South Korean media workers resist privatisation of television networks, 2008-2009

Time period notes: The National Union of Mediaworkers issued warnings of a general strike as early as 22nd July 2008

26th December
2008
to: 8th January
2009
Country: South Korea
Location City/State/Province: Nationwide
Location Description: Media networks nationwide participated in the strike, but the headquarters of many of these companies, and the focal point of visible protest was in Seoul

Goals:
Retraction of plans to privatise television networks (public). Privately, the union leadership first strived to open up the bill for negotiation and stall its passage.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support › by 297 members of public from academia, media, and religious sectors
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television › broadcast of protests as a form of protest
- 011. Records, radio, and television › press conference by media academics calling on government to retract proposed media laws
- 019. Wearing of symbols › wearing of black clothes by media workers
- 024. Symbolic lights › Candle vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 024. Symbolic lights ➔ Candle vigils
• 038. Marches
• 048. Protest meetings
• 104. Professional strike

Methods in 4th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 016. Picketing
• 019. Wearing of symbols ➔ holding of yellow balloons (part of wider public discontent demonstration)
• 019. Wearing of symbols ➔ of cone shaped heads by protesters at rallies
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 104. Professional strike

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 024. Symbolic lights ➔ Candle vigils
• 048. Protest meetings
• 104. Professional strike

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 024. Symbolic lights ➔ Candle vigils
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 104. Professional strike

Notes on Methods:
The use of yellow balloons, pickets, and cone hats may have been more prevalent than just in the 4th segment.

Legislative deals were reached on the 6th of January, and the union ceased all strikes starting on early morning of 8th January.

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:
• Media Workers
• academics
• citizens
• religious leaders

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
National Union of Mediaworkers (under Choi, Sangje’s leadership)

External allies:
Academics, journalists, and religious leaders

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Journalists
• National Union of Mediaworkers
• Religious Leaders
• academics

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The Grand National Party (under Lee Myung-bak government)

Campaigner violence:
Not known.

Repressive Violence:
Not known.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
Following President Lee Myungbak’s inauguration in February 2008, media workers criticised his policies on the press. The workers accused Lee of attempting to exert greater control over the media by handpicking the chair of the national broadcasting committee and YTN, a prominent television network in South Korea, and by pressuring the executive of the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) to resign. Indeed, Freedom House that year downgraded South Korea’s freedom of the press classification to ‘partly free’ from ‘free.’ In protest of the President’s actions, the National Union of Mediaworkers conducted a one-day strike on 23 July 2008. The protests notwithstanding, the government released plans to reform the media. The proposed reform bills contained clauses that would allow corporations to own broadcasting networks. The mediaworkers’ union criticised these reforms as an underhanded manoeuvre by the government to gain greater control over national discourse by allowing pro-government firms to broadcast. In response, the union held a referendum on the 21 October and with an 86.1% participation rate and 82.1% approval, the union secured the support of its members to launch a strike against the bill.

The media workers’ 13-day strike began at 6am on 26 December 2008, and continued until 7 January 2009. The protesters called for the retraction of government plans to privatise the media, decrying greater corporate control of the television networks as corrosive to democracy in South Korea. Major television networks and press companies, such as the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), Hankyoreh, and Yonhap News participated in these strikes. Regional press in cities such as Busan, Jeju, and Ulsan also participated.

In its struggles, the union posted flyers and banners on the streets of Seoul, and on the second day of the protests, 297 academics, journalists, and religious leaders declared their solidarity with the media workers. Aside from the widely utilised forms of protests, such as banners, public speeches, and slogans, union members also expressed their discontent by holding candle vigils with yellow balloons. Some union members opted to protest against the government by wearing black on television while documenting the protest – something that the government-owned television network, KBS, was hesitant to do. In fact, KBS was the only major media network that did not partake in the strikes. The candle vigils and yellow balloons were part of the wider expression of South Korean public discontent, which had been sparked by Lee’s decision to import American beef. Later in their memoirs, the union leaders acknowledged that the brimming public frustration at the time was important in adding momentum to the media workers’ strikes.

On 6 July, negotiations involving the Grand National Party, the Democratic Party, and the media workers reached a deal to delay the passage of the most contentious portions of the media reform bill. The bill was to be debated further in parliament before passage. Satisfied, the union called for an end to all strikes from the early hours of 8 January 2009. The media workers continued to fight against increasing government control on the media through privatisation, but they were sidelined when the Grand National Party passed the full media reform bill without much public consultation on July 2009. Despite continuing protests, the National Union of Mediaworkers was not able to reverse these laws.

Research Notes

Influences:
There was a one-day strike on 23rd of July 2008 by the media workers to protest the increasing government control on freedom of press (1).

The strikes from 26th of December to 8th of January was the first in three phases of strikes led by the National Union of Mediaworkers in 2008 (2).

 Sources:
Additional Notes:
The media workers' strikes gained much support by riding the tide of great public discontent against many government policies (especially following the import of US beef into South Korea).

The union's struggle to abolish the privatisation bills continued up to at least 2010.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
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