WORKER REPRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: ARE THE IDEALS OF THE WAGNER ACT MODEL ATTAINABLE?

THE CASE OF SOUTH KOREA

McGill University
Agenda

◆ Socio-Political Background of South Korea
◆ Institutionalization of Worker’s Representation
◆ The Strategies of Trade Unions in the Institutionalization
◆ Implication
Socio-Political Context

◆ Simultaneous Pressure for Democratization & Globalization
  ❖ No time for the socio-economic democratization
    ■ Exposed to the pressure of neo-liberalism immediately after achieving the political democratization in the late 1980s and early 90s
  ❖ Weak internal momentum for the socio-economic democratization from civil society and trade unions in the public sector

◆ Democratic / Liberal Government (1998~2007)
  ❖ Triggered the social discussion for the institutionalization of workers representation in the public sector
  ❖ Introduced neo-liberalism policies to the public sector based on New Public Management

◆ Conservative Government (2008~)
  ❖ Pro-Management / Anti-Unionism
The institutionalization

◆ Forced Institutionalization
  ❖ Due to the international pressure on South Korea to improve its poor labor environment in the public sector.
    ■ A series of recommendations from ILO and OECD calling for South Korea to institutionalize worker representation in public sector
  ❖ 2006.1: The government legalized a civil servants' union, announcing “The act for civil workers labor union”

◆ Restricted Institutionalization
  ❖ Regulating the qualifications for membership
  ❖ Expanding essential areas unilaterally
  ❖ Frequent use of back-to-work legislation to end strikes
  ❖ Restrictions on the subject of collective bargaining
Unions’ Response to the institutionalization

**Beyond the Institution**
- the Korean Government Employees’ Union (KGEU)
  - Refused to do register itself officially, saying that the law would limit its freedom of assembly and freedom to strike.
- the Korea Democracy Government Employees Union (KDGE)

**Within the Institution**
- Federation of Government Employees Unions (FGEU)
  - The first agreement reached through collective bargaining (2007.12)
The Union Repression under the conservative government

- Ban Ki-moon, President of South Korea, recently agreed on repression
Unions’ Response to the repression (1)

- Consolidation of three major unions (except for FGEU)
- Joined the progressive and anti-government umbrella labor union, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)
- Public condemnation of the government in solidarity with NGO and civil activists
The Government’s Response

◆ Refusing to acknowledge the KGEU as a legal labor union
  “Civil servants are not allowed to collectively criticize the government or interfere with policy planning and law enforcement under the name of a labor union or other forms of groups.” from the cabinet meeting

◆ More Repressions
  The Ministry of Public Administration and Security recently banned union members from conducting certain ceremonies at the beginning of their official events
  “When they sing labor songs with their fists clenched, they antagonize the government and the country,” An official at the ministry said. “Civil servants work for the people and they should not deny the national flag or the national anthem.”
Unions’ Response to the repression (2)

- Strengthen the Partnership with the Government
- Keep distance from political matters emphasizing the neutrality as an public servants
- *No umbrella Union*
Implication

- In the public sector, hard to make a distinction between the collective bargaining for the collective interest of members (business unionism) and the political bargaining for promoting the public service (social/political unionism).
- Recent policies of conservative government focus on making the political voice illegal by isolating it from the economic bargaining.
- Staying within the Institution seems not enough to change legal frame and fight against unilateral government policies.