

## Introduction to the Special Issue: A Comparative Perspective of Union-CSO Coalitions in the East Asian Countries

AKIRA SUZUKI | HOSEI UNIVERSITY

BYOUNG-HOON LEE | CHUNG-ANG UNIVERSITY

This special issue of *Development and Society* examines the historical development and current state of coalitions between labor unions and civil society organizations (CSOs) in South Korea (hereafter Korea), Taiwan, and Japan. It focuses on the possibilities and limits of union-CSO coalitions as ways to (re-)establish the labor movements as a counterweight to state, business, and market domination of civil society. Although the three East Asian countries have different trajectories of political and economic development in the postwar period (for example, Korea and Taiwan experienced authoritarian state rule; Japan did not), their labor movements and civil societies share characteristics. They each have decentralized union organizations and civil societies whose spheres of activity tend to be constrained by the state, political parties, and business corporations.

The special issue consists of five articles on union-CSO coalitions in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Three articles are about historical evolution of such coalitions in each country, while two articles are on notable contemporary cases of the coalition observed in Korea and Taiwan. It is a meaningful attempt to examine union-CSO coalitions among these non-Western countries, particularly from the comparative and historical perspective, in that the existing English literature has given little attention to the relationship between labor unions and civil society organizations outside countries in the West.

## The Challenges Facing Labor Movements in East Asian Countries

Labor movements in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan are organizationally decentralized, and enterprise unions are the dominant form of union organization. Industrial unions, a typical form in advanced democracies in the West, were formed only under exceptional circumstances. Unlike labor movements in advanced Western democracies, the labor movements in these three countries, either directly through mobilization or indirectly through political parties representing workers' interests, lacked political power sufficient to promote the development of welfare states that granted universal social rights to workers and their families. In Korea and Taiwan, labor unions under authoritarian rule were repressed by the state (Korea) or tightly controlled by enterprise-level organs of the Kuomintang (the KMT). In Japan, even under formally democratic rule, labor unions came under the hegemonic control of management at the enterprise level after the defeat of class-oriented unions in labor disputes in the 1950s and early 1960s. We should note, though, that, despite their organizational and political weakness, Korean and Taiwanese unions were leading civil society actors in the democratization process in their respective countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As the economies of the three countries came under the influence of neo-liberal globalization in the 1990s, their labor movements experienced similar structural changes in labor markets: disparities in wages, working conditions, and employment security between (mostly male) regular workers in large firms, on one hand, and (mainly female and migrant) non-regular workers and workers in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), on the other. The enterprise unions of large private-sector firms and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the core sector are mainly concerned with protecting the economic interests of union members and are unwilling to represent class-wide interests of workers including those precariously employed in the peripheral sector. Deindustrialization and privatization have meant a decline in union ranks. In Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, there has been a corresponding loss in union political influence and social presence. Their labor movements face the challenge of overcoming the "representation crisis." Can they reframe their goals and embrace the interests of workers in the peripheral sector, and what strategies should they take to increase union membership and to reassert their role as important actors in civil society? Some labor unions,

though still in the minority, have taken up the challenges by forming coalitions with CSOs and labor NGOs to address labor and social issues ignored by mainstream institutionalized unions. They include poor working conditions of precariously employed workers, discriminations against female and migrant workers, and the reconstitution of community among workers exposed to individualizing market pressures.

## Literature Review of Union-CSO Coalitions

Burgeoning literature on social movement unionism (SMU) stresses the importance of coalition-building between labor unions and CSOs, such as community groups and social movement organizations. Union-CSO coalitions have not only taken up organizing non-regular and precariously-employed workers, but they have also sought to (re-)establish the labor movement as a major civil societal force against the domination of the state and markets (Tattersall 2010).

Previous studies mainly analyzed cases of inter-movement coalition building in advanced democracies in the West, particularly the United States. These studies show that labor unions formed coalitions with community groups, faith-based organizations, and social movement organizations primarily to realize their own goals such as campaigns for union organizing and union recognition, and secondarily for broader social and policy goals such as living wage and immigrant rights campaigns. The studies indicate that the coalitions may lead to broadening labor union goals from the representation of narrowly-defined member interests to addressing more inclusive social concerns through mutual learning between coalition partners (Obach 2004).

The literature on SMU also examines partner commitment among union-CSO coalitions (Tattersall 2006), tensions in the coalitions due to different organizational cultures (Fine 2007), and cross-national/cross-regional comparisons of social, institutional, and political factors that promote or constrain the development of union-CSO coalitions (Frege, Heery, and Turner 2004; Turner 2007).

Most research, concerned mainly with cases in advanced democracies in the West, has paid little attention to union-CSO coalitions in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan (cf. Chun 2009; Suzuki ed. 2012). The articles in this special issue aim to fill this lacuna in labor studies. They contribute to the field by paying attention to historical aspects of union-CSO coalitions. Although previous

studies have tended to associate these coalitions with recent attempts by unions to revitalize labor movements weakened by neoliberal economies, the articles in this issue on their historical development show that coalitions were also formed as social movements against a repressive political regime (Korea) or against the threat of the re-imposition of authoritarian state control (Japan).

### Comparative Highlights on the Historical Evolution of Union-CSO Coalitions in the East Asian Countries

In Korea, the relationship between labor unions and CSOs has evolved from the resistance coalition against the developmental regime of political dictatorship (-1987) to the diverging coalitions in the post-democratization period (1988-1997) to the hollowed coalitions under the neoliberal regime (from 1998 on), as delineated in Lee, B.'s article. In postwar Japan, as discussed in Suzuki's article, union-CSO coalitions have transformed from the union-led vanguard model in the post-authoritarian period (1950s) through the pattern of distant/tense relationship concerning industrial pollution issues between 1960s and 1970s, to the balanced model to jointly respond to neoliberal labor market deregulation. In Taiwan, Ho's article notes, the labor movement has shown the dialectic or "yo-yo" style trajectory between institutionalized social dialogue versus extra-institutional militancy in the transition of political democratization (in 1987) and under the context of political power shift (in 2000), exposing the ever-growing contention between these diverging approaches in the relationship with social movement/labor NPOs as well as the state.

From a cross-national comparative perspective, the historical evolution of union-CSO coalitions or relationship in the three countries appears to differ from each other to the extent that such divergence justifies the idiosyncrasy of each country's political economy regime. There, however, exist a couple of commonalities implied from this comparison. The first common finding is that union-CSO coalitions have been transformed over time, rather than staying constant, and that the changes in the relationship between labor unions and CSOs might be to a large extent explained by the political contingency, such as reconfiguration of the political regime (i.e. democratization and power shift in Korea and Taiwan) and contested public agenda (i.e. Japan's case about changes in policy issues from "peace and democracy" in 1950s to industrial pollution in 1960s-1970s). The second

commonality is that the union-CSO coalitions have been split into the pragmatic/conciliatory and the radical/militant approaches with regards to the state's labor market reforms and social policies, and that this divide is mainly related with the ideological inclination and strategic prioritization of labor unions and CSOs. As commonly observed in the three countries, the former approach is often shown by the top-level union leadership representing the entrenched interests of their union members in the primary labor market, whereas the latter is made by grassroots activists who tried to protect the marginalized workforce, including non-regular workers, immigrant workers, female workers, and the youth or the aged workers, in the secondary markets. It is noteworthy that during the recent years progressive union-CSO coalitions have gained the growing presence under the context of the weakened influence of labor movements and intensified societal polarization in each country, by mobilizing militant activism and public protest to resist the neoliberal state geared at business-friendly energy and industry policy as well as labor market deregulation.

## New Possibilities of Union-CSO Coalitions in the East Asian Countries

The case study articles present a variety of interesting attempts to build union-CSO coalitions for protecting marginalized workers and ordinary citizens from business' unjust infringements as well as deregulated labor markets. Three Korean cases, discussed in Lee, M.'s article – Seoul General Union's planting allotment project, the establishment of the rest center for female care workers, assisted by the Korean Healthcare Workers Union, and the People's House – are of general interest, in that grassroots activists of local union branches and progressive CSOs attempt to build coalition communities for protecting disadvantaged workers and fortifying sustainable solidarity networks between union members and local residents/citizens.

Two Taiwanese cases, delineated in Li's article, also illustrate a meaningful experience to produce the union-CSO coalition in an unconventional manner. An NPO (Pong Wan-Ru Foundation) helped domestic workers to establish the Union of Community Servicewomen, and worked together with this union for developing a strategy of "market closure" to set out the standards of professionalization for those vulnerable workers. The Documentary Media Workers Union does not only establish a standard labor contract for advancing general labor welfare, but also creates coalition

activism with other social activist groups beyond its occupational interests. These two cases exemplify a new frontier of union-CSO coalitions to produce advocacy activism to jointly voice social issues as well as to pursue social movement unionism for protecting precarious workers at the margins of labor markets.

As such, those cases of union-CSO coalition closely examined by the two case study articles and various cases discussed in the three articles on the historical evolution exemplify various possibilities of cross-movement activism for labor unions and CSOs to act together for seeking for social justice and building anti-neoliberal communities in these East Asian countries. As shown in the cases, such cross-movement coalition could be carried out in a variety of unconventional ways, such as producing a public drama to raise societal issues, protecting or advocating the interests of marginalized people, and building the solidarity communities – whether at the local level or in the occupational sector. These cases offer lessons of general interest with implications for social movements and labor activism beyond the East Asian setting, as well.

## Some Future Research Issues

This special issue delineates the historical evolution of union-CSO coalitions in the three East Asian countries and explores the exemplary cases of such coalitions. Drawn from what we discussed in the introduction, several issues could be pointed out for future research on the same subject, union-CSO coalitions. The first issue is on how to overcome the split of union-CSO coalitions. The cross-movement coalition implies that different movement groups like labor unions and CSOs work together for pursuing the common goals. As commonly indicated in the articles of this issue, union-CSO coalitions are fragile and often divided or hollowed, owing to different interests and attitudinal inclination of movement groups. In this light, it is necessary to find out the preconditions to achieve the organic solidarity, coined by Zoll (2000), or the deep coalition, classified by Tattersall and Reynolds (2007). That is, how to reconcile and unify the different interests and views of various social movement groups into a common justice is the key to the success of union-CSO coalition. Thus, what factors facilitate or constrain/damage the cohesiveness of union-CSO coalition is the very issue to be figured out in future research.

The second issue is on the sustainability and diffusion of union-CSO

coalitions. Many studies, including the case study articles of this special issue, mainly focus on how union-CSO coalitions are built and make success, but pay little attention to how the coalitions are changed over time and if the coalitions are diffused to other movement groups across sectors and/or geographical territory. In that union-CSO coalitions are theoretically viewed as the principal bastion for the civil society to resist and overcome the dominance of the neoliberal state and business power, it is significant to discover the factors to make such coalitions sustainable and diffusible in future research.

The third one is on the expansion of comparative studies regarding union-CSO coalitions. This special issue covers the historical evolution and exemplary cases of union-CSO coalitions in the East Asian countries and tries to attract meaningful implications from a cross-national comparative perspective. If we expand our comparative scope to the Western countries, we can take advantage of rich research findings and insightful theoretical explanation concerning the evolutionary dynamics and strategic approaches of union-CSO coalitions, so as to broaden/deepen our understanding of union-CSO coalitions being attempted in non-Western or Asian context. In addition, such comparison of the expanded scope might contribute to the verification of theoretical premises proposed by the existing Western literature concerning union-CSO coalitions. Therefore, it could be a next research project to compare the historical evolution and casual mechanism of union-CSO coalitions between Western and non-Western countries.

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**AKIRA SUZUKI** is Professor at the Ohara Institute for Social Research, Hosei University in Japan. His major research interests include social movement unionism and the historical analysis of union involvement in environmental issues. He recently edited *Cross-National Comparisons of Social Movement Unionism: Diversities of Labour Movement Revitalization in Japan, Korea and the United States* (Peter Lang, 2012). *Address*: The Ohara Institute for Social Research, Hosei University, 4342 Aihara-Machi Machida-Shi Tokyo, 194-0298, Japan. [*E-mail*: insmove@hosei.ac.jp]

**BYOUNG-HOON LEE** is Professor at the Department of Sociology, Chung-Ang University in South Korea. His main research areas are labor union movements, labor market segmentation/polarization, and non-regular labor issues. He has co-edited a special volume of the *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Varieties of Labor Movement in Asia-Pacific Region* (2012), and authored a number of papers and book chapters on the transformation of labor union movements and labor markets in Korea. *Address*: Department of Sociology, Chung-Ang University, Heuksuk-ro 84, Dongjak-gu, 156-756, Seoul, South Korea. [*E-mail*: bhlee@cau.ac.kr]