

The History of inter-relationship between Tripartite Commission and Democratic Trade Union Movement in South Korea

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1. Introduction

Kim, Dae-Jung was elected as president of South Korea in December, 1997. He was expected to promote democratization of South Korea. Labourers and workers wholeheartedly supported Kim's regime more than any previous regime. It was because of their belief that Kim's regime was the first peaceful handover of power in 37 years since the April 19 Revolution in 1960 (which overthrew the Rhee Syngman dictatorship but which was quickly defeated by a military coup). Additionally, Kim's government is believed to represent not only the middle class but also the lower class. That is why the Kim regime's ideology of "People's Government" functions on the basis of the people's identification with the destiny of the regime and their mobilization for the government's program of democratic transformation. Taking advantage of the people's support, Kim's regime has been pursuing the globalization of capital in the name of neo-liberalism. But the "People's Government" is dealing with all the problems that arise out of the process of neoliberalism by shifting the painful burden onto the people. Neo-liberalism was understood as a common good for all the people to overcome the national crisis brought on by the IMF.

The ideological hypocrisy of Kim's regime was shown in the process of adopting the policy of neo-liberalism. Restructuring of industrial structure based on reduction of labour, a welfare system just for show, investment of public funds to rescue banks and enterprises and so on are the good examples which shows how the daily life of the people are being threatened in South Korea. Particularly, right after the summit meeting between South and North Korea,

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which happened on 15th of June, 2000, Kim's regime is becoming more repressive towards the workers than before. It means that his government is not a 'People's government' but a 'government of capital.' Nho, Mu-Hyun's government, which claimed to stand for (issued on) "participation and reformation" was established in February, 2002.

But Nho's regime enforced neo-liberalism as well. Especially Nho's regime have been driving restructuring public section on the basis of neo-liberalism under the good reason of reformation for public section. Workers are faced with unemployment and a wage cut. On the other hand, Nho's government tried to form a 'society-unified' connection with labor and capital, and the focus of it was to join Democratic Trade Union in The Tripartite Commission. So the government investigated the leaders about personal absurdities, which was used to compelled Democratic Trade Union to join in the Commission.

The idea of it was that labor - capital could pursue a mutual victory through social consensus. The forth leadership of Democratic Trade Union put 'social negotiation' on the major agenda of three Representative conventions, which were held from September 21, 2004 to February 1, 2005. But the representatives refused the strategy of social consensus suggested by the leadership of Democratic Trade Union

The reason to refuse the strategy was the following : the Tripartite Commission formed in Kim's government is not only the system giving a good reason to repress laborers, but is not performing the agreements between government and labor in the Tripartite Commission. Trade union movement in Korea is now struggling to acquire the right for temporary worker without 'social consensus'. Democratic Trade Union is preparing a general nationwide strike. This line raises various questions.

First, how the strategy of social consensus has been pursued? Second, has the struggle line to decline the strategy of social consensus hindered neo-liberalism policy of restructuring of industrial structure by nation - capital. Third, does the militant trade unionism against nation - capital strengthen solidarity between labor class and conflict between classes? The purpose of this article is to research the grounds to answer those questions.

2. The characteristics of Korean Tripartite Commission

Regimes and capitals after 1987 attempted to concretize the above tactic. 'Studying Committee of Labour Law' in Noh, Tae-woo regime and 'Committee for Reformative Labour Relation' in Kim, Young-Sam regime are the examples. The question of social consensus policy is not founded on such multi-dimensional consensuses of opposition parties, civil movement camps and labour movement groups.

However, Kim, Dae-Jung regime activated the reinforcement of social consensus based on the overall consensus from all directions. Kim's regime tried to form 'the Tripartite Commission' right after the government required relief funds to IMF in November 21, 1997. The expected state such as large - scale unemployment, long-term depression was straining all of nation, capital and labor. So through a resolution of the Central Committee, DTU required the government to organize 'the Tripartite Commission' for overcoming economic crisis and the stability of employment.

It means that Kim's regime fortified a structure which asks KCTU to participate in a tripartite committee of workers, owners of companies and government authorities, to work legitimately in South Korea. In the above-mentioned committee, individual activists from labour unions are being delegated as representative. For Kim's regime has nation-wide connection to diverse labour unions from the time when Kim, Dae-Jung himself was the head of opposition camps before.

The political functions of the tripartite committee of labour, capital and the government are classified into four purposes. Firstly, the committee carries out the mission of making the Korean internal market more open to foreign investors and follows the principles of IMF faithfully. Secondly, it helps to gain a kind of legitimacy for the regime by establishing a form of participatory democracy. Thirdly, it should take a role in breaking the harmony among labour classes by systematic intervention and divide and rule policy. Fourthly, it should foreclose the possible struggle or strike by grassroots classes in the process of restructuring. The problem is that KCTU was contained by the regime's tactic in the process of affiliating to and withdrawing from the committee.

But those who had a critical view on the tripartite committee evaluated that 'the committee is neo-liberalistic corporatism for winning labor class to their side falsely, or only a new means for control over labor class.'

Due to these differences of recognition, KCTU couldn't help adopting social consensus strategy of nation-capital as a tactic means.

The tactic of the KCTU brought about two problems. One is the fact that it caused confusion in the working class in identifying the characteristics of Kim's regime. The other is the fact that it offered an opportunity for corporatist bargaining to be emergent inside labour union movement. Kim's and Noh's regime used corporatist bargaining as the tool for containing the leaders of labour movements.

Differently from South Korea, 'National economic development and Labour Committee (Nedlac) in South Africa is also an example of corporatist bargaining. But as long as Nedlac is "struggling to participate in the decision making of anti-apartheid program and anti-authoritarian government," labourers in South Africa are "supportive of the committee for their activity against anti-apartheid, reinforcement of tripartite system, and actual democratization." E. C. Webster explains Nedlac of South Africa with game theory. He argues that "Nedlac is the final version of corporatist bargaining." But it is "an important line, which infiltrates into the hegemony of working classes by way of reformative corporatism." 'Growth, employment and redistribution' are the main targets of tripartite, who are following the neoliberal line after 1996. Nevertheless, Nedlac of South Africa is leading a class struggle between the black workers and mass and the economically superior white bourgeois.

Poulantzas indicates that social consensus is seeking "reconciliation among hostile classes by systematizing the class struggle and by denying class identity of ruling classes. Thus, it needs to ascertain the cooperation among labourer classes to overcome identity crisis of labourers." On the other hand, bargained corporatism in South Korea is resolved by a struggle line based on labourer classes. However, Kim's and Noh's regime still agonizes to break the integrated line of labourer class by withdrawing the policy of social consensus. It means that Kim's regime realizes that unless the labour classes accept being comrades of the regime, the policy of neo-liberalism is hard to be planted in South Korea.

3. The Korean Tripartite Commission and Struggles of KCTU

KCTU has struggled against neo-liberalism policy which got into its stride from 1998. It has chosen diverse struggling ways to participate in , be absent from, return to, secess from the tripartite commission. These struggling ways are classified into six stages by periods (according to an occasion). The following table shows periods at each stage, struggling subjects, struggling tactics, and struggling contents.

(Fig 1) The Struggles of KCTU by periods.

	Periods	Struggling Subjects	Struggling Tactics	Struggling Contents
1st Stage	1998.1.15 ~ 1998.2.9	The first KCTU	Consensus Struggle	Agreed on dismissing worker and Despatched working between government and KCTU
2nd Stage	1998.2.10 ~ 1998.3.31	Emergency Committee	Inside Organization	Election of Union Leader of KCTU
3rd Stage	1998.4.1 ~ 1999.3.31	The Second KCTU	General Strike Struggle	No Restructuring Shortening of Labour Time
4th Stage	1999.4.1 ~ 2000 년 12.	Replaced Leader of KCTU	Flexible General Strike Struggle	No unemployment No Retirement
5th Stage	2001.1 ~ 2003.12	The Third KCTU	General Strike Struggle	No Restructuring Shortening of Labour Time No unemployment No Retirement

As shown in (Fig 1), the struggles of KCTU can be divided into six phases. The first was the phase to participate in the social consensus of Kim's regime. The second was to elect the new leaders of the KCTU, after the old leaders were expelled by the representative members of the union. The third stage, fourth stage, and fifth stage were the phases for struggling against the neoliberal policy of restructuring. But the sixth stage the phase to pursue the social consensus strategy in priority.

In 6th of February, 1998, the committee of labour, capital and government issued a joint declaration. The key contents of it were "equal sharing of the suffering of the IMF, acceptance of unemployment and outsourcing, legalization of teachers' union." But the representatives of the KCTU rejected accepting the declaration of the committee. As a result, the leaders of KCTU were expelled from their positions. The next leadership struggled against the policies of restructuring, shortening of the labour time and unemployment.

Kim's regime systematically internalized labour union movement by establishing a tripartite commission of labour, capital and government to establish social consensus among labourers.

It was to isolate the labour movement from the interests of the masses. Kim's regime tried to make KCTU leaders participate in the committee. KCTU in 1996 through 1997 was an anti-government union, which tried its' best to look after the interest and livelihood of the labourers. It is natural that Kim's regime regards the KCTU as the prime object of containment. To KCTU, the tripartite commission was a challenge. If not to participate in the tripartite commission, it was certain that Kim's regime will exclude KCTU from the mass by adopting a social consensus policy. If accepted an idea to take part in the tripartite commission, Kim's regime would be coercive to KCTU to accept a program of bargained corporatism and to take sides with a policy of neo-liberalism.

The debate around this agenda can be interpreted as follows. Firstly, there was an agreement not to participate in the tripartite commission program. Secondly, there was an idea that KCTU should use the commission for its own advantage. Thirdly, there was a force who argued that KCTU should positively accept the tripartite commission program.

The position of no participation clarifies that Kim's regime is anti-populace and anti-democratic. The tripartite committee is believed to be a pseudo-committee, which deters the labour movement from opposing neo-liberalism.

On the other hand, the position of positive participation argues that 'Kim's regime is different from the fascist former regimes. So it can offer diverse policies, which are helpful to the labourers and labour union.' Under this standpoint, labour movement should follow the social consensus enough not to be class-centered under the national crisis. Under this condition, there is no choice for KCTU but to follow the policies of the regime such as neo-liberalism and restructuring. To follow the regime was seen as the one and only answer to implant democracy in the society. This kind of line couldn't overcome the illusion given by the regime, which was to eradicate the labour movement on the basis of social consensus.

Lastly, those who wanted to use the opportunity expressed as follows. 'Kim's regime has two faces. One is reformative face for democratization and the other is retroactive against the labourer forces.' They wanted to support the positive side of the regime to the labourers. They worried about the fact that when KCTU reject to take part in the committee, it could cause an unstable atmosphere to the employment. So they wanted KCTU to be a negotiable union, which can selectively affiliate with the government according to the issues. They could actually acquire positive agreement from the members of KCTU. But there arose a confusion in the line of struggle against the government.

Inside the labour union movement, there exists diverse types of lines. The first leaders of KCTU fought inside the system, within the tripartite committee. But the second leaders of the KCTU kept an equal distance between the fighting inside the system and the fighting outside. The leaders of this phase already overcame the illusive perspective towards Kim's regime. The following figure shows a periodization of the tripartite committee, modes of participation of KCTU in the committee and the main contents of the struggle of KCTU.

(Fig 2) The Ways of Participation of KCTU in the Tripartite Commission republic of Korea and Contents of Struggle.

periods	1st Phase	2nd Phase	3rd Phase
KCTU	(1998.1.15 ~ 1998.2.9)	(1998.4 ~ 1999.2)	(1999.3 ~ 2005.12)
Ways of participation	Total participation	Conditional participation	No participation
Subjects	1st leaders of KCTU	2nd leaders of KCTU 2nd replaced leaders of KCTU	2nd replaced leaders of KCTU 3rd leaders of KCTU
Main struggle	policy-making struggle	labour-Gov. negotiation+ general strike struggle	struggling for legitimization+ general strike struggle
Process of participation Decision	unity of labour, government, and capital → delegate → decision of participation	labour-government negotiation(6.5) → returning(6.19) participation → declaration of no participation(7.10) → declaration of returning participation(7.27) → no participation(Feb, 99.)	No participation

By incorporating the leaders of KCTU, Kim's regime tried to prevent the labour movement against neo-liberalism from breaking out. But as shown above, the tripartite commission couldn't work regularly. The third tripartite commission is working without the KCTU, while the first and second tripartite commissions couldn't work without KCTU. KCTU, as shown before, responded tactically to the tripartite commission. It reflects the diversity of opinions

inside the labourer forces and the confrontation between the labourer camp and government. Kim's regime used a collective power based on the policy of idolizing of populace to lead KCTU to take part in the tripartite commission. To this coerciveness of the regime, KCTU is tactically responding.

1) The First Phase of KCTU.

The leaders of the first phase of KCTU were elected as the representatives of the union and developed a general strike in 1996 through 1997. Their line was to struggle with the people. They believed that the labour movement should reflect the common interest of the people by avoiding the trap of a particular class-orientation. So they chose without hesitation the national interest, when it collided with the class interest. The leaders of the first phase of KCTU are certain that the reason why the general strike in 1996 through 1997 could be successful was because of people's support. For the people then were angry about the illegitimate pass of the labour-related law in the parliament. But the leaders of the first phase of KCTU rejected to take part in the tripartite commission anymore, when it agreed to work together with labourer, government and capital to efficiently restructure the economic system by expelling the workers from employment. Dan, Byung-Ho, the head of the leaders of KCTU declared a general strike on 10th of February, 1998, though he cancelled it two days later. The leaders of the first phase of KCTU succeeded in guaranteeing the right of free political activity of labour union, teachers' union and the three rights of public servants. But it was dismissed by the decision of the members for its mishandling of the neo-liberalism question. The second phase of KCTU starts from the 1st of April, 1998, proclaiming that the union will negotiate with the government about neo-liberalism and promise to renovate the union itself.

2) The Second Phase of KCTU.

The leaders of the second phase of KCTU used two-pronged tactics of struggling and negotiating against government, as they promised in the election. By abolishing the policy of struggling with the people, adopted by the first leaders of KCTU, they followed two lines of struggling with the labourers based on the class interest and negotiating with the government to prevent being isolated.

The leaders of the second phase of KCTU, as promised, led the nationally simultaneous strike(4. 16), May-day struggle(5. 1), and the first general strike(the end of May). Kim's regime under this process could successfully draw the compromise between the labourer forces and the government. As a result of it, the leaders of KCTU gave up the general strike, which was scheduled to happen on the 10th of June and instead take part in the tripartite commission. As a return, they are paid the promise of ending the repressive restructuring. This was the first success of the leaders of second phase of KCTU. But Kim's regime didn't slacken the speed of restructuring of banking institutions, which caused the leaders of KCTU to be agreed on the idea of no more participation in the tripartite commission. It happened twenty three days after the second meeting of tripartite commission. Again, nation-wide strikes such as strike by banking institution and strike by metal workers continued. Kim's regime cracked down on the strike by physical means, imprisoning over one-hundred members of the union.

But the leaders from FKTU and KCTU put off the general strike, scheduled to be happened on 27th of July and decided to return to the tripartite commission. After their returning to the tripartite commission, they could solve some strikes inside the system. This can be called the second success of the leaders of the second phase of KCTU.

After this happening, the leaders of KCTU changed their mind not to participate in the tripartite commission from February, 1999. The reason is stated as follows by one of the leaders of the union. "The tripartite commission run by Kim's regime shows that it can't solve the problems of social reform and employment."

The key issues of agreement made by KCTU and government was "abolition of restructuring program, solution of unemployment and the stopping of physical crackdown on the labour movement." But the leaders of KCTU decided not to take part in the tripartite commission to look after the interests of labourer forces.

3) The Second Replacement Leaders of KCTU.

The second replacement leaders of KCTU harmonized the lines of struggle of the first and second leaders of KCTU. In other words, the line of the second leaders of KCTU can be called 'struggling line of populace looking for formal legitimacy.' It connected the first leaders' line of 'struggling with the people' with the second leaders' line of 'struggling with

the labourer classes.' It is a realistic line in one sense, but an opportunistic line in the other sense.

The second leaders of KCTU, though there were continuous attempts by the government to revive the committee, decided not to take part in the tripartite commission. The decision was based on the requirements of stopping of restructuring and solving the problem of unemployment.

But the second leaders of KCTU developed two struggle lines at the same time. One was to legitimize the KCTU, while the other was to reorganize the union. But actually, their line declined to a struggle for the first goal.

The second leaders of KCTU organized the general strike on the 31st of May, 2000, but just a few unions took part in the strike. The strike by metal workers' union was just a formality. Many other strikes such as subway workers' strike on 19th of April, 1999, television companies' strike on 13th of July, 1999, Halla heavy industry workers' strike in July, 1999 were developed, but the second leaders of KCTU failed to show leadership.

However, there comes a chance that they couldn't help participating in the strike against restructuring in the first half of 2000. So they led the general strike on May, just revealing the lack of leadership. The lack of leadership is shown in the ossification of the strike. The strike by the workers of Hotel Lotte on July, 2000 could make a momentum to overcome such ossified struggle. The second leaders of KCTU stated that Kim's regime is fascist regime, which is based on the physical means of crackdown on the labour movement. The workers of Hotel Lotte could successfully get through their requirement of recovering the positions of the dismissed workers. The problem of the second leaders of KCTU couldn't organize the national line of struggling against the neo-liberalism.

4) The Third Phase of 3rd KCTU

The third leaders struggled to hold back the neo-liberalistic restructuring policy of Kim's regime. The regime didn't perform agreements between labor-government, which had been agreed from June 5 to July 25, 1998.

Then KCTU demanded to perform agreements between labor-government before discussing participation in the tripartite commission with the government. But Kim's regime enforced restructuring policy on public sector.

Six public enterprises had been privatized from January, 1998 to December, 2000. And Five ones have been privatizing from January, 2002 to the present. Eighteen of sixty-one subsidiary companies were merged and abolished completely. Thirty-six of forty-three subsidiary companies are in process of privatization and merger and abolition. Noh's government, which established in 2002, have been completing this policy on public sector.

Neo-liberalistic restructuring policy is on the basis of reformation of public enterprises, promotion of efficiency by the market, and reinforcement of national competitiveness. Through this policy, workers in the public sector were reduced to 20%, and the work conditions of those left worsened - reduction of real wages, consolidation of the system where there is no wage for extra labor.

So workers in KCTU struggled to stop privatizing national public industries - a united strike of workers in power plants, gas, rail road sectors(2002.2.25), a strike of workers in rail road sector, and a general strike for solidarity for winning 5 일제 without sacrifice of temporary labor (2001.6/2001.7/2002.3/2003.7/2003/11). KCTU kept pace with struggle for Kim's resignation and denouncement of Noh's government.

The struggles from 2001 to 2003 were joint strikes mostly like these, and the main form of them was to mobilize organizations like general strikes. The content of them was to stop government - leaded restructuring including privatization of public sector, to urge the government to perform agreements between labor and government, to organize a the Structural Reform Commission to secure workers' employment on public sector, to legitimize reduction of work time, and to abolish temporary labor.

The 3rd leaders didn't take part in the tripartite commission. Firstly, Kim's and Noh's regime didn't perform agreements between labor - regimes. This didn't cause KCTU to trust the governments. Secondly, workers in KCTU kept struggling against the governments, by which the leaders were forced to last the struggle phase. Thirdly workers recognized that the government had no choice but to guarantee capital interest, neo-liberalism, and so ended up denying governmental suggestions.

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