Church organizations made several distinct contributions to the development of the Korean the working-class movement in the 1970s. First of all, the progressive churches provided a shelter, a social space, where workers gathered and shared their problems and perspectives. In the 1970s, there was no other place where Korean workers could interact freely and discuss their common problems. Second, church organizations helped workers to direct their efforts at organizing independent unions rather than sporadic individualistic protests. Through small-group activities and night schools that the church groups sponsored, workers learned about the importance of unions as the only effective means of improving their conditions in the factory. Third, church leaders assumed the role of protecting workers against state oppression, although not always effectively, and of mobilizing democratic alliances to support the fledgling democratic union movement. All in all, progressive church organizations played a critical role in facilitating the Korean labor movement and shaping the pattern of its development.

But, again, we must be careful not to be confused about who were the real agents of these struggles—the women workers not the church organizations. It was their experiences of brutality at work and the strong emotional bond they developed based on their common work experiences and common social background that made the remarkable solidarity actions possible. The role of the church leaders and intellectuals can best be understood as that of a catalyst, helping transform a structurally determined potentiality into an actuality.

In any event, it is important to remember that it was the women workers in the labor-intensive export sectors who fought hard to lay the foundation for the democratic union movement in the 1980s. The women-led struggles in the 1970s made a tremendous contribution in promoting worker consciousness, class identity, and networks of solidarity. Based on this groundwork, the Korean working-class formation developed rapidly in the next decade. Ogle is absolutely right when he writes: "When in the mid-eighties the male workers began to take action of their own, they found that they were standing on the shoulders of women who had been struggling for justice for more than ten years" (1990, 86).