5 Workers and Students

These barbarous repression and revenge given to our solidarity struggle taught truth in starkest clarity. What is choking workers is not just wicked employers, not just violent police, not just the labor department which became a tool of the regime, but the present regime which hides its vile face behind all these.

[Declaration of the Workers' Solidarity Struggle, in Donga Ilbo 1990, 71]

Several months of political freedom and uncertainty followed Park Chung Hee's death in October 1979. The Spring of Seoul in 1980 was the spring of political activism and democratic hope after the two-decade winter of authoritarian rule. The military was lurking behind the scenes, seeking the right moment and the right excuse to step in, but the people enjoyed a new sense of power and freedom to speak out without immediate fear of police repression. The civil society was suddenly resurrected.

Workers did not fail to take advantage of this political opening to press their bottled-up demands, and thus a wave of labor unrest erupted in spring 1980. The number of reported labor disputes increased sharply from 105 in 1979 to 407 in 1980. The absolute majority of these conflicts were concerned with economic issues such as delayed payments, wage increases, plant closings, and layoffs. So the labor unrest during this period was primarily a reflection of the workers’ desperate economic situation in the ailing economy at the end of the 1970s. But the labor unrest during this period of liberalization was not simply a reaction to these economic problems, but also a challenge to the oppressive labor regime. A major objective of many labor protests was to dismantle the company-controlled unions (dyong chohap) and to organize independent unions, a natural extension of grassroots unionization movement that had begun at the end of the 1970s.

Labor conflicts during this period were by and large spontaneous and unorganized. They were expressions of the workers’ long-suppressed demands for the minimum condition of “humanlike living,” and there were few organizations that could systematically organize and guide workers’ impulsive actions. Two cases of labor conflict that attracted much attention in 1980 reflect the general character of the labor movement in this period very well.

The first is the violent labor strike that occurred in April 1980 in the mining town of Sabuk in Kangwon province. Some three thousand miners employed at Tongwon colliery had long been suffering incredibly poor and dangerous working conditions, which had become worse in previous years due to the general decline of the coal industry. Miners’ wages were very low and their overtime pay was not adequate. On top of that, the miners bitterly hated the company union and especially their coopted union leader, who had long betrayed the workers, misusing his position for personal enrichment and being a puppet for management. The Tongwon miners went on a strike, demanding a substantial wage increase and the resignation of the union leader. During their confrontation with the police, however, an accident happened in which three protestors were hit by a police car. The number of protestors quickly increased to several hundred, turning into an angry mob. The protestors occupied the police station, set fire to the union office, tore apart managers’ houses, and, when the hated union president was not found, they held his wife in retaliation. The local police was unable to control the mob and withdrew from the area, leaving the town under the workers’ control. But the absence of any form of leadership and a growing anxiety over the consequences of their illegal actions led them to surrender to the police after three days.

Another similarly violent strike occurred a week later, on April 28, at Tongkook Chekang, a steel mill located in Pusan. Here again, the labor protest occurred initially over low wages and poor working conditions, but the management’s unresponsive attitude and unfriendly police intervention angered the workers and triggered violent actions. Workers broke into the company office and destroyed personnel files, set fire to the buildings, and beat up several managers and foremen. Later, they battled with riot police with stones, iron pipes, and wooden bars. But, again, this spontaneous protest lasted only two days, bringing hardly any gains for workers.

These incidents demonstrate the character of worker struggles during this period: highly emotional, violent, unorganized, and short-lived. Virtu-
ally all labor conflicts and unionization struggles were confined to individual firms, and the labor activists of the time paid little attention to developing effective industry-level or regional-level labor organizations. The dominant orientation among the unionists was economic unionism, concerned with improving the wages and working conditions of the workers [Lim Ho 1992, 62–92; Kim Jin-ok 1984; Kim and Park 1989].

Repression and the Politicization of the Labor Struggle

The political activism that occurred in spring 1980 came to an abrupt end when the military took over on May 17, 1980. A new military strongman, Chun Doo Hwan, came to power after the bloody suppression of a civil uprising in Kwangju, a provincial capital of the southwest region in which more than two hundred citizens, students, and workers were massacred ruthlessly by a special military unit drawn from the demilitarized zone [Clark 1988].

On assuming power, Chun Doo Hwan took extremely harsh measures to demobilize the civil society and resume control of labor. Thousands of political activists were rounded up and, along with hoodlums and racketeers, were sent to jails or purification camps. The regime cracked down especially hard on labor, abolishing the newly created independent unions one by one and expelling labor activists from union leadership. The Chun regime was determined to wipe out “impure elements” from the industrial arena. Employers took advantage of this anti-labor atmosphere and fired thousands of workers who had actively participated in the democratic union movement. These fired workers were then blacklisted by the security agency and barred from gainful employment. This fierce attack on the democratic union movement continued until 1983. As a consequence of these joint attacks on labor by the state and by employers, the number of unions dropped drastically, from 6,011 in May 1980 to 2,618 by the end of the year; the number of union members also decreased from 1,120,000 to 930,000. Again, workers were forced into silence and submission, and the labor movement was virtually suspended, at least on the surface, for the next three years [Kim Jang-han 1989].

Ironically, however, the Korean working-class movement grew stronger and more mature during the first years of the Chun regime. Beneath a surface of political passivity, students, workers, and other dissident groups were reflecting on their defeats in 1980, on the meaning of the Kwangju massacre, and on their future strategy. As one prominent intellectual labor activist, Kim Moon-soo remarked, “The 5.17 [military coup in 1980]—that was a critical occasion that shook not only me but also our nation’s labor movement at its roots and forced us to search for a radical redirection” (1986, 146). This was a period of much important theorizing about the nature of South Korea’s social formation, the historic mission of the minjung movement, and U.S. involvement in the country’s destiny. It was a period of Marxism and radical discourse; many students, intellectuals, and political activists were strongly influenced by Marxism, dependency perspective, or people’s liberation theology and embraced the idea of radical social transformation through collective action. For a review of the many political debates during this period, see Park Hyun-chae and Cho Hee-Yeon 1989; Hong Seung-tae 1994.

In this period, church influence on the labor movement declined considerably as labor leaders gradually became disenchanted with the church leaders’ mild approach to labor struggles. They realized that in the face of the determined efforts of the Chun regime to pulverize the democratic union movement, the church organizations were of little help and the church leaders’ humanitarian orientation was too meek and passive in light of the workers’ recent experiences with the repressive regime. By the early 1980s, there were a large number of unemployed blacklisted workers, such as the unionists at Wonpoong, Dongil, Y. H., and Control Data. The Chun regime’s ferocious attack on democratic unions produced still more determined labor activists with years of union experience who had been expelled from their jobs. Blocked from gainful employment by the government, they had no choice but to become professional labor activists. These outside (chaeya) labor activists played an instrumental role in interconnecting unionists across firms and linking them to dissident political communities. They organized mass demonstrations demanding the revision of the labor laws and the abolition of the blacklist. The consequences of hardline labor repression during the Chun regime was, therefore, the ever-enlarging circle of sŏnjin nodongja (workers with advanced consciousness), who had acquired years of experience in the democratic union movement and, from it, a high level of class consciousness. With the growth of the number of grassroots labor activists, both inside and outside the industrial arena, the labor movement gradually outgrew the need to depend on outside organizations, especially on church organizations.

The growth of class-conscious labor activists and grassroots organizations, however, did not lead the South Korean labor movement to develop autonomously. On the contrary, the working-class struggles became more intimately enmeshed in the larger political struggles against the authoritarian state. Increasingly, however, the workers’ ties with outside agencies were not because of the workers’ weakness or inability to defend themselves but because of their strength and strategic value, which other antigovernment opposition groups began to recognize. Despite their internal organizational weakness, and despite workplace conditions that stifled their interest articulation beyond immediate economic circumstances, the number of factory workers grew to three million by the early 1980s and
constituted the largest occupational group possessing huge potential. The concentration of these workers in a few industrial centers, the slow improvement of their working conditions in a rapidly growing economy, and the rapidly growing class awareness among workers promised that the industrial proletariat was destined to become a major social force in the evolution of the new industrial society.

Those who recognized this potential most clearly were the student activists. Although students had been involved in labor affairs since the 1970s, their direct involvement in the labor movement was relatively insignificant until the early 1980s. However, the bitter experiences of struggle in 1980 and harsh political repression by the Chun regime led them to view labor mobilization as a new strategy of the anti-regime democratic movement. During the first three years of Chun's rule, when political opposition was not tolerated, the student movement adopted labor praxis (hyönjangron) as its major political strategy. Their methodology of labor praxis was to enter the industrial arena by becoming factory workers and try to promote class consciousness among the workers and help them organize unions. The ultimate goal was to lead the labor struggles toward the larger political goals of ending military rule and achieving the radical transformation of South Korean society. The development of the labor movement in the 1980s was intimately connected to the large number of students who dropped out of college and became students-turned-workers, whom the government labeled “disguised workers.” Thus, it is important to examine the role of activist students during this period more closely.

Worker-Student Alliance

South Korean students' involvement in the labor movement began in the early 1970s. Chun Tae-II's self-immolation in 1970 was an important trigger of this movement. On hearing of Chun's heroic protest by self-sacrifice, students from several colleges rushed to the hospital emergency room where he had died. They tried to carry out Chun's funeral, but the police forbade this. Students were particularly touched when they discovered that Chun Tae-II had longed for acquaintance with intellectuals who could render some help in his lone struggle against the unsympathetic government. Chun was known to have said frequently, "How I wish I had a college student friend" (Cho Young-rae 1991, 168). He lamented his ignorance in legal matters and his lack of ties with influential people. Chun's death thus provided an awakening for students. They discovered one of the most serious problems in South Korean society hidden behind the glory of economic development, something to which they had paid little attention in their preoccupation with political issues. The students who had to become involved in labor issues in the 1970s, however, were primarily motivated by humanitarian concern for workers who suffered from inhumane conditions, and thus their orientation was not much different from that of church leaders. One of the earliest students-turned-workers, Kim Moon-soo (who became a factory worker in the early 1970s well before labor praxis became popular among student activists) explained his motivation for entering factory world: "the rudimentary realization that not only do industrial workers constitute a large group but also the labor movement constitutes the core force for societal development, that workers must also be able to live as respectable human beings, and that when Chun Tae-II even committed self-immolation I must make at least a small contribution... these are all the reasons why I decided to select the life of a factory worker at that time" (1986, 148).

Entering the 1980s with bitter political experiences and a growing awareness of the need to build broad alliances with other democratic forces in their struggle against the immensely powerful state, students developed a new orientation toward labor. They no longer looked at industrial laborers as mere objects of humanitarian concern. They now looked on them as their most important political allies and as potentially a most powerful force for social transformation. They had seen how powerful and threatening mass labor mobilizations could be in the violent labor strikes of 1980, such as the Sabuk miners' strike. They realized, however, that the power of labor remained only a potential; it had yet to be tapped and mobilized. They defined their critical task as that of raising political consciousness among workers, helping them organize themselves into effective unions, and leading their collective actions toward larger political goals. During the early years of the 1980s, out of the intense student debates on appropriate ideologies and strategies, worker-student solidarity (nohak yöndae) emerged as a dominant orientation among radical students (Song Jung-nam 1985; Hwang Üi-bong 1986; Ilsongjung 1988).

Thus, from the early 1980s the number of students who carried their political convictions into the factories increased dramatically. Some dropped out of college, some graduated, and some were expelled from their schools for being involved in illegal anti-government demonstrations. The greatest number, several hundred a year, entered factories between 1983 and 1986. Ogle (1990, 99) estimates that there were approximately three thousand or more students-turned-workers by the mid-1980s. My informants gave slightly higher estimates and told me that about a half of these students

1. This essay presents an excellent description of the experience of an intellectual who participated deeply in the democratic union movement. Kim Moon-soo was one of a few students-turned-workers, who was elected president of a local union and was able to lead the union movement with strong support from the rank-and-file members even after the company disclosed his identity and tried to discredit his true motives for union activity. In the 1990s, he entered politics, and he was elected to National Assembly in 1996.
were women (Chung Kwang-pil, Roh Hoe-chan, Sim Sang-jung, and Lee Sun-ju, interviews, summer 1996; see also Hwang 1985, 15). They were mostly employed in medium-size manufacturing firms located in major industrial centers around Seoul, Incheon and Puppyong (west of Seoul), and Anyang (south of Seoul). Very few of them went to the heavy industrial belts in the southern part of the country, such as Ulsan, Masan, and Changwon.

In the early 1980s, there were so many students-turned-workers in factory towns in Seoul-Incheon area that they unknowingly bumped to one another in their disguised identities. Kim Seung-kyung tells one student-turned-worker’s interesting story, a story similar to those I have heard from my own informants: “I went to work [as a disguised worker] at a small electronics factory with 140 employees in Incheon. And guess what? Of those 140 workers, there were about 10 disguised workers. Immediately, I could tell who were activists (hwadongga). That small factory was over-flowing with hwadongga” (1997, 135).

Students-turned-workers went through a difficult period of adapting to hard factory life and establishing themselves as sincere and trustworthy people to fellow workers. Then they began to recruit workers to form small groups (sogurup), designed to cultivate class identity and consciousness among workers through study, discussions, and recreational activities. Composed of seven to twelve workers, these small groups met regularly to discuss labor-management issues and study labor history, labor laws, and the logistics of organizing a union. During the first half of the 1980s, an estimated two thousand factory workers in the Kyungin (Kyungsan-Incheon) areas participated in these small-group activities and received a consciousness-raising education. Close social networks developed among these small groups across firms through the overlapping ties of the students-turned-workers and the outside (chaeya) labor activists who had been fired from their jobs for their union activities. Many of those who played a major role in the democratic union movement in the second half of the 1980s were those who had actively participated in these small-group activities.

As the students’ labor praxis became a dominant trend in the student movement in the 1980s, controversies arose among the activists over the most appropriate strategy for labor mobilization. Broadly speaking, student labor strategists were divided into two opposing camps. The first was the “small-group movement” approach, which stressed the importance of fostering class capacity in the industrial arena by raising class consciousness among the rank-and-file workers and producing a nucleus of advanced-

consciousness labor activists (sonjin nodongia), who would lead the working-class struggle in the future. The advocates of this approach believed that any large-scale political mobilization of workers at that time was premature and unrealistic without this foundational work. They argued that clandestine small-group activities were the most practical approach, given the political circumstances under which even legitimate unions found little space to operate.

The opposing strategy was more politically oriented and ambitious. Proponents of this approach, called the “area-based labor movement,” criticized the small-group approach as putting too much emphasis on education and preparatory work while neglecting the importance of actual political struggle. They insisted that a more effective strategy was to organize the “explosive energy of the masses of workers” at the level of industrial area, rather than at the level of individual firms, and to develop political organizations that could coordinate and guide worker struggles at the regional level. Whereas the small-group approach emphasized the importance of ground work at the level of individual enterprises, the area approach stressed the strategic significance of area-based interfirm political organizations that could promote workers’ economic and political interests.

Proponents of these two approaches adopted divergent methods of labor involvement. Whereas the small-group-oriented activists chose to enter factories and work at the lowest level of the labor praxis, working diligently to raise consciousness among workers and building the foundational units of labor organization, the area-oriented group attempted to form labor organizations at the regional level and engage in political struggles in open defiance of the regime. They also, however, regarded actual labor experience in the factory as a prerequisite for their regional labor movement. Thus, the divergence of the two camps was not really as great as each group of labor activists believed at the time. Regardless of their differences in political and strategic orientations, there is no question that both groups of student activists contributed greatly to the development of the Korean labor movement in the 1980s. Whereas the small-group approach represented the mainstream of the worker-student (nohak yondae) movement in the first years of the Chun regime, when political repression was at its height, the regional labor movement became more popular among radical students with a gradual weakening of political control by the regime.

After the brutal repression of civil society in his first years of power, Chun Doo Hwan decided to introduce a partial liberalization of political activities in the hope of broadening the popular base of his regime in the second half of 1983. In spring 1984, the government released a number of political prisoners, allowed dissident professors and students to return to
their schools, and partially relaxed its tight control over labor activities. Several factors contributed to this partial political liberalization. Chun was troubled by the continual lagging legitimacy of his regime and felt it necessary to broaden its social base of support in preparation for the upcoming general election in 1985 and for the two sets of Olympic Games to be staged in Seoul, the Asian Olympic Games in 1986 and the worldwide Olympic Games in 1988. Furthermore, the goals of economic liberalization and a welfare society, which the Chun government identified as the regime's principal project, called for a more liberal political approach. Also, the robust economic growth after a brief period of political instability in 1980 probably made Chun feel fairly confident about securing popular support, especially from the middle class.

In any event, Chun's gesture of political reapproachment allowed an upsurge of political activism and labor conflicts. Labor disputes increased in frequency from 98 cases in 1983 to 113 cases in 1984 to 265 cases in 1985. When the labor movement resurfaced in 1984, it demonstrated a greater organizational strength and a higher level of political consciousness among workers than ever before. Workers swiftly organized numerous independent unions (about two hundred independent unions were formed in 1984) and fought to revive those unions previously dissolved by the government. Of particular significance was the effort to revive the Chunggye districtwide labor union, which had been formed by Chun Tae-II's fellow garment factory workers after his self-immolation and which had symbolized the democratic union movement in the 1970s. An alliance of workers, students, and other political activists staged several public rallies and reopened the union in defiance of the government ban.

The Chunggye district garment union received the harshest repression by the military junta in 1980 and its members fought against it most fiercely. The military government first arrested Lee So-sun—Chun Tae-II's mother, who was regarded as the mother of all workers by Chunggye district workers—and the military court gave her a 1-year sentence for her involvement in the labor dispute in the spring 1980. Subsequently, the authority ordered the Chunggye union to disband, and when its members defied the order it sent the police to remove union files and other materials and lock up the office. Chunggye union members, however, never accepted the state action as legitimate and fought for the reinstatement of their union. At a protest in January 1981, union leaders clashed with the police violently and threatened to commit mass suicide in protest. When the Chun regime loosened its iron-fist control a little in 1983, the Chunggye union leaders were the first to organize a mass protest in defiance of the security laws. Claiming the illegality of the previous state action, they organized a preparatory committee for the reinstatement of Chunggye garment union in March 1984, headed by Min Jong-duk. Subsequently, they organized public forums, attended by many church leaders and representatives of pro-democracy organizations, and a series of public rallies and street demonstrations. In fall 1984, an alliance of Chunggye union leaders, students, and other labor activists organized two large-scale street demonstrations in downtown Seoul and clashed violently with riot police. Some two thousand students were estimated to have participated in these street protests [Hong Seung-tae 1994, 126]. The Chunggye union struggle thus portended the emerging pattern of labor struggle based on the alliance between students and workers. The character of labor conflicts had changed noticeably by the mid-1980s. Increasingly, the focus of workers' struggles was no longer isolated economic issues but organizing new independent unions, and their new tactics centered on promoting solidarity struggles among workers in several factories located within an industrial area. The concentration of factories in a few industrial parks and the close personal networks developed among the labor activists made this strategy feasible. The changed character of working-class struggles in the mid-1980s was demonstrated most clearly by two major worker struggles that occurred in 1985: the strike at a conglomerate firm, Daewoo Automobile Plant; and the solidarity struggle among workers employed at several factories located in Kuro Industrial Park. Both were, to a great extent, the products of student involvement in the labor movement.

**Daewoo Auto Strike**

On April 22–23, 1985, a very unusual wage negotiation was held at Daewoo Auto Company's Pupyong plant, located approximately twenty miles west of Seoul. [This account is based primarily on Daewoo Auto Union 1985.] Two men faced each other across the table in a temporary meeting room at the plant. One man was Kim Woo Jung, chairman of the Daewoo group, at the time the fourth largest conglomerate in South Korea, and the other man, wearing a red ribbon on his head, was Hong Young-ryo, a representative of the striking workers. Until two days before, wage negotiations had been held between the president of the Daewoo Auto Company, Choe Myung-kul, and a team of union representatives. But as the negotiations deteriorated and the six-day strike became violent, and as the media began to highlight the strike, the conglomerate's chairman decided to settle the matter himself.

Hong, the 28-year-old leader of the striking workers, was not a union leader, nor was he a typical worker. He was an ex-college student who had majored in philosophy for two years and then dropped out to become one of several students-turned-workers who entered the Pupyong plant in the early 1980s.
Daewoo Pupong workers' highly organized and aggressive struggle, unprecedented at Daewoo or at any Korean conglomerate firm, had been initially organized and led by two other students-turned-workers, Song Kyung-pyung and Lee Yong-sun. In August 1984, Song led a protest against the company for treating unfairly those who returned from compulsory military service during their tenure with the company. The law prescribed that the length of service in the military be counted toward tenure at the company, but management refused. Workers had been extremely unhappy about unpaid bonuses in the past two years and with underpayments in their holiday and overtime wages. Workers' brewing resentment burst out in a spontaneous protest in early August 1984 over another unreasonable work assignment for workers who had just returned from three days of reserve army drill. The workers were angry not only with management but also with the company union, which had been collecting dues from them but had done nothing for them. During the course of the workers' protest, Song and Lee skillfully articulated the workers' resentment and channeled it to the larger issues of labor relations and union representativeness. The company investigated the backgrounds of Song and Lee and discovered that they were students-turned-workers. Management then assigned Song to a clerical post and transferred Lee to an affiliate company in another locality. However, both of them refused to comply with these transfer orders and fought to retain their posts. Although they were eventually fired and physically forced to leave the factory, their spirited fight made a great impact on other workers. Workers came to acquire a strong sense of their rights in the face of the many unfair and arbitrary practices of management and showed a strong desire to transform their puppet union into a genuine representative union. They organized a special Committee for Normalization of the Union and prepared themselves for a major confrontation with management and the incumbent union leadership. With overwhelming support from rank-and-file members, the rebel committee quickly took over the functions of the official union.

Thus, when the annual wage-negotiation period arrived in spring 1985, Pupong's Daewoo workers were fully charged for aggressive wage bargaining. Workers had a good reason for demanding a high wage hike that year: they had not received a wage increase for the previous two years due to the company's poor financial situation. Daewoo Auto, under a joint venture with General Motors, had not performed well in the early 1980s, but had begun to turn around in 1984. In April 1985, Daewoo workers demanded an 18.7 percent wage increase and a fair share of the profit from the increase in productivity. The workers had rejected a more modest proposal made by the official union. Workers further expressed their distrust of the current union leaders by selecting a new wage-negotiation team. In particular, they demanded that Hong Young-pyo, a student-turned-worker, be included in the negotiation team. After a few days of tense negotiations and sit-in demonstrations, workers went on strike on April 16. On the fourth day of the strike, some 350 workers forced their way into the third floor of the company's Technology Development Center and began a vigil protest. The Daewoo strike soon became a sensitive political issue, and the Daewoo company came under heavy pressure from the government to settle the matter quickly, lest it spread to other firms where wage negotiations were being conducted in April.

Thus, the Daewoo group chairman, Kim Woo Jung decided to intervene in the negotiations. Arriving at the Inchon plant, Kim first met with the official union representatives. After a few unsuccessful meetings with them, he realized that it would be necessary to negotiate with Hong Young-pyo, the bona fide leader of the striking workers. In a move uncharacteristic of a Korean big business owner, Kim proposed to have direct, one-to-one talks with Hong. After several marathon meetings that lasted through two middnights, the two men agreed on a wage package that included a 10 percent increase in basic wage rates, a new allowance of 4 percent, and the expansion of the company welfare facilities, including the construction of employee apartments. All in all, this agreement came very close to the workers' original demands.

The Daewoo Auto strike was significant in that it was the first well-organized strike that occurred at a conglomerate firm and in the male-dominated heavy industrial sector. This strike thus presaged the arrival of male workers as the major agents of the South Korean labor movement. It also signaled that labor activism in South Korea was no longer confined to the light manufacturing sector, but had begun to spread to heavy and chemical industries dominated by large firms. The Daewoo strike also demonstrated that students-turned-workers constituted a critical element in labor activism in the Seoul-Kyungin industrial areas, where they entered in large numbers.

Kuro Solidarity Struggle

Two months after the successful strike at Daewoo Auto, a more significant labor struggle occurred in Seoul. (This account is drawn primarily from Seoul nodong undong yonhap 1986. More in-depth information was gathered from my interviews in 1996 with several active participants in the struggle, including Kim Jun-yong, the union leader of Daewoo Apparel whose arrest triggered the Kuro struggle; and Lee Sun-ju and Shim Sang-jung, members of a secret regional organizing committee.) In the early morning of June 22, 1985, the police appeared at Daewoo Apparel, a medium-size garment factory located in the Kuro Industrial Park, and arrested three union leaders. Workers at the Daewoo Apparel factory were