

Reform or Revolution?

Union-Cooperative Partnerships in the U.S. and South Korea

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Introduction

Though the post-1970s era of global neoliberalism has seen a withering of labor power across the world, recent years have witnessed a florescence of union-coop partnerships, including renewed thinking about how unions can use their resources to build the alternative kind of economy many worker coops support, and of how coop owners can think politically and in solidarity with union workers in a struggle to humanize the economic system. Both unions and worker cooperatives believe in “economic democracy, wealth sharing and putting people before profits,” and these shared values are increasingly moving unions and cooperatives “from indifference to common ground” (Davidson 2011).

However, the growth of partnerships between unions and worker cooperatives is not necessarily associated with new forms of progressive labor action, nor may it be assumed that the power and scope of labor movements will necessarily grow through such alliances. Rather, an examination of how these collaborations are unfolding on the ground shows that union-coop alliances are not necessarily accommodating to the existing capitalist system, nor are they necessarily transformational. Both unions and worker coops face important dilemmas in balancing their practical work as “simply business” against broader aspirations to wage a “battle for socialism” (Buber 1958, 70: cited in Prychitko 1989:3). When the two organizations come together, these dilemmas are not always resolved in a way that advances progressive alternatives to capitalism. Rather, union-coop collaborations can adopt a model of accommodational business unionism, just as they can adopt a model of labor militancy.

In practice, the nature of union-coop collaborations depends on local context. This paper posits that the political culture of labor history in differing countries, and the ideology of leadership within labor organizations, matter greatly in shaping the union-cooperative relationships that emerge on the ground. To demonstrate these themes, the paper provides a case study of emerging union-cooperative collaborations in two countries: the United States and Korea. In the United States, Denver’s immigrant taxi union cooperatives are allying with a local union in a way that reflects traditional business unionism, whereas a unionized bus driver cooperative in Korea is following a path of transformational labor militancy.

Dual Nature of Labor Unions and Worker Cooperatives

As union-coop partnerships expand globally, an important question is “to what end?” New labor partnerships suggests a future of enhanced labor power, but we must remain attuned to the fact that labor movements, old or new, constantly face the difficult choices described by America’s Progressive Labor Party in 1964. “Two paths are open to the workers of any given

country. One is the path of resolute class struggle; the other is the path of accommodation, collaboration.” (Challenge-Desafio, 1964).

This quote highlights how a great deal of labor history is shaped by the different trajectories that result from labor organizations choosing different paths in navigating the choices between “class struggle” and “accommodation, collaboration.” In assessing the likely consequences of newly emerging partnerships between unions and coops in today’s labor movement, we must therefore pay attention to the way these movements unfold on the ground, and how they answer that eternal question of “reform or revolution,” “class struggle or accommodation.”

The choice between “class struggle” and “accommodation” with capitalism is deeply related to notions of “class” itself. E.P. Thomson, in his classic *Making of the English Working Class* (1966) argues that “class” is something that happens when people “as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel *and articulate* the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against others whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs” (cited in Issac, Harrison, Lipold 2008: 11) (emphasis).

But the ways by which the concept of a shared class identity is *articulated* among workers as a result of common experience and shared interests are obscure. For example, it is difficult to define the relationships between capital and labor (inherently exploitive? potentially collaborative?). It is not always self-evident to a worker that he or she shares an identity with co-workers, or that this identity might be naturally “against others [i.e., capitalists] whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.” Both unions and worker owned cooperatives consistently face this difficult task of helping workers define the relationship between labor and capital, and their own class position, and both institutions have offered radical and accommodating responses to this enduring task.

Regarding labor unions, there have long been differing perspectives on how unions should respond to capital. Although radical labor advocates assume an inevitably adversarial relationship between labor and capital, more accommodationist perspectives have emphasized the need for unions to cooperate with capital in order to survive in a capitalist reality, and to forge pragmatic partnerships that advance the interests of both capital and labor in any given workplace. From the more radical perspective, Marx argued that trade unions are “important as an organized means to promote the abolition of the very system of wage labour” (ibid. I.W.A on Trade Unions, Geneva, 1866, Quoted in Dridzo 1935: 17). Marx considered trade unions as “organising centres, centres for collecting the forces of the workers, organisations for giving the workers an elementary class training” (Dridzo 1935: 15).

Although some argue that adversarial relations between unions and employers are necessary to strengthen labor movements (Kelly 1996), many have argued against these adversarial assumptions. For instance, Streech (1992) argues that “unions should move from a conflict-oriented, adversarial, distributionist position to a productive, cooperationist position” (cited in Wheeler 2002: 180). Many scholars have similarly argued that “the willingness of unions and their members to behave ‘moderately’ provides a way to survive in capitalism,” and some suggest that “offering concessions to the employer” is “a part of a new social partnership” based on decreased antagonism between labor and capital (Kelly 1998: 14).

The stances of worker cooperatives concerning capital-labor relations have been similarly Janus-faced. While a radical view of worker cooperatives sees these institutions as a transformational strategy through which labor absorbs capital, pursues the elimination of the wage system and seeks control of the workplace by labor—even across the broader economy, a more reformist view on capital-labor relations focuses on worker cooperatives as simply a tool to foster worker ownership of company shares, as a tool to advance their own economic self-interest.

It is certainly true that worker coops often must consider the path of an efficient, business-like approach, since in the end worker cooperatives are economic organizations that need to survive in the capitalist system and therefore must operate like any other business, seeking to build profits through efficient business practices. As “a product of capitalist society,” the goal of the cooperative is to “improve the income of members as part of the private enterprise system” (Thornley 1981: 173; Abrahamsen 1976: 11). This reality means that worker cooperatives often face a danger of degeneration, in terms of any broader goals of social transformation, in that they face pressure to “adopt the same organizational forms and priorities as capitalist businesses in order to survive” (Cornforth 1995: 488).¹

On the other hand, worker cooperatives also have transformational potential because of their concerns for a sustainable and equitable community, and their commitment to workplace democracy as part of a radical critique of capitalism (Engler 2010; Mallason 2014; Hoyt 2010; Restakis 2010; Clay 2013). From this perspective, economic democracy through a worker cooperative becomes one way to practice political democracy and build a “broader social democracy” (Rastakis 2010; Bernard 2009).

Though many coops naturally have such broader social and political goals, worker coops often find it difficult to build new forms of competitive businesses while also staying connected to broader political goals. In their focus on operating a successful business, “worker cooperatives became disassociated from the labor movement” (Hochner et. al. 1988: 16). It is often challenging for cooperatives to be efficient economic entities, and provide “a high living standard for their members,” while also participating in progressive campaigns and advancing “egalitarian and participatory values” across their community (Lawrence 2001:8).

Both unions and worker cooperatives face these enduring dilemmas of accommodation or transformation. Although some have argued that affiliation with labor unions naturally offer worker cooperatives the opportunity to be more politically engaged through “action in solidarity on workers’ rights and opportunities in the community and broader economic arena” (Hoyer 2015; Wright 2010), the way by which actual worker coop-union collaborations unfold on the ground can be quite accommodationist (according to principles of business unionism) or potentially transformational (according to principles of labor militancy), depending on the local political and economic context.

U.S. Business Unionism in Coop-Union Relationships

¹ Degeneration theory is presented by many scholars such as Webb and Webb 1914, 1921; Shirom 1972; Meister 1974, 1984; Mandel 1975.

American labor unions have functioned according to the principle of accommodationist business unionism for most of 20th century. The notion of revolutionary unionism never gained much traction in America, fueling a cottage industry of scholarship examining “why is there no socialism in the United States?” In his classic answer, Louis Hartz (1955) pointed to an individualistic, “liberal tradition” in America that undermines notions of class solidarity among workers. Writing in this tradition, Salvatore (1984) finds that America’s open and pluralistic political system has led to the lack of a class-conscious, oppositional identity among workers--a kind of unique “Americanism” identified as far back as Tocqueville. Class conflict has often occurred in American history, Salvatore notes, “but only rarely did that experience produce a conscious and sustained self-image of working people as a class standing in opposition to other classes in society” (see also Lipset and Marks 2000) This “liberal” American political culture has shaped a tradition of business unionism, “which has undermined the notions of class solidarity among workers, and also has been associated with the idea of a “belief in the harmony of interests of capital and labor” (cited in Greenston 1967: 28).

The root of business unionism is the belief that “workers and bosses have common interests” in sustaining a competitive capitalist business (Neal 2011), and that the role of unions is to work within the framework of a collective bargaining agreement to build mutually beneficial relations between management and labor. This business unionism philosophy especially escalated among American union leaders when the successes of the New Deal persuaded many that capitalism could work for both capital and labor. As a response to the Great Depression, Roosevelt built New Deal assistance programs to provide the poor with good wages, public assistance, and a variety of public goods like health care and housing. Preceding radical concepts of a self-sufficient alliance of unions and cooperatives replacing the entire capitalist system, advanced by such groups as the Knights of Labor and the IWW in the decades before the New Deal, evaporated in the face of the growing welfare state, which resulted in less union leader interest in worker cooperatives (Leikin 1996; also see Rotschild 2009). In these years the AFL turned away from campaigns to replace capitalism with cooperativism and instead sought to be an institution of management-labor collaboration, working in “service to the union members and to the industry in which its members are employed” (Greenstone 1977: 28).

Seeking primarily to secure economic benefits for individual union members in the form of higher wages and benefits, business unionism has resulted in top-down union hierarchies, with professional leaders who negotiate with business management, have little connection with rank-and-file members, and have minimum expectations that union members will be engaged in building sectoral labor power. Business unionism involves a “strategic choice by key leaders of labor unions to move away from workers and the workplace” (416), and to focus on “corporate campaigns” of securing better work benefits rather than on developing worker leadership (McAlevey 2015: 416). Key tasks of professional labor organizers in this model are to represent workers in boardroom negotiations with management, and to “produce constant and immediate improvements in the material conditions of union members’ lives” (Ross 2012: 35-6).²

² As an alternative to business unionism, there has been a turn within some U.S. unions since the 1990s to revitalize labor by emphasizing rank and file organizing and alliance-building with broader community campaigns. Many progressive unions (SEIU, USW, UE) have increased “social movement unionism” efforts to organize the unorganized (such as immigrants) and wage agitational political campaigns to win industry-wide labor

Worker Cooperative Movements

While the power of labor unions to organize workers has continued to shrink due to globalization and associated economic restructuring, the worker cooperative movement in the U.S. is small but growing. There are now an estimated 300-400 worker cooperatives that have 2,500-3,500 worker owners in the United States (Abel 2014). Although worker cooperatives constitute less than 1% of the economy, the growth of worker cooperatives since the global crisis of 2008 is significant.

In the United States, the trend of economic informalization has been coupled with expanding worker owned cooperatives, especially within the service sector (i.e., cleaning, food catering, landscaping, taxi driving), and with an especially notable growth of immigrant worker owned cooperatives (Ji and Robinson 2012). It is estimated that 35% of worker cooperatives are in the service sector, and 23 % of worker cooperatives are in retail sectors (Abel 2014: 7). The growth of worker owned cooperatives is paralleled by the rising support of many urban leaders. In Cleveland, university, business and civic leaders have united behind the "Evergreen Initiative," a well-funded plan to build an expanding network of worker cooperatives across the city (Alperovitz, et. al.2010; Johnsen 2010). Cincinnati and Pittsburgh have launched initiatives to support worker-owned cooperatives with city funds. In New York, Mayor Blasio has dedicated \$1.2 million in city funds to create "234 jobs in worker cooperative businesses, reach 920 cooperative entrepreneurs, provide for the start-up of 28 new worker cooperative small businesses and [assist] another 20 existing co-ops" (Flander 2014). Madison, Jackson (MI), Richmond and Reading (PA), Cincinnati (OH) and cities across the California Bay Area also have supported worker owned cooperatives (Scher 2014).

Labor unions have also stepped up to support worker owned cooperatives, as seen most dramatically in the case of the United Steel Workers initiating a partnership with Mondragon in 2009. The Cincinnati Union Cooperative Initiative (CUCI) launched in 2012 with a goal to expand union collaboration with worker cooperatives. Pittsburgh's Operating Engineers, Local 66, has recently initiated the Clean and Green Laundry Cooperative project in collaboration with labor unions (USW and SEIU) and a community group, the Steel Valley Authority (SVA) (Dean 2013). The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UERMWA) played an important role in taking over a failing window manufacturing company in Chicago to turn it into a worker cooperative in 2012. All these examples demonstrate an effort to renew the radical notion of "worker solidarity" in the labor movement—but understanding the actual nature of these emerging partnerships requires case-study examination.

Case Study: Denver's Immigrant Taxi Workers

Greenberg (1986) once described the radical potential of a worker cooperative as follows.

improvements (as in the Justice for Janitors campaign). Still, as this paper's case study shows, the tradition of business unionism in the United States remains strong.

Workplace democracy encourages participation in other social institutions outside or the workplace; helps create citizens who are endowed with a sense of their own political efficacy; increases participation in normal political life; and creates a sense of community and cooperation as well as a commitment to the public interests (Greenberg 1986:119)

However, these potentially far-reaching effects of worker cooperativism don't occur naturally. Transformational practices emerging from a workers cooperative don't occur without "workers committed to radical ideology" (Wright 2000: 62)—a commitment which can be supported or undermined by collaboration with union partners. The case of Denver's recent union-coop taxi collaboration is a case where the radical potential of union-coop alliance is being overtaken by the spirit of business unionism.

Taxi Workers' Life

Taxi driving is often regarded as a "poor man's gateway to mainstream America" (Dao 1992: cited in Inamdar 2013: 52),³ but the reality is that drivers "have to pay for the right to work in that they need access to a taxi medallion to do their job."⁴ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), the annual income for a taxi driver is \$ 22,820, with no benefits or insurance provided by most taxi companies (Washington post, August 10, 2014). Enduring these low wages, 38 percent of U.S taxi drivers are immigrants (cited in Schwer et al. 2009:22), generally unattached to American labor institutions and working as contingent, "independent contractors" in the taxi industry due to the relative ease of entering the job sector without higher education (Schwer et al. 2009: 22).

The difficulties associated with taxi work have to do with the classification of workers as independent contractors. While the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act guarantees a minimum wage, regulated hours, and overtime pay for employees in most industries, "independent contractors" are excluded from those guarantees. Thus, independent contractors lack access to minimum wage as well as "employer- provided health insurance, paid vacation and sick days, pensions and other benefits" (Milkman 2014: 6). Another difficulty is that the number of taxi licenses (often called "medallions") is limited by law, so as not to introduce destructive competition into the taxi business (Inamdar 2013). The scarce and expensive nature of these medallions and the limited number of taxi companies that control them, mean that individual taxi drivers are at a disadvantage in negotiating fair payments from the company (Bruno 2008).

Other challenges are associated with the rise of ride-sharing services such as Uber, which has resulted in "a lesser degree of scrutiny and oversight than that of the taxi industry," and which has undermined the regulations and limited worker protections that taxi drivers do have (McBride 2014). As Uber and similar companies are classified as "Transportation Network Companies" made up of independent contractors—and not as individually owned businesses with employees—these companies can avoid complying with state regulations, thus "shifting risk from corporations to workers, weakening labor protections and driving down wages" (Asher-Schapiro 2014). Due to this range of challenges, taxi workers are subject to exploitation by companies with low wages, few benefits and little protection.

³ New York Times. 1992. "A Living, Barely, Behind the Wheel; Low Pay and Long Hours Cut Through Taxi World Stratum" December 6. By James Dao.

⁴ April 13, 2013. <http://blog.priceonomics.com/post/47636506327/the-tyranny-of-the-taxi-medallion>

Denver's First Taxi Worker Cooperative: Union Taxi

Denver taxi drivers face the normal range of challenges. Denver taxi workers, as independent contractors, are subject to high monthly leasing fees to private companies, ranging from \$2,000-\$3,200. For instance, workers owe the Metro Taxi company \$127 every day for vehicle leasing, even when a worker is too sick to drive. “The moment we ignite our car in the morning, we owe the company money,” explains A (interview, July 10, 2013). Workers have to pay over \$3,500 per month to their company when they have access to the airport. Many companies have fired workers on the spot for any attempts to protest the company’s fees, arguing that “Mohammad comes, Mohammad goes” (interview with a worker, September 11, 2015). It is estimated that the hourly wage, excluding all expenses, is about \$3.75 an hour (interview with an organizer, July 10, 2013). One worker stated that “I worked 15 hours a day for three days but I did not make any penny for these three days because I had to pay all to the company” (interview with worker J, September 6, 2015).

As a response to such conditions, the effort to organize a taxi cooperative within a labor union came from a previous Communication Workers of America (CWA) 7777 president, Duncan Harrington (interview with CWA 7777 President, Lisa Bolton, December 10, 2014). Harrington decided to help workers organize after hearing their plight, and he helped taxi workers form a taxi association, Pro Taxi in 2005, which became instrumental in creating Denver’s first union-cooperative affiliated with CWA 7777, Union Taxi. CWA 7777 helped with political lobbying to secure the necessary legislation to break the monopoly taxi business in Denver, and the Union Taxi cooperative received 262 licenses to run a new taxi company in 2009. Union Taxi worker owners also became CWA 7777 members, renting CWA 7777 space until they purchased their own building in 2014. Union Taxi had annual revenue of \$13 million as of 2014 (an interview with a worker, Feb. 10, 2015).

The Second Worker Cooperative: Green Taxi

A second Denver taxi cooperative, Green Taxi, which is currently in the process of forming, was established by over 1000 immigrant workers. After a few meetings among workers themselves over summer in 2014, workers decided to form a new taxi cooperative company and they decided to join the CWA 7777 because of CWA 7777’s track record of success with Union Taxi. Workers viewed labor unions positively, as a worker noted that “I wanted a union because the labor union will give us more power” (Ji 2014). Within a month of first proposing the co-op idea among themselves, over 1000 drivers joined CWA 7777 in October of 2014, with the hope of opening a worker cooperative (interview with Lisa Bolton 2014). The CWA successfully lobbied for legislation in 2015 which allowed workers to form their new company. As of this writing, taxi workers are waiting to hear from the Colorado Public Utilities Commission, which will make a final decision on whether to grant licenses to the new taxi cooperative.

Business Unionism Among Denver’s Taxi Cooperatives

Individual Owners, Not Collective Workers

Though some have celebrated alliances of unions and coops as a new strategy of labor empowerment, the case of Denver taxi cooperatives shows unionized coop members seeking

little more than individual economic benefit through their new coop—there is little evidence of broader transformational possibilities in the strategies so far adopted by Denver taxi coops and their union partners. For example, when interviewed by this author about their notions of class solidarity, 100 percent of 69 Denver taxi cooperative members regarded themselves as individual business owners and not as collective worker-owners. As a matter of fact, individual taxi drivers can in fact transfer their ownership to someone else at will, and there is no collective organizational control or regulation as to how the transfer of ownership has to occur. Many members have in fact transferred or leased their coop ownership share to families and relatives, without requiring any kind of training in cooperative principles or allowing for broader group involvement in reviewing such transfers. This author interviewed several drivers who paid to lease their cooperative taxi license from another coop member, and found that none of those who leased their cooperative license knew what a worker cooperative was or how it was meant to function.

With a strong sentiment of individualistic ownership, 59% of cooperative members (41 members) claimed that they did not think of themselves in class terms, while just 25% of workers (17 members) interviewed did. The majority of workers interviewed agreed with one workers' claim that "I do not think of myself in working class terms, as I am just an individual owner" (interview with a worker, Sept 10, 2015). Another taxi coop owner claimed that "we are all here with an American dream of becoming business owners like many Americans."

This notion of low-income workers transcending their situation through individualistic business ownership corresponds to a long-enduring pattern wherein American workers seek to transcend class position through individual effort, and not by mobilizing as self-conscious members of a "working class," confronting the inequities of capitalism (Salvatore 1984). In this way, worker ownership can be seen as a mechanism for attaining middle-class identity and facilitating "flexible accumulation in the way that Gramsci (1971) suggested that home ownership, family form and other factors made Fordism successful" (Kasmir 1996: 196).

In Denver, these consequences of individualistic business ownership in undermining notions of class solidarity was made clear as both organizers and rank-and-file members of the existing Denver taxi cooperative (Union Taxi) worried about the possibility of competition from another taxi cooperative when Green Taxi first organized. The Union Taxi coop owners were not supportive of these new labor organizing efforts, and resisted the granting of a business license to this "competing" association of taxi drivers, since this new license might lower profits for Union Taxi workers (interview with Lisa Bolton, President CWA 7777). At the same time, and also reflecting an individualistic and divided labor movement, some Union Taxi coop members attempted to join the new Green Taxi cooperative as double owners of both cooperatives—and subsequently leased their personal work licenses to entirely new tax drivers—in order to maximize their own material gains (interview with J, September 27, 2015). These realities of Union Taxi cooperative members are well described in Azellini's (2015) statement that "the notion of individualistic characteristics of worker cooperatives creates more problems than being an alternative to capitalism." When worker cooperatives retain "an individualist notion of ownership: shares can be traded, inherited or accumulated by individuals, and this enables unequal distributions of shares."⁵

⁵ An interview with Dario Azzellini, 2015. <http://www.geo.coop/story/workers-control-andor-worker-cooperatives>

Denver Taxi Cooperative Governance Structure

The governance structure at Union Taxi clearly separates management and labor. Although workers are owners of their cooperative and elect their own president, the ways by which the company is run is similar to any conventional company. Average workers are not involved in company governance as they depend upon seven elected board members to take care of all business concerns. There are no workers committees to work on various issues—such as strategic business growth, political campaigns, or worker education. No worker education programs about cooperative principles have been offered to interviewed taxi coop owners in Denver, and many drivers believed that such education programs are meant only for board members.

Interviewed workers also expressed that there should be a clear separation between a manager and worker owners, and that managers should have power over many different administrative affairs. Over 50% of taxi coop owners interviewed believed that they needed “bosses” in order to run the coop effectively. Both Union and Green Taxi are governed by seven member Boards of Directors, and an elected president, without any other mechanisms for worker engagement in coop governance. The communication between elected Directors and worker-owners occurs mostly through email, with two general meetings a year and a few occasional meetings on the need basis. Thus, Union Taxi has been quite isolated from the rest of the broader labor or progressive community.

The Role of Labor Unions

The CWA 7777 union has interpreted its role almost entirely as a supportive lobbying group for the Green Taxi coop. CWA 7777 has convened meetings of taxi coop owners only in rare instances and has not offered leadership development programs to coop owners, nor sought to engage the coop members in day-to-day union work or community campaigns. Rather, the CWA 7777 approach has been to limit their role to professional advising to a small circle of coop owners, and political lobbying before official licensing bodies. In serving as narrowly defined professional consultants in this way, CWA 7777 has worked within the tradition of business unionism, “explicitly *limiting* the field of contestation to a narrow field of concerns” (Perlman 1928, 232, cited in Dubb 1999: 94).

Despite the fact that 59% percent of workers (41 members) interviewed expressed receptiveness to unionization in general (see also Milkman 2014, 2012), 100 % of Union Taxi cooperative members expressed strong discontent with the actual practices of their local union. Many workers expressed that “the union did nothing for us for the past six years after we opened the cooperative. They only collected membership fees from us” (Interview, Sept. 10, 2015). Another worker states that “they did not contact us. The union provided us with nothing. No education. No contact, Nothing” (Interview, Sept. 11, 2015). Discontent with such patterns, Union Taxi members pulled out of CWA 7777 in 2015. This outcome is the predictable result of a situation in which “a business union reserves all decision-making action to labor leaders—the rank-and-file are not to engage in independent activity, but are to remain in lock-step behind their respective leaders” (Neal 2011). This outcome is also reflected in the tendency of the union to overvalue the union organization itself, “which from a means has gradually been changed into an

end in itself’ rather than valuing democratic worker participation within the labor union⁶ (Holt 2007: 99).

In short, CWA 7777 was critical in the beginning to help workers set up a worker cooperative and to help them pass necessary legislation necessary to open a new business. However, its role after the worker cooperative was established has been dramatically minimized, in accordance with practices of business unionism, and with negative effects on the advancement of workers’ class identity, educational development, and broader political involvement.

Conclusion

In a pluralistic political environment where diverse approaches in social movements are possible, a union-cooperative model has both strengths and weakness. The strengths of the union-cooperative collaboration in a pluralistic political environment like Denver is that it has found room for independent contractor taxi drivers to establish new, officially licensed businesses as an alternative to the existing landscape of exploitive taxi companies. In this environment, labor unions can step up to play a role in passing legislation or political lobbying to back up taxi workers.

However, the weakness of the taxi driver union-cooperative alliance in Denver is that the union continues to work within the spirit of business unionism, so that CWA 777 has not shown much leadership or effort in mobilizing workers as a solidary group or in building alliances with broader community campaigns. Although the combination of worker cooperatives and a labor union can “infuse a renewed energy in the membership to democratize and take control of their workplace” (Geminjen 2012), this possibility cannot be actualized without committed action by labor leaders to move beyond business unionism and build more comprehensive approaches to organizing workers.

Case Study: Korea’s Woojin Bus Cooperative

Korean Labor Militancy

Korea’s militant labor movement has been much less likely than American labor leaders to take an accommodationist stance vis-à-vis capitalist power. Characterized by a strong tradition of labor antagonism, Korean union movements are well known as militant, waging frequent strikes of national impact (Buchanan and Nicholls 67; Roett 1997; Lee and Yi 2012). Although a growing numbers of scholars argue for Korea’s weakening labor militancy due to globalization, this paper argues that Korea’s labor movement is still imbued with the ideology of classical Marxism which sees labor militancy as a necessary vehicle for social change.

In Korea, militant labor union movements were catalyzed by the strong oppression of the military and authoritarian government until the late 1980s. Korean labor unions “developed in the process of resistance against the military government and employer” (Kwon, 270), naturally becoming political in nature, and built a tradition of fighting for changes “in the context of the whole society, not merely within the arena of labor management relations” (Johnston 2001; Lee, 2005:1). Thus, the Korean labor movement developed not just to protect “workers’ rights in

⁶ This quotation is originally attributed by Rosa Luxemburg, “The Mass Strike the Political Party and the Trade Unions” [1906] in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York 1970). 214-215.

industrial relations, but also to promote the social justice of the working class” (Lee, Changwon 2005:1). In this way, labor unions always have been politically oriented as Korean labor history has been in the context of state repression for decades; and as Kelly (1998) argues, “state repression can serve to radicalize and generalize labor mobilization.”

With the democratization movement in late 1980s (which ultimately toppled a governing regime), labor unions emerged as an important force to change Korean labor practices and the broader nature of Korean society. Various radical unions were established during the process of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s—a process that was led largely by class-conscious and highly mobilized unions. Throughout this time, major political clashes erupted regularly in the streets between the military government of Chun Doo Hwan and the democratization forces led by Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam (student and union leaders). These clashes ultimately led to a 1987 agreement to allow Koreans to elect their own democratic president for the first time, catalyzed a burst of worker organizing leading to several thousand new unions across the country, and continue to shape the face of labor organizing in Korea today.

Although union density has declined by one-third in Korea since the mid- 1990s following neoliberal economic restructuring (Suzuki 2012: 22), the level of militancy by Korean labor unions, and its willingness to engage in direct confrontations with capitalists, is still well established (Suzuki 2012: 10; Shin 2012; Rowley and Bae 2010; Yoo, Hyung-Geun 2012). Korea’s modern level of labor militancy has been described as a kind of “social movement unionism,” “representing new forms of labor/societal resistance against globalization” (Ramasamy 2005: 32; also see Ranald 2002). In short, antagonism between workers and capitalists in Korea continues to be strong, and built around a historical antagonism between capital and labor, in which an “us versus them attitude” is a force for mobilizing union members for collective actions (Kwon, Soon Sik 2013: 270).

Korea’s Flowering Worker Cooperative Movement

The landscape of Korean union and coop organizing changed dramatically after the 1997 economic crisis in Asia. As a response to the crisis, Korea was forced (under the guidance of the IMF) to implement neoliberal market system reforms by opening their market to increased foreign investment and imports. At the same time, Korea was forced to decrease social spending and to replace the lifetime employment system with a flexible employment structure, under the new “Irregular Workers Act” and “Labour Standard Act” which allow businesses to replace permanent employees with contingent and part-time workers (Kwon, Seung ho 1997: Koo 2000). Following these reforms, the number of jobless workers increased from 574,000 in November 1997 to 1.7 million in December 1998 (Koo 2000: 244) and contingent and precarious employment rates skyrocketed to more than 50% of newly created jobs (Read 2007: 12). Subsequently, Korea had “one of the highest rates of temporary employment” of any OECD country, marking “32.3 per cent of the total workforce compared with the OECD average of 25 percent” (Financial Times, July 15, 2013). These developments have weakened Korean unions, as “the union density among precarious workers is merely 2.1 per cent and 40 percent of them are paid below minimum wage level” (Yun 2014).

The recent rise of worker cooperatives in Korea has occurred in this context of growing informalization and declining union power. It has also occurred as part of a broader civil society

movement in which many intellectuals have risen to create organizations and movements that address broader social and economic problems of Korea. In 1999, the passage of the “National Basic Livelihood Security Act” resulted in the creation of self-reliance program centres and self-help community programs to overcome the 1997 financial crisis. There are nearly 300 self-help program centers and communities in Korea today (Kim, Jisun 2008). The modern growth of Korean worker cooperatives is part of this flowering of the self-help social economy.

The most critical law that catalyzed recent worker cooperative growth in Korea was the Basic Law on Cooperatives in 2012, and many socially conscious enterprises such as Happy Bridge (a restaurant franchise) and Actus (a technology company) subsequently converted to worker cooperatives. The very first Korean Federation of Worker Cooperative (KFWC) was established in 2014 to create a cooperative incubation center, to be a support center for coop businesses, and to increase public awareness of worker cooperatives as an alternative path to job creation and workplace democracy (Interview with KFWC president, Inchang Song, August 27, 2015).

This new breed of worker-owned cooperatives often see themselves as part of a transformational social movement to challenge the corporate-dominated structure of Korean society. In fact, most leaders of the newly emerging Korean worker cooperative movements were also labor activists during the radical democratization movements of the 1980s and 90s, and they bring the militant perspectives of those transformational days to their current labor politics.

Militant Union-Coop Organizing in the Woojin Bus Company

Woojin is a unionized bus company in Korea’s mid-region that has been operated according to principles of self-management⁷. Since 2005, this bus company has been influenced by the strong leadership of a labor union that has supported the creation of a self-managed worker cooperative. Woojin has been successful in implementing strong worker participation in running the company, and developing a notion of collective ownership, community solidarity and social responsibility among workers, rather than a sense of individual ownership of company shares in pursuit of individual economic gain.

Woojin was the largest private bus company in the Chungju region when it went bankrupt in 2004. Following bankruptcy, bus workers took over the company and reopened it in January 2005, after more than 171 days of worker strikes. In the middle of this strike, 90% of workers voted in favor of turning the failing company into a worker cooperative, and they did so by switching from their conservative labor union, the Federation of Korean Trade Union (FKTU) to a progressive labor union, Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) (Gang, Sudol 2012: 41). The KCTU representative in the Chungju region, Jaesoo Kim, emerged as a leader in a series of public protests (such as squatting at City Hall to demand the right of workers to run their own company), and providing educational forums and moral support for workers (Gang, Sudol 2012). Following this campaign, the city of Chungju granted workers the right to run the failing bus company, and negotiated with Woojin workers to restructure the Woojin company debt. Three hundred workers put down investment money of \$5,000 each to pay some portion

⁷ Woojin is called the “self-management company”, instead of using a word, unionized worker cooperative.

of the company debt (totaling \$15 million), and workers reopened the doors to Woojin on January 20, 2005, as a worker-owned cooperative.

However, Woojin went through a crisis in 2008 because of internal conflicts with members over Woojin's management structure. Sixty bus drivers suddenly left the company, demanding their retirement funds and salaries of over \$4.6 million dollars. As a result, Woojin was almost at the point of company seizure in bankruptcy court, due to accumulating debts. However, remaining workers volunteered not to take more than 60% of their salaries for six months until they could turn the company around (Pressian Nov.1, 2013).

After the crisis in 2008, Woojin re-adopted the principle that management should not be separated from workers' labor. Subsequently, Woojin revamped its internal management structure, started a series of in-depth educational programs regarding self-management, communication strategies and cultural programs to help members understand the principle of "equal rights and equal obligation."⁸ Woojin has also expanded its range of cooperative businesses (i.e., selling tires, operating vending machines, and running a lunch program) to bring earned income and to cut down on expenses. Woojin also operates their own cooperative insurance company, provides condos and a van for members to use on vacation, and has established a financial cooperative within the company. To date, Woojin workers have paid off the company debt of \$15 million, and Woojin has also participated in a bid to save a failing hospital by turning it into a self-managed cooperative hospital. Although Woojin was not successful in the bid, Woojin has remained committed to various community causes beyond their own cooperative.

We are Workers, Not Individual Business Owners

Woojin has a strong conviction that "cooperative members are workers, and not capitalists" (Interview with Jaesoo Kim, April 15, 2015). The by-laws of Woojin express this principle as follows.

The goal of the self-management cooperative is that all members as *workers* have equal rights and obligation to operate the self-management company with transparent and democratic principle to create a healthy social and public enterprise that values "labor" and benefits a broader society with a sense of social responsibility (By-laws).

The Woojin union representative, Kim, further argues that "Woojin's members are workers, and not the owners of a company. We actually don't like to use the terminology, 'owners'" (personal interview, April 15, 2015). This self-conscious stance as "workers" and not "owners" of a business reflects the radical and oppositional stance of Woojin vis-à-vis the broader capitalist system. "Woojin is not in the contradictory relationship of the worker-capitalist structure. We are in a worker-worker relationship that has a different production system," explains the Woojin union representative (personal interview, May 18, 2015).

In this way, Woojin focuses on maximizing "worker control" without emphasizing the concept of individual ownership (Slott 1985; Witherell 2013). Avoiding the concept of "ownership" of a business, Woojin is more interested in "how capital-labor relations can be switched to labor-labor relations and how labor-labor relations can be operated without conflicts" (interview with Kim, Jaesoo, May 18, 2015). In this regard, Woojin's self-management model is similar to what

⁸ Woojin produced an article, "We Practice the Hopes of Workers" pg. 14.

Drio Azellini calls a “collective or social form of ownership,” which is quite different than a model of individualistic ownership of business shares that Denver Taxi coop owners have created in the U.S.⁹ Woojin promotes the idea that “enterprises are seen not as privately owned” (belonging to individuals or groups of shareholders) but are social property, or “common property” of the community of workers, “managed directly and democratically by those most affected by them.”¹⁰ By removing the contradiction between capital and labor in this way, a capitalist business is transformed into a communal project, collectively owned.

Governance Structure

The legal ownership structure of Woojin is in the form of a corporation run by workers collectively. The Board of Directors consists of 13 members and eight of them are elected worker representatives. Regular meetings to discuss matters regarding finance, budget, and operations occur monthly and there are also various committee meetings wherein workers participate in discussions and decision-making on all the company’s business operations.

The governance structure of the cooperative has become more sophisticated over time, as the company has grown. Woojin management is now divided into two groups: bus company administrators and bus committees to govern daily operations on the ground. The administration committee, with seven subcommittees, focuses on hiring, budgeting, finance, welfare, elections, and different business affairs, while the bus committee, with eleven sub-committees, is responsible for public safety, work-related business, and the working environment. The governance structure in the beginning of the Woojin operation originally established a clear separation between management and labor (interview with Jaesoo Kim, May 18, 2015). The purpose of separating governance (management) from labor was the idea that “workers would not become possessed with the idea of ownership, if they did not get into management areas.”¹¹ However, this principle of separation between management and labor became an increasing obstacle to company solidarity, because it created friction between people in management and workers. Thus, “Woojin gradually switched to the principle of ‘one management, one labor,’” wherein workers are regularly involved in all management decisions and in daily work as well (interview with Kim, May 18, 2015).

To enhance their leadership capacity, all three hundred Woojin workers have to participate in self-management educational programs lasting six months, for a total hours of 150 hours. The educational programs include “philosophy of capitalism” modules, units on the history and theory of self-management, courses to raise workers’ political consciousness, facilitation of meetings, and workers’ culture programs (interview with Kim, May 18, 2015). As of April 2015, 120 workers had completed the entire program.

The Role of Labor Unions

The role of the labor union at Woojin has shifted substantially over the years. Woojin’s labor union has given up on the traditional role as a professional negotiator on workers’ behalf, and instead has adopted the cooperative principle of organic “participation” and “help” within the

¹⁰ <http://www.geo.coop/story/workers-control-andor-worker-cooperatives>

¹¹ An interview with Jaesoo Kim, April 15, 2015.

cooperative to foster solidarity and broader class consciousness among workers. Heegu Ji, the Director at the Self-Management Committee, describes that “if the labor union once meant a negotiation for better wages as a counterpart for the employers in the past, the labor union now means ‘participation and help’ of the cooperative internally to make sure that all are working in harmony” (interview May 18, 2015). Although labor unions still negotiate on wages, the final decision on wages is taken at committee meetings with workers.

As wage negotiation is no longer the major role of the union, the labor union at Woojin is more committed to “building solidarity with other community groups” (personal interview with Heegu Ji, May 18, 2015) and workers at Woojin have shown up at various community rallies to support broader causes. As Ji states: “we continue to carry the sentiment of the working class, and we are helping others as part of the working class struggle” (interview, April 15, 2015). Thus, Woojin’s concept of worker ownership is self-understood as part of a working class struggle in capitalist society, which occurs through a wide range of community efforts at the local and regional level (interview with Ji, May 18, 2005). This notion of solidary working class struggle is quite different from the view that “cooperatives can divide working classes” (Kasmir 1996:198), as seen in the case of Denver’s competing taxi cooperatives which experienced mutual conflict when they saw each other as business competitors and not labor allies. Woojin’s self-management philosophy and commitment to broader labor solidarity shows that a union-coop alliance can be formed with the radical principle of self-management and worker control, and without accommodating to normal business management practices or narrow business unionism as in the case of Denver taxi worker cooperatives.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the organizational and ideological choices always available to labor activists (accommodation or transformation?), and shows how the paths taken by labor activists in the United States and Korea in dealing with today’s economic challenges reflect long-enduring historical and cultural forces which continue to shape the labor movement in each country. Although the recent emergence of union-cooperative collaboration has shown creativity in bringing visions of labor radicalism to the movement, coop-labor union relationships should not automatically be assumed to be more politically oriented or more democratic by nature. Rather the nature of these relationships is shaped by an internal factor (the leadership of unions and cooperatives) and by an external factor (the labor history and political culture of their nation). These factors help explain why the examined union-coop partnership in the U.S. shows tendencies of business unionism, while the union-cooperative partnership in Korea has shown labor militancy.

These case studies confirm the findings of D’Art and Turner (2002), who argue that “the policies and practices of the union leadership are an important determinant of union activism and activism is strongly associated with solidarity” (7). Several studies of the role of union leadership in America have found that the choices and rhetoric of leaders have led modern union members to “become more individualized and free from ideological orientation against employers,” (Cited in Kwon, Soon Sik 2013:281), which is exactly the path that Denver’s Green Taxi Cooperative members have followed. For such reasons, Kwon’s (2013: 267) study of “the role of leadership on the labor movement” finds that this role has consistently been

“underestimated” in that “labor leadership is the most important antecedent of labor mobilization, together with social psychology of members.”

In both the United States and Korea, there is evidence that changing economic conditions are opening new paths to innovative union-coop labor collaborations. For all the hopeful talk of how these partnerships might herald a new era in labor power, however, we need to remain aware that the paths that labor activists on the ground choose to follow in building new alliances, are typically well-worn channels, carved by long-enduring political cultures and histories in each nation, and revealed to rank-and-file members by the strategic choices of their labor leaders.

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