

UC Irvine

Symposium: Democracy and Its Development 2005-2011

Title

Creating Union Democracy, Workers' Consciousness and Solidarity: Decision-Making Process, Election, and Education in Korean Unions

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6dc1z62z>

Author

Choi, Inyi

Publication Date

2005-05-23

Creating Union Democracy, Workers' Consciousness and Solidarity: Decision-Making Process, Election, and Education in Korean Unions

Inyi Choi (ichoi@weber.ucsd.edu)
University of California, San Diego

Union democracy is an important factor constituting union movements because "it makes differences in the daily lives of workers: A union with a democratic constitution, organized opposition, and active membership tends to constitute workers' immediate political community, sustaining both a sense of common identity between them and their leaders and class solidarity; as a result such unions tend to defy the hegemony of capital in the sphere of production" (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1995, 847). In the Korean union movement, union democracy also makes remarkable changes in the daily lives of workers. Through the organizational power based on a strong sense of identity and solidarity of workers, Korean workers have increased union power in the sphere of production. Furthermore, union democracy makes important differences in Korean politics. Unionized workers learn how to play a role as democratic citizens in their society through participation in the internal politics of unions. Workers' experience making union democracy possible allows them to have a new perspective on political and social democracy and this perspective influences contemporary Korean politics.

In this paper, I focus on differences in how the two Korean union federations create and consolidate union democracy and how their constituent unions are affected. The Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), established by the government in 1954, has cooperated with the authoritarian state and the hegemony of capital, rarely challenges the fundamentals of the capitalist system and seldom encourages the full democratic participation of its members. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), a group of independent unions which is familiar with a wide range of political radicalism, always challenges the hegemony of global capitalism. Unions affiliated with the KCTU, as Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin indicate, historically more involved in "insurgent political practices," have more successfully developed internal democracy, especially participatory democracy, than the FKTU-affiliated unions (1995, 847). In addition, the KCTU and its constituents have tried to resist "the hegemony of capital in the sphere of *politics*" through participating in the political party system while continuously challenging "the hegemony of capital in the sphere of *production*" through their union actions. In this they have been quite successful.

For the KCTU and its affiliates, participatory democracy is the most crucial strategy for mobilizing union members to improve working class livelihood. They try to construct a system of democratic decision-making processes and educate union members as political citizens who actively participate in union politics as well as national politics. Elections, meetings, discussions and even all kinds of union-organized activities are closely intertwined with creating and maintaining the union

democracy. Encouraged participation in union activities and decision-making processes play a crucial role in building solidarity among union members and in training members as future leaders.

The FKTU and its constituents, however, still generally follow a bureaucratic decision-making process. Although they try to change their organizational structure into a more participatory democratic one in order to compete with the KCTU affiliates, their bureaucratic characteristics, formed by the long lasting relationship with employers and the state, hinder them from developing a participatory democratic structure. For the leaders from the FKTU and its affiliated unions, participatory democracy can hardly be a strategic choice for mobilization.

Results of these differences in strategic use of internal democracy have been clear: The leadership of the KCTU tries to extend union democracy to social or political democracy. The Democratic Labor Party organized in 2000 by mainly KCTU members and its political supporters won 10 seats in the 2004 Korean National Assembly Election while the FKTU's Green Social Democratic Party faced a serious electoral failure.

To look at the relationship between union history and internal democracy, and between union democracy and the possibility of defying the hegemony of capital, I investigate 1) how historical experiences affect union leaders' political consciousness about creating union democracy, and 2) how both federations and their affiliated unions create and consolidate union democracy by comparing various union activities, including the decision-making process, elections and education.

Union Democracy in the FKTU and KCTU: Procedural Democracy vs. Participatory Democracy

The two federations in Korea have shown different organizational characteristics, which have evolved since they were established in dissimilar ways. These different characteristics are embedded in their institutional systems and activities, such as elections and decision-making processes, which mainly constitute union democracy. These institutional systems and activities reproduce their organizational identity, enable the achievement of their organizational goals, and consolidate union democracy. They also influence organizational democracy in constituent unions that play a main role in labor movements in Korea.

Until the mid-1990s independent union leaders realized that union democracy is the most important element to sustain union organizations and a key to the success of union movements because it is, internally, a foundation of mobilizing union members, and, externally, a basis of legitimating union movements in relation to political and social democracy. For them, it is also an effective way of expressing their authenticity as representatives of working-class people against the existing pro-business unions. Therefore, independent union leaders made a lot of effort to establish democratic institutional systems inside unions while they suffered from the severe oppression of the state and capital. However, it was hard for these leaders to bring internal democracy to their

organizations because fighting to protect union organizations from the state and employers sometimes came first as an immediate goal (Choi 1988, Koo 2001). Independent labor leaders fought for organizational rights and safety until the KCTU was legally recognized in 1995.

In contrast, the FKTU has been publicly characterized as a hierarchical and conservative union. FKTU leaders did not pay enough attention to the issue of union democracy because they looked for a harmonious relationship with state power and rarely wanted any changes in their organization. These characteristics kept the FKTU and its affiliated unions from developing union democracy in the last 50 years. One FKTU affiliated union official criticized the conservatism pervading the FKTU:

Our meetings are always plain. Not many debates and discussions. We don't have "discussion culture" (*toron moonwha*) inside our organizations. Sometimes I really envy the KCTU's "discussion culture." I really want to have a hot debate in our meetings. But it doesn't seem to happen (interview with FIU official).

In fact, FKTU-affiliated union members' demands for union democracy, especially organizational democracy, have intensified and this seemed to put FKTU leaders in a dilemma. As one FKTU leader said,

The KCTU was established by intellectuals who easily speak about union democracy in theory. Also, they have been showing militancy unlike us. I guess those factors attracted our union members.... I think that the more democratic our federation becomes, the higher the possibility of losing organizations gets. Demands for democracy from local unions get stronger and stronger, so we should be democratic. But, as our organization gets democratic, local members' consciousness of democracy also gets higher and they tend to defect from our federation (interview with FKTU leader 1).

While union democracy may cause a difficulty in maintaining the membership of the FKTU, KCTU leaders are successful in mobilizing workers by constructing a definition of union democracy within the context of Korean labor politics. For the KCTU-affiliated union leaders, "union democracy" or "democratic union" means a union organization independent from state power. In this they try to distinguish themselves from the existing FKTU affiliates, which have been used as organizations to mobilize workers for state-led economic development. For the KCTU leaders, independence from state control is the most important condition to identify them as an organization working for social justice and representing working-class people's interests. They also agree that independence from the state and employers' power is a key to bringing internal democracy into union organizations. For them, the history of Korean labor movements is defined as a history of the construction of democratic

unions. An autonomous union organization, which is free from the political and economic influences of state power, is the ideal type of union organizations in which internal democracy can be guaranteed.

For the KCTU leaders, members' participation in internal union politics is another point that should be emphasized for union democracy because they believe that the independence of unions is possible on the basis of the bottom-up process of decision-making. From their ideological point of view, the independence of unions and the participatory democracy inside unions cannot be separated. As one KCTU-affiliated union official states, "Democratic unions should reflect their members' opinions on their policies and activities. Without ordinary members' interests in and loyalty toward their unions, democratic union movements cannot survive even though they have leaders of ability" (interview with KCTU official).

In contrast, the FKTU leaders are familiar with government-like organizational structures represented by the hierarchical and bureaucratic decision-making process because they were established by the government and have developed their organization through frequent contacts with state power. In this sense, it was natural for the FKTU to be shaped on the model of the government or business organizations, which emphasize organizational efficacy rather than members' voluntary participation.

After the KCTU was legally recognized in 1995, union democracy became an important issue to Korean union leaders because recognition of the KCTU as a legal organization let labor movement leaders devote their time and energy to building internal democracy. Especially, for the KCTU leadership, which has refused financial support from the government to keep their independence from state control, participatory democracy was the way to compensate for their lack of financial resources with human resources.¹

As the KCTU won its legal status, both federations finally started competing with each other to obtain more members, which caused an increasing necessity of participatory democracy. The FKTU also needed organizational changes to compete with a new rival by directing its own members' attentions to union activities. In this regard, leaders from both federations and their affiliates agree that building participatory democracy is the best way of engaging union members in labor movement activities, but whether they take this as a main strategy or not seems to be determined by existing organizational culture and history. In general, the KCTU and its local unions fully recognize the organizational benefits of participatory democracy and generate various programs to enhance members' engagement in the decision-making process. These programs are tightly intertwined with union education, which builds solidarity and accountability of union members.

The FKTU and its affiliates, however, show weak links between participatory democracy as a strategy and their general union activities. Some local unions in the FKTU demonstrate their efforts to bring participatory democracy into union activities (interview with K music union leader, S bank

¹ This resembles Ganz's findings that in union movements the lack of resources can be compensated for by a resourcefulness which is mainly based on human resources (Ganz 2001).

union official), but most unions still either lean more to the hierarchical decision-making process or manage themselves within the procedural democracy, which emphasizes formality rather than substance of democracy. Especially, the hierarchical decision-making structure and organizational culture of the FKTU are often criticized by its affiliated union leaders. One local union leader described the FKTU as "a company owned by Lee Nam Soon (a president of the FKTU from 2000 to 2004)" when he talked about the decision-making process the FKTU and his union went through during the C Bank strike (interview with FIU official). According to this leader, the FKTU asked the C Bank Union leader to approve a contract without ratification votes in order to end this strike more quickly; but the C Bank Union leader could not sign on this contract because he knew that union members would not accept this undemocratic process. This example of ignoring union members' participatory rights was criticized by local union leaders and members and, in part, initiated a new movement for reforming the internal structure of the FKTU. Another criticism of the FKTU leadership is found in an article by FIU official Kim Deuk Yon evaluating the 2002 strike in the financial industry. He indicates that the Financial Industry Union (FIU) leaders tended to overestimate the result of their first industry-wide strike and criticizes undemocratic and bureaucratic organizational culture rooted in the FKTU and its constituents. Kim writes, "Even though this strike was conducted by a formal democratic process, operations of the FIU and its constituents still depended on the decision a top leader made. Don't you think we can stop the top leader's dogmatic decision, which is against all members' thoughts, if we have a system to check and balance?" (Kim Deuk Yon 2000).

A criticism of the internal democracy in the FKTU is also stated by a leader from the Signetics Union, which defected from the FKTU and joined the KCTU while they were struggling against layoffs. One leader said, "The first thing we learned as soon as we moved to the KCTU was how to organize and operate union meetings. We had had no idea about discussions and debates before we learned from the KCTU experts from the organization department. Since then, we established some institutional structures for democratic decision-making processes, such as meetings and elections. Now, we try to reflect our members' opinions in every decision-making process through these institutions" (interview with Signetics Union leader 2).

The KCTU leaders stress "workplace activities" (*hyunjang whaldong*), which means that the federation leadership should have close connections with local union members through frequent visits to local unions and workplaces. They also encourage officials from the federation as well as local unions to get closer to ordinary members and to listen to what those members say. They think that this is the way in which they can increase participatory democracy at the level of local unions and workplaces. Also, they utilize various events, such as elections and conventions, to collect diverse opinions from the rank and file. Education programs also play a crucial role in enhancing internal democracy in unions. The federation and local union leaders make an effort to develop new curricula and programs to facilitate members' participation in decision-making processes. In turn, they believe

that increasing members' participation should enhance the working-class consciousness of union members.

However, the FKTU still follows the traditional way of managing union organizations, which is based on the top-down way of making decisions. Even though the FKTU leaders acknowledge the importance of participatory democracy, they still have difficulties adopting the new system of democracy that their counterpart employs because existing organizational culture hinders them from making radical changes inside the organization.

To understand how both federation leaderships create and manage union democracy, I examine the decision-making structures and elections mainly constituting internal democracy.

Constitutions and Inner Political Life: General Decision-making Structures and Elections

In general, union constitutions and questions of inner political life—such as whether political factions exist—have been recognized as significant indicators of the internal democracy of unions because they determine whether enough resources and opportunities for participation are provided to union members (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1995, Stepan-Norris 1997). In Korean unions, the decision-making structures and elections are the main institutional elements reflecting the constitutions and inner political life of unions.

Comparisons between the FKTU and KCTU, however, show that constitutions are not necessarily a very useful guide to union democracy because the constitutions of the two federations are very similar. Both federations' constitutions have the same definitions of member unions' rights and duties, and similar organizational structures and decision-making systems. According to both federations' constitutions, “each member union has a right to deploy its representatives, who are elected by its own members, to the general convention, and these representatives have a right to speak, vote, and be eligible for elections. All member unions also have equal opportunities to participate in activities the federation organizes” (FKTU constitution Chapter 4, KCTU constitution Chapter 3). Member unions are also under obligation to pay their dues and to observe the rules federations produce through proper processes (FKTU constitution Chapter 4, KCTU constitution Chapter 3).

Both federations and their constituents similarly give priority to meetings (or committees) as an organizational structure of decision-making. They define the General Convention, which consists of shop stewards from constituent unions, as a top decision-maker. The Central Committee (elected central committee members from local unions, national federation leaders, and the head of each regional office), Central Executive Committee (local union leaders, national federation leaders, the head of each regional office, and the chief official from each committee),² Executive Committee (national federation leaders and officials) and Auditing Committee are institutions producing agendas and policies for decision-making in the general convention.

² The FKTU calls its Central Executive Committee “Member Union Representative Meeting,” but constituents are the same as the KCTU's.

Although both federations and their constituents have similar structures of decision-making, the dynamics among participants inside meetings are very distinct because of dissimilarities in the inner political structures of the two federations. The FKTU does not have distinctive political factions based on ideological differences while three clearly distinguished political factions in the KCTU produce candidates in most elections.

In fact, the FKTU has historically shown very competitive presidential elections because the presidency of the FKTU was considered as a pathway to be a politician, such as a member of the Korean National Assembly. From the 8th (1971) to the 13th Korean National Assembly Election (1988), a total of 13 FKTU leaders, who cooperated with the ruling party, gained seats inside the national assembly building. In that span of elections, therefore, it was hard to find any clearly distinguished political factions among candidates. However, local leaders and members criticized excessive competition among FKTU presidential candidates, who were eager to use this position as their stepping-stones for political careers. FKTU leaders also recognized that excessive electoral competition could weaken their organizational power. Therefore, the 2002 election, they tried to install "a single candidate system" for the FKTU top leadership. In general, many FKTU-affiliated union leaders tend to think that a single candidacy minimizes the conflict that could be produced in the process of elections. One FKTU-affiliated union official indicated, "Current FKTU leaders are likely to be afraid of having different opinions about an issue. Therefore, it is hard to see any kinds of debate going on in this organization" (interview with FIU official). Some industrial federation leaders have been skeptical about the clearly undemocratic process of offering only a single candidate and tried to bring increased internal democracy. However, their effort to enhance internal democracy has been limited because there is no political faction which can contest the leadership of FKTU. In the 2002 election, two candidates ran for the top leadership position of the FKTU even though most affiliated industrial federation leaders tried to make a single candidacy. At that time, the president of the FKTU (Lee Nam Soon) was running for his second term and most constituent union leaders supported him, but the opposing candidate, who was the chemical industry federation leader, said that he was running for the FKTU presidency because he wanted a democratic reform of the FKTU through this election with at least dual candidates (Labortoday 01/08/2002). Even so, it was hard to find a clear difference in political/ideological perspectives between the two candidates in this election.

The FKTU had another election for selecting the top leader in 2004 when president Lee Nam Soon resigned to take responsibility for the disappointing result of the 2004 National Assembly Election. The FKTU had established the "Green Social Democratic Party" to gain political power right before the National Assembly Election in order to counter the increasing power of the Democratic Labor Party established by the KCTU (Pressian 04/20/2004). However, the Green Social Democratic Party gained no seats in the National Assembly while the Democratic Labor Party won 10 seats (2 elected from districts plus 8 proportional seats). Following the national assembly election, Lee Nam Soon also faced criticism from local union leaders seeking democratic reform of the FKTU and

objecting to unnecessary union spending. Lee Nam Soon also mentioned in his resignation speech that the FKTU needed an election to establish new leadership to take care of requests for an internal democracy that would emphasize close relationships between the top leadership and local union leaders (Pressian 04/20/2004). This shows that demands for internal democracy from local unions in the FKTU has been getting stronger.

Although the issue of democratic organizational reform was prominently raised, a single candidate (Lee Yong Deuk) ran again in 2004 for the top leadership and he was elected as federation president because "Solidarity for Reform," a group of local leaders pursuing democratic organizational reform, did not fully develop its political competence.³ It sought to change the current election system into a popular vote in order to reflect average members' opinions on the election; however, their request was not strongly supported by representatives from local unions (Labortoday 05/25/2004). The whole process of the 2004 election was broadcast via internet for the purpose of drawing members' attention by showing the transparent process of this election to the public; however, according to one news report, some local union leaders joining "Solidarity for Reform" said, "the way of processing this election itself showed undemocratic aspects of the FKTU" and "ordinary members must have been disappointed with the new leadership after watching this election" (Labortoday 05/25/2004).

In contrast, we can clearly see differences in political perspectives of candidates in the KCTU elections. The three political factions, Nationalist (*Gookminpa*), Neutralist (*Joongangpa*), and Leftist (*Jwapa*), consistently compete with each other for the top leadership positions (interview with the KCTU official 1). These three factions mainly lead discussions and debate about current issues and policies the KCTU produces.

On July 26, 2002, the 6th Central Committee meeting was held at the meeting hall in the KCTU. The agendas for this meeting were 1) union movement plans for the second half of the year, 2) a special election for the six vacant posts of vice presidents, 3) strategies for the upcoming Presidential Election in December, 4) organizing a rally for National Reunification and a meeting of South and North Korean workers, and 5) establishment of cooperative relationships with other movement groups such as the National Farmers League (*Jeon Nong*) or Peoples' Solidarity (*Minjoong Yunde*). The first and fourth agenda items were easily passed because committee members were already well informed about them through local level discussions. However, the other three items provoked deep discussion based on each faction's political interests. Some committee members indicated that the top leadership did not make enough effort to reflect local unions' requests on the process of preparing for a new election. They also urged that the Election Administration Committee should ensure fairness in union elections to inspire the trust of all union members. Several committee members also spoke up to express their concerns about the KCTU's political strategies for the upcoming Korean presidential

³ The Special Committee for Organizational Reform was established in 2001 in order to respond to requests for democratic reform of the FKTU from local constituents; however, "this committee could not make big changes in organizational structure and culture because the existing privileged power bloc was not ready to accept those changes" (interview with FIU official).

election. The KCTU was trying to unify all “progressive political parties” in support of one candidate in order to fight against the “conservative institutional power bloc,” which meant existing political parties. Several committee members asserted that the KCTU's project for the cooperation of these parties had to be discussed from the level of local unions so that it could reflect members' opinions about the candidacy and continue their education in the process of discussing this issue (field note from the central committee meeting on July 22 2002).⁴ The meeting took 5 hours, but one KCTU leader said that this ended relatively fast compared to other meetings. It is noteworthy that committee members were very cautious about the democratic process of decision-making, especially in soliciting the valued participation of the rank and file in every decision.

The special election for a new leadership (seven vacant posts for vice-presidents) on August 27 2002 shows how the three political factions in the KCTU actively participated in inner politics. This election was held because the previous leadership resigned, taking responsibility for failing in the negotiation between the Korea Power Plant Industry Union (KPIU) and the government. Except for the KCTU president, Dan Byungho, who was in prison in that period, seven vice presidents involved in the bargaining process resigned from their positions and a special committee was organized for damage control. This committee ran the KCTU for about four months and prepared the election to set up a new leadership.

Eleven people from local unions filed their candidacies. Candidates from the same political faction used the same logo and catchphrase expressing their political positions. Although all candidates projected their specific plans for integrating unions in the KCTU and for consolidating the organizational structure on the basis of union democracy, issues that candidates emphasized were different according to their political positions:

Eleven candidates were running for this election. Among them, four people were from the "National League of Workers from Workplaces" (*Jeongook Hyunjang Nodongjahwe*) which is a faction of a current labor movement close to NL—National Liberation, which used to be a powerful political faction of student movements and now called Nationalist (*Gookminpa*). One out of these four was elected. And all three candidates from the collaboration of Neutralist (*Joongangpa*) and Leftist (*Jwapa*) factions, constituting the current leadership, were elected. Beside these four, two more candidates representing female workers and non-standard workers were also elected (interview with KCTU official 1).⁵

Nationalist candidates used the same phrase, “Wipe off the grime of the KCTU,” as a slogan to express their criticism of the improper decision-making process that the previous leadership showed in

⁴ Besides discussions about main agendas, about 5 members asked for the floor on a point of order to indicate a problem with the way in which the top leader proceeded with this meeting. It made the meeting longer.

⁵ Originally, seven vice president positions were open, but only six candidates got a majority vote and were elected.

the bargaining with the government for the KPIU. They also presented their political priorities, such as a National Reunification movement and political economic independence from the U.S, which clearly reflected their political perspectives. Candidates from the existing leadership used the slogan “Strengthen the KCTU, Be united as one,” which emphasized resolving conflicts caused by unsatisfactory outcomes from the KPIU case and intensifying the organizational solidarity of political factions (campaign posters and advertisements from each candidate) and showed the will to continue union activities the previous leadership had planned.

The result of the election shows that political factions play an important role in balancing the power structure inside the KCTU; however, it also indicates that it is hard for candidates who do not have a connection with a political faction to be elected (interview with KCTU official 1).

The KCTU leaders utilized the election as a successful event to mobilize union members. Candidates were standing up in front of the Yungdeungpo community hall rented for this election meeting, greeting voters and shaking hands with them. Each candidate tried to get support from 609 participating voters (the total number of legitimate voters was 836) by giving a seven-minute election address with only their voices—even though they could use a microphone—in order to express their willpower to fight for their goals. All candidates wore working clothes like a jumper and also wore headbands or chest-bands on which their slogans were inscribed (field note August 27, 2002). This is an interesting contrast with candidates for the FKTU presidency who wear business suits and use a microphone when they give a speech.

The atmosphere of the KCTU election meeting was quite militant and vivid compared to the election their counterpart federation had. The FKTU process right before the voting is very ritualized and formalized compared to the one that KCTU organized (the FKTU election broadcasting via internet, Labortoday 05/25/2004). Also, internet communication becomes a very important part of union activities in both federations. Both the FKTU and KCTU utilize cyberspace for sharing information, collecting opinions and educating members. Leaderships of both federations broadcast the whole process of the election to increase average members' interest in union politics. It was quite successful to draw the attention even of the rank and file without voting rights (interview with the KCTU official 1 and FKTU official 2).

In addition to the internet broadcasting, facilitating communications through federations' websites is also crucial to strengthen internal democracy. Open discussion boards of both federations' websites are places where average union members express their concerns and hotly debate political issues and federation policies. Especially, during the election period, free message boards tend to be very crowded with various opinions, including harsh comments of each candidate made by anonymous members.

KCTU leaders take a cautious approach in the way they manage the free message boards of their website. Sometimes, nasty comments about individuals on the board become problematic and the webmaster is asked to delete them. However, KCTU leaders are reluctant to delete those comments

because they do not want to harm the freedom of speech. As one official said, "Sometimes, we think that those kinds of comments are really bad and unfair to a person concerned and they need to be deleted. But the center [top leadership] does not want to control the board because they are afraid that they might interrupt the freedom of speech, which is a basis of internal democracy" (interview with KHMWU official).

While KCTU-affiliated union members are proud of their "discussion culture" (*toron moonhwa*), established by various union meetings and discussion sessions and guaranteed by the freedom of speech, constituents of the FKTU are likely to complain about their generally hierarchical organizational culture and lack of communication between leadership and average union members. Overall, the union leaders affiliated with the FKTU tend to be afraid of getting divided opinions because they worry that their organizations might be torn apart if they cannot handle conflicts. Leaders' lack of experience in decision-making through heated discussions also keeps them from encouraging "discussion culture" inside their organization. Their preference of a single candidate for the federation election is a typical example showing that the FKTU leaders are likely to choose a conciliatory way of operating their organization rather than a way of productively dealing with conflictual situations.

Making Internal Democracy Work: Education as a Strategy for Creating Sense of Ownership

Union democracy is not easily measured by organizational rules and constitutions. Without democratic practices or culture, it is impossible to consolidate the internal democracy of unions. KCTU leaders, who learned the importance of democratic practices and culture from their own organizational history, now use union education to produce good union citizens.

In general, union democracy is consolidated and reproduced by union members' participation in union politics. On the one hand, union members participate in formally institutionalized political events, such as elections and votes. On the other hand, they participate in diverse informal decision-making processes, such as small meetings and group discussions. While institutionalized events are more related to building up an organizational structure of democracy inside unions or between federations and local unions, meetings and discussions where average union members participate are important to create a consciousness of union democracy.

In general, Korean union leaders agree that discussions and meetings are excellent tools for educating union members. Especially, since general school education in Korea has taught students to absorb the logic of capitalism in a very passive way, union education with meetings and discussions is crucial to change workers into politically active citizens with the ability to critically think (interview with CMC union leader, KHMWU leader, Signetics union leader 2, KTU official and K music union leader).

Especially, KCTU-affiliated union leaders believe that the educational effects of participatory democracy play an essential role in increasing possibilities for "defying the hegemony of capital in the sphere of production" (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1995, 847). According to these leaders, through continuous participation in discussions on political, social, and economic issues and democratic resolutions of these issues, union members come to realize "the nature of capitalism" and to have a new perspective on the ideal society (interview with CMC union leader, Signetics union leader 1). Participatory democracy in everyday union activities creates union members' sense of ownership, which is a basis of mobilization and strengthens their collective identity as workers and working-class solidarity.

FKTU-affiliated union leaders also agree that the sense of ownership given from participation in diverse union activities increases union members' interests in union politics (interview with K music union leader, FIU official and YMCU leader). However, their interest in union politics is likely to develop in a limited way that hardly extends their interests to the politics in the outside world.

In this section, I particularly examine how local unions create and consolidate the sense of ownership through the educational programs based on participatory democracy. As the two federations' dissimilar organizational characteristics make a difference in adopting participatory democracy as a strategy for mobilizing workers, their local unions are likely to differ in how to use participatory democracy. The two case unions, the Korea Health and Medical Workers' Union (KHMWU) affiliated with the KCTU and Y Medical Center Union (YMCU) under the FKTU, show differences in how local unions' leadership utilizes participatory democratic processes through their education programs.

Leaders from both the KHMWU and YMCU agree that union education has a strong influence on workers' consciousness and participation in union activities. They also have the same idea that union democracy is reinforced on the basis of members' participation. The content and frequency of their educational programs, however, differ. The main educational goal that union leaders share is to develop workers' consciousness in union members. But the leaders interpret this goal differently. The leaders of the YMCU have a flexible and pragmatic idea of worker consciousness and workers' identities while KHMWU leaders have a rigid Marxist concept of workers' consciousness. This difference in the idea of "worker" and worker consciousness is reflected in the content of education. It also affects how much weight unions place on their education program.

Participatory Democracy in Education: The KHMWU's Strategy for Mobilization

The KHMWU's system of education focuses on producing and reproducing working-class consciousness. This education emphasizes the role of workers in capitalist society and makes them recognize their social status in the context of class relations. In order to reinforce the working-class consciousness, union leaders spend a fair amount of time developing educational materials that contain information about current political economic situations and organizing small group

discussions, which convey those materials to union members. During the discussions, the leaders encourage union members to express their understanding of political and economic issues, such as declining job security, with regard to changes in the world economy. The members learn that the process of economic globalization, which strongly affects their job security, is closely related to an imperial attempt of transnational capitalism and the neo-liberal restructuring of the world economy. In the process of sharing ideas with other union members, they also become able to criticize the national government for cooperating with transnational capitalists without protecting domestic workers' livelihood (KHMWU Education Material 1, 2002).

Branch unions in the KHMWU regularly hold education events for all union members (interview with CMC union leader). All members of the KHMWU are required to spend a workday per year participating in the education program organized by the regional office. In this program (one-day education), workers learn why they need a union, how they protect and maintain their union, and what they should do as workers in Korean society. A local union leader explains the content of this program: "the program usually begins with the question 'who are we in this society?' and gives an answer by teaching us about the history of labor and the importance of labor unions" (interview with CMC union leader). Union members consider this education program a social education. A worker from the CMC union said,

We have never had any kind of social education after graduating from college, so the education program offered by the union is very useful. It allows us to have a broad perspective to understand this society and social issues. Nobody at school taught what workers' life in this society would be like, but we eventually became workers. We need to know how to manage our lives as workers (interview with CMC union member 1).

Union education also strongly influences "worker" consciousness:

I used to complain about strikes organized by the subway union because they made me late for work. I thought they held people as hostages for their own interests. I completely trusted what the media said about the strike. But after I took the union education including the one-day educational workshop, one thing I learned from it is that I am a worker like them. I used to think I am a professional. ... The education changed what I thought about a worker, who workers are... My image about workers has been completely changed (interview with CMC union member 2).

Both union leaders and members in the KHMWU's CMC union indicated that their ability to conduct a 217-day strike was a product of this union education.⁶

The one-day educational workshop plays a crucial role in consolidating workers' solidarity because it offers them an opportunity to meet other branch union members and share their sentiments as workers in the same industry. The solidarity built up in these educational workshops has been the basis of allied activities among branch unions, such as sympathy strikes, fundraising efforts, and physical presence in rallies (interview with CMC union leader).

In addition to the formal educational workshops, local branch unions provide resources for everyday group activities organized by their members, including singing, dancing, filming, etc. Both KHMWU and CMC union leaders indicate that group activities are useful tools for developing members' sense of ownership. Union members voluntarily join the group and participate in planning and organizing projects, which gives them a basic sense of the democratic decision-making process and leadership.

Workers' experience of strikes is another element in reproducing the movement ideology and maintaining the organizational culture. Usually, Korean labor leaders think that a strike is the best school for union members because workers can get a valuable lesson. In addition to rallying, strike participants spend most of their time listening to lectures and discussing strike issues. Especially if the strike is lengthy, the leadership offers an increasing variety of education programs in order to maintain morale and keep workers focused on their demands. One union member said, "We have so many lectures and discussions during the strike. I don't think we need more education for union members. We all have clear identities as workers and we all now realize that's what workers' positions in the capitalist society look like. Also, I got to think more about our society and social issues" (interview with the CMC union member 2).

Especially when the union goes through a difficult time like the strike, the leaders intentionally try to have their members engaged in the process of decision-making, which always accompanies small group discussions and meetings. The fact that union members are accustomed to discussions and meetings organized on a regular basis enables the leadership to mobilize union members for collective actions during difficult situations.

Small-group discussions, meetings, and group activities play a crucial role in formulating informal networks among union members. Union members share emotional feelings as well as knowledge through meetings and discussions. Especially, small gatherings for dinner after education programs make workers have strong emotional ties, which is a basis of building solidarity among members during the strike (interview with CMC union member 1, and CMC union leader).

For the KHMWU leaders, educational programs are important to mobilize members and build solidarity among them. Through the content of education, union members enhance their collective

⁶ The CMC union is one of the branch unions that belong to the KHMWU. This union conducted a 217-day strike in 2002 because of failed collective bargaining. This union offered bargaining demands, such as a wage increase, improvement of working conditions, and employment security for non-standard workers. But employers never accepted these demands.

working-class identity and obtain a new perspective to view their society critically. Various group works also produce and reproduce organizational and emotional ties among workers. More importantly, as Polletta indicates, union members learn internal democracy and desirable leadership through the form of education emphasizing participation. KHMWU leaders are likely to take strategic advantage of participatory democracy in building solidarity, training new leaders, encouraging tactical innovation, developing accountability, and in changing structures (2002).

Union Democracy without Political Perspectives: YMCU

The YMCU leadership uses education as a tool for mobilizing its members as the KHMWU does. The education conducted by the YMCU leadership is, however, different in both the content and form. The education of the YMCU lacks political perspective compared to the KHMWU's and emphasizes the economic rationale of the unionization of workers in a capitalist society. YMCU members are likely to have a different view on union democracy compared to their counterparts and show a different response to organizational issues in internal democracy.

The YMCU educates its members by focusing on what kind of benefit they can get through joining unions. Because the YMCU, unlike the KHMWU, still has the open-shop system, union leaders are likely to concentrate on recruiting individual union members rather than on educating existing members. They claim that the union is an organization of workers who want to enhance their economic security within the company. They do not focus on class relations in society and rarely criticize the capitalist economic structure. For them, the labor union is defined as an interest group pursuing job security and company benefits:

Economic security is the most important reason why workers join unions. Workers can have economic benefits only by joining unions because unions always seek their members' economic interests through the system of collective bargaining. In terms of job security and economic benefits, collective actions by unions are more effective than any individual worker's effort. ... Workers want to be treated like human beings, not as instruments of production. Therefore, workers should be able to appeal to employers about unfair and arbitrary decisions and to ask employers for fair judgments and treatments. When workers join the union, workers can have the right to demand humane and fair treatment (Union as my friend 2001, 12-13).

The following quote, further exemplifies the rationale:

Samsung [one of Korean Chaebols] without the union does not have any problem with increasing workers' welfare because this company has high enough profits to pay for its workers' benefits. It also has well-trained and knowledgeable managers who are in

charge of labor-management relations. However, it is difficult for most companies to guarantee company benefits as Samsung does. That is why we need unions. We need an organization to protect our legal rights as employees (Union as my friend 2001, 14-15).

Education takes place through formal channels. The education of shop stewards is conducted mainly at annual meetings. Twice a year, all union members are required to participate in one-day union education programs. The contents of this education are mostly about union activities and member identity, not directly related to politics and capitalism. FKTU officials are often invited to give a lecture about the union movement, which emphasizes practical approaches to labor issues. YMCU leaders choose a broad range of topics in order to draw members' attention to education programs (Annual Report of YMCU Activities 2001). The content of union education is closely related to their conciliatory approach to union activities, which tries to avoid provocative actions.

YMCU members also organize group activities, but these activities are not tools for advancing the union's political agenda. This union has groups devoted to activities like calligraphy, mountain climbing and historical site visiting (YMCU News Letter 2002). These groups aim to promote friendship amongst members in ways not directly related to building worker consciousness. Rather, these group activities encourage members to see the union as a social club.

The education formulated by practical economic considerations not emphasizing the political role of unions generates a different type of internal democracy issue and shapes members' responses to it. Conciliatory approaches developed by education programs also influence union members' reactions to conflicts developing after revelations of leadership corruption. After about 40 years of peaceful inner politics inside the YMCU, the YMCU leadership faced a serious criticism of its financial affairs in 2003. "The group for reforming YMCU" organized by some average union members claimed that the union leadership had misused the franchise for a restaurant and concession stand inside the hospital, which this union had won from the collective bargaining in 1989 and decided to use for union members' benefits. According to this group, the union leadership gave this franchise to the wife of a union official and expected to share profits in return. But they did not create an official contract and after 13 years, it turned out that the YMCU had not been paid back about \$600,000. Union members discovered that the leaders and owner made money illegally out of the profits from the restaurant business. Related union leaders were forced to resign from their positions. The president of the YMCU resigned and the restaurant was returned to the hospital management (Labortoday 05/13/2004). According to the group for reforming YMCU, in the last 14 years about 270 union members were expelled from the union because they raised a question about the restaurant business. These 270 union members regained their memberships after this event. However, the members in the group for reforming YMCU tried to call an emergency general convention meeting in order to publicize the misbehavior of the current leadership and set up a new leadership. They also demanded a

transparent process for the election for shop stewards. However, the union leadership strongly refused their demands for calling an emergency general convention (Labortoday 07/21/2004). A leader of this group went on a hunger strike and asked the FKTU top leader to intervene in their problem. Right after the FKTU top leader visited the YMCU office, both parties reached an agreement. The current leadership agreed to give back voting rights and eligibility for being elected to reinstated union members and to use official ballots with candidates' signatures for the shop steward election. Both parties also officially apologized about their insulting remarks and violent actions toward each other and promised not to take any legal actions against each other regarding this event (Labortoday 08/24/2004).

This event shows two interesting points in terms of the internal democracy of this union. First, there is a significant discrepancy in how to create and manage internal democracy between leaders and members in this union. As FKTU official commented, "This event happened due to the rigidity of old organizational culture" (Labortoday 08/24/2004); YMCU leaders have had a closed decision-making process, which does not pay attention to members' participation. They took advantage of this closed process to protect their leadership. However, some union members kept demanding an open democratic decision-making process, which guarantees members' rights to share information and to participate. Second, YMCU members' interests in internal democracy, however, is solely limited to resistance against the power of current leadership which, they thought, had not been honest with them. It is hard to find any socio-political perspectives involved in the criticism of the current leadership. This event shows that members' demand of financial transparency of the leadership extended to the issue of the shop steward election process, the only way in which the group for reforming YMCU could participate in the inner politics. This group also demanded the adaptation of the popular vote system for the YMCU top leader election; however, it was not included in the agreement made by the mediation of the FKTU leadership. The content of union education conducted by the current YMCU leadership and members' lack of exposure to political actions keep general YMCU members from being politically active.

In addition, it took less than a day for both parties to accept the agreement mediated by the FKTU after the FKTU top leader visited the YMCU office. This illustrates that YMCU members and leaders are likely to accept negotiation as their supervisory federation, FKTU, does. Also, it demonstrates a hierarchical organizational culture that gives a lot of credit to the authority of the FKTU top leader; local unions under the FKTU tend to be affected by the decisions of one person, the top leader. Some local union leaders who demand democratic reform of the FKTU criticize this pattern of decision-making, which has existed for over 50 years (Kim Deuk Yon 2000). However, it still has a strong influence on the politics of local unions even though the new leadership of the FKTU inaugurated in 2004 promises to change it.

Conclusion

In this paper I showed how the two federations and their affiliates create and maintain union democracy. The KCTU and its affiliated unions are more likely to be sensitive about internal democracy compared to their counterparts. They prioritize the democratic decision-making through open channels as their organizational principle because they learned from the history of organizing unions under political oppression that union democracy is a key to the success of the labor movement. Emphasizing union democracy is also an important strategy in distinguishing themselves from the existing labor unions (the FKTU and its affiliated unions) that have maintained close relationships with the state and employers.

It is noteworthy that the KCTU-affiliated unions are fully aware of the participatory democratic decision-making process and use this as their main strategy to mobilize members. They work hard to construct a system of democratic decision-making processes and to educate union members as political citizens who eagerly participate in internal union politics as well as national politics. Elections, meetings, discussions and even all kinds of union-organized activities are closely intertwined with creating and maintaining union democracy. Encouraged participation in union activities and decision-making processes plays a role in building solidarity among union members and in training members as future leaders.

The FKTU and its constituents, however, still hold a bureaucratic decision-making process, which does not encourage union members' participation as much as their counterparts do. Although they try to change their organizational structure into more participatory-democratic one in order to compete with the KCTU and its affiliates, their organizational characteristics, shaped by their long-lasting relationship with employers and the state, hinder them from developing a participatory democratic decision-making structure. Therefore, for the FKTU and its affiliated unions, participatory democracy can hardly be a realistic strategic choice for mobilization. Further, the leadership of the KCTU tries to extend union democracy to social or political democracy, which aims to improve working-class people's livelihood. The Democratic Labor Party, organized in 2000 mainly by KCTU members and political supporters who agreed with the KCTU's ideology, gained significant success in the 2004 National Assembly Election while the FKTU's Green Social Democratic Party faced electoral failure and serious criticism.

The KCTU and its constituents, historically involved in both insurgent political practices and radical leadership, have made an effort to resist "the hegemony of capital in the sphere of *politics*" through participating in the party system while they have continuously tried to challenge "the hegemony of capital in the sphere of production" through their union actions, and it has been quite successful, so far. However, the FKTU and its affiliated unions, which have not developed a system of union democracy, had difficulty gaining political power.

Bibliography

Books and Articles

- Choi, Jang Jip. 1989. *Labor and the Authoritarian state: Labor Unions in South Korean Manufacturing Industries, 1960-1980*. Seoul: Korea University Press.
- Ganz, Marshall. 2000. "Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture, 1959-1966." *American Journal of Sociology* 105(January): 1003-1062.
- Kim, Deuk Yon. 2000. "Looking back the Financial Industry Strike." *Labor and Society* Seoul: Korea Labor and Society Institute (in Korean).
- Koo, Hagen. 2001. *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Polleta, Francesca. 2002. *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stepan-Norris, Judith. 1997. "The Making of Union Democracy." *Social Forces* 76:475-510.
- Stepan-Norris, Judith and Maurice Zeitlin. 1995. "Union Democracy, Radical Leadership, and the Hegemony of Capital." *American Sociological Review* 60: 829-50.

Union Publications (In Korean)

KCTU

- KCTU Constitution (1995, the last revision in 2001)
Election Posters and Advertisement (2002)

FKTU

- FKTU Constitution (1961, the last revision in 2004)

YMCU

- Annual Report of YMCU Activities in 2001, Y Medical Center Trade Union.
Union as My Friend (Guidebook for Newcomers), Y Medical Center Trade Union, 2001.
YMCU News Letter (June 2001-May 2002), Y Medical Center Trade Union.

KHMWU

- Annual Report of Activities in 2001, Korean Health and Medical Workers Union.
Education Material 1, Korean Health and Medical Workers Union 2002.
Explication of Main Demands for Collective Bargaining 2002, Korean Health and Medical Workers Union

Interviews

FKTU and affiliated unions

FKTU official 1. September 11 2002. Interview by author. Director, Policy-Planning Department.
FKTU.

FKTU official 2. June 24 2003. Interview by author. Director, Foreign Affairs Department. FKTU.

FIU Official. September 11 2002 and June 25 2003. Interview by author. Vice-director,
Policy-Planning Department. FIU.

S Bank Union. September 18 2002. Interview by author. Director, Policy-Planning Department.
S Bank Union.

K Music Union leader. September 30 2002. Interview by author. President, K music Union.

YMCU official. Interview by Author. Administrative organizer, YMCU.

KCTU and affiliated unions

KCTU official 1. July 2 2002. Interview by author. Vice-director, Policy-Planning Department.
KCTU.

KTU official. September 26 2002. Interview by author. Director, Policy-Planning Department.
KTU.

Signetics union leader 1 September 19 2002. Interview by author. President. Signetics Union.

Signetics union leader 2 September 19 2002. Interview by author. Director, General Affairs
Department. Signetics Union.

KHMWU official. July 2 and September 19 2002. Interview by Author. Director, Policy-Planning
Department, KHMWU.

CMC union leader. Aug. 31 2002. Interview by Author. Vice-president, CMC Yuido branch
Union, KHMWU.

CMC union member 1. Aug. 31 2002. Interview by Author. Nurse, CMC Yuido branch union.
Union member since 1996.

CMC union member 2. Aug. 31 2002. Interview by Author. Nurse, CMC Yuido branch union.
Union member since 2000.

Observations

Rally at the strike site (the lobby at the C Medical Center, K Branch) (August 2, 7, 31)

KHMWU Representative Meeting (August 7 2002)

KCTU's 6th Central Committee Meeting in 2002. (July 26 2002)

KCTU General Convention, Election (August 27 2002)

Web Site

KCTU website, <http://www.nodong.org>

KHMWU website, <http://bogun.nodong.org>

FKTU website, <http://fktu.or.kr>

YMCU website, <http://YUMCTU.or.kr>

CMC union website, <http://www.cmcnojo.com>

Labortoday (newspaper) <http://www.labortoday.or.kr>

Pressian (newspaper) <http://pressian.com>