

ORGANIZING AT THE MARGINS

The Symbolic Politics of Labor in
South Korea and the United States

Jennifer Jihye Chun

Property of
MARTIN P. CATHERWOOD LIBRARY
NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVE
INDUSTRIAL AND LABOR RELATIONS

ILR PRESS

AN IMPRINT OF

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS ITHACA AND LONDON



Korea Foundation

한국국제교류재단

The Korea Foundation has provided financial assistance for the undertaking of this publication project.

Copyright © 2009 by Cornell University

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 2009 by Cornell University Press
Printed in the United States of America

Librarians: A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-0-8014-4711-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

Cornell University Press strives to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the fullest extent possible in the publishing of its books. Such materials include vegetable-based, low-VOC inks and acid-free papers that are recycled, totally chlorine-free, or partly composed of nonwood fibers. For further information, visit our website at www.cornellpress.cornell.edu.

Cloth printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
Abbreviations	xix
1. The Symbolic Leverage of Labor	1
2. Employer and State Offensives against Unionized Workers	24
3. Reconstructing the Marginalized Workforce	44
4. Social Movement Legacies and Organizing the Marginalized	68
5. What Is an “Employer”? Organizing Subcontracted University Janitors	101
6. What Is a “Worker”? Organizing Independently Contracted Home Care Workers and Golf Caddies	142
7. Dilemmas of Organizing Workers at the Margins	171
Notes	185
Bibliography	199
Index	215

In the summer of 1998, I left Berkeley, California, and arrived in Seoul, Korea. I was immediately swept up in a wave of union protests organized by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)—the militant democratic wing of the labor movement. With raised fists and indignant voices, hundreds of thousands of unionists participated in mass rallies, marches, and strikes to express their opposition to structural adjustment reforms by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹ While the Korean government insisted that privatization, labor market deregulation, and flexible labor law revisions were all necessary for the country to overcome the so-called IMF crisis, the nation's highly militant workforce rejected the assault on their wages and livelihoods. From the huge banners that were prominently displayed at public demonstrations to the synchronized chants of protesting unionists, the terms of their opposition were clear: "Eradicate Unilateral Economic Restructuring! Guarantee Job Security! Defend Workers' Right to Live!" There would be no national economic recovery off the backs of workers.

The mass opposition of Korean workers to the "flexible" prescriptions of neoliberal globalization was exactly what led my ethnographic pursuits from one of Silicon Valley's high-tech shop floors to the contentious streets of downtown Seoul. My previous research examining low-paid assembly work, and much of the literature on the fate of trade unions under globalization, indicated that workers had little, if any, power to challenge the flexible imperatives of today's highly competitive global economy. While touted for its "win-win" advantages

for both workers and managers alike, the drive for flexibility was more than a business strategy to boost profits and efficiency; it constituted a powerful disciplinary force upon workers, whose very livelihoods had become subordinated to a dizzying array of performance indicators, quality-control measures, and market forecasts (Chun 2001). The militant struggles of Korean unionists, however, seemed to defy the universalizing laws of the new global marketplace. Rather than accept its inevitability, the Korean labor movement was mounting a full-scale effort to challenge neoliberal restructuring and its flexible prescriptions. While the IMF's structural adjustment loan conditionalities were virulently criticized, the Korean government's attempt to operationalize its universalizing mandates were also harshly censured. The mass-based, politically charged defiance of Korean unionists, I speculated, could signal the beginnings of a potential shift in the international geography of working-class power. Although workers and trade unions in the advanced industrialized core of the Global North had submitted to the logic of flexibility, however unwillingly at first, perhaps the workers and trade unions of the rapidly industrializing peripheries of the Global South could chart an alternative course.²

In a few short months, however, I would encounter the first of several violated expectations in the messy world of ethnography. Rather than lead a dynamic worker-based movement against the flexible prescriptions of global neoliberalism, the Korean labor movement seemed to be imploding. In August 1998, the leadership of one of the most militant of KCTU's member unions, the Hyundai Motors Union in Ulsan, consented to the mass layoffs under the rationale of "necessary business restructuring," igniting a chain of events that began undermining the strength and legitimacy of organized labor, especially militant forms of unionism (see chapter 2). Skyrocketing layoffs, unprecedented unemployment, and mass social dislocation followed the state deregulation of the labor market and the privatization of public industries. The criminalization of union militancy recommenced under the guise of shepherding national economic recovery. As the national economic crisis unfolded, the seduction of mass labor militancy gave way to a more sobering look at the internal schisms playing out among workers and their collective organizations, not only in Korea but also around the world. As more and more workers faced downward pressures on their wages and working conditions, clear fault lines began to emerge. Unions representing more privileged sectors of the industrial workforce increasingly prioritized the job security and interests of their members at the expense of more disadvantaged groups of workers, thereby exacerbating capital's divide-and-conquer strategies. Whereas in the United States, dividing lines cut across race, immigration status, and gender, in South Korea, they primarily cut

across gender (see chapter 3). “Women fired first” seemed to be the overarching principle of mass layoffs, especially at the height of Korea’s financial crisis, and some male-dominated unions were accused of using women workers as a buffer to mitigate the damaging effects of workplace restructuring on male members.

I left South Korea after fifteen months of fieldwork in an ethnographic haze. Instead of documenting the vibrancy of industrial unionism, my notes told a story of a militant, yet highly divided and conflict-ridden labor movement. While I had not anticipated writing another account of organized labor’s defeats at the hands of global capital and neoliberal states, the Korean labor movement seemed to be heading on the same downward spiral as labor movements in the Global North, left only to try to slow down the erosion and decay.

To my surprise, the year 2000 threw up another violated expectation. After decades of exclusion, the Executive Committee of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) issued a historic reversal of its anti-immigrant stance. Not only did the AFL-CIO Executive Council publicly declare that it “stands proudly on the side of immigrant workers,” but it also called for sweeping protections of undocumented workers, including the repeal of employer sanctions, unconditional amnesty for undocumented immigrants and laws that provide full workplace rights for immigrant workers.³ Likewise, in South Korea, in response to the exclusionary tendencies of big enterprise unions, the KCTU elected a new president in 2000 who passionately reaffirmed the KCTU’s commitment to act as the “the genuine representative of all working people, including those workers in non-standard employment, the unemployed, and the vast array of workers in small enterprises.”⁴ In addition, the independent KCTU and the historically government-linked, more politically moderate Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), once starkly opposed, began uniting under the cause of “abolishing irregular employment” (*pjǒng’gyujik ch’ölpye*).

This unexpected convergence became the new starting point for my project. Previously stigmatized as “unorganizable,” the ranks of unorganized workers in low-paid, insecure jobs represent the new *cause célèbre* of labor movements in two very different countries—South Korea and the United States (see chapter 4). Although the embrace of historically excluded sectors of the workforce in both countries is partial and contested, the relative successes of local organizing cases waged by marginalized workers are redefining the priorities and the vocabularies of crisis-ridden labor movements. In the United States, low-wage service workers in highly insecure, precarious jobs—many of whom are immigrants and women—have won historic victories in their fight

to secure more just living and working conditions. By challenging the institutional policies and cultural values that permit workers and their families to live in a chronic state of poverty, immigrant janitors, hotel workers, home care workers, and others are paving the way for the renewal of the U.S. labor movement. In South Korea as well, low-paid workers in luxury hotels, country clubs, cafeterias, and other service sectors—many of whom are women—have begun challenging the deterioration of their wages and working conditions under more insecure forms of irregular employment. Given the harsh climate of anti-unionism that has followed the Asian debt crisis (1997–1998), the unexpected militancy of irregularly employed women workers is injecting renewed vitality into the Korean labor movement.⁵

The gains made by these groups of workers are still relatively minor with respect to the deepening crises plaguing organized labor movements in today's global economy. However, they are part of a growing effort by unions, community organizations, social justice organizations, immigrant rights advocates, and labor activists, among others, to prioritize the struggles of workers that have been historically relegated to the bottom of national labor market hierarchies (see chapter 4). What might the striking convergence in the trajectories of the South Korean and U.S. labor movements mean for the dynamics of change taking place for labor on a global scale? To what extent does the embrace of marginalized groups of workers such as immigrants and women by previously exclusionary labor movements signal the development of more inclusive and democratic forms of labor politics? How can workers subject to overlapping forms of social, economic, and political marginality actually transform the unequal relations of power and domination that underpin downgraded forms of employment?

The answers to these questions constitute the heart of this book. What unfolds is a story about a sea change in the dynamics of labor politics and organization. South Korea and the United States have two different paths of industrial development, histories of class formation, and positions in the larger world economic system, yet both labor movements are experiencing profound shifts in who the “working class” is and how to build collective power under processes of globalization. Through a comparative historical analysis of the changing dynamics of the Korean and U.S. labor movements, the first part of the book reveals that global economic transformations are reshaping the balance of power among capital, labor, and the state in strikingly similar ways. While each labor movement previously built its base of power on the capacity of some of the most powerful workers in the labor market to extract concessions from capital

and the state, the reconfiguration of national terrains of unionism under processes of globalization has begun shifting organized labor's attention to some of the most vulnerable groups of workers, especially the growing ranks of (im)migrant and women workers employed in low-paid, insecure service jobs. This shift has revived the importance of social movement-inspired forms of unionism that seek to challenge the overlapping conditions of economic and social marginalization.

Through a comparative analysis of ethnographic case studies of labor organizing, the second half of the book illustrates exactly how and under what conditions marginalized groups of workers can challenge the downward pressures on their wages and working conditions. In particular, I focus on two groups of workers in low-paid, service jobs: subcontracted university janitors and independently contracted personal service workers. Rather than rely solely on conventional tactics such as the labor strike, which harness workers' power at the point of production, these workers are cultivating an alternative form of leverage based on symbolic politics; that is, "symbolic leverage." By waging dramatic, morally charged struggles against the injustice of their living and working conditions, janitors, home care workers, and golf caddies are seeking to transform the relations of power and inequality that underpin downgraded forms of low-paid, service work. As I elaborate in chapters 5 and 6, "symbolic leverage" roots the source of worker power in the contested arena of culture and public debates about values. By shifting the focus of their struggles away from narrowly defined labor disputes, symbolic leverage aims to undermine official sources of authority such as the law and demand alternative applications of social justice.

By emphasizing how processes of globalization are reconfiguring national terrains of unionism in unexpected ways, this book attempts to provide a systematic account of the shifting balance of power among labor, capital, and the state and its implications for how workers and their collective organizations are refashioning their politics and practices. My aim is not to write a comparative history of trade union renewal, nor is it to produce a "best practices" guide that weighs the benefits and disadvantages of various organizing strategies. It is, rather, to convey an account of "what might be called a conjuncture, a turning point, a break, a rupture" (Cooper 1987, xii). The story at the heart of this book is about exposing the limitations of old ways of organizing the workforce, based on historical relationships among labor, capital, and the state, and uncovering new ways of strengthening the basis of worker power, especially when approached from the perspective of workers on the bottom of

social and economic hierarchies. In a global economy that feeds on and profits from social inequalities, rooting worker power in the contested politics of justice is central to any effort to produce more emancipatory possibilities for future generations.

Please note that all Korean words have been Romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system; exceptions are published Korean authors and well-known Korean names and events using a different spelling in English.

Acknowledgments

The process of writing this book has brought me into contact with many exceptional people. I want to begin by thanking the workers, activists, students, and teachers in Korea who embraced me into their worlds of activism and shared their joys, hopes, heartaches, and passions with me. I owe special thanks to Maria Chol Soon Rhie who welcomed me into the Korean Women Workers Associations United (KWWAU) and gave me so many opportunities to learn from the wisdom and experience of activists like herself and others. Jinyoung Park with the KWWAU has not only been an invaluable researcher but a wonderful friend and confidante. I am also thankful to Jinkyoung Bae, Sanglim Choi, Soonim Choi, Jeehyeon Kim, Juhwan Kim, Namhee Park, Insoon Wang, and the rest of the staff at the Korean Women Workers Association and the Korean Women's Trade Union. Whether it was scouring their archives, spending late nights at the office, tagging along on their workshops and membership retreats, or perpetually asking questions, I learned as much from their generosity as I did from their courage and perseverance in trying to create a more just and compassionate world. I am also deeply indebted to the staff at the KCTU Seoul Regional Center, the KCTU Central Office, and the Korean Health and Medical Workers Union. They greeted my eagerness to learn with much patience, kindness, and generosity, bringing me to strikes, protests, marches, meetings, and postmeeting *dwipuri* sessions. Witnessing the intensity, stamina, and sheer bodily deprivation required to fill their shoes was both humbling and inspiring. Sangyun Bak's passing was a great shock to many, and I will miss his endless

teasing, irreverent humor, and unflinching commitment to irregular workers and class liberation. I am particularly grateful to Soonkyoung Cho, Kyungsook Choi, Bonghee Chu, Hyewon Chung, Jooyeon Jeong, Myoung Joon Kim, Yoon-joo Lee, and Aelim Yoon for helping me make sense of the inspiring history and complex politics of the Korean labor movement.

I also want to thank the workers and the staff at the SEIU locals in Boston and Los Angeles where I visited. I am grateful to every worker, union organizer, and student activist who took the time out of their tremendously busy schedules to talk to me about the specific cases I was interested in. Special thanks to Sujin Lee for introducing me to the USC case and putting me in touch with her friends and former coworkers.

At Berkeley, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Michael Burawoy. His constant encouragement and unwavering expectations instilled me with the confidence to see this work to completion, challenging me to take my ideas to the next level and reminding me of the bigger picture (that we drew so many times on the white board in his office). From my brief and early days as a shop-floor ethnographer to my later years as a participant observer in the Korean labor movement, my forays into the world of ethnography were inspired by his rigorous pursuit of the linkages between everyday life and the broader historical and structural forces that shape them. Kim Voss has been an insightful teacher and wonderful friend, always willing to lend a constructive ear and sound advice when I needed it the most. Peter Evans, Gillian Hart, John Lie, and Michael Omi provided sound advice, constructive feedback, and enthusiastic support throughout this project. I am privileged to have benefited from their astute and rigorous insights about the workings of politics, power, inequality, and capitalism.

While at Berkeley, I was fortunate to have the support of a wide community of friends and fellow students. I am especially grateful for the strength, humor, and intelligence of Robyn Rodriguez and Michelle Williams both of whom I have learned so much from as scholars and human beings. Lynnéa Stephen was a wonderful office mate and good friend, and she is dearly missed. I am also thankful for the input and support of Hwa-Jen Liu, Josh Page, Gretchen Purser, Jeff Sallaz, Youyenn Teo, Elsa Tranter, and Chris Wetzel. Outside my academic life, I am thankful to the members of my drumming group, *Jamae-sori*, and the members and staff at Asian Immigrant Women Advocates in the Oakland and San Jose offices. I also appreciate the friendship and support of Sarah Eunkyung Chee, Helen Kim, Mimi Kim, Sujin Lee, Shruti Mehta, Young Shin, Shin Yi Tsai, and Eliza Wee.

Many people generously provided valuable insights and feedback as I began to turn my research into a book. I want to thank my colleagues at the University of British Columbia who graciously read parts of the manuscript and offered constructive feedback: Neil Gross, Amy Hanser, Tom Kemple, Renisa Mawani, Wendy Roth, and Rima Wilkes. I want to thank Ruth Milkman for her enthusiastic support for the project and her close reading of the entire manuscript. Hagen Koo also offered insightful comments and suggestions for how to improve the manuscript. I also benefited from comments I received after talks I gave at the UBC Centre for Women's and Gender Studies, the UBC Centre for Korean Research, the UBC Inter-Faculty Initiative on Migration Studies, and the University of Toronto Institute for Asian Studies. I am particularly grateful to Rina Agarwala, Yunshik Chang, Gillian Creese, Nam-lin Hur, Ching Kwan Lee, Hyun Ok Park, Becki Ross, Jesook Song, and Henry Yu. The UBC Centre for Korean Research provided invaluable support to help me revise and finish the manuscript. I thank Sage Publications for permission to reprint portions of an article published in 2005 as "Public Dramas and the Politics of Justice: Comparison of Janitors' Union Struggles in South Korea and the United States," *Work and Occupations* 32 (4): 486–503.

As I prepared the final version, I had the good fortune of benefiting from the editorial assistance of UBC undergraduate, Tamara Ibrahim. I also thank the staff at Cornell University Press, especially Susan Specter for her fantastic manuscript editing and Fran Benson for her enthusiasm, commitment, and patience. All errors, of course, are mine alone.

Last but not least are the thanks I owe to my family for weathering the ups and downs of the seemingly never-ending process of writing and rewriting. I am deeply grateful for the love, support, and companionship of Ju Hui Judy Han. She has gone above and beyond to help me complete this milestone, from challenging me to sharpen and deepen my ideas to easing my bouts of stress and anxiety to making sure that Puca, George, and I did not go hungry. My steadfast and beloved friendship with Joanne Chang helped me keep the most important things in life in perspective. My sister, Joanne, has always been my rock, lending her unconditional love and support to everything I do. My brother, David, has brought humor and a healthy dose of perspective to all my endeavors. My greatest debt of gratitude is owed to my parents, Yang Kog and Kyung Ja Chun. My father instilled me with a love of books and writing; my mother instilled me with a passion and curiosity about the world around me. Without their unfailing faith and support, I would not be where I am today. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

Abbreviations

ACORN	Associations of Community Organizations for Reform NOW
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
BLS	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
ERAP	Economic Research and Action Project
88CC	88 Country Club
FLSA	Fair Labor Standards Act (US)
FKTU	Federation of Korean Trade Unions
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GM	General Motors
HCECP	Harvard Committee of Employment and Contracting Procedures
HERE	Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees
HPLM	Harvard Progressive Labor Movement
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IHSS	In-Home Supportive Service System
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Services
IWWA	Incheon Women Workers Association
JforJ	“Justice for Janitors”
KCTU	Korean Confederation of Trade Unions

KLI	Korea Labor Institute
KSPW	Korean Solidarity against Precarious Work
KT	Korea Telecom
KWWA	Korean Women Workers Association
KWWAU	Korean Women Workers Associations United
KWTU	Korean Women's Trade Union
LSA	Labor Standards Act (South Korea)
NACLA	North American Congress on Latin America
NFWA	National Farm Workers Association
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NICs	Newly Industrializing Countries
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PATCO	Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization
PASC	Personal Assistance Services Council
PD	"Participatory Democracy"
PICIS	Policy and Information Center of Internal Solidarity
PSSP	People's Solidarity for Social Progress
PWC	Power of the Working Class
ROK	Republic of Korea
SCALE	Student Coalition Against Labor Exploitation
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SNU	Seoul National University
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SWTU	Seoul Women's Trade Union
TAN	Transnational advocacy network
UAW	United Auto Workers
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
UFW	United Farm Workers
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
USAS	United Students Against Sweatshops
USC	University of Southern California

ORGANIZING AT THE MARGINS

THE SYMBOLIC LEVERAGE OF LABOR

SEIU gets their moral center from the janitors.... We are the campaign that people in the public look at and gives SEIU its glamour and identity. People say all the time that janitors are the “urban farmworkers.” They have that kind of moral cause that people are really able to unite around.... We put janitors forward as examples of what’s wrong—economic injustice. But they are not victims of it, because people are standing up and fighting militant actions in the street. The personal stories that we put out there [about the hardships of health care workers, immigrants, and mothers]...in my opinion, that’s really where public support comes from.

—Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizer

When I see middle-aged or elderly women [*ajumma*] find a way through labor unions to show off the abilities and skills they have had all these years, it is moving and inspirational. I see how all their energies and capacities were repressed, all because they were women, working at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, earning minimum wages, as lowly janitors and irregular [*pjông’gyujik*] workers. These people meet women’s movements and women’s labor unions and they just blossom and come to life. There are some amazing orators and great leaders, and that’s because their stories are rooted in life experiences. Sixty-something union members saying they can now live with pride.... It’s only when the majority of the public participates that we’ll see meaningful change.

—Korean Women’s Trade Union (KWTU) organizer

The struggles of janitors as well as other low-paid service workers—many of whom are immigrants, people of color, and women—demonstrate that building power from the margins is not only possible but *pivotal* to the future of workers and their collective organizations in the twenty-first century. The unexpected

makeover of one of the most unglamorous segments of the U.S. workforce speaks to the transformative potential of marginality. By rendering the injustice of poverty wages and social inequality both intimate and public, SEIU has refashioned the identity of janitors from one of the most undervalued and demeaned segments of society into the “moral center” of the most rapidly growing union in the United States. The use of tactics and vocabularies from civil rights–inspired unions such as the United Farm Workers (UFW) in the 1960s and 1970s has also garnered rare public support for unpopular trade unions. As the etymological origin of the word janitors to the two-headed Roman god Janus suggests, the role of janitors as doorkeepers or, more specifically, guards to the gates of heaven, makes the figure of the janitor a powerful catalyst of transitions and new beginnings.¹ Since the SEIU launched its morally charged “Justice for Janitors” (JforJ) campaign in 1985, one hundred thousand new janitors as well as many other low-paid service workers such as home care workers, nursing care workers, and security guards have joined the union’s ranks. While its dynamic growth and aggressive organizing campaigns have created schisms and conflicts, the SEIU has led one of the most decisive shifts in the contemporary U.S. labor movement.

Likewise, in South Korea the growing ranks of *pijöng’gyujik* (hereafter translated as “irregular” or “nonstandard”) workers—many of whom are women employed in low-paid and insecure jobs—are redefining the landscape of unionism. By “irregular” workers, I refer to those workers employed outside the boundaries of full-time work under a single employer, including part-time, temporary, subcontracted, independently contracted, and daily workers among others, and thus, often denied basic rights entitled to fully employed workers such as paid sick and vacation leave, employer-paid health care, unemployment compensation, and seniority. No longer willing to accept the stigma and chronic poverty associated with work on the “lowest rungs of the social hierarchy,” a new generation is rising up against the rampant cost-cutting and discrimination associated with the post-IMF deregulated labor relations climate. While “elderly women” and “lowly janitors” do not represent the “typical” image of a militant and male trade unionist, they too are joining unions and taking to the streets. Women’s movement organizations and newly formed independent women’s unions provide an important vehicle to empower “sixty-something union members” to live with pride and dignity, according to the KWTU organizer quoted above. For those who never imagined wearing a union vest or participating in a “demo” (*taemo*), a colloquial term for mass protests, the experience of speaking out against the unjust terms of irregular employment is both uplifting and transformative not only for individual workers but also for the broader labor movement. In addition to striking workers in the

auto and steel factories, shipbuilding and transportation, telecommunications and other white-collar sectors, images of union struggles now include the primarily female workforce of golf game assistants and home study tutors misclassified as independent contractors; hotel room cleaners, school cafeteria workers, and train attendants employed under outsourced and often negligent third parties; and telephone operators and retail cashiers employed under highly insecure and unregulated short-term contracts.

The upsurge of labor unrest by atypical and vulnerable segments of the workforce in South Korea and the United States as well as around the world is reviving interest in the transformation of trade unions and labor movements, more broadly (Clawson 2003; Cornfield and McCammon 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Milkman 2006; Moody 1997; Munck and Waterman 1999; Voss and Sherman 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001). Despite widespread consensus from both sides of the political spectrum that trade unions have become obsolete in a globalizing world, many are beginning to deliver optimistic forecasts for the future. The development of new organizational strategies and forms that can outsmart anti-union employers (e.g., comprehensive organizing campaigns), outmaneuver transnational corporations (e.g., consumer-student boycotts, transnational labor coalitions, cross-border organizing), and overcome overlapping forms of social, economic, and political disadvantage (e.g., community unionism, labor-community coalitions) represent hopeful signs of change amidst a backdrop of dwindling union density, deepening income polarization, and deteriorating labor standards.² While labor scholars and practitioners debate the pros and cons of different strategies and organizing models, most agree that the narrow, self-interested unionism of the post-1945 era has reached its limits. What we find, in particular, is renewed interest in the role of labor as a dynamic social movement, replete with contentious politics and collective mobilization (Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Lopez 2004; Moody 1997; Turner and Hurd 2001).

The proliferation of vibrant forms of collective action that go beyond organized labor's traditional weapon—the strike—and mobilize the broader public alongside unions calls attention to the significance of the *symbolic* as a key site of contestation in contemporary labor struggles. The fight against economic injustice invariably includes another conception of justice that is rooted in the cultural or symbolic. The overlapping nature of such struggles is particularly salient for workers situated at the bottom of the socioeconomic and symbolic order. Challenging economic marginalization often entails overcoming “institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible,” thus intertwining what Nancy

Fraser calls “struggles for recognition” with “struggles for redistribution” (1995, 70–71; 1997).

The entanglement of the material and symbolic also foregrounds the importance of the *public*, or perhaps more fittingly, “counterpublics” as driving forces of change (see Fraser 1996; Warner 2002). While the physical gathering of a broad array of individuals during a public protest is crucial for demonstrating strength in numbers, the morally charged language that is circulated on protest signs and in protest chants as well as in the media evokes a longer history of discursively mediated struggles on behalf of the poor, the excluded, and the marginalized. Using the signs, slogans, and vocabularies of past social movement legacies to revalue the identities and contributions of devalued members of society is crucial to reconfiguring the hierarchies that underpin and reproduce relations of economic domination and subordination. In other words, influencing how people think and act in relation to each other is about more than just the art of communication. The symbolic battleground of contemporary workers’ struggles are reflective of, in Pierre Bourdieu’s words, broader “political struggles...for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world...and the direction in which it is going and should go” (Bourdieu 2000, 185).

To better understand the potential leverage that derives from the symbolic and public dimensions of workers’ struggles, we need to eschew the tendency to treat struggles over meaning and values as separate and unrelated to struggles over the distribution of power and resources.³ Too often, the colorful and dramatic aspects of public protests are dismissed as attention-grabbing tactics with little staying power over the long term. We see this in the thinking of union organizers and researchers that deem public sentiment as an important but ultimately fleeting and intangible source of support. While it is certainly true that appealing to the public can have limited and even detrimental effects, neglecting to examine the interplay between the cultural and structural basis of worker power leaves some crucial questions unanswered: Why have the struggles of some of the most vulnerable, as opposed to most powerful, workers become such a revitalizing force for crisis-ridden labor movements in today’s global economy? What is the significance of the symbolic and public dimensions of struggles for marginalized groups of workers? How do these struggles help change the unequal balance of power between workers and those entities that use and benefit from their labor? In other words, what exactly are the mechanics of converting social and economic marginality into a concrete form of leverage?

Building Power from the Margins: A Comparative Study

To answer the questions above, I compare the struggles of workers employed at the bottom of labor market hierarchies in two distinct national contexts: South Korea and the United States. In both countries, this stratum of the workforce disproportionately represents historically disadvantaged groups that have faced and continue to face barriers to obtaining higher-paid and higher-skilled employment. Racialized groups of immigrants and women in the United States and socially disadvantaged women in South Korea are a predominant part of the marginalized workforce in each country, though other kinds of workers (e.g., youth, the elderly, the disabled, ex-offenders, former welfare recipients, and those with low education levels) also can be found in the low-paid, service workforce. The growth of flexible employment relationships such as part-time, temporary, independently contracted, subcontracted, and daily work (Cranford and Vosko 2006; Gonos 1998; Gottfried 1992; Houseman and Polivka 2000; Kelleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000) has rendered marginalized workers particularly susceptible to precarious and unfavorable wage bargains. Although there are certainly exceptions, in comparison to workers in full-time, permanent jobs, workers in flexible employment relationships usually receive fewer benefits and statutory entitlements, are subject to a greater risk of employer abuse, and are less likely to be unionized.

To understand how and under what conditions marginalized workers are attempting to overcome downgraded forms of flexible employment, I analyze the dynamics of workers' struggles on multiple scales—from the local and national to the global. While studies of labor movement revitalization in the United States provide the most concrete understanding of how unions are organizing new sectors of the workforce, there have been limited attempts to interrogate their "connections with dynamics at play in other places, and in wider regional, national and transnational arenas" (Hart 2002, 14). We know little about how labor movements in other national contexts are responding to similar conditions of crises associated with global economic restructuring and labor market deregulation. We also know little about the relationship of their struggles with respect to each other. To bring a much needed cross-national lens to the study of labor revitalization, I focus on the dynamics of change in South Korea and the United States.

On the surface, these two countries seem an unlikely pair for comparison; they represent two places with asymmetrical trajectories of economic development