South Korean workers campaign against apparel sweatshop conditions in Pyunghwa Market, 1969-1970

June 1969 to: November 1970

Country: South Korea

Location City/State/Province: Seoul

Location Description: Pyunghwa Market is located in the center of Seoul

Goals:
The goal was to force the domestic apparel factories concentrated in the Pyunghwa Market to observe the Labor Standard Laws.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing
- 033. Fraternization
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
Notes on Methods:
There was a yearlong pause in the campaign between September 1969 and September 1970 when Jun was away from the Pyunghwa Market area.

At the climax of this campaign, Tae Il Jun committed suicide through self-immolation. This aroused major public attention toward the adverse labor conditions of Korea and would become major recurrent symbol that inspired the following labor movements in 1970s and 1980s.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
Group characterization:
- apparel laborers
- minister of labor
- press
- religious organizations
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Tae Il Jun, founder of both the Babo and Samdong Societies
Babo Society
Samdong Society
So Sun Lee, mother of Tae Il Jun's
Cheonggye Apparel Worker’s Union

Partners:
Federation of Korean Trade Union (FKTU)
Ki Pyo Jang
Students (from Seoul National University, Ehwa Woman's University, Korea University, and Yonsei University)

External allies:
Kyunghyang Daily Newspaper
Catholic and Christian organizations

Involvement of social elites:
Minister of Labor
Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- apparel laborers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:
- Students
- minister of labor
- press
- religious organizations

Segment Length: Approximately 3 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Business owners of domestic apparel factories in Pyunghwa Market

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
In terms of reaching the short-term clear goal, the campaign was not completely successful, although it did gain greater enforcement of labor rights in the apparel sweatshops. The government's apologetic expression was an ostensible effort to quell the intensity of labor campaign. However, this campaign became the precursor of the future labor movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Jun's self-immolation became a symbol that kindled the minds of deprived laborers during that era.

Since the Jung Hee Park regime seized power in South Korea through a military coup in 1962, the government’s economic policy had grown more pro-market and anti-union. Because of its large economic success (in terms of large economic measures like GDP) the public sentiment toward his economic policy was supportive enough to sustain it. Many people adhered to Park’s
political narrative of a “growth-first ideology” at the cost of sacrificing labor rights. Moreover, the red scare, and its tendency to avoid anything that evoked North Korea’s communism rendered the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) powerless, and kept the labor movement to be almost nonexistent.

Pyunghwa [Peace] Market was one of the prototypical areas that embodied such a legacy of industrial exploitations and labor compliance. Large numbers of small-size domestic apparel factories were concentrated in the market. Situated near the Cheonggye Stream area, which accommodated the most deprived Seoul residents, Pyunghwa Market apparel factories largely exploited the poor laborers. More than an estimated 25,000 apparel workers were paid below the minimum wage, and they had not been conscious of their rights; most laborers were not even aware of the existence of the Labor Standards Law.

Under such circumstances, Tae Il Jun, and his Samdong Society (evolved from the Babo Society) led the labor campaign from 1969 to 1970. Although best known for the extreme method of self-immolation by Jun at the climax, the residual parts of this campaign had not been dynamic. Driven solely out of passion and sympathy for their companions, the campaigners had not been systematic. Jun and the members of the Samdong Society had not even known that they could form a labor union or conduct a strike.

In his early years, Jun decided that he would seek to help the workers by becoming a tailor. Because tailors were at the top of the laborer hierarchies, Jun thought they would have closer relationship with the entrepreneurs, and thus would be able to persuade them to be more generous towards laborers. Although he managed to obtain a tailor position at 19, he was disenchanted by the entrepreneurs’ apathy and hostility when he begged them to be lenient on the workers.

In 1969, as he turned 20, Jun first encountered the Labor Standard Law by accident. It was almost a moment of epiphany for him to realize the existence of a legal framework through which he could argue against the adverse conditions that the entrepreneurs enforced upon the workers. Most of the laborers were largely unaware that there were laws designed to protect their rights; thus, Jun’s strategy was to first raise awareness about these rights.

In June 1969, Jun founded the Babo Society that drew several dozen workers into its membership. The Babo Society had four clear objectives which they endorsed under the oath:

1. To form group study on Labor Standard Law.
2. To plan an alternative and exemplary business model that respects labor rights and to find a capitalist who would fund the project.
3. To endorse a supervising system that would force the entrepreneurs to abide by the Labor Standard Law.
4. To investigate the reality of labor conditions through questionnaires.

Despite its four grandiose and idealistic objectives, the Babo Society could not fulfill many of them. It failed on every attempt to reach its initial objectives except for the first one—to collectively study Labor Standard Law. The Society could not find anyone that would fund their project of creating an alternative business model.

The reason for its large failure can be attributed to the naiveté and idealistic campaign methods subsumed into the paternalistic ideals of the Park regime. An example that demonstrates this was the Babo Society’s attempt to appeal to President Park by sending an imploring letter. After elaborating on the adverse labor conditions in Pyunghwa Market, the letter to Park read, “I truly revere the achievement of your revolution…You are the ‘father’ of this country, and I beg you to heal our ‘sore spot’…”

The Babo Society did not last more than three months. While it reached a certain population of laborers to hand out the questionnaires, the rumors of this spread out around Pyunghwa Market and eventually reached the business owners. Jun and the members of the Babo Society were eventually fired during August 1969. Informed beforehand of its “surreptitious” efforts, the business owners in Pyunghwa Market collectively rejected members of the Babo Society. Most members had to leave the market to get new jobs. In despair, the Babo Society was virtually dismantled.

Jun returned to the Pyunghwa Market after a year of deliberation that solidified in him committed goals for labor reform. In
September 1970, he formed the Samdong Society, which consisted of six former members of the Babo Society and six new members. The Samdong Society resumed where the Babo Society had left off. This time, it was able to finish its effort to hand out and sum up the results of questionnaires by October 1970.

According to the questionnaire taken by 126 workers, the average workday was roughly 14 hours long; workers also worked an average of 28 days each month. Due to the unhygienic settings and stressful workloads, most laborers had neurotic dyspepsia, chronic gastrointestinal disorder, and neuralgia; a considerable number even suffered from tuberculosis. Young female apprentices were the most deprived and disadvantaged. They received less than three dollars for a monthly wage and were subjected to malnutrition.

Reflecting on the failures of the Babo Society’s previous attempt at reform, the Samdong Society also developed comparatively more systematic efforts to appeal to the government administration and the public. On October 6, it filed a petition—signed by roughly 90 laborers—to the Ministry of Labor for the promotion of laborer rights. On October 7, as a result of the Society’s effort to draw the involvement of the press into its favor, Kyunghyang Daily Newspaper covered the adverse labor conditions of Pyunghwa Market on its front page with a title, “16 Hours of Labor A Day: Down-trodden Laborers in Pyunghwa Market’s Apparel Factories”.

After the newspaper coverage, labor supervisors approached the Samdong Society, and coaxed them to calm down; they promised to put the Pyunghwa Market’s labor conditions under strict supervision and to implement the Labor Standard Laws within several weeks if the Samdong Society halted its efforts to publicly announce their hardships. But the employers’ promise turned out to be makeshift efforts to silence the Samdong Society’s voice; nothing had changed within the following weeks.

Infuriated, the Samdong Society planned a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Labor on October 20. However, the labor supervisors and business owners persuaded members of the Samdong Society to just wait few days for the change. Without any changes, the Samdong Society decided to demonstrate in Pyunghwa Market on November 3. Informed beforehand of these plans, policemen guarded every street and district inside the market to defend the factories and avoid such “disruptions”.

The staunch members of Samdong Society finally managed to demonstrate inside Pyunghwa Market on November 13. Roughly 500 laborers, who had been given pickets by the Samdong Society, marched throughout the market at one o’clock in the afternoon. Policemen immediately arrived in the market and surrounded these demonstrating workers. Workers had no other better plans than to shout in fury against the business owners and denounce the corrupt nature of police.

At about two o’ clock, to turn the tide of this stalemate, Jun finally decided to burn himself. Holding the book of Labor Standard Law in one of his hand, he declared what he would call a “stake of Labor Standard Law”. Then he poured oil into the book and his body and burned himself. The inflamed Jun bellowed, “observe the Labor Standard Law!” “don’t overdrive the laborers!”, and “don’t let my suicide be in vain!” The shocked members of Samdong Society quickly extinguished the fire, picked up his burnt body, and sent him to the hospital. He died at eleven that night.

Jun’s self-immolation was covered in several newspapers the next day. It caught the attention of the public, and many students and religious organizations tried to attend his funeral. However, Jun’s mother, So Sun Lee, who had promised him before he died to fight on his behalf and complete what he had dreamed of, refused to take over his body before the sweatshops in Pyunghwa Market had begun to observe the Labor Standard Law.

While Lee refused to take over Jun’s body, roughly 70 students from the Seoul National University’s (SNU) Law School came down to Pyunghwa Market to discuss with Lee about how to conduct a funeral that would be favorable to the labor campaign. These students also decided that they would investigate the labor conditions in Pyunghwa Market and would petition to the government if the conditions were too harsh.

On November 17, 1970, the Minister of Labor publicly announced that it would take full responsibility of making sure that the domestic factories in Pyunghwa Market observed established labor laws. The Labor Ministry extended the number of labor supervisors from 60 to 90; it also established the “Labor Standard Branch”, which would deal solely with administrative effort to
make sure the factories around Korea observed the Labor Standard Law.

Now that the government had promised to take practical—although ostensible—measures to supervise the labor conditions, Lee finally conducted a funeral the next day. In the funeral, roughly 200 students (under the leadership of Ki Pyo Chang, who would become a prominent figure at the forefront of the labor movement in the 1970s and 1980s) from the SNU’s Department of Commerce declared, in the unprecedented framework of a democratic movement, that it would try to merge the student’s democratization activism with labor movements. The group also declared that members would go on a hunger strike for indefinite periods of time to draw more attention on the labor campaigns.

On November 20, hundreds of students from SNU, Ehwa Women’s University, Korea University, and Yonsei University, laborers in Pyunghwa Market, and priests and pastors from Catholic and Christian organizations held a memorial service for Jun in Pyunghwa Market. In the service, one student read the “Public Denouncement of Five Murderers of Jun: Park’s regime, business owners, sycophant labor unions, incompetent intellectuals, and publicly renowned, but silent social figures”.

The Samdong Society evolved into a labor union with a new name, the Cheonggye Apparel Worker’s Union, after being informed of the existence of labor unions by FKTU. The union held its inaugurating rally on November 27 with 500 members, announcing that it would continue the efforts to ensure the rights of laborers in the Pyunghwa Market.

Research Notes

Influences:
This campaign became precursor of the future labor movements in 1970s and 1980s. Jun’s self-immolation became a symbol that kindled the minds of deprived laborers during that era. (2)

Sources:
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Kim, Jung Nam. (2005) "??, ?? ??: ????? 30?? ?? [Truth Rise Up in a Square: 30 Years History of Democratization Movement].” Changbi Publication


*Picture of Tae Il Jeon's funeral can be seen on: http://www.wikitree.co.kr/main/news_view.php?id=44003

Additional Notes:
“A Single Spark (???? ?? ?? - Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il ; A Beautiful Youth, Jeon Tae-il)” is a 1995 South Korean film that covers the life of the leader of this campaign.

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