Rethinking the Employee Representation in Taiwan: the Role and Future of Trade Unions

Hsiao-Hui Tai
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

The Taiwanese government has introduced the representation systems since 1929 when the Trade Union Law was stipulated. So far, different mechanisms of employee representation have been implemented in many businesses and the outcomes vary as well. Trade unions and collective bargaining take place in most state-owned or privatised enterprises, but private-owned companies are often in favour of non-union representative mechanisms that become the only channel of workers’ voice in non-unionised workplaces. In 2000, the government proposed the new ‘labour-management partnership’ to encourage the harmony in workplaces whilst the systems of worker representation have been re-examined and promoted. Therefore, the first aim of this research is to outline as well as to investigate experiences and challenges of the employee representation in Taiwan.

According to the official statistics (Council of Labour Affairs, 2009), the total number of trade unions in workplaces has been slightly declining for the past decade and so was the total number of collective agreements, but at the same time, the total number of labour-management committees, which are one kind of representative mechanism regulated by the state, has dramatically increased. As a result, whether trade unions would be replaced by mechanisms of non-union representation has become a current debating issue. The second but more important aim of this study is to discuss the role and future of trade unions in Taiwan.

By combining the two foci, this research deals with this question: how the Taiwanese representative systems have been structured and implemented whether trade unions played an important role or not. To answer it, methods of qualitative research were conducted in one major case company ‘C’ and two supplementary case companies ‘S’ and ‘F’ in Taiwan.

The case ‘C’ is a privatised corporation with the largest single-plant trade union in Taiwan, where the data were collected between July 2003 and December 2007 by doing participant observation, in-depth interviews with union president, union officers and worker representatives, a survey of ordinary workers, and documentary analysis of meeting minutes, official letters and internal documents. The case ‘S’ is a state-owned enterprise with a federation of workers unions, and the case ‘F’ is a private-owned and non-unionised company implementing some non-union mechanisms; and in-depth interviews with worker representatives were conducted in both ‘S’ and ‘F’ between April and August 2007.

In terms of the representation systems in Taiwan, the comparison between three research cases illustrates a full view of representative mechanisms in businesses. Non-union representation is gradually developing in all kinds of corporations because of mandatory regulations, business needs, and even
worker and union demands. No matter how an enterprise is state-owned, privatised or private-owned, mandatory committees are held accordingly, and the implementation of legal mechanisms is regarded as some good impression and social responsibility of companies. Besides, corporations usually treat non-union mechanisms, especially those management-oriented committees, as the replacement for trade unions.

From the case ‘F’, the absence of trade unions results in an incomplete system of representation whilst workers’ voice cannot be efficiently passed to the management who does not always respect their voice. Moreover, experiences of the case ‘C’ shed light on the role and future of trade unions. Trade unions propose new kinds of representative committees and start manipulating non-union representation as a strategy to expand their influence and importance in workplaces. By electing employee representatives and organising internal committees to provide support to representatives, the union recognition has been re-strengthened.

To sum up, the dynamic systems of worker representation provide Taiwanese trade unions the possibility of significance and influence in the future. Rather than viewing the non-union representation as the obstruction, unions embody those mechanisms in their own structures and organisations. Whilst the decline of trade unions is ongoing, there are more ways for trade unions to redefine their own roles and offer more functions in the near future.

Reference