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# Korean women textile workers fight for Fair Union Election, 1976-1978

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) women](#) [2]
- [an example of paradox of repression](#) [3]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [4]

## Timing

July

1976

to:

April

1978

## Location and Goals

Country:

South Korea

Location City/State/Province:

Inchon

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

To stop the managers of the company to unfairly intervene in the union's election.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 022. Protest disrobings
- 037. Singing
- 097. Protest strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 097. Protest strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Segment Length:

Approximately 100 days

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- Catholic priests
- Female textile workers
- labor union

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

Dong Il Textile Labor Union (DTLU)

Chong Gak Lee

Partners:

Hwa Sun Cho

External allies:

Myungdong Catholic Church

Stephen Su Han Kim

Involvement of social elites:

Stephen Su Han Kim

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Catholic priests
- labor union

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:  
Groups in 6th Segment:  
Segment Length:  
Approximately 100 days

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

Managers and male laborers of Dong Il Textile Factory

KCIA

Kim Yong Tae

National Textile Worker Union (NTWU)

Federation of Korean Trade Unions (KFTU)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

The company managers selectively fired the “most problematic” 126 campaign leaders, and created a blacklist of these fired employees. They worked in concert with FKTU circulate their names around the other workplaces. These expelled employees could not get any job from anywhere around the country because of this blacklist. This was the first instance (in Korean labor history) in which the companys systematically engaged in nationwide effort to create blacklists of "problematic union leaders" so that they could not get jobs from anywhere. This tactic successfully inspired fear among the workers.

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

The riot squads violently beat and arrested female labor strikers.(July 23, 1976)

Five male members of Organization Action Squad were instigated by KCIA and Kim Young Tae, a political henchman, to exert violence on women who came to union election. They used human excrement to attack the female union members. They also bashed ballot boxes to nullify the election.

(February 22, 1978)

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

4 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

While the DTLU leaders lost completely in their short term campaign, they continued their efforts to travel

around nationally to stage what was to become greater labor movements in 1970s. They gained large support of the student activists, other labor union members, and sympathetic religious organizations.

The Dong Il Textile was one of the leading Korean companies whose products were exported to foreign countries during 1970s. At the time, the Korean economy was heavily dependent on the profits gained from exportation of low-industrial cheap products (mostly apparel and chemical products). Dong Il was deemed by the people to be one of those exemplary firms in this context, because it succeeded in “efficiently” producing cheap and mass textile products. Such “efficiency” was possible only because it exploited an abundant supply of cheap labor.

Women were at the center of the exploitation process in textile industries. They were subjected not only to exploitation as laborers but also to structural gender discrimination. Among 1,000 female and 300 male laborers (in 1976), female workers received 56% of the wages that their male counterpart of the same rank received; while male laborer had two shifts, females had three. Under the deeply ingrained patriarchal norm, the manifest discrimination was justified on the pretext that women were secondary wage earners, so they were comparatively insignificant compared to men, who were assumed to take the role of breadwinners.

Although the Dong Il laborers had their Dong Il Textile Labor Union (DTLU), most female laborers were hindered from taking part in the union activities by two factors. First, despite minority in numbers, male laborers had kept the leadership positions within the union. Moreover, male laborers and their union leaders were subsumed into the divisive tactics endorsed by the company. They complied with the company managers and disregarded the concerns of female laborers due to their comparatively larger wages and better treatment. Discontented female laborers were always regarded as being against the comparatively larger interest that the male laborers had gained. Men wanted to deter women from “nibbling away” their privilege.

Second, DTLU had been forced to be incorporated into National Textile Worker Union (NTWU) by the state. NTWU was one of the 17 branches of Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), which was also largely controlled by the state, almost serving as its watchdog to supervise “problem unions”. DTLU was forced to abide by the rules of FKTU, and thus, to naturally comply with the managers of the factory.

Females had not been conscious of their rights until 1966, when Reverend Hwa Sun Cho of the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) entered Dong Il to work with other female laborers. She began several small discussion groups to study labor laws and discuss ways to challenge the working conditions. The awareness among the female laborers grew gradually, and as a result, in 1972 women voted out the male chairperson of the union and elected a woman, the first in the history of Korean labor.

The managers of the company regarded a female-led union as unacceptable and refused to deal with it. They also stirred the anti-unionist anger among the male laborers to turn its support against the female-directed DTLU, and exert violence on it. The agitated male laborers frequently threatened the female laborers to cease their involvement in the union.

The underhanded effort of the male laborers and company managers culminated in July of 1976, when a Union General Assembly was held for new election for the chairperson of the union.

Before the election, male workers had been beating up the female candidates and ardent members. The company managers bribed some laborers who had high positions in DTLU. Managers also bribed the police to investigate independent-minded union leaders.

When the election day arrived on 23 July, several pro-management workers nailed the doors of the dormitory

shut to keep in the female labor residents. The compliant union members came together (the noncompliant leaders were under the police investigation) and elected a male chairperson for DTLU. The few female workers who were able to get to the voting place were severely assaulted.

Roughly 200 indignant female laborers smashed down the nailed doors and initiated a sit-down strike inside the union office. The company managers closed the lavatories and cut off the water supply and electricity to pressure the strikers to give up and come out. But such pressure only spurred the campaign to grow; by the second day of the campaign, more than 400 women gathered in the union office.

On the third day, the riot squads arrived to quell the strike. After a five-minute warning, they started to approach the women. While these police officers advanced toward them, one of the workers whispered extemporaneously, "Let's get undressed! Men cannot handle naked women—even the police."

Roughly seventy courageous female workers took off their clothing and surrounded their fellow campaigners to protect them from the approaching riot squads. They sang a union song while whirling their clothing around.

This kept the police dumbfounded for a moment. But then police reached the "human wall", clubbed the women, dragged them, and finally dumped them in police cars. Some assaulted women laid down on the road in front of the police cars to obstruct them, but the police hauled them away.

As a result of the suppression seventy-two were arrested. Among them, fifty lost consciousness, fourteen were hospitalized, and two had to stay in hospital for more than six months as a result of mental trauma.

Despite such severe suppression, however, the female DTLU members managed to elect female worker Chong Gak Lee, as their third chairperson in April 1977. This drove the company managers to adopt more forceful methods to stifle the female labor union leader.

On 22 February 1978, on the day of Union General Assembly and election, a male anti-unionist group rushed into the scene. These men were members of NTWU's "Organization Action Squad" team, which was formed under the guidance of the NTWU's President and political henchman Yong Tae Kim. The team was instigated by the Korean CIA to suppress the "problem union" by any means.

With rubber gloves on their hands, holding baskets full of human excrement, five men attacked the female labor union members who arrived to vote. These men plastered female union members on their face, and stuck the excrement in their mouths and breasts.

Some female members ran away in horror into the dressing room to change their clothing, only to realize that the attackers had already soaked them with the excrement. Others ran towards the police to ask for help, but what they received was a derogatory response: "Shut up you bitches, we will watch you get messed up with shits for a little bit longer!"

The attackers also bashed twenty ballot boxes to make sure that the election was nullified. As a result of the assault, more than fifty female members were injured, and the election was cancelled.

The systematic repression of DTLU did not cease. After the day of the assault, placards which said "Let's Drive Out Lee Chong Gak" and "Let's Beat Up Communist Hwa Sun Cho!" had been put up in front of the company by the pro-management male union members. On 25 February, Yong Tae Kim and his NTWU expelled DTLU's union leaders including the chairperson Chong Gak Lee.

To resist the systematic repression, Lee and other union members decided to undergo a long-term strike against

the company managers and its adherents. More than sixty laborers declared a hunger strike for 15 days at Myung Dong Catholic Cathedral—where the prominent democratic supporter Stephen Su Han Kim was. Another sixty female union members were led by the union leader Lee to conduct a sit-in strike in the factory.

The most dramatic moment of the resistance occurred on 10 March 1978, Employee's Day. (Korea did not celebrate May Day at that time.)

On that day many government officials including Prime Minister Kyu Ha Choi gathered in Jangchung gymnasium for a commemoration event. In the middle of the event, more than 100 female members of DTLU rushed into the rostrum, holding pickets in their hand, bellowing, “we cannot eat human excrements!” and “shame on Yong Tae Kim! We strongly urge you to resign”

The Organization Action Squads rushed into the protestors, punched and kicked them, and arrested them. But the scene of suppression and arrest was televised as a nationwide live broadcast. Thirty-one among the protestors were arrested.

The remaining protestors traveled around the nation, and asked for help in the churches and Catholic cathedrals. Churches and cathedrals from Incheon, Gwangju, and Seoul widely supported their resistance. On 12 March, Chong Gak Lee was arrested while traveling from Incheon to Seoul, and sixty-seven campaigners initiated a hunger strike with Hwa Sun Cho for indefinite periods.

Although the campaign gained nationwide attention through its effort for exposure on television and campaigns supported by religious organizations, the company managers remained undisturbed. They selectively fired the “most problematic” 126 campaign leaders on April 1. They also worked in concert with the FKTU to create a blacklist of 126 fired employees and circulated their names around the other workplaces.

The expelled employees could not get any job from anywhere around the country because of this blacklist. As this tactic aroused fear among the other campaigners, the company managers threatened other female members of the union to give up and apologize for their dissent. This strategy was largely successful. Aside from the 126 fired employees, most others complied with the company because they had feared that they were given no alternative for earning their living. However, the expelled employees continued their efforts to travel around nationally—to stage what was to become greater labor movements in the 1970s.

## Research Notes

Influences:

Reverend Hwa Sun Cho of the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) entered Dong Il to work with other female laborers. She began the effort of teach-in among the workers to instill in them a sense of the dignity of themselves. (1)

The expelled employees continued their efforts to travel around nationally—to stage what was to become greater labor movements in 1970s. (2)

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\*Picture of the strike and assaulted women can be found on:

<http://www.catholicnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=4235>

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

Soul Han, 11/11/2012

[Back to top](#)

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