

extremely surprised because there were no particular labor problems at the time and the union had not initiated any activity that conflicted with management. The spring wage negotiations had been settled already and they believed that management was relatively content with this year's wage settlement. Then suddenly, two months after their collective action on the wage negotiation, the police arrested the union leader, Kim Jun-yong and two other union officers, Kang Myung-ja and Chu Jae-sook, on charges of organizing overnight sit-ins during the wage-negotiation period.

The arrest was made on a Saturday, so workers had to wait until Monday morning to respond to this offensive action. But on Sunday, forty-four union representatives met at the arrested Kim's apartment and decided to go on a strike and fight for the release of their union leaders. This incident also angered union leaders at other firms in Kuro Industrial Park and many students-turned workers who were active in the area. There was a consensus among labor leaders that the arrest of the Daewoo Apparel union officers was not a simple isolated incident but a clear signal of the government's new offensive on the labor movement. Indeed, the Chun government had been concerned about the escalation of the opposition movement and labor conflicts since the end of 1983, in the wake of partial political liberalization. The April strike at the Daewoo Auto plant and the astonishing degree of solidarity and aggressiveness it demonstrated must have made a strong impression on both employers and the government. Labor leaders believed that the government was intent on stamping out the democratic union movement, starting with the removal of the radical leadership from Daewoo Apparel. They also believed that the government had deliberately delayed its attack on the unions until late June because the colleges were on summer vacation and the national assembly was not in session. June was normally a relatively quiet political season in South Korea.

Most of the unions at the factories in Kuro Industrial Park had been formed during the short liberalization period since the end of 1983. The Daewoo Apparel union was formed in June 1984 by a small group of workers after years of determined efforts. Kim Jun-yong, who had previously worked as a tailor in the Chunggye garment district, had played a critical role in forming the union at Daewoo Apparel and was elected union president. In the same month that the Daewoo Apparel union was formed, several other unions were established in the Kuro area, including unions at Karibong Electronics, Hyosŏng Mulsan, Sŏnil Textile, and Puhŭngsa Garment Factory, all located close to one another in the densely populated industrial district of Kuro. From the establishment of these unions and even before, union leaders collaborated closely, exchanging information and devising common strategies for union action. They often organized interfirm



Figure 6. Kuro solidarity strike in 1985. (Provided by JoongAng Daily)

activities and received leadership training together at the office of the Metal Industry Union or elsewhere. Thus, on hearing that Daewoo Apparel union officers had been arrested, union leaders representing Kuro's democratic unions gathered quickly and decided to go on a solidarity strike (fig. 6).

On Monday morning, June 24, workers who reported to work at the Daewoo Apparel Kuro plant heard the news of Kim Jun-yong's arrest. They were shocked and outraged. As soon as the morning stretching exercises were over, some three hundred workers stormed into the second floor of the factory building and blocked the entrances with sewing machines and rolls of fabric. The workers' demands, unlike most previous labor protests, were primarily political. The placards they hung from the second floor read: "Release our Union Officers!"; "Guarantee the Three Basic Labor Laws!"; "Stop Repressing Democratic Unions!"; "Revise the Oppressive Labor Laws!"; "Step Down, Labor Minister!"; "Go Away, Violent

Police!" There were no placards making economic demands or demands addressed to the employers. All the demands were addressed to the government, the oppressive power. From the very beginning, this was a political struggle.

At 2 P.M., the Daewoo Apparel workers heard the loud sounds of gongs (*ching* and *kkwaengari*) from the opposite building where the Hyosŏng Textile factory was located. The gongs were a signal that the Hyosŏng workers had started their strike. Daewoo workers rushed to the windows facing the Hyosŏng factory and there was a big placard: "Daewoo Fighting!" They also saw Hyosŏng workers dancing the "liberation dance" (popular among students and workers in the 1980s) on the second-floor veranda. Both groups of workers shouted encouragement and waved at each other. At about the same time, workers at three other factories went on solidarity strikes—at two of the Karibong Electronics factories and at Sŏnil Textile. Thus, by the afternoon of June 24, four firms were involved in solidarity strikes, involving approximately 1,300 workers (three hundred at Daewoo Apparel, four hundred at Hyosŏng Textile, five hundred at the two Karibong Electronics plants, and seventy at Sŏnil Textile).

On the second day, workers at three more firms, Sejin Electronics, Namsung Electronics, and Rom-Korea, joined the solidarity struggle by engaging in sit-ins, work slowdowns, and refusals to have lunch. And two days later on June 27, union members at another firm, Samsung Pharmaceutical Company (at Sungsu-dong), also joined the solidarity struggle. All together, eight firms and a total of 2,500 workers participated in the Kuro solidarity struggle, which lasted six days. In addition, Chunggye Textile Union, although not located in the Kuro area, played a very important supportive role from the very beginning. Its midtown office was a major gathering place for labor activists, who provided strategic guidance for the striking workers in Kuro Industrial Park, while organizing aggressive anti-government campaigns and demonstrations.

The Kuro struggle in June 1985 was a solidarity struggle in two senses. First, it was an interfirm solidarity struggle, drawing participation from workers employed in several firms in Kuro industrial area and its vicinity. Second, this struggle represented an effort to forge solidarity among labor, students, and various dissident groups fighting together for justice and democracy. Students and pro-democracy opposition groups were actively involved in the solidarity strikes from the first day. Every day during the six-day struggle, the Kuro industrial area became a battleground, as many students and labor activists who had been fired from their previous workplaces congregated to express support for the Kuro workers. From the second day, a large number of anti-regime groups waged sit-ins at various places in Seoul and issued a joint protest announcement denouncing the dictatorial regime and its oppressive labor policies. Also, several religious

groups, including Protestant, Catholic, and Buddhist groups, expressed their support for the Kuro workers' struggle.

Daewoo Apparel workers went on a hunger strike demanding the release of their union leaders. In reaction, the company blocked the delivery of food to protesters and turned off the electricity and water to the building. Managers also used the familiar tactic of sending telegrams to the striking workers' parents, telling them that their children had been "duped and taken hostage by communists," and that their children were destroying the company's property and the parents would be charged for the damage. Many scared parents came and tried to take their daughters home. Many of them, upset and angry at their daughters' participation in this kind of protest activity, called their daughters names in angry voices and some even threatened their daughters using phrases such as, "You communist-like girl, I'll kill you when we get home!" (Seoul nodong undong yŏnhap 1986, 57). Some agitated fathers broke into the room where strikers were and took their daughters away, pulling them by the hair. After the strike had ended, the workers recollected that, other than enduring hunger, their parents' reaction was the most difficult thing to endure during the strike (Seoul nodong undong yŏnhap 1986, 50-65).

The strike at Daewoo Apparel ended on June 29 with a violent attack by pro-management male workers and company-hired thugs. In the early morning of that day, striking workers received unexpected guests—twelve students entered the second floor of the Daewoo Apparel building by climbing up the wall of the next building. They brought food in their backpacks, and they told the workers that they had come to participate in their struggle. Soon after the students and workers had exchanged emotional greetings, however, they were attacked by hundreds of strike breakers who broke into the room. The intruders, composed largely of hired thugs, hit strikers ruthlessly with wooden bars and iron pipes; the students were beaten almost to death. Hungry and extremely exhausted, workers had little strength to resist the violence, and the police surrounding the factory compound did not bother to interfere. The strikes at other factories ended in more or less the same way.

Undoubtedly, Kuro workers suffered enormous sacrifices. Many union leaders were arrested and jailed, while others left the area. The unions at Daewoo Apparel, Karibong, Hyosŏng, Sŏnil, and Puhŭng disbanded after the loss of their dedicated members. All firms intensified their labor surveillance, and the government proclaimed that it would employ whatever means necessary to eradicate "impure elements" from the industrial arena. Thus, it seems that workers lost everything—their jobs, their leaders, their comrades, and their hard-won unions.

However, these were just the immediate consequences. As world history has shown many times, class struggles can produce remarkable results in

the long run, from defeats as well as from victories. Although the Kuro solidarity struggle seemed to have brought only devastating defeat to workers, this collective experience contributed tremendously in raising the workers' political consciousness and promoting mutual solidarity among workers across firms. Given the political nature of the Kuro struggle, in terms of both its objectives and its organizational form, this solidarity struggle had a much greater impact on workers' political consciousness than most previous struggles.³

After the Kuro solidarity struggle, labor activists became more interested in establishing broader and more politically oriented labor organizations beyond the confines of enterprise unions. In August 1985, labor activists who had led the Kuro struggle (the majority of whom were students-turned-workers) formed a regional class organization, the Seoul Council of the Labor Movement (*Sŏnoryŏn*), by merging three Seoul-based labor organizations that had openly challenged the state's labor repression in the previous years (the Committee to Fight Labor Repression, Association of Democratic Union Movements in Kuro Area, and Chunggye Textile Union). In the following year, a similar regional political organization was formed in the Incheon area, the Incheon Council of the Labor Movement (*Inoryŏn*). Both organizations were the products of the changing orientation among labor activists, especially among ex-student labor leaders, toward building class organizations at the regional level, overcoming economic unionism at the enterprise level, and channeling labor protests toward broader political goals. Those who organized the Seoul and Incheon regional labor councils represented the most radical segment of the democratic union movement at the time. The two organizations positioned themselves as vanguard political organizations in the workers' revolutionary struggles against the "fascist state," but neither of them existed very long. Plagued by internal disunity due to ideological controversies, external repression, and lack of resources, both organizations were dissolved within two years.⁴

Social Bases of the Solidarity Struggle

We have already seen that students played an active role in supporting workers during the Kuro solidarity struggle. They were ubiquitous on Kuro

3. Kim Moon-soo writes about the significance of the Kuro struggle: "The Kuro solidarity struggle was an extremely meaningful struggle that provided a critical juncture in the Korean labor movement by breaking at once with the past negative trend, the economic and preparatory orientation, and the limitation of trade unionism" (1986, 154).

4. Critics of this regional political labor movement in 1985 and 1986 argued that they "had no proper appreciation of developing unions which is the basic mass organization of the working class and even showed a tendency to denigrate the union movement itself" (Kim Jang-han, et al. 1989, 107).

streets, shouting slogans and throwing leaflets, and they organized street demonstrations with workers from other areas. But the students' role in the Kuro struggle was more significant than just what they did on the streets. The government claimed that the Kuro workers' strikes had been instigated by leftist students who had penetrated the industrial arena in order to agitate innocent workers and cause social instability. Managers also told their workers that they had been duped and used by pro-communist student radicals. To convince their skeptical workers, some companies detected the students-turned-workers among their union officers and displayed their names in a big sign in front of striking workers. The mass media also collaborated by making many direct and indirect references to the role of "disguised workers" in organizing this politically motivated worker struggle.

The majority of workers must have been skeptical of these accusations, but were nevertheless scared to participate in the strikes. However, there were many workers who were willing to bear the consequences of joining the strikes. Workers were upset by the way they were depicted in the media, as if they were "just ignorant people or puppets who are incapable of defending their own rights." In an angry tone, one worker claimed, "What has awakened us was not 'agitations' or 'steerings from the rear,' but the wretched condition of our lives. That's what taught us everything" (Um Hyun-young 1986, 153).

Korean analysts tend to agree with this view. Choi Chang-woo, who analyzed the context of the Kuro solidarity struggle argues, "At the time of the strike, students-turned-workers had shorter periods of labor involvement compared with the ordinary workers who constituted the core leadership of the democratic unions, and they also had an insufficient understanding of the ordinary workers' thinking and attitudes" (Choi Chang-woo 1987, 117). He quotes one union leader as saying that the solidarity strikes were the course of action that "the mass of the workers selected and what they decided to do" (118). Choi further argues that there is no evidence to believe that "the solidarity strikes of the Kuro workers, which were a 'political struggle,' were possible thanks to the 'correct guidance' by the outside organizations [of the intellectual labor activists]" (118).

Obviously, attributing the occurrence of the Kuro solidarity struggle solely to agitation by radical students distorts the true nature of this struggle. Workers were not simply duped into these collective actions by student agitators. As workers themselves said, the abject conditions of their lives and all the mistreatment they had undergone made them angry and volatile. And it was their realization of the significance of the independent unions as their only hope of bringing change that made the Kuro workers fight fiercely in defense of their unions. In addition, there were ecological factors that made the interfirm solidarity struggle possible. A high con-

centration of production workers in a fairly restricted industrial town, the relative homogeneity of the labor force in terms of demographic and social characteristics, and a high rate of job mobility within the geographical area all promoted social ties and communication among the different groups of workers in this area.

These structural and ecological conditions, however, were probably not sufficient to produce the Kuro solidarity struggle. The cultivation of worker solidarity across firms required the role of an agency and a common experience of struggles. In this very regard, we must not underestimate the role of the student activists, as well as that of other (professional) labor activists from the working-class background, in fostering worker solidarity across firms and also across regions. As we have seen, an area-based labor-student solidarity struggle was an important strategy among the student activists, and a number of students-turned-workers in the Kuro industrial area before 1985 had devoted their efforts toward this goal. Also active in this area were many previous union leaders, who were genuine workers but had been fired from their jobs because of their union activism. These two groups of labor activists (from a working-class background and from a student background), despite some differences in political orientation,⁵ were intimately meshed together to form large networks of professional labor activists, inside and outside the industrial arena. They were both actively involved in small-group activities, which mushroomed in Kuro industrial area and which produced a large number of workers equipped with a growing class awareness and union consciousness in the early 1980s. As previously noted, the unions at Daewoo Apparel, Karibong, Hyosŏng, and Sŏnil companies were organized at the same time in 1984 and went through the same struggles to protect themselves against hostile actions to destroy them by the companies. From the time of union formation, unionists cooperated closely among themselves by exchanging information, seeking expert advice, and devising common strategies. Subsequently, they invited one another to a variety of union activities, such as

5. In general, labor leaders from working-class backgrounds, be they inside or outside employment, tended to take a more cautious approach in linking labor disputes to larger political issues for fear of inviting punitive state actions on their unions, whereas students-turned-workers were more politically oriented and were generally more willing to sacrifice individual unions if deemed necessary for a larger political cause. Bang Yong-suk (who was the president of Wonpoong Textile union) told me that "students sometimes do not appreciate how precious our unions are and how much sacrifices we had to make in order to establish these unions," and that students-turned-workers were apt to engage in a kind of "political adventurism" at the risk of destroying these hard-built unions (interview, June 1994). Kim Ji-sun made a similar remark: "Jobs and unions are the basis of our livelihood. When fired, students can leave [factory jobs] but we cannot" (interview, June 2000). But both of them stressed that these differences between them and student labor activists were minor and caused no problem in the close cooperation between the two groups—because they had a common and formidable enemy.

the celebration of the union anniversary, overnight training of union officers, and cultural or athletic events. All these efforts had produced a strong sense of comradeship and common destiny among the active members of the four unions prior to the 1985 solidarity struggles.

Two Students-Turned-Workers

Lee Sun-ju was born in 1960 into a comfortable middle-class family. She and her younger brother grew up in Taegu, the third largest city in South Korea. After graduating from an elite high school in Taegu, she entered Seoul Women's University in 1979, majoring in nutritional science. She was a typical student, with a relatively quiet and passive personality, but with a great intellectual curiosity.

In her first years in college, she participated in circle activities, as many students did at that time, and became acquainted with many leftist books. Because there were few such books available in Korean, her circle members learned Japanese to read these books. She felt that these books provided very clear and persuasive answers to many questions she and her friends had about current problems in Korean society and the world, questions never addressed in her college classes. Their circle members spent many hours reading the then-prohibited Marxist literature and debating heatedly the root causes of the tremendous injustices they witnessed in Korean society. In particular, she agonized over what to do in order to live her life in the most meaningful and just way (*chŏngŭiropke*) in a society full of injustices and human sufferings. The answer was not difficult to come by during that period of student radicalism, Lee said. She decided to "go to factory" near the end of her sophomore year and she spent the rest of her college life primarily for preparing to become a factory worker. She purposely refrained from participating in student protests so that she would have a clean police record when she entered the factory. In the student activist culture of the early 1980s, those who had declared a factory-bound career (*kongjanghaeng*) were excused from participating in street demonstrations.

As a preparatory step, Lee first worked for a month at a garment factory in Kuro Industrial Park during winter vacation in her junior year. From the first day, she was given a tremendous amount of work with hardly any training. Because she worked more slowly than other workers, she was scolded and ridiculed frequently. More difficult than that was, however, behaving like a middle school graduate, using a simpler form of language, wearing the same type of clothes outside of work, and even changing her walking style. She finished the month of factory work without having her identity revealed to the foremen or other workers. It was a great educational experience for her. She saw how miserable the factory conditions

were and how tender-hearted and nice the young factory women workers were. Returning to school after her trial month of factory work, she told herself, "I must never betray these people."

After graduation, she got a job at another garment factory, using the fake name Kim Soon-young. She was twenty-four years old at that time, but reported her age as twenty. This was a small subcontractor factory with about fifteen workers producing children's clothes. Overtime until midnight or even 2 A.M. was very frequent. The daily wages were approximately 1,600 won (equivalent to the price of lunch at a medium-priced restaurant in Seoul) and even these low wages were not paid on a regular basis because the business was slow at the time. One day, the employer gave them an unexpected vacation with a small sum of money. When they returned to work a few days later, they were astonished to find that the employer had closed the plant and disappeared. It was her first experience with the treachery of the factory world. The workers filed a suit at the regional office of the Labor Bureau. After a while, a labor officer arranged to meet with worker representatives at a tea house. When they met him, he brought them 40,000 won as compensation from the employer and told them, in a highly authoritarian manner, to withdraw the suit.

After another short period of employment at a small sweatshop, Lee got a job as a sewing-machine stitcher at Puhŭngsa, a relatively large manufacturer of export clothing in Kuro Industrial Park. Two of her college classmates got jobs in the same area, one at a clothing factory and another at an electronics firm. When Lee was hired at Puhŭngsa, another student-turned-worker was already there, and during her employment three or four more "disguised workers" entered the firm. Lee said that it was relatively easy to identify other workers from student background (known as *hakchul*) from their eye movement, their low tone of voice, and their exaggerated efforts to make friends with workers. But until 1985, most managers seemed unaware of or unconcerned with the penetration by many *hakchul* into their factories.

The working life at Puhŭngsa was both hard and exhausting. Lee said that she was a rather clumsy manual worker and so had a particularly hard time mastering the skills of sewing. At first, she did not do anything other than try to get friendly with many of her coworkers and to understand their world and their ways of thinking. Like other *hakchul*, she invited her coworkers frequently over to her rooming house after work and cooked *ddökkbokki* (pan-broiled rice cake) and other favorite dishes for them. At that time, the workers in this company routinely worked 10–12 hours a day and had only one day off every other Sunday. But she said that she did not feel that the work was too hard. Nor did she find the managers' high-handed and condescending attitude unbearable. Life was too busy to reflect on or to regret her decision to become a factory worker, she said.

Gradually, she began to engage in workers' consciousness-raising activities by organizing small groups and linking them to similar activities outside the firm. The workers, especially those with some high school education, were quick to acquire a critical class perspective on their situation as well as a strong sense of solidarity with workers in other factories. In 1984, she and other activists decided to take over the hitherto management-controlled union. Labor activists ran in the union election and were elected shop stewards in large numbers. Lee was also elected to assistant secretary of the union. Management first tried to bribe her to stop her union activism, and when that failed tried to isolate her from other workers and harassed her in every possible way. She did not succumb to these pressures and devoted herself not only to Puhŭngsa union but also to building the Kuro area interfirm labor movement. In 1984 she became a member of the clandestine network of Kuro labor activists, called among activists the Committee of fourteen Members. This secret committee was organized by another *hakchul* woman worker, Shim Sang-jung.

SHIM Sang-jung, born in 1959, had been a student leader at the School of Education, Seoul National University, and entered factory employment in Kuro with several friends with a clear objective of developing the area-based political union movement. They purposely chose different factories in Kuro area as part of their strategy. They used as their major vehicle of workers' consciousness raising the interfirm small groups, each composed of six workers from different factories. From 1980 to 1985, Shim said that about eight such small groups were in operation at any time, producing about forty-eight *sŏnjin nodongja* (workers with advanced consciousness). The Committee of fourteen Members was an informal group of area activists, all *hakchul* workers and predominantly women (there were only three men).⁶ It operated as a core planning group for the area-based small-group activities and Shim played a leading role in it. In addition to coordinating the small groups, the committee also published a newsletter for the Kuro-area workers, printing as many as 30,000 copies of each issue.

Before entering factory work in 1980, Shim had worked as a teacher at a workers' night school for six months. She said that this experience helped her to better understand the situation of poor and alienated people. The first question she had in her mind after entering the factory was, "Can they really become the master of history?" To raise workers' consciousness, she thought that first she should become a person whom other workers respected. And in order to become a respected worker, she must work harder than the others. She said that she worked unbelievably hard. After work,

6. Kim Jun-yong, the president of Daewoo Apparel union, told me that he had been invited to attend this group's meeting only once; he came to know more about the group after he went to jail in June 1985.

she invited her coworkers to her place and cooked for them and talked with them until midnight. After that, she met with other activists, whom she called "professionals," for planning meetings until 2 A.M. Despite this schedule, she said, she went to work at 8 A.M. in a happy mood.

HOWEVER, not every student-turned-worker made a successful transition to factory life and to the role of activist. Both Lee and Shim told me that it was usually those who had relatively passive and speculative personalities or those who entered the factory with a predominantly humanistic orientation who became doubtful of their role and left the factory early. Shim said that many student labor activists became disappointed with the workers because they were too impatient, expecting a quick change in workers' consciousness, and did not try hard enough to understand the workers on their own terms.

The democratic union movement in the Kuro area began in 1983 and became very successful in organizing new independent unions or in transforming company unions into genuine representative ones by 1984. *Hakchul* labor leaders played a critical role in these union organizations, although not assuming formal leadership positions, and orchestrated several labor actions concerning wages in spring 1984. At Puhŭngsa, the first strike occurred in spring 1985 over the issue of overtime on Sunday. During this period, Lee's identity was revealed to other workers. One day at dawn, the president of her union, who was from a working-class background, came to see her and asked if she was really a "disguised worker." Lee confessed that she was a college graduate and explained why she had decided to become a factory worker. The union president thanked her for telling the truth and told her that she understood and appreciated Lee's motives. After that, however, Lee began to feel that their relationship became distant and she was not given a leadership role in the union. That was a very unhappy period for her. Then, with the arrest of the Daewoo Apparel union leader, Kim Jun-yong, in June 1985, she became active again in organizing the interfirm solidarity struggle. As a result of this activity, she was arrested and imprisoned for ten months. After being released from prison in 1986, she participated in the Seoul Council of the Labor Movement (*Sŏnoryŏn*), organized by radical labor activists who had participated in the Kuro solidarity struggle, but became somewhat disenchanted with its rash political radicalism. Later, she worked as a labor consultant at the Institute for Workers' Human Rights and also participated in a research project on labor relations at the Hyundai Group. In this research project, she met her present husband, an economist at the Korea Labor Institute, who had not been an activist himself.

At the time of Kim Jun-yong's arrest, Shim Sang-jung was the leader of the Kuro clandestine network of labor activists. On hearing the news of

Kim's arrest, Shim immediately gathered the labor leaders in the area and they decided within thirty minutes to go for a solidarity strike. She then went to see the president of Chunggye Textile Union and asked for his support in the solidarity struggle. He gladly agreed to provide the Chunggye union office as a center for mobilizing broad support from all the democratic forces on behalf of the Kuro solidarity strike. Shim proudly said that the Kuro solidarity struggle was "the first product of our project." Although she had been on the arrest list since the end of 1983, she managed not to be arrested during the 1985 Kuro struggle or when most of *Sŏnoryŏn* leaders, including Kim Moon-soo, were arrested. Subsequently, she worked as a key organizing member of the National Congress of Trade Unions (*Chŏnohyŏp*) and later the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and was serving as an assistant secretary-general of the National Federation of Metal Unions under the KCTU in 1996 when I interviewed her. She married a labor activist from a similar background and has one son.

Looking back on those days in the mid-1980s, Lee and Shim said that they had no regrets about what they chose to do. They both said that those were days when they led their lives in the fullest and most meaningful way. Lee said that her only regret was that she had been still somewhat immature and a little too simplistic and dogmatic in her political convictions, so that she rejected many people who held different political views and isolated herself from many of her close friends and even from family members. Her parents had not known what she was doing until a year after she became a factory worker. She recalled that working at the factory was not only a hard life in a physical sense but also a lonely one because she had no real close friends or family members to associate with, only other workers with very different family backgrounds and interests. Both Lee and Shim told me that several of their friends who had become *hakchul* workers ended their factory life in considerable despair—some of them became ill on the job; some became disenchanted with labor activism after becoming acquainted with ordinary factory workers, who were mostly conservative and individualistic in their interests; and some were pressured by their families to return to their normal lives.

Conclusion

One of the most distinctive aspects of the South Korean labor movement is the intimate linkages that developed between labor struggles and the political movement for democracy. As I have argued, this close articulation of the two movements is the crucial factor explaining why the working-class movement in South Korea became stronger more quickly than in other industrializing societies in Asia and elsewhere. Although it is true

that the labor movements in other societies also received support from the intelligentsia, the extent and the depth of intellectual involvement in South Korea seems to have been exceptional. As we have seen in this chapter, the student movement in Korea actively pursued a strategy of worker-student alliance in the 1980s and sent thousands of students into industrial arena with the specific aim of cultivating class consciousness among workers and mobilizing labor for political struggles. The resurgence of labor disputes and the increase of solidarity struggles in the mid-1980s owed a great deal to these students-turned-workers, as well as to many ordinary workers who were fired because of their involvement in union activism in the 1970s.

The close interconnections that developed between labor and students was to a great extent the product of the state's repressive control of labor. From Park's *yushin* period through Chun's era, the state's consistent policy was to forestall the emergence of an independent union movement outside the government-controlled union structure and to prevent the development of connections between the labor and the political opposition movements. Thus, any sign of organized resistance was ruthlessly suppressed, allowing no channel for the release of the mounting tensions and resentments on the shop floor. The mode of labor control in South Korea was more repressive than corporatist, more direct and physical than bureaucratic or ideological, and more blatantly anti-labor than subtle and disguised. Workers who participated in labor disputes did not fail to confront repressive state power and see the true nature of the relationship between capital and state power. The authoritarian state's attempt to remove "impure elements" from the labor arena by having activist workers fired and blacklisted from industrial employment had the ironic consequence of strengthening student-worker ties and fostering a wide clandestine network of labor activists, church leaders, and dissident intellectuals. Harsh state repression thus helped produce organizational, ideological, and personnel resources for the Korean labor movement.

The Kuro solidarity struggle was the most significant labor struggle that occurred in the first half of the 1980s. But we must be careful not to take this struggle as representative of the level of development of the South Korean labor movement at that time. The South Korean labor movement in the early 1980s as a whole was at a much lower level. Apart from the Seoul-Kyungin region, the rest of the country had seen very little labor unrest. In particular, the major industrial cities in the southern region, such as Ulsan, Masan, Changwon, and Kōje, where the heavy and chemical industries were concentrated and where large conglomerate firms employed a primarily male labor force, were hardly affected by the union movement until 1987.

Several factors were responsible for this labor passivity in the southern industrial towns; among these were the superior ability of conglomerate

capital to control and coopt the workers, the more intense political control by the state, and the relatively higher level of wages and welfare benefits enjoyed by the workers. But probably the most important reason for this regional unevenness in the development of the South Korean labor movement was that the professional labor activists and many labor-supportive dissident organizations were located primarily in Seoul and its surrounding region. This is the region where the church organizations had been active in helping workers organize independent unions, and this is the site chosen by student activists as a primary locus for practicing their strategy of worker-student solidarity struggles.⁷ Equally important, the grassroots unionization movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s produced a large number of workers who had been fired and blacklisted. These grassroots labor leaders were also active in the Kuro, Anyang, and Inchon areas and collaborated closely with the student activists who came later.

The major significance of the 1985 Kuro strike was that it was the first interfirm solidarity struggle based on close social ties that had developed among union members located in an industrial area and that the strike was triggered not by economic grievances but by political repression applied to the democratic union movement.⁸ In this sense, this solidarity struggle marked a major transition in the development of the South Korean labor movement, and it was a precursor of the working-class movement to come. The massive worker revolt in 1987 inherited this critical legacy.

7. Before 1987, very few students went beyond the Kyungin region. The students' strategy prior to 1987 was to produce a substantial vanguard of politically trained workers in this region and then to penetrate large industrial firms in other regions. Roh Hoe-chan, a prominent labor activist, however, told me that by 1986, Inchon-based labor organizations had begun to send *hakchul* workers, though small in number, to industrial towns in the southern coastal regions.

8. The *Sōnbong'e sōsō* report on the Kuro solidarity struggle defines this event as "an intense political struggle to protect the independent unions against political repression and a solidarity struggle among the mass of advanced (class conscious) workers that overcame the enterprise-oriented trade unionism" (Seoul nodong undong yōnhap 1986, 176).