

**A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT
IN A RAPIDLY INDUSTRIALIZING COUNTRY:
THE KOREAN CASE***

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This paper aims at analyzing the structure of industrial conflict in Korea. The focus is on why labor disputes, well-contained for the most part, have exploded at specific points in time. To approach the subject systematically, theoretical perspectives are analyzed first by reviewing previous studies of strike activity. Then the characteristics of industrial conflict in Korea are discussed from the point of accident theory and societal strains. Finally, this paper gives some consideration to the future of Korean industrial relations, and discusses the theoretical implications which the forgoing analyses give rise to.

THE PATTERN OF STRIKES IN KOREA

Management seeks to purchase labor most economically, while labor wants to maximize wages and other benefits. Conflict of interests between employers and employees is ubiquitous in all capitalist societies. (Miller and Form 1980, p. 413). Industrial conflict has existed for well over two hundred years. For most of that time, scholars of various disciplines have been interested in analyzing and explaining it. The subject has recently received special attention in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) because of its critical effects on the economic situation.

Over the past quarter century, Korea rapidly marched towards industrialization, sustaining an unusually high growth rate of GNP, with an average of 9.1 percent (The Bank of Korea 1982; 1989). The economic growth of such a small country as Korea, meager in raw materials and scanty in capital, is considered a miracle. It is also discussed as a deviant case of a dependent country (Barrett and Whyte 1982, p. 1086), because Korea became industrialized and raised her standard of living even while being dependent upon industrialized countries. Various explanations for this miraculous growth have been put forward, each of them emphasizing a particular aspect of Korea (Lim 1985, pp. 10-15). All of them, however, noted

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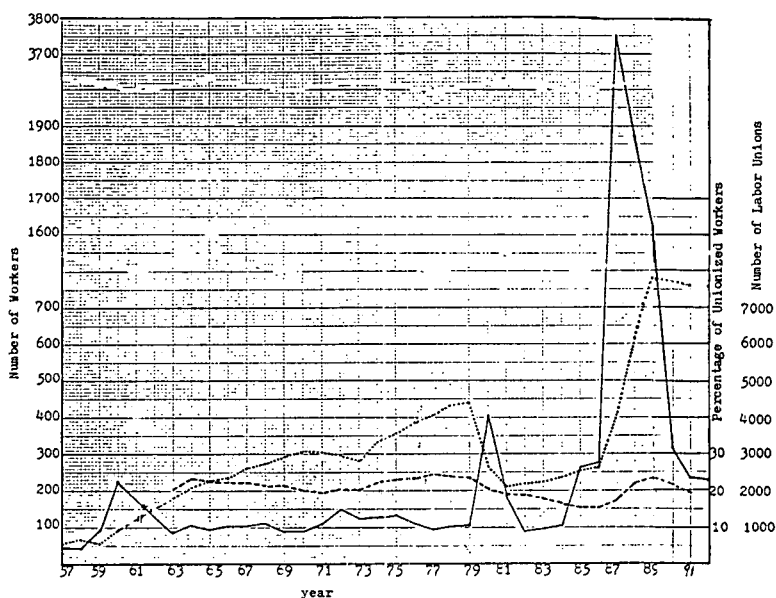
that Korea had peaceful labor relations despite its low level of wages during the main period of economic growth, and that the high performance of industrial workers was a key explanatory variable.¹⁾

Now, Korea is said to have encountered a bottleneck, whether it will join the industrialized countries or sink back among the frustrated industrializing countries. The answer lies in the way that Korea will deal with explosive labor disputes. The so-called "politically docile and uncomplaining" image of Korean workers was broken by the strikes which occurred in 1987. These disputes were more frequent and severe than those in any other country. Many Koreans worry that labor-management disputes may hinder the continuous growth prospects of the country. Thus more attention is being given to the subject, and what is being called the "labor-management problem" has been elevated to the status of a central social and political issue.

To sketch the history of labor disputes in Korea, I reviewed the time-series pattern of strike activity since the 1960s—the date Korea started its rapid increase in industrialization. Figure 1 summarizes the number of strikes and unionized workers for the years 1957-1991. Several distinct features typify the pattern of strike activity since 1957. First, there are three remarkable peaks in 1960, 1980, and 1987. Second, fluctuations over the other periods are not great. Third, the peaks get higher as the years pass, 1987 being especially high. Fourth, the number of strikes is positively related with the number of labor unions, but not related with the percentage of unionized workers which is relatively stable.

Several researchers have attempted to discover the factors that gave rise to the especially explosive strikes in 1987, but the studies have failed to provide a coherent explanation for them. This paper aims at analyzing the structure of industrial conflict in Korea. The focus is on why labor disputes, well-contained for the most part, have exploded at specific points in time. Then, I speculate on the future of Korean industrial relations, and finally discuss theoretical implications resulting from the analysis. The analysis of industrial conflict in Korea is very important not only for Koreans but also for other developing countries, for Korea is a test case for development theories and provides a model for the economic growth of underdeveloped countries.

¹For a more detailed discussion on the creation of such a high-quality labor force in Korea, see Bae (1989).



—Number of Strikes Number of Labor Unions --- % of Unionized Workers

Source: The Ministry of Labor, *Yearbook of Labor Statistics*, 1978, 1989, 1992.

Korea Labor Institute, *Quarterly Labor Reviews*, 1989, 1992.

FIGURE 1. ANNUAL NUMBERS OF STRIKES AND LABOR UNIONS, AND PERCENTAGE OF UNION WORKERS, 1957-1992.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO EXPLAIN STRIKES

An unceasing power struggle is a central feature of industrial relations. Although industrial conflict manifests itself in various forms, the strike is the most usual and typical. To construct an analytical framework to explain the pattern of strike activity in Korea, previous studies of strike activity will be reviewed first. The strike literature reveals four conceptual and analytical frameworks (Snyder 1975, pp. 259-60; Paldam and Pedersen 1982, pp. 504-05). In the four perspectives, different specific factors explain strikes (Kaufman 1982, pp. 478-84).

First, industrial conflict is considered a political and organizational phenomenon (Shorter and Tilly 1974). According to this view, individuals organize themselves to pursue common interests (Olsen 1965), and strikes occur to the extent that there is an organizational capacity for such action. Labor unions arise as a countervailing power to contest that of management. In the political-organizational framework, particular political

events and the broader political climate in a country explain the causes of strikes. Sometimes, strikes fluctuate with changes in political currents more than with economic conditions. As the Webbs suggested (Webb and Webb 1902, pp. 173-221, 247-78), there are two general methods by which the trade union movement can secure its objectives: either by bargaining directly with employers or by using the legislative process of legal enactment. Availability of the latter method results in strikes being related to political events.²⁾

The extent of inter-union rivalry may be another political factor in determining strike activity. Union leaders are interested in ensuring the survival and growth of their unions as organizations. Thus their efforts in both organizing and bargaining are partly related to the amount of competition with rival labor organizations. Also, jurisdictional disputes between competing unions may lead to more strikes.³⁾

A second approach is the theory of bargaining (Paldam and Pedersen 1982, pp. 504-05) which considers the strike as a strategic action in the process of bargaining. This theory attributes more strategic autonomy to labor and management, assuming that each party has perfect information about the other's intentions. According to the bargaining theory, economic conditions are the most important determinant of the propensity to strike. It goes without saying that changing economic conditions such as inflation and the unemployment rate may affect strike patterns.

A third framework for the analysis of strikes is the so-called accident theory. It contends that the majority of strikes are the result of faulty negotiation (Hicks 1963, p. 146). This point of view contends that a good way of reducing strikes is to identify variables that increase uncertainty for one or both parties in the bargaining process. The probability of strikes may be determined by the institutional settings of collective bargaining which may include the organizational structure, customs, and practices. The accident theory considers institutional factors as very important to explain strikes. As Snyder (1975) indicated, the decision to strike is not independent of institutional arrangements. He argued that a particular structure and process of bargaining can play a major role in determining the extent of

²There is little disagreement as to the general importance of including political events as a potential cause of fluctuations in strike patterns. It is, however, disputable with respect to the more specific questions of how and in what manner political events actually influence strike activity (Kaufman 1982, p. 481).

³Goldberg and Yabroff (1951, p. 3) indicated that the number of strikes in the United States showed a significant difference before and after 1936, when the period of the rivalry between AFL and CIO began with the birth of the CIO. The merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 effectively put an end to the source of conflict.

conflict.

A fourth approach views rapid social change as a source of societal strains (Durkheim 1951; Smelser 1963). That is, rapid industrialization and urbanization break down social groups, generate anomie, and consequently lead to protest. Strikes are one manifestation of this protest (Kerr *et al.* p. 1960). This approach suggests that the decision to strike may be influenced by subjective attitudinal or psychological factors as well as objective circumstances. They are, for example, the militancy of workers, the ideological perspective of the business community, the charisma or style of union leaders, the overall climate of public opinion toward organized labor and its goals, etc.. Derber (1957) attributed part of the abrupt increase in strike activity in the United States after 1932 to the profound shift in opinion toward unions brought about by the Depression, which seriously tarnished the moral authority of the business class.

CHARACTERISTIC FACTORS OF LABOR DISPUTES IN KOREA

According to the organizational perspective, the number of strikes would be associated with the number of unions, percentage of unionized workers, inter-union rivalry, and so on. Figure 2 shows the annual economic growth rate, GNP per capita, and the percentage demanding wage raise among total number of strikes in Korea during 1975 to 1991. Comparing Figure 2 with Figure 1, the strike pattern in Korea is found to be neither related to the economic conditions of the country nor to the organizational capacity of workers. Bargaining theory predicts that the number of strikes would move in conformity with the rise and fall of business activity (Kaufman 1982, p. 478). Comparing the number of strikes in Figure 1 to the annual economic growth rate in Figure 2, however, we find rather a negative association. The pattern of strikes in Korea may be explained better by the accident theory or societal strains rather than the organizational or bargaining theory. The former theories emphasize institutional and societal factors in explaining industrial conflicts.

Labor Control and Political Instability

Strike activities in Korea sharply increased in 1960, 1980, and 1987 as shown in Figure 1. Considering the political situations in three years, the factor that most influenced the number of strikes seems to have been political instability.

In 1960, President Lee's dictatorship collapsed due to the Student Revolution in April, and a new democratic government appeared. With

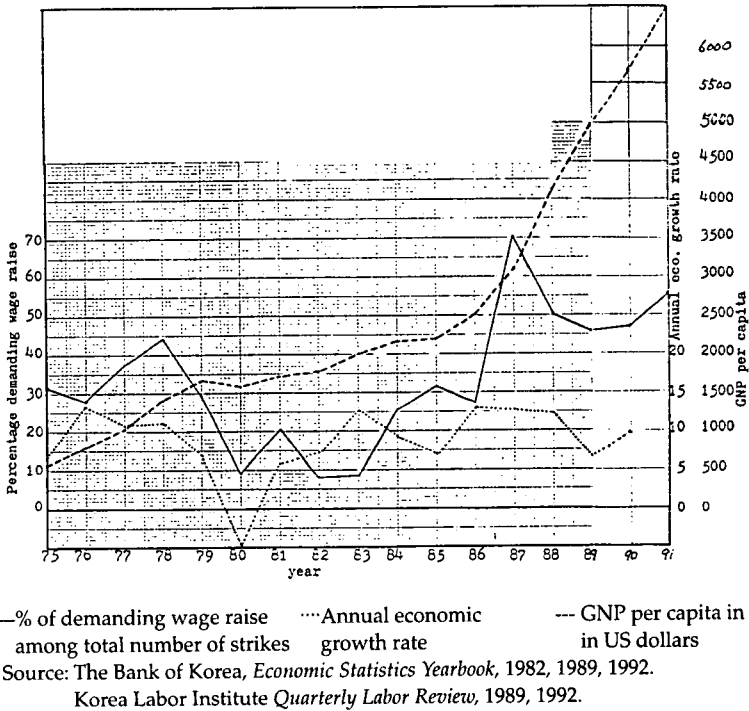


FIGURE 2. ANNUAL ECONOMIC GROWTH RATE, GNP PER CAPITA, AND PERCENTAGE DEMANDING WAGE RAISE AMONG TOTAL NUMBER OF STRIKES, 1975-1991.

political liberalization, the labor movement was activated. But the movement soon stagnated after the emergence of a military government in 1961. Next, political instability in October, 1979 was caused by the assassination of President Park, who had ruled the country since the military coup in 1961. Once more, labor disputes sharply increased. In May, 1980, the "Spring of Seoul" for democratization was terminated by another military leader, General Chun, becoming President. In 1987, the 26-year military, authoritarian government was forced by the people into collapse and democracy began in Korea. It is evident that the number of strikes was conditioned by the political climate. That is, the dramatic increase of strikes in those three years was associated with political liberalization. Strike activity fell down significantly during periods of stable government.

Why are industrial disputes so closely interrelated with political situations in Korea? Although many western governments may be neutral agencies in labor-management relations, the Korean government clearly favored entrepreneurs in the 1960s through 1970s. The fact is well reflected

in the slogan, "First growth, after distribution," which was the most compressed expression of the uneven economic growth policy of Korea. To support the uneven developmental strategy, the government revised labor laws in 1963. As the result, organized workers' political activities were banned, and legal strike activity was made extremely difficult. The labor laws were strengthened after President Park's political "leadership crisis" in 1971. It took away workers' rights of collective bargaining and action. Labor controls which loosened for a while after President Park's assassination became more repressive and extensive in the revision of labor laws in December, 1980 (Lee 1988, pp. 107-10).

Economic planners of Korea wanted to keep wages low to fight inflation and to make the country's exports more competitive. The government maintained a tight grip on labor and used a plain-clothes security force and anti-communist ideology to interfere with the formation and organization of labor unions (Koo 1989, p. 28). In the 1980s, for example, labor unions were totally restructured, and leaders of the labor movement in the 1970s were fired. Thus, all the existing labor unions came under the domination of the government or management (Lee 1988, pp. 111-12).

However, collective action does not necessarily require the prior existence of a formal organization. Numerous strikes in Korea were initiated by workers in the absence of unions. Autonomous grass-root unions (not approved by the government and the management) have been continually organized since the 1970s. Development of these autonomous grass-root labor organizations put strong pressure on the official union leadership as well as on the government (Lee 1988, pp. 104-05). During periods of political liberalization, therefore, union representativeness became a controversial issue which also increased strikes.

As labor disputes were strongly repressed throughout the period of industrialization, workers' dissatisfaction continuously accumulated. In this vicious circle of increasing controls and increasing resentment, strikes were usually repressed and hidden. It was inevitable that they would explode during the periods of political liberalization. In short, a main reason for the explosive strikes in specific times was that the government kept a tight control on labor activities.

Strategies for Economic Growth and Inequality

As indicated earlier, strike activity in Korea was not positively related to changing economic conditions. This reflects the absence of formal negotiation. It resulted from the governmental policy for economic growth. The economic growth strategy of the Korean government in the 1960s and

the 1970s did not provide workers the opportunity to engage in short-term adjustment implied in costs and benefits calculations in the bargaining model.

The major Korean strategies for economic growth may be summarized as follows. First, the Korean government adopted an uneven development strategy. Neglecting the rural sector, the country drove towards highly selected industrial policies. Second, the government pursued an export-oriented pattern of industrialization (Zubekas 1979, pp. 250-52). Since the country had neither raw materials nor an internal market, it imported raw materials and exported finished goods, taking advantage of low labor costs. Third, a great deal of capital and technology was borrowed from industrialized countries. The government managed its allocation and guaranteed future payment. Fourth, the government initiated the investment and banking system and then interfered with it using such measures as tax policy, import-quota allocation, and export subsidy. Fifth, the government strongly controlled workers' wage levels and consumer prices.

The economic growth strategies of Korea were generally successful. But the strategies implied some contradictions between growth and income distribution. An increase in the urban population meant a more unequal comparison with rural population. Strategic support of selected enterprises resulted in the rise of several great monopolies, and the strong alliance of political elites and entrepreneurs was unavoidable. These strategies achieved rapid economic growth, but increased income inequality. Data in Table 1 reveal that the income of the upper 20% increased with economic growth, while that of lower 40% decreased. Compared to Japan and Taiwan, Korea's income distribution is much more unequal. The portion of income that the lower 40% of the Japanese received in 1979 was 21.9%, and 22.3% for Taiwan in comparison with 16.1% of Korea in 1980. Korea's national growth sacrificed the economic inequality of industrial workers and farmers. In other words, while their standard of living was improved, the inequality also sharply increased.

In the early stage of industrialization, Korean workers were strongly motivated and committed to their work (Bae 1986, pp. 256-57). They worked hard, more than ten hours a day, without complaining of the sacrifice of their personal lives. However, as the income gap widened with economic growth, the degree of work commitment decreased while workers' discontent increased. Furthermore, the feeling of relative deprivation grew as they saw themselves excluded from the distribution of the fruits of economic growth. Workers' demands for equitable distribution of the

TABLE 1. INDEX OF CONCENTRATION OF INCOME DISTRIBUTION OF KOREA

	Year				
	1965	1970	1976	1980	1985
Lower 40% (A)	19.3	19.7	16.8	16.1	17.7
Upper 20% (B)	41.9	41.6	45.3	45.4	43.7
A/B	.46	.47	.37	.35	.35
Gini Coefficient	.34	.33	.39	.39	.36

Source: Economic Planning Board, *Social Indicators in Korea*. 1982, 1986.

benefits were successfully depressed during the period of political stability, but it burst when controls were weakened.

Everyday attitudes towards industrial relations owe much to the way in which they are portrayed by the mass media. The media often simplify the situation. In the 1960s, strikes were portrayed as subversive or irresponsible behavior, and trade unions were considered an assault on "national development." By the 1980s, however, the public became sympathetic to industrial workers. Armed with a clear conception of the life styles of each social strata through the media, workers' notions about tolerable standards were necessarily affected. The feeling of relative deprivation of the 1980s made collective action an acceptable solution to an apparent failure of equitable income distribution. They believed that the unequal distribution meshed closely with the broad structure of class inequality and the distribution of social power which it incorporated. Processes of power and psychological factors thus interacted in the labor market of Korea. These factors made the strikes in 1987 more militant and explosive than ever before.

Cultural Values and Institutionalization

While the causes of conflict remain inherent in the structure of social and economic relations, their expression is contained by a network of institutions and procedures (Hyman 1989, p. 191). Therefore, social institutions or cultural norms are considered to be an important factor in explaining the industrial relations of a country. As a matter of fact, institutional discord in the process of rapid industrialization may partly explain the strike pattern of Korea.

Korean government took advantage of traditional Korean values in order to build a loyal labor force. The government developed *Nosa Hyobuihoe* (Labor-Management Council) as a substitute for labor unions in the late 1960s. The Council was granted legal status by the *Nosa Hyobuihoe Bob*

(Labor-Management Council Law) in 1980. The law stipulated that all industries with one hundred or more employees must have such a council, made up of an equal number of labor and management representatives. The council's function was to improve productivity, train workers, resolve disputes, promote workers' interests, improve safety and the work environment, and increase labor-management cooperation.

The governmental policies on industrial relations seem to have been designed to implement Confucian, group-oriented values (Bae 1987, pp. 159-160), which, whether or not it is realized by the population at large, underlie Korean traditional social relations. Confucianism stresses respect for authority and a sense of one's place in the social hierarchy, emphasizing that hierarchical relationships are necessary in order to produce harmony in organizations. It teaches five ethics in social life, called *Oryun*.⁴) Of these five, *Pucha Yuchin* (i.e. the relationship between father and son) is the most valued. The government-led *Kongchang Saemaul Undong* (New Factory Community Movement) was the Council's ideological fulcrum (Bae and Form 1986, p. 121). The movement's slogan was "Treat employees like family, do factory work like a family business" (Park 1979, pp. 210-16). It asked workers to be as loyal to the company as they would be to their parents (Bae 1989, pp. 360-61).

However, while management contended that it behaved responsibly in accord with the Confucian tradition, workers felt that management did not take care of them in spite of their hard work and loyalty (Bae and Form 1986, p. 129). While management complained "Workers do not do factory work like a family business," workers complained "Management do not treat employees like family." The elements of ambivalence on both sides were an important cause of their conflicts.

Korean cultural traditions value human relationships, family, and community solidarity above anything else. According to researches on the trends of changing attitude and values of Koreans (Bae 1986), workers and management felt strong bonds before the economic growth, but afterwards the distributional consequences destroyed their bases of solidarity. In other words, inconsistency of expectations disturbed informal and formal rules which constrain workers' behavior. New relationships based on the modern concept of rationalism or social contract were not institutionalized yet.

Industrial conflicts conventionally center around the level of wages and

⁴*Oryun* (five ethics) are ① Kunshin Yuui - stressing duty between king and subject; ② Pucha Yuchin - the close relationship between father and son and the father's authority; ③ Pubu Yupyol - the distinction between husband and wife; ④ Changyu Yusuh - the precedence of the old over the young; ⑤ Pungwoo Yushin - the good faith between friends.

working conditions. In Korea, however, as shown in Figure 2, the percentage of demanding wage raise among total number of strikes averages about 20% before 1987. Workers made usually non-wage strike demands: better humane treatment, family allowances, educational funds for children, and courteous treatment for senior workers. These non-wage demands reflect the cultural characteristics of Korea, often involving questions of principle on which compromise is far more difficult. In short, the non-institutionalization of industrial relations is another important factor which augmented strikes in Korea.

Ideology and Class Conflict

The hypothesized link between the political situation and strikes seems evident in the above observations. Then, how could political factors play a critical role in determining strikes in Korea? Some explanation is needed in order to understand the relationship between economic growth and political factors in the Korean process of industrialization.

Whereas in western societies entrepreneurs initiated industrialization and sustained economic growth, in Korea political elites played a more vital role in stimulating entrepreneurial ideology.⁵⁾ The military government in the 1960s considered the construction of a self-sufficient national economy as the most urgent goal to achieve political legitimacy as well as economic growth. Towards this end, the government launched a series of economic development 5-year plans in 1962. With the "free" enterprise system being oriented by governmental "guidance," the government reserved the power to control firms and to determine prices, taxation, and tariff policy (Kim 1976, pp. 465-68).

The government elites maintained that the only way to accomplish successful economic growth and to escape from four-thousand years of poverty was to "modernize" the nation. To achieve this objective, the government urged everybody to participate voluntarily in the national project of modernization. It asked workers to endure such hardships as low wages, long overtime work, bad working conditions, etc., which were said to be "temporary." The government defined "collective bargaining" to be "conflict," rather than "a rational way of settling labor problems." To shorten the unhappy temporary period, all workers were asked to follow orders from "above."

Even though Korean workers approved of the Confucian ethics of hierarchy and wanted their employers to behave like caring parents, they

⁵For a more detailed discussion on entrepreneurial ideology in Korea, see Bae (1989, pp. 359-62).

came to realize that, as the inequality widened, their employers were primarily motivated by profit. They also saw a government that favored the rich and was biased against workers and the poor (Form and Bae 1988, pp. 637-42). Workers felt that they had to protect themselves by pursuing their own class interests.

A group of students and intellectuals who had been against the military government supported the workers. They entered into an alliance. In order to make the workers more conscious about their own class interest, they developed the *Minjung* ideology, which was against the economic growth ideology of the government and capitals. The word, *Minjung* means "the people" or "the masses." The *Minjung* ideology emerged in the early 1970s, with the help of the middle class intelligentsia, "as a reaction to widening economic disparities and the lack of morality in the accumulation process... The *Minjung* ideology juxtaposes the masses with the ruling class, the repressed with the oppressed" (Koo 1989, p. 29).

Distrust in management and in the government made the workers reject the original ideology of economic growth and accept the *Minjung* ideology. The ideology made workers' passions stronger, and functioned as an ideological fulcrum for the labor movement in Korea. Thus despite governmental repression, union activity was more vigorous, and strikes became more militant as labor control tightened.

PROSPECTS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Prospects

Until the 1970s, Korea has been considered a model for Third World economic growth with its relatively low wages and strong work ethic. In the 1980s, however, the labor movement gained strength in spite of government repression, and labor unrest grew. A dramatic indication of this change was provided by the explosive strikes after political democratization in 1987. The strikes occurred in newspapers, broadcasting stations, and universities, as well as in various industries. In 1990, strikes calmed down again.

The peculiar pattern of strikes in Korea resulted, first of all, from the government's strong application of labor controls. Workers' requests for a higher quality of working life were suppressed not only physically but also culturally, in the name of "national unity" or "modernization." As income inequality between classes grew, however, workers' feelings of relative deprivation and powerlessness increased. Korean workers began to think that it was almost impossible to win improvements in their conditions within the present institutional setting. Consequently, every political crisis

or change inevitably brought about explosive strikes.

The chances for successful political control of industrial wage-earners are greatest when they are neither too few (i.e. weak) nor too many (i.e. strong to be held in check) (Gagliani 1987, p. 317). In 1989, permanent employees in Korean non-farm industries were over 8.3 million, equivalent to one-fifth of the Korean population (Economic Planning Board 1990). Union membership at the end of June, 1989 was up 76% from 1986 to 1.8 million workers. More significantly, the number of unions rose 178% during the same period to 7,380 (See Figure 1). The government's maintaining control over labor seems to have become difficult after 1987, the year the military government surrendered to the peoples' desire for democratization.

In addition, governmental officials realized through the 1987 experience that workers, if organized, could become a powerful political force, and that the crackdown on unions could make workers more militant. It began to regard organized labor as the biggest potential threat to stability. In the past, employers were reluctant to get involved in workers' activities. Through the long period of labor stability, entrepreneurs did not try to introduce many technological and organizational innovations.

With the recent changes in the government labor policy, most employers find they must pay more attention to workers' behavior. Some try to promote "managerial identity" or "corporate culture" through "training abroad" and "periodic meetings between employers and employees" (*Chosun-Ilbo*, April 9, 1990). Workers reciprocate by undertaking mostly "legal strikes" and ensuring that their conduct during strikes is "orderly." Collective bargaining tends to produce relatively self-limiting boundaries that distinguish permissible from subversive industrial disorder. In 1992, the number of strikes was only 233.

There has been signs of change in the industrial relations of Korea. In the past, the pattern of industrial conflicts in Korea reflected political instability, workers' powerlessness and psychological frustration, ideological conflicts, and cultural maladjustment. After 1987, the percentage of demanding wage raise among total number of strikes was increasing. This rate change positively related with GNP per capita. It seemed that the pattern of strikes moved toward bargaining style. The government was trying to coordinate employers and workers as a neutral agency. Although unions are acquiring an important measure of legitimacy, it is only the beginning. It should be recognized by all that social conflict is inevitable in complex societies, and a necessary process within and between groups in a democratically organized pluralistic society (Miller and Form 1980, pp. 418-19).

The conception of industrial relations as a source of order and regularity

This paper suggests that the concept of global politics, if refined and elaborated, would be useful for analyzing industrial relations, especially in rapidly industrializing countries like Korea.

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⁶Paul Thompson referred to "global politics" as "the relations of production and reproduction—for example, ownership, appropriation, and distribution of the surplus product—at the level of capitalist society as a whole," and "production politics," as "the manifestations of exploitation, control, and the wage-effort bargain as work relations" (Thompson 1986, p. 237).

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