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# With or Without Class: A Comparative Study of Union-Worker Cooperative Relations in the U.S. and South Korea

## Abstract

This dissertation examines to what extent union-cooperative partnerships in the U.S. and S. Korea might revitalize labor movements and to what extent class-based narratives (or their absence) shape labor movements. Exploring competing labor ontologies, the dissertation analyzes how variants of traditional Marxism and poststructural thinking shape labor campaigns. Through a historical review of union and worker coop activism, and modern case studies of union-coop partnerships among taxi drivers and bus drivers, the dissertation analyzes the consequences of organizing "with" and "without" class narratives.

These labor histories and case studies lend support to the poststructural claim that class identity is constructed and contingent, varying by political-cultural context. However, these case studies undermine the poststructural critique that traditional notions of "class" are unimaginative and disempowering of diverse organizing projects that do not speak of "class." Countering such arguments, this dissertation provides evidence that in labor organizing, class narratives remain powerful and necessary. Without talk of class in Denver, unionized cooperative taxi drivers constricted their field of action to maximizing individual economic gains through business ownership. The results of their activism were therefore limited. In labor activism, talk of class remains a generative force, capable of uniting workers, challenging regimes, and crafting alternative economies.

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George DeMartino, Ph.D.

## Second Advisor

Aaron Schneider

## Third Advisor

Karin Wedig

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Presented to

the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Minsun Ji

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Advisor: Dr. George DeMartino

Author: Minsun Ji

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines to what extent union-cooperative partnerships in the U.S. and S. Korea might revitalize labor movements and to what extent class-based narratives (or their absence) shape labor movements. Exploring competing labor ontologies, the dissertation analyzes how variants of traditional Marxism and poststructural thinking shape labor campaigns. Through a historical review of union and worker coop activism, and modern case studies of union-coop partnerships among taxi drivers and bus drivers, the dissertation analyzes the consequences of organizing “with” and “without” class narratives.

These labor histories and case studies lend support to the poststructural claim that class identity is constructed and contingent, varying by political-cultural context. However, these case studies undermine the poststructural critique that traditional notions of “class” are unimaginative and disempowering of diverse organizing projects that do not speak of “class.” Countering such arguments, this dissertation provides evidence that in labor organizing, class narratives remain powerful and necessary. Without talk of class in Denver, unionized cooperative taxi drivers constricted their field of action to maximizing individual economic gains through business ownership. The results of their activism were therefore limited. In these efforts, talk of class remains a generative force, capable of uniting workers, challenging regimes, and crafting alternative economies. Class narratives remain a necessary component in the conceptual toolbox of those committed to transformation in their community.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Global Neoliberalism and Labor in Crisis	1
Union-Coop Relationships: From Indifference to Common Ground	4
With or Without Class? Differing Approaches to Labor Organizing	7
Theorizing Labor Empowerment: Ontology Matters	11
Different Worlds of Labor Activism: the U.S. and South Korea	19
Class Matters: Preview of the Argument	21
Plan of the Dissertation	26
 Chapter 2. Methodology	 32
Addressing Bias and Presupposition: Multiple-Method Triangulation	34
Conclusion	40
 Chapter 3. Traditional vs. Poststructural Marxism	 41
Competing Ontologies: Economic Determinism vs. the Decentered Economy	45
Competing Ontologies: the Nature of “Class”	55
Traditional versus Poststructural Marxism: Practical Consequences of Ontological Orientations	71
 Chapter 4. Traditional vs. Poststructural Marxism: Labor Unions, Worker Cooperatives, and the Labor Movement	 77
Traditional Marxism on Worker Cooperatives	79
Traditional Marxism on Labor Unions	86
Poststructural Marxism on Worker Cooperatives	94
Poststructural Marxism on Labor Unions	101
Conclusion	104
 Chapter 5. “There’s No Class in America”: Postructural U.S. Labor Movement	 108
Job Consciousness and Business Unionism	112
The State and Business Unionism	125
Identity Politics and Pluralistic Labor Strategies	132
Conclusion	147
 Chapter 6. From Radical to Business Cooperativism: Worker Cooperatives in the U.S.	 150
Radical Roots: the Class-Conscious Cooperatives	151
State Action and the Rise of Business Cooperativism: The New Deal Legacy	158

Post-war Economic Gains and the Degeneration Thesis	164
ESOPS in the 1970s-1990s	172
Unions and Cooperatives Faces the New Economy: The USW-Mondragon Initiative and New Era Windows	180
Conclusion	187
Chapter 7. A Case Study of Denver's Taxi Driver Union-Coop Relations	189
The Harsh World of Taxi Workers	190
The Uber and Lyft Taxi Driver Solution: Cooperatives without Class Consciousness	193
Union Organizing of Denver's SuperShuttle Transportation Workers	200
From Union to Worker Cooperative: New Direction in Taxi Driver Organizing	210
A Unionized Worker Cooperative in Practice	217
Conclusion	233
Chapter 8. South Korea's Class Conscious Labor Movement	235
The Authoritarian State and Labor Antagonism	237
Consequences of State Institutions on Labor Organizing Patterns	251
Labor Movements before Democratization in 1987	255
Labor Movements after Democratization: KCTU and labor Militancy	266
Labor Militancy: Organizing Irregular Workers	275
Conclusion	282
Chapter 9. South Korea's Worker Cooperative Movement	284
The First Stage of worker cooperative development: 1910-1950	286
The Second stage of worker cooperative Development: 1980s-1990s	290
The Third stage worker cooperative Development: 1997- Present	295
Relations between Third-stage Worker Cooperatives and Labor Unions	308
Conclusion	317
Chapter 10. Case Study of Woojin Bus Workers' Union- Cooperative in South Korea	319
Privately Owned Korea Bus Companies and Worker Exploitation	322
Worker Takeover at Woojin Bus: The rise of a Worker-Cooperative Solution	328
The Analysis of Woojin: Strong Class Consciousness	329
A Growing Ecology of Bus Driver Cooperatives	347
Conclusion	350
Chapter 11. Conclusion	355
Beyond Class: The Post-structural Political Imagination	355
Organizing with Class: Practical Benefits of a Class-Conscious Approach	359

Bibliography	368
Appendices	425
Appendix 1. Abbreviation	425
Appendix 2. Questionnaire: The Survey of Taxi Workers in Denver, U.S	427
Appendix 3. Survey Results: Denver's Taxi Workers (U.S.)	429
Appendix 4. Questionnaire: Survey of Woojin Workers, Korea (in Korean)	432
Appendix 5. Questionnaire: Survey of Woojin Workers, Korea (in English)	434
Appendix 6. Survey Results: Woojin Workers (South Korea)	438
Appendix 7. List of Charts	441

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Though the post-1970s era of global neoliberalism has seen a withering of labor power across the globe, 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 cooperatives support, and of how worker coop owners can think politically and in solidarity with union workers in a struggle to humanize the broader economic system. As Hazel Corcoran, the Executive Director of the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation, stated at a union-coop solidarity conference in 2011, both labor institutions believe in “economic democracy, wealth sharing and putting people before profits.” It is these shared values of union and coop activists that are increasingly moving the two institutions “from indifference to common ground” (Davidson, 2011). What strategies of labor organizing can we expect these new union-coop partnerships to follow, and what will be the ground-level consequences in terms of building or undermining long-term prospects for labor empowerment in different communities?

### **Global Neoliberalism and Labor in Crisis**

The general consensus in labor studies literature has been that global workforces are increasingly vulnerable to the exploitive dictates of mobile capital, and that labor

movements to confront this growing exploitation are “in a general and severe crisis” (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout 2008; see also Mosoeta and Williams 2012; Bieler and Lindberg, 2011; Murray 2009; Dunn 2006). Though the expansion of global trade, liberalized rules of global investment, and the free flow of finance have been credited with creating tens of millions of new jobs across the world in recent decades (Bacchetta 2009), the nature of this expanding global workforce is problematic. The substantial majority of new jobs created since 1995 in the global economy have been precarious, contingent, informal positions—resulting in the emergence of what Standing (2011) has called the global precariat (see also Davis 2007). This global precariat increasingly works in a system of subcontracting, outsourcing and informal employment that privileges the power of centralized management while undermining local workers’ power. The shift to a flexible global production system serviced by informal workers has resulted in a global informal economy worth about \$10 trillion a year and involving approximately 1.8 billion informal workers worldwide (Neuwirth 2012; ILO 2012).

With growing global commodity chains, just-in time delivery systems, and flexible work rules, labor employment structures have moved away from “vertical integration toward the extensive use of subcontracted inputs (outsourcing)”, utilizing “lean and mean” (Harrison 1997) employment systems to increase efficiency and flexibility (Silver 2003, 67). The consequence is “a corporate race to the bottom,” including growing sweatshop conditions and declining wages in developed countries, facilitated by an eroding sense of legal or moral responsibility by employers, who are increasingly beyond the reach of traditional labor organizing campaigns (Ji 2012; Standing 2011; Rodrik 1997; Korten 1995). A host of recent labor scholars have documented the exploitation embedded in

growing global care chains of immigrant domestic work (Hondagnue-Sotelo 2007), the profound vulnerability of the world's exploding undocumented immigrant workforces (Chavez 2012), and the emergence of perhaps the largest labor class in the world today—the informal and highly contingent “precariat,” eking out an existence in part-time home-based piecework, living in day to day jobs without contracts, or surviving on small scale entrepreneurial projects in the world's metastasizing slums (Standing 2011; Davis 2007).

Though contingent workers are profoundly vulnerable and easily exploited, labor organizing has proved very difficult among workers employed by placeless corporations, which partly accounts for rapidly declining union density globally (Wallerstein and Western 2000; Magnani and Prentice 2003; Abraham, Konings and Vanormelingen 2009). Traditional labor organizing has certainly faced challenges in the two nations focused on in this dissertation: The United States and South Korea. Union density in the combined public and private sectors in the U.S. has fallen from 24.6% in 1973 to 11.1% in 2014. Union density in the private sector alone was only 6.6% in 2014 and service sector union density was only 3%, placing it below the 5% threshold at which unions have essentially “zero influence on industry standards” (Fine 2005; also see Ikeler 2011, 378). Union density in Korea has senith fallen to 9.9 % as of 2011, down from a zenith of almost 20% in 1989.<sup>1</sup>

The days of industrial scale labor organizing seem long gone, as full time employment systems at vertically integrated and geographically anchored companies have been replaced by the part time, informal, subcontracting or outsourcing systems of a global

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<sup>1</sup> The Economist, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010. <http://www.economist.com/node/16097305>

commodity chain, where workers are often isolated from each other, making labor organizing difficult and weakening the power of collective bargaining between unions and large workplaces (Hyman 2011, 17, cited in Mosoetsa and Williams 2012, 5; Frenkel and Peetz ILO 1998; Dicken 2003, cited in Frege and Kelly 2004: 35; Sen 2012 ). In this changing employment structure, labor is often viewed as “the major loser from globalization and its progress in coping with globalization has been limited” (Ross 2000, 90).

### **Union-Coop Relationships: From Indifference to Common Ground**

In the face of these global economic challenges to traditional labor union power, one counter-current has been the florescence of worker cooperatives across the globe (South Mountain, 2013). In 2010, the International Cooperative Alliance represented co-operatives with over one billion members, in 180 countries (including cooperatives of all sorts, not just worker coops). In some countries, like Spain and Italy, workers cooperatives have grown to constitute a sizable share of the national economy. Some studies have found that worker coops have proved more resilient than mainstream businesses after the 2008 crisis, creating more post-recession jobs in many countries than has the traditional business sector (CICOPA, 2012).

In the United States, including both consumer and worker cooperatives, there are at least 30,000 cooperatives, “with at least \$3 trillion in assets, \$654 billion in annual revenues, \$75 billion in wages and benefits and 875,000 jobs directly created.” (Cited in

Stern 2013).<sup>2</sup> Although the number of worker cooperatives in the US is less than 1% of all businesses (Abel 2014), their number is growing. Today there are hundreds of worker-owned cooperatives, hiring thousands of workers. Since the economic crisis in 2008, worker cooperatives have emerged as a job creation strategy (Alperovitz, et. al. 2010; Johnson 2010). Coupled with rapid growth of the informal economy, immigrant worker cooperatives in service sector (i.e., cleaning, food catering, moving assistance, landscaping, child care, taxi driving) are particularly growing rapidly (Ji and Robinson 2012).

In South Korea, as well, cooperative movements are growing rapidly, especially following the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The active development of “social economy” and cooperative development enterprises has been supported with passage of various “social economy” laws since the 2000s, promoting the creation of social enterprises such as worker cooperatives and mutual assistance networks serving the less privileged. In particular, Korea’s passage of the “General Act on Worker Cooperatives” in 2012 was critical in laying a foundation for growing diverse social enterprises, including worker cooperatives. As of October 2015, more than 8,000 consumer cooperatives and over 300 worker cooperatives were set up pursuant to the “General Act” of 2012.

The U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC) defines worker cooperatives as follows.

Worker cooperatives are business entities that are owned and controlled by their members, the people who work in them. The two central characteristics of worker cooperatives are: (1) workers invest in and own the business and (2) decision-making is democratic, generally adhering to the principle of one worker-one vote.

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<sup>2</sup> The original quotation is from Dubb, Steve. 2012. *The Big Picture: The Cleveland Evergreen Model and Community Wealth Building*. Democracy Collaborative, University of Maryland.

As locally rooted economic enterprises, and with cooperative values like autonomy and dignity of workers, fair wages, and democratic control of the workplace, worker owned cooperatives run counter to the narrative of universally exploitive global capitalism. By giving workers control over their workplace, enhancing worker income potential, and building a sense of community among workers—even the most vulnerable workers who hold contingent employment--cooperative efforts redefine vulnerable and contingent workers as fully dignified “owners” of their own businesses.

As worker cooperatives expand across the world, union leaders are showing great interest in partnering with these alternative institutions of worker empowerment. Unions are increasingly sponsoring worker cooperatives in such fields as domestic work, taxi-driving, and light manufacturing. A 2013 (5:2) special edition of the *International Journal of Labour Research* (“Trade Unions and Worker Cooperatives: Where Are We At?”) describes a wide range of emerging partnerships between unions and worker cooperatives, citing a broad-based “renewal of interest” between union and cooperative leaders worldwide in building joint projects of worker empowerment (Laliberte 2013, 4). This international renewal of union-coop relationships comes as a response to the challenges of neoliberal globalization in general, and to the challenges of the 2008 economic crisis in specific. “In the wake of the financial crisis, this renewal of interest among trade union leaders in helping workers to operate their own workplace should not come as a big surprise,” Laliberte (2013,4) notes. Rather it is “typically emerging as a response to crisis and the need to maintain jobs...In many ways, neoliberal globalization has not only jeopardized jobs all over the world, but has also destroyed the trust that workers might once have had in their employers.” While formal unions have found their strength eroding in

the new global order, decentralized workers cooperatives have grown rapidly, as their organizational model matches the decentralized and fluid dynamics of today's global world.

Today, increased technology, globalization of labor markets and the mobility of capital has ended the reign of large centralized factories. The new casual and decentralized labor force has decimated the major strength of trade unions' power—a large, unified labor force. Unions have been forced to look at the creation of unionized worker-coops, not just as a fall back during depressions, but as the new order of the day” (Geminijen 2012).

### **With or Without Class? Differing Approaches to Labor Organizing**

Though the growth of partnerships between unions and worker cooperatives has promising implications in terms of labor empowerment, these partnerships are 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. 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 can be resolved in a way that advances or undermines progressive alternatives to capitalism. The result will be contingent on actual strategic and organizational choices made by labor activists, in response to their local political and economic milieu.

For this reason, it is unclear what new union-coop partnerships will bring in terms of shaping local labor movements in either enervated or empowered new directions. 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). Others have worried that these partnerships might co-opt labor militancy as worker-owners become petite-managers, undermine pay and workplace conditions as workers accept lower pay in exchange for workplace ownership, and devalue the role of the union in the workplace (Hochner 1983). The reality is that actual worker coop-union collaborations on the ground can either be accommodationist (according to principles of business unionism) or potentially transformational (according to principles of labor militancy), depending on the local political and economic context, and the orientation of coop members toward their mission of their enterprises.

Throughout history, relations between labor unions and worker cooperatives have always been shaped by differing ontologies held by activists regarding capital and labor relations, with associated differences regarding the fundamental question of “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 Isaac, Harrison, and Lipold 2008, 11, emphasis added).

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 coworkers, 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” (Dridzo 1935, 17). Although advocates in the classical Marxist tradition have argued that adversarial relations between unions and employers are necessary to strengthen labor movements (Kelly 1998), 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, 4).

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, a more reformist view on capital-labor relations focuses on worker cooperatives as simply a tool to foster worker ownership of company shares, and as a tool helping workers 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” (Abrahamsen 1976, 11; Thornley 1981, 173). 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).

However, 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 (Clay 2013; Engler 2010; Malleson 2014; Restakis 2010). From this perspective, economic democracy through a worker cooperative becomes one way to practice political democracy and build a “broader social democracy” (Bernard 2008-2009; Restakis 2010). 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 offers 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.

### **Theorizing Labor Empowerment: Ontology Matters**

I investigate these labor organizing dilemmas with the assumption that *ontology matters*. Significant light can be shed on the nature and potentialities of union-coop relationships by investigating the differing economic and labor ontologies that animate union and coop activists on the ground. To paraphrase Gibson-Graham (2006:4), it is the way labor relations have been “thought” by activists on the ground that structures how advocates of the two labor institutions imagine coming together in creative ways to supersede or build alternatives to capitalist processes. This dissertation posits that differing

labor/economic ontologies underlie the differing practical politics of labor unions and worker-owned cooperatives on the ground and shapes differing levels of worker empowerment that emerge from those practices.

Social science research tends to be rich with notions of economic structural determinism (Crother 1996; Connor 2011), but an important alternative approach to social science research begins by taking notions of ideational ontology seriously. In this tradition, how people think about, intellectually frame, and talk about their world shapes the way the world is, and what alternative worlds can come to be, in ways that can't be reduced to the influence of deterministic social or economic structures (see, for example, Smith 2013). In this alternative tradition, the dissertation will explore how ideationally distinct "ontologies of labor" significantly influence the relationship between unions and worker coops in their efforts to build alternatives to traditional capitalism. Ontology matters not just to isolated academics who debate metaphysical concepts in the detached quiet of offices and seminar rooms, but also and especially on the ground, in the streets, and in the factories, union halls and other business enterprises where workers attempt to protect themselves from the vagaries of capitalist economic processes.

Ontology is traditionally conceived of as a branch of philosophy, focused on the study of "metaphysically inspired abstractions" concerning the fundamental nature of existence, being, and the relationships between basic categories of being (Howarth 2012, 88-89; Latow 1999; Law 2004; Blaser 2009). Relatedly, and important for this dissertation, "political ontology, by extension, relates to political being; to what is politically, to what exists politically and to the units that comprise political reality."

Some social scientists reject the study of ontology because of its characterization as “mere discourse” in social science inquiry. For example, Potter (1998) rejects ontology on the ground that the study of metaphysical ontology is not useful to examining actual political conflict over material matters, while classical Marxists such as Adorno (1973: 61) similarly reject ontology on the ground that “ontology is apolitical” and its study cannot guide real political struggles. This view is shared by another Marxist, Critchley, who argues that politics involves a struggle over real material matters such as the distribution of wealth, and cannot be reduced to struggles over differing theories of reality: “politics is a disruption of the ontological domain and separate categories are required for its analysis and practice. There is no transitivity between ontology and politics” (Critchley 2007, 105).

However, this dissertation takes a different approach to the usefulness of the ontological approach in understanding political processes. It is, of course, evident that political struggles are not just struggles over ideas and battles about differing ways of seeing the world. Nor can it be said that we can simply “think” our way out of various social or economic crises. Still, there is tremendous evidence that how labor activists think about the nature of political-economic challenges, and the ideational stances that they take regarding such things as the necessity of class conflict or virtues of compromising with workplace managers, significantly shape actual political practices on the ground, and therefore shape the social reality that comes to be. In this way, ontology shapes actual political struggles and the “particular world” that emerges from those struggles; it can even be said that a good deal of political struggle results as differing ontological world-views “strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other” (Blaser 2009, 877).

*Classical vs. Poststructural Marxism: Ontological Essentialism vs. Anti-Essentialism*

Adopting the framework that ontology matters, this dissertation engages the ongoing debate between traditional Marxism (with essentialist notions of structural labor oppression and necessary labor militancy) with more recent developments in anti-essentialist, poststructural Marxism, which highlights avenues to labor empowerment that can be discovered through the construction of local, diverse alternatives to the so-called capitalist system. We can trace the tensions between traditional Marxists and poststructural Marxists at least to the late 1800s, when traditional Marxists voiced deep skepticism about the potential of worker owned cooperatives, because they believed that worker owned cooperatives could not possibly challenge the supremacy of capital. For those traditional Marxists, worker cooperatives were not believed to transcend the market nor offer a new economic model, as they were simply too small in scale and too “reformist” in perspective. This skepticism in the tradition of traditional Marxism is well summarized by Gibson-Graham (2003).

The historical antagonism between left labor politics and worker cooperatives continues to have resonance in the present as do the still prominent views that the cooperative sector is insignificant and unthreatening to the dominant economic order, that cooperatives are unable to build sustainable interdependencies, that they are economically flawed and not really distinguishable from capitalism, that cooperators are prone to the individualistic self-interests of the cooperative, that cooperatives are short-lived as well as politically conservative and disinterested in solidarity with the more political struggles of the left (131).

For these kinds of reasons, the relations between many labor unions that originally came of age in oppositional struggles against industrial capitalists and worker cooperatives

who pursued small-scale alternatives in local places, have been rocky throughout history (Bell 2006). As Hochner (1983, 347) puts it, many union advocates have argued that the “dwarfish” cooperative form of ownership “would require workers to give up the adversarial role vis-à-vis management, and would undercut the traditional union as an organization.”

Rejecting the tendency of such structural thinking to devalue small-scale reform efforts and to present the capitalist system as impervious to the daily efforts of people on the ground to humanize local economies, the poststructural Gibson-Graham has instead celebrated the “novel economic performances” (2006) of people who everyday challenge the dominant logic of global capitalism through such tactics as developing “informal markets, barter, ethical fair-trade markets, underground markets, local trading system, alternative currencies, co-op exchanges, alternative credit and the sale of public good”<sup>3</sup> This way of celebrating the wide range of alternative economic arrangements that emerge in the realm of “community economies” assumes that such innovations as self-employment, volunteer work, peer-lending, gifting, self-provisioning and worker cooperatives, even when locally focused and small in scale, have real meaning in terms of opening up “different economic practices and pathways.” Gibson-Graham advances a theory of ever-present diverse economies (often called “community economies”) as a way to deconstruct “capitalocentric” economic thinking and create room for conceptualizing the importance of non-capitalist economies (e.g., cooperative economics) that always pose alternatives to the so-called global economic system.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/11sa/Gibson-Graham-Roelvink.html>

*An Anti-Essentialist Critique of Classical Class Narratives*

In her influential poststructural approach, Gibson-Graham (2000, 6) critiques the essentialist notion that “class” is the “central contradiction of the social totality...the principle axis of social transformation...charged with *the* transformative historical task.” Such a way of thinking is “closed” and “univocal,” she argues, and undermines the many different non-capitalist identities and activities that people participate in across their diverse lives—identities and activities such as a parent building a family economy, a hobbyist enjoying leisurely retreat from work, or a community volunteer helping others.

Focusing only on traditional notions of totalizing “class conflict” is a disempowering project for the progressive imagination, Gibson-Graham argues, full of “closures and constrictions” which end up “greatly restricting political efficacy” (8). As opposed to a traditional class ontology which allegedly closes down alternative sources of identity, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) calls for an ontology and a politics in which “class can no longer be understood at the organizing center of individual and collective identity” (9). She imagines a liberating focus on emancipatory actions in the always-existing non-capitalist world around us, and offers the following summary.

We might think here of the strategic actions of a housewife (traditional houseworker) convincing family members to participate in the communal production and distribution of domestic surplus labor when she seeks a job outside the home, or the repeated strategic decision by members of a worker cooperative not to hire temporary employees and to minimize wage differences between categories of workers, or the traditional labor union “enrolling” and “enlisting” members who will exert power (in the form of strikes or consumer campaigns or shareholder organizing)... or community stakeholders threatening legal action a local firm and effecting a new distribution of appropriated surplus value toward environmental cleanup. Each of these acts marshals bodies and materials and affects flows of surplus labor, in the process constituting power, class, and subjects (12).

Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) propose that a focus on such diverse actions and identities takes us beyond traditional, totalizing “master-slave” class narratives which simply cannot explain the reality of diverse identities—identities which may be platforms on which micro-projects of non-capitalist economics can be built, without necessarily connecting to master-slave narratives of class conflict. At heart, what they hope to do is to “open up new discursive spaces where a language of class can articulate with other aspects of social existence that are themselves potential sources of identity” (11). They hope thereby to hold on to the emotional intensity and deep political commitment that is associated with traditional class-organizing campaigns, but to channel it into a broader range of liberatory practices.

We would hope to carry forward the intensity of feeling that has been politically affixed to the experience of exploitation, while unyoking this affective energy from the essentialist commitments and confining narratives to which it has been contingently attached...we would also like to ‘undo’ the ties that have harnessed those intensities to a limited range of emotions (9, 15).

Such a project of holding on to the traditional emotional intensity of class-organizing campaigns while moving beyond a totalizing focus on class is vital, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff argue, because traditional Marxist class reasoning is a dead-end as far as political organizing goes. Although traditional class politics have a history of positive and successful effects, today there are many other deleterious consequences of thinking in traditional Marxist ways about class.

Resignation (at least where revolutionary possibility is concerned), the tendency to focus on pain and injury rather than hope and possibility, blaming and moralizing rather than envisioning and

acting....Revolutionary possibility is relegated to the future and the present becomes barren of any real possibility. It is therefore also empty of the kinds of emotions (like creative excitement, pleasure, hope, surprise, pride and satisfaction, daily enjoyment) that are associated with present possibilities (15).

This is a damning indictment of the political and emotional consequences of adopting an essentialist labor ontology to guide organizing campaigns, and a hopeful celebration of the possibilities of non-essentialist thinking. But how well does the theory match practice and facts on the ground? How likely is it that labor organizers on the ground can recognize diverse forms of human identity and non-class based practices, and build passionate campaigns of social transformation around those identities, bereft of traditional notions of class resentment? Orthodox Marxists like Cole (2003) have critiqued such poststructural hopes, claiming that in practice poststructural approaches fail to succeed in leveraging meaningful social change.

Localised struggle can, of course, be liberating for individuals and certain selected small groups, but postmodernism cannot set out any viable mass strategy or programme for an emancipated future. The importance of local as well as national and international struggle is recognised by Marxists, but the postmodern rejection of mass struggle ultimately plays into the hands of those whose interests lie in the maintenance of national and global systems of exploitation and oppression (492).

This dissertation engages this thorny theoretical debate between the essentialists and anti-essentialists by posing the issue as a simple empirical question. What does the actual record of labor organizing teach us regarding the utility, or lack thereof, of class-centric labor organizing strategies? As unions and cooperatives increasingly build partnerships as a response to recent economic crisis, what does the evidence suggest regarding the labor-

empowerment virtues of building those partnerships along essentialist, orthodox Marxist lines (anchored around traditional notions of class conflict) versus building those partnerships along anti-essentialist, poststructural lines (celebrating alternative practices of personal liberation that may have nothing to do with mobilized class conflict).

### **Comparing Different Worlds of Labor Activism: The United States and South Korea**

Seeking to better understand how differing ontological approaches might structure different patterns of union-cooperative relations, with important consequences for local labor movements, this dissertation compares two case studies of emerging union-coop partnerships in the United States and South Korea. These countries have similarly advanced economies, in which the local labor forces face similar challenges in confronting global neo-liberalism, but they vary greatly in historical paths, cultural dynamics and governance patterns, thus providing for rich comparative possibilities.

In my early explorations of this subject through conversations with labor activists in both countries, one particular difference was immediately provocative. Korean labor activists unabashedly called upon the legacy of Marx himself, and constantly made reference to such terms as “class position” and “class consciousness”; American labor activists never did. Among American union-coop activists, concepts of deterministic “class” or the need for “class consciousness” are usually regarded as a thing of the past. Many labor activists eschew these hoary terms when talking labor politics, as such terms are alleged to repel possibly allies from more moderate circles, while being increasingly irrelevant to the world of economic and social diversity confronting labor activists today.

Korean labor leaders, on the other hand, speak regularly and powerfully of the need for “class consciousness” and for educational programs to help workers understand their class realities. Accordingly, a growing number of Korean unions are joining select worker cooperatives in pursuing a militant and class-conscious organizing agenda on the ground.

These differing approaches can be linked to differences between a “class-oriented” ontology of economic essentialism among many Korean labor organizers versus a “diverse economies” ontology of anti-essentialism among many U.S. labor organizers. The different ideational orientations of many U.S. and South Korean labor organizers allow for a comparative investigation of several intriguing questions. First, what accounts for why American and Korean labor organizers bring differing notions of class and the necessity of labor militancy to their efforts? How do differing historical, cultural and political-economic contexts shape fundamentally different class identities and organizing strategies in the two countries? Second, in what ways have differing notions of class and differing understandings of the necessity of conflict between labor and capital (or lack thereof) shaped differing patterns of union-cooperative relations in both countries?

Third, to what extent do differing notions of “class” or “class consciousness” within unions and cooperatives affect the trajectory and power of local labor movements? More specifically, in what ways do class-based labor organizing principles, rooted in traditional Marxist<sup>4</sup> theoretical ontology, strengthen or undermine labor power in a community? Inversely, in what ways do non-class based organized principles, rooted in poststructural,

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<sup>4</sup> Traditional Marxists, in this dissertation, refers to those who believe in classical Marxist principles such as the “essential” nature of a capitalist system built on class exploitation which necessitates class conflict. Traditional Marxists emphasize the importance of class-based social analysis and the necessity of class-consciousness and class-conflict to confront and transform capitalist structures.

post-Marxist <sup>5</sup> theoretical traditions, strengthen or undermine labor power in the community? These three questions revolve around the underlying question providing the gravitational anchor of this dissertation: what are the ground-level consequences of labor movements organizing “with” or “without” the ideological notion of class?

### **Class Matters: Preview of the Argument**

The case studies in this dissertation will demonstrate that U.S. and Korean labor strategies have been shaped by the national political-cultures in which they are situated—which can be broadly characterized as a generally “non-essentialist” political-culture (the U.S.) and an “essentialist” political-culture (Korea). In diverse and pluralistic nations like the United States, shaped by a robust and autonomous civil society, the ground is fertile for new notions and practices of union-coop collaboration to fluoresce at the grass-roots level, when conditions warrant. Within that pluralistic and relatively open-ended political economy, the nature of union-coop relationships has been largely shaped by moderate business unionism, a “liberal tradition” in America that has been remarked upon by observers from Tocqueville (1835) to Hartz (1955) to Lipset and Marks (2000).

But in a less diverse nation like South Korea, with a frail social economy sector, the traditional government-licensed cooperative sector’s long record of “business

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<sup>5</sup> Poststructural Marxists (or Post-Marxists) in this dissertation, refers to who are generally aligned with the social theory and critical stance of traditional Marxist thought vis-à-vis capitalism, but who have discarded important tenets of orthodox Marxism such as the notion of a universally exploitive capitalist system that inevitably generates class-conflict and that demands militant class-conscious rebellion as a response. In particular, this dissertation uses “poststructural Marxist” or “Post-Marxists” to describe scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe, Gibson-Graham, Resnick, or Wolff (especially in his earlier writings), who have been critical of essentialism and economic determinism among traditional Marxists, but who retain an oppositional stance to capitalism and who seek alternative economic models.

cooperativism” and domination by government elites is fundamentally at odds with the union sector’s long record of militant collective organizing, against both the authoritarian state and corporate elites. In that kind of national context, competing union and coop ontologies remain more deeply oppositional and new forms of union-coop collaboration remain inchoate. But where a limited number of stronger and independent cooperatives are growing in Korea—instigated by changing global economic challenges--and where they are building deeper relationships with Korean unions, they are doing so within a context of union radicalism and an essentialist discourse of class conscious conflict, and are increasingly adopting radicalized economic and political strategies to reflect this context.

These differing patterns of union-cooperative relationships and related labor ontologies have important consequences in terms of shaping the kinds of labor activities and economic possibilities that have emerged on the ground in the two nations. The pluralistic, non-class-conscious American model will be shown to support a flourishing range of alternative economic activity, opening up all manner of novel ruptures in the broader capitalist system through widespread and growing union-coop partnerships that offer such things as mutual assistance exchange systems, community currencies, community-credit operations, crowd-funded microenterprise startups. In myriad small ways, in the here-and-now, union-coop partnerships in the United States are opening up alternative economic pathways, giving workers a way to pursue their own entrepreneurial dreams through business ownership of a social enterprises, and without having to report to an external “boss” for a wage. These developments are confirmation of the “community economies” claim that not all economic activity should be understood as part of a

structural capitalist system—in fact, a vast amount of activity fundamentally challenges the model of “wage labor produce for a market in a capitalist firm”<sup>6</sup> In this way, the case-studies provide support to the post-Marxist argument that deepening our understanding and appreciation of the meaning of these alternative economic activities can be liberating, both for labor activists on the ground and for scholars seeking a fuller understanding of economic life.

However, the case-study analysis in this dissertation also offers a partial critique of the kind of post-Marxian strategies of economic liberation dominant in the US, to the extent that they are bereft of class-consciousness. Diverse and pluralistic innovations within the labor movement can foster local innovations like a flourishing range of worker cooperatives, but such innovations can also weaken labor movements to the extent that they fragment class consciousness and turn workers towards an accommodationist, entrepreneurial mindset. By highlighting such possibilities, these case studies undermine the common poststructural critique that traditionally Marxist notions of “class” are ineffectual, unimaginative, and disempowering the diverse organizing projects that do not speak of “class.” Countering such arguments, this Korean case study will provide evidence that in the world of labor organizing, class narratives remain powerful and even necessary. Precisely because they were motivated by class-conscious sensitivities, the Korean labor activists studied here saw themselves as community change agents, overthrew a regime, and are currently building meaningful, alternative economic ecologies in their local communities. In Korea, the evidence shows that a class-conscious and capital-antagonistic

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home/Key-Ideas>

commitment to workers' rights and interests has been fundamental to the achievement of a worker-centric coop (Woojin)--one that cultivates and depends for its success on worker solidarity, and a commitment by the worker-owners to the promotion of the interests of working people, even when these workers are not part of the coop, but are instead simply members of the broader communities that are served by bus company. At Woojin, emphasis is placed on coop members as oppositional and class-conscious "workers" within an exploitive capitalist system, rather than as efficient business "owners," seeking to improve their own economic condition. As a result, the unionized bus driver Woojin cooperative in Korea is following a path of transformational labor militancy, and in accordance with a structural economic critique of the capitalist system—which has led Woojin labor activists into widening circles of political engagement and transformational commitments.

On the other hand, a fluid willingness to celebrate and support diverse economic practices such as worker cooperatives in the United States doesn't necessarily sustain a commitment to social change—in fact, under certain conditions it may actually stunt such a commitment. For example, and as I will present in the case study of a Denver taxi driver workers' cooperative, there was minimal ideological resistance or "dampening" among local labor leaders to the idea of a union working with a worker owned taxi cooperative business when the idea emerged in Denver in 2005. Denver's immigrant taxi union cooperatives easily allied with a local union for support, but they did so in a way that reflects traditional business unionism, bereft of class consciousness and disconnected from broader political mobilization. As a result, cooperative taxi drivers in Denver narrowly constricted their field of action to maximizing individual economic gains through small business ownership. They have subsequently chosen to minimize their involvement in

labor campaigns in their community, and have experienced their cooperative following the common path of “cooperative degeneration” (Cornforth, 1995) in that cooperative owners have begun to develop strategies to profit by becoming petit-managers of newly enrolled taxi drivers, who are paid much less than the first-wave of taxi driver coop owners.

Exploring such consequences of organizing with, or without, essentialist notions of “class” is a guiding thread throughout the dissertation. Though poststructuralists like Gibson-Graham argue that an appreciation of diverse economic strategies is necessary to imagine different possibilities and to sustain the motivation for struggle, there may also be situations where these locally rooted, diverse economic practices become diversionary reformism, undermining the motivation for class-struggle, and enfeebling the ability to imagine alternatives. In this particular sense, the post-Marxist community economies project may be susceptible to the very same critique it offers of standard Marxism. In the poststructural tendency to turn away from “totalizing” class analysis approaches, it too may narrow the ability to understand, critique and transcend current political-economic arrangements, may close-off liberatory practices that emerge from class-centric approaches, and may enfeeble the transformational imagination.

There can be deleterious consequences, in terms of labor empowerment, when activists turn away from structural critiques of capitalism and associated labor politics. Gibson-Graham may be correct that a creative openness to alternative economic forms always around us might open up new alternatives, but there may also be times that such an approach diverts attention from the reality of central concentrations of power, and real patterns of accumulation by dispossession that demand a coherent, class-conscious response. Even though the poststructuralists may be right that economic power is always

more fluid and decentered than the traditional Marxists imagine, and though they may be correct that alternative economic practices (bartering, self-help associations, etc.) always exist in the here and now, that does not necessarily mean that a traditionally Marxist class-conscious organizing narrative is dysfunctional or enfeebling.

Poststructural approaches like Gibson-Graham may open up imaginative paths to new economies in the here and now, but they may also leave other unmapped mental paths underexplored, weak and enervated—and in so doing, important class-conscious alternatives may wither in places where they might have sustained powerful local movements. And while an orthodox structural Marxist approach to the “capitalist system” as a whole may indeed undervalue and limit the ways in which local groups like unions and worker cooperatives might come together in building collaborative local alternatives to capitalism, there may be times when a structural critique of “mere reformism” can inspire activists to bold and sustained activism, and can help them move beyond their role as local actors seeking to reform economic practices in their own small neighborhood. In such cases, it may be that focusing the mental energies of labor activists and leaders on the exploitations of “capitalism” as a coherent and universal system does not disempower and limit the imagination, but actually sustains an oppositional identity, connects workers to coherent and empowering narratives of historical social movements, and fosters a radical critique and sustainable commitment to structural change.

### **Plan of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized into the following chapters. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter explains the methodological approach of the dissertation. The

third chapter explores the theoretical foundations of two Marxist perspectives: classical Marxism (I call modern adherents “traditional Marxists”) and poststructural Marxism (alternatively, “post-Marxism”). These two Marxisms are contrasted in terms of their view of the nature of capitalism, the nature of the antagonism between capital and labor, and the nature of class itself. This chapter shows that traditional Marxists presents the antagonism between capital and labor as inevitable and essential in capitalism, which also gives rise to the importance of class-based struggles between capital and labor. On the other hand, poststructural Marxists argue that the antagonism between capital and labor is not a necessity but arises out of certain contingent realities that vary by time and place. Class analysis in this way of thinking is just one of many entry points for social analysis and thus pluralism in society, and an appreciation of plural strategies of economic improvement is important in understanding the potentials of diverse economic enterprises to create meaningful alternatives to wage-capitalism in local communities.

The fourth chapter addresses how these different ontologies of traditional and poststructural Marxism have shaped the different relationships between labor unions and worker cooperatives through history. This chapter explains how historically different understandings of the essence of capitalism, capital-labor relations within capitalism, and the nature of class have inevitably influenced relationships between worker cooperatives (representing capital) and labor unions (representing labor). The traditional Marxist tradition will be compared to the poststructural Marxist tradition which has been less enamored of labor unions and workers parties as agents of historical transformation, and more attentive to the diverse strategies of economic innovation and liberation performed

every day in local communities, including innovations such as peer-lending, volunteer assistance, community bartering systems, and worker-owned cooperatives.

The fifth chapter examines the history of labor union ideology in the U.S., and frames that ideology as more aligned with poststructural Marxist thinking than with the militant traditions of classical Marxism. It argues that labor unions in the U.S. are enamored of the ideology of “job consciousness” and the practice of “business unionism.” Although U.S. labor unions have demonstrated strong labor militancy throughout history and though labor unions since the 1990s have increasingly attempted to revitalize the movement to generate a new “social movement unionism,” U.S. labor unions continue to be dominated by traditions of job consciousness and business unionism. A weak tradition of class-based labor organizing is linked to a recent history of pluralist identity-based organizing, and a middle-class ethos that is embedded in labor union members.

The sixth chapter addresses the pluralistic nature of worker cooperative movements in the U.S., and the accommodating relationships that have often united those movements and labor unions. Just as U.S. labor unions are rooted in a job conscious middle-class ideology more than in a class-conscious working class ideology, so too is the U.S. worker cooperative movement. Although worker cooperatives have a dual nature of pursuing self-interested economic goals for members (e.g., increasing members’ income) while also pursuing broader political/social roles (seeking workplace democracy, challenging the current economic structure, and catalyzing workers’ participation in political processes), the socio-political roles of worker-coop owners in the United States are often crowded out by a strong emphasis on the roles of a worker cooperative in creating jobs and improving the economic situation of individual coop owners.

The seventh chapter is a case study of an emerging union-coop partnership in the United States that is bringing immigrant taxi drivers together as business owners and as members of the Communication Workers of America union. This case study shows that this partnership fits well within a tradition of business unionism and minimal class based organizing in the U.S. labor movement because the unionized cooperative has focused mostly on maximizing the economic opportunities available to coop-owners, by focusing mostly on securing a better income through efficient competition against other taxi companies, rather than on notions of worker empowerment by developing a strong class consciousness among workers or class solidarity with other transportation workers.

The eighth chapter examines the history of the labor union movement in South Korea. The chapter shows that the Korean labor movement has followed a very different trajectory than the U.S. labor movement, in that it has been strongly influenced by classical Marxist notions, which has given rise to stronger labor militancy than in the U.S. This strong labor militancy has somewhat been fostered by the history of a repressive state and unified corporate Chaebols dominating the Korean economy, which gave rise to a strong labor union power as a necessary means to resist powerful and centralized elites. Thus, labor unions in Korea have an affinity with traditional Marxism more than with post-Marxism.

The ninth chapter examines worker cooperative movements in South Korea, and relationships between cooperatives and labor unions there. As the nature of worker cooperative movements in the U.S. has depended on political and economic context, and has shifted over time from labor radicalism in its early days to more modern forms of labor conservatism, so too has the worker cooperative movement in Korea moved between periods of labor conservatism and labor radicalism. This dissertation traces the role of the

Korean state in shaping the nature of the worker cooperative movement to be geared more toward labor conservatism, focusing more on economic goals of expanded individual economic opportunities than on collective social change, and explores the labor empowerment consequences of that kind of labor conservatism.

The tenth Chapter is a case study of a recent union-coop partnership in South Korea, the Woojin Traffic bus drivers' unionized worker cooperative. While most Korean worker cooperatives have come from anti-essentialist perspectives regarding the necessity of class-based organizing (and thus have usually not developed deep relations with Korea's militant and class-conscious union community), the Woojin cooperative has organized self-consciously within a framework of traditional Marxism and has therefore built strong alliances with local unions committed to class-organizing campaigns. The result has been a growing commitment to broad-based labor mobilization at Woojin, together with strong institutions of worker control and political educational campaigns at their bus company.

The eleventh chapter is a conclusion. It argues that different labor ontologies have produced different effects on the ground in terms of labor organizing strategies. While dogmatic notions advanced by classical Marxism have sometimes been associated with weaknesses and obstacles in terms of building connections between cooperatives and unions in South Korea, poststructural notions of celebrating diverse economic initiatives bereft of class-consciousness also have been associated with the development of weak and ineffective labor movement in the United States. Thus, the dissertation concludes that traditional Marxist approaches to labor organizing should not always be seen as unimaginative and disempowering, nor as only offering impossibly revolutionary dreams that are "difficult to follow, especially when it came to changing the world" as Gibson-

Graham argued (2008, 614). Rather, class-based organizing strategies can be an efficacious political tool. Such strategies can help sustain worker solidarity and build the strong class consciousness necessary for workers to demand meaningful power over capital, in real ways, in the here and now.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Though this dissertation advances a constructivist argument that labor union and worker coop activists in the USA and Korea live in different social worlds, defined by contrasting philosophies of reality, this does not mean that these competing social worlds cannot be investigated systematically. Indeed, there is a branch of “scientific social ontology” which is committed to the scientific study of “the ontological presuppositions of theories and practices of different groups and communities,” in order to better understand the varying ideological values or cultural systems of differing ontological “tribes” (Lawson, 2014).

This dissertation fits in this tradition. Though this dissertation eschews positivist notions that the validity of competing ontologies of union and coop activists could ever ultimately be tested or scientifically verified through empirical proofs, this dissertation asserts that these socially constructed ontologies have real effects on the social world (for example, in shaping the kinds of labor organizations that activists build), and that both the existence of the ontologies and their social effects can be examined through social science methodologies. The goal is not be to identify the actual nature of the capitalist world beyond conceptions, but to identify the “conceptual presuppositions or sets of belief systems” that motivate the actions, organizations and social relationships of labor activists on the ground (Lawson 2014, 2).

This dissertation does not advance a positivist focus on neutral fact gathering, except for gathering facts that document the existence and effect of competing labor ontologies among labor activists. But even those kinds of facts (gathered through such methods as surveys, interviews, and print discourse analysis) require creative interpretation to contextualize them and explain their meaning from the ontological perspective of various labor activists. In this way, this dissertation seeks to explain the meaning of social actions by union and coop activists through an interpretivist *verstehen*--an understanding and interpretation of the social meaning of the facts, from the ontological perspective of the research subjects themselves.

Such as interpretivist methodology has pitfalls. Questions of how to escape predetermined biases of the researcher, or how to insure the credibility of one's findings, are commonly associated with interpretivism, because an interpretivist search for *verstehen* inevitably requires the researcher to advance antecedent ontological assumptions to guide research (Hay 2006; Stanley 2012). In creatively exploring the way in which research subjects construct meaning to their action, there is certainly the potential for predetermined bias to undermine research quality. Although it can be argued that any social science study is "contingent upon what one looks for, and what one looks for it is to some extent contingent upon what one expects to find" (Gerring 2004, 351), this problem seems particularly true of interpretivist methodologies (Hay 2006; Danermark et al., 2002; Downward and Mearman 2005; Stanley 2012). To mitigate these problems, a multiple-method triangulation process will be utilized, relying on a case-study of labor organizing in two nations, with data collected through interviews, surveys, and historical analysis.

### **Addressing Bias and Presupposition: Multiple-Method Triangulation**

To build a well-rounded understanding of the ontological presuppositions of labor activists in these two countries, and the ways in which these presuppositions undergird different social worlds of labor activism, various strategies will be employed. These mixed methods will provide a range of data from various sources that can together build a clear picture of the social phenomenon under investigation, and that can help guard against investigator bias and presupposition.

Ellingson (2009) uses the term “crystallization,” while Blaikie (1991, 115) uses the related concept of “triangulation,” to describe this use of multiple methods and measurements of an empirical phenomenon, in order to “overcome problems of bias and validity” (see also Blaikie 2000; Scandura and Williams 2000, cited in Cox and Hassard 2005). Triangulation is used to “overcome the complacent dependence on single operational definitions of theoretical concepts” and “to supplement the use of the interview or questionnaire with unobtrusive measures” (such as a review of written organizational records, or attending public meetings) “that do not require the cooperation of the respondent and that do not themselves contaminate the response” (1966: 2, cited in Blaikie 1991: 116). The theory is that “we can move closer to obtaining a ‘true’ picture if we take multiple measurements, using multiple methods, or at multiple levels of analysis” (E.g., Gersick 1991; Lewis and Grimes 1999, cited in Cox and Hassard 2005; also see Denzin 2012). In this way, triangulation’s reliance on multiple methods can be considered as a strategy of research validation.

But more accurately, this dissertation utilizes the concept of triangulation *not* as “a tool or a strategy of validation” but as an *alternative* to validation (cited in Denzin

2012). In fact, even though the mixed methods of triangulation may “crystallize” deeper and more complex findings, the interpretivist insight is that these findings can still only reflect a partial, situated, constructed, multiple, and temporarily embodied reality (Ellingson 2009). An interpretivist use of mixed methods, including interviews, surveys and researcher participation in activities and meetings with subjects, emphasizes “how much we value the opportunity to learn about the participants’ world” (Ellingson 2009, 78, cited in Pia 2013, 79), by blurring the dividing line between the knower and the known (Liu, 2011) and by providing room for their voices (Pia 2013, 79; also see Ellingson 2009, Miles and Huberman 1994). But developing a deeper *verstehen* in this fluid and blurred way, utilizing multiple methods, cannot be equated to traditional scientific validation.

### *Case Study*

Through a systematic study of comparative cases, Rueschemeyer (2003) states that “case studies can do more than generate theoretical ideas. They can test theoretical propositions as well, and they can offer persuasive causal explanations” (318). Yin (2003) also asserts that case study method is appropriate when investigators either desire or are forced by circumstances: a) To define research topics broadly and not narrowly; b) to cover contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not just isolated variables; and c) to relay on multiple and not singular sources of evidence (Yin 2003, xi). In approaching case studies, the use of a priori deductive frameworks can be very important to guide observations, as “reliance on theoretical concepts remains one of the most important

strategies for completing successful case studies, whether exploratory, descriptive or explanatory” (Yin 2003, xv).

Although this dissertation takes on an approach of cross-national comparison of two countries, which poses a challenge due to different political, social and economic conditions in each country, it proceeds with confidence that comparing two different countries may result in better understanding of the effects of differing ontologies on different labor organizations and strategies. The importance of comparison between different countries is well established by Lipset (1963, 9-10).

The analyst of societies must choose between a primarily historical or a primarily comparative approach.... But... he cannot ignore the other. Without examining social relations in *different* countries it is impossible to know to what extent a given factor actually has the effect attributed to it in a *single* country (cited in Sartori, 1994, 24).

What accounts for differences between the countries in this study? Based on the a priori deductive premise that ontology matters, this study hypothesizes that differing national labor ontologies provide an important part of the answer to that question. The United States and South Korea were chosen as case study nations due to the a priori understanding that these two similarly developed nations might offer useful evidence regarding the influence of differing labor ontologies, since they have such differing labor organizing traditions. Though both countries have similarly advanced economies, the United States has a long history of what has been called “business unionism”—and labor movements are popularly understood to avoid talk of such things as “class” or “class consciousness”—while South Korean labor activists are well-known for their rebellious labor militancy and commonly make reference to the need for class solidarity and

aggressive conflict against centralized corporate power. I chose U.S. and South Korea with the hypothesis that the Korea labor movement overall has an ontological affinity with Marxist essentialism and its notions of class conflict and class empowerment, while the U.S. workers' movement has an affinity with poststructural, anti-essentialist Marxism, with its notions that workers are not necessarily in constant conflict with business owners, and that there are many paths to individual opportunity and empowerment in the extant, diverse economy. Knowing these broad differences existed between modern labor traditions in the U.S. and South Korea led me to suspect that comparing the two countries would offer a useful study of the actual existence and consequences of differing labor ontologies on ground-level labor movements.

### *Interviews*

This dissertation utilizes in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews with union and coop activists in both countries. These interviews allow for detailed and nuanced discussions of core themes, which allows for a more complete interpretation of the ontological viewpoints of union and coop activists. The interviews are a non-random convenience sample, drawing on lead activists in various labor organizations, and utilized snowball sampling techniques as these activists shared contacts with other activists. For the case of Denver's immigrant cooperatives, the author interviewed labor union officers, labor activists and worker cooperative activists and taxi workers on the street between 2013 and 2015. The author conducted 69 brief open-ended interviews with workers in short sessions on the street, and ten formal, sit-down and open-ended interviews to

understand taxi-driver perspectives on their worker cooperative and the associated labor union and to learn how drivers define their own identity and role within the union-coop model. For the case of Korea's Woojin union-cooperative, the author utilized open-ended interviews with 16 leaders of bus union-cooperatives, 35 open-ended interviews with worker cooperative leaders and 10 open-ended interviews with leaders from labor unions.

### *Survey*

This dissertation also draws on an author-administered fixed-response survey of 69 Denver taxi workers and 165 Korean bus drivers (survey questions included in appendix A). The reason the different numbers of surveys in the two countries is that the Denver surveys were administered under challenging circumstances by the author in street-locations where taxi drivers gathered, while the survey of Korean workers at Woojin was facilitated by the support of Woojin leaders, who helped circulate the surveys. In Denver, local union officials chose not to assist in the distribution of surveys to taxi drivers, and survey administration was additionally complicated by the fact that there were hardly any general meetings of taxi driver union-cooperative members (due largely to a labor organizing approach that focused on delivering economic benefits to individual drivers, but not on building collective political power among the drivers). Because drivers did not gather centrally at places where I was allowed to distribute surveys, I had to collect the 69 Denver surveys on the street. Because Korea's Woojin cooperative supported the distribution of surveys, and because bus drivers commonly met together in political strategy and education meetings to which I had access, I was able to gather the much larger

number of 165 Woojin bus driver surveys. The response rate among Woojin bus drivers invited to take the survey was 55%.

In the case of Denver's taxi drivers, survey sampling methodology was a mixture of cluster and convenience sampling. Cluster respondents were selected from strategically chosen sites known to be frequented by taxi and bus drivers, such as the taxi waiting area near Denver's DIA airport, taxi queues near hotels, and the bus yards where drivers gather to begin their shift. At each of the cluster sample sites, I collected responses from a convenience sampling of all respondents who were present at the time and willing to take the survey. A count was kept of respondent refusals, to give a response rate of 58%.

#### *Historical and Document Analysis*

In addition to interviews with principal activists and surveys of workers, this dissertation utilizes analyses of the historical records found in the documents and archives of the relevant labor organizations in each country, and the public record of discourse found in labor union/coop newsletters, websites, public statements, white papers and other official documents. Mixing these various tools (surveys, interviews, document analysis and case studies) will allow for contextualized “thick description” of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967; see also Dey 1999)—and the kind of detailed information that will allow for an interpretivist understanding of the ontological presuppositions of activists on the ground, and why those presuppositions matter.

## Conclusion

To summarize, this dissertation does not seek to determine the most scientifically valid or the verifiably most important cause of the historic and ongoing tensions between labor unions and worker owned cooperatives, or of their more recent collaborations. Rather, before beginning research, I identified a particular angle on that question that I felt would lead to useful insights—the angle that ontology matters. Exploring the ways in which differing social ontologies of labor activists may lead them into fundamentally differing and even competing forms of labor organization requires attention to the underlying values and social meanings that subjects import to their own action. It requires a methodology of *verstehen*--understanding social action from the point of view of the actor him or herself. This dissertation seeks to build that *verstehen*—and to document its credibility-- through multiple methods of triangulation, allowing me a systematic way to document the existence of differing labor ontologies, and the effect of these differences on ground level actions.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **TRADITIONAL VERSUS POSTSTRUCTURAL MARXISM**

Traditional Marxism, once so central to political projects in Russia, Eastern Europe, China and Cuba, had lost much of its influence by the time the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980s. With the collapse of so-called communist countries, and the rise of neoliberal leaders such as Thatcher in UK and Reagan in the US, neoliberal globalization and free market principles became the fashion. Fukuyama even claimed the “end of history” to refer to the victory of neoliberalism after the collapse of communism, and the associated termination of the ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism. As this great ideological struggle has withered in the political world, new and less ideologically rigid traditions in social science have also emerged. Filc and Ram (2004, 97) argue that perspectives of post-modernism and poststructuralism have replaced structural Marxism and become the “vital component of the New Times,” while Hey agrees that “postmodernism is now an orthodox position in critical social science research” (Hey 2004, 1).

The arrival of these new theoretical perspectives have been linked to a fundamental change in economic, social and cultural life associated with the rise of “post-Fordist” economic production systems (Filc and Ram 2004, 297; see also Amin 1994; Boyer 2000; Hall 1991; Hirsh 1988; Jessop 2002). Accompanied by the rapid growth of post-Fordist

economic processes, there has been “the rapid decline of the industrial proletariat in western countries” and the rise of new social movements—feminism, environmentalism, gay rights, etc.--that do not quite fit into the model of class-based resistance movements as traditional Marxists define them. Thus, many poststructural theorists have been critical of classic Marxist approaches, with their emphasis on class position as the foundation of resistance struggles. As Lockman (2009) argues:

Marxian and political economy approaches came to be seen by many in the 1980s as too narrow in their insistence on the centrality of class as a category, too essentialist in their commitment to social structural causation, and too teleological in their positing of large-scale and long term historical trajectories. They also seemed to ignore, or at least marginalize, discourse, culture, or more broad questions of meaning, which were the key focus on the new work on representation (Lockman 2009, 211).

In this light, many poststructuralists have introduced new approaches to the study of social movements, especially due to their argument that social movements do not necessarily have to start from the class struggle of workers, nor do meaningful social movements only emerge at transformative political junctures involving mass mobilization of workers (Rutherford 2010).

Rather, poststructuralists such as Gibson-Graham argue that “we were done with waiting for the revolution and had embarked on a project of smashing capitalism while working at home in our spare time” (Gibson-Graham 2014, 76). From a poststructural perspective, this attitude of “not waiting for the revolution” but rather being a spontaneous cook who “open[s] the cupboard and cook[s] with what is there” (Gibson-Graham 2014,92)—for example by forming alternative economic institutions in small places such as worker-owned cooperatives--celebrates the perennial existence of alternative

economies, contributes to “a politics of economic innovation” (Gibson-Graham 2005a, 6) and helps open up “space for a different political imagination” (Gibson-Graham 2014, 81).

This chapter examines such arguments of poststructuralists, mostly focusing on Gibson-Graham’s influential perspective, which is a good representation of poststructuralist arguments regarding the nature of the so-called capitalist economy, relations between capital and labor in capitalism, and the nature of “class” itself. Although Sharpe (2014) argues that “Gibson-Graham remain committed Marxists”<sup>7</sup> in that “they embrace a hopeful, world-building sense of power inherent in the species-being of humans” (Sharpe 2014 29), it can also be argued that Gibson-Graham’s emphasis on fluid class relations, perennial and diverse economic potentials, and always contingent relations between capital and labor, undermines the oppositional and essentialist ideological tradition that traditional Marxism once brought to the labor movement. For this reason, I will categorize the poststructural thinking of those like Gibson-Graham as “post-Marxist.”

In exploring the different perspectives of Gibson-Graham and traditional Marxism, this chapter will address fundamentally different views regarding the concepts of class, class consciousness, economic determinism and the decentered economy. While traditional Marxism argues for the centrality of mobilized class-consciousness in developing an accurate analysis of existing oppressions, and in sustaining a broad-based and meaningful resistance to those oppressions, poststructural Marxists like Gibson-

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Schmitt (2010) in his book review for Gibson-Graham’s two books, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, and a *Postcapitalist politics* notes that “She (JKGG) describes herself as both a Marxist and a Feminist. (EC, 251)”. See Schmitt’s book review, <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2010/74>

Graham have argued that excessive focus on a “class” analysis actually clouds understanding of diverse economic possibilities and the diverse identities of people, while undermining the possibility of imagining alternative models of living in the here and now (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001).

Focusing too much on class-based organizing projects turns attention too often to limited campaigns of better wages and workplace conditions, these poststructuralists argue, simply reproducing capitalism in slightly mitigated form. A broader transformation is needed. Focusing on non-class subjectivities of people (perhaps their identities as women, or young people, or as economic localists) is a potential source of “imaginative enlargement,” Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2001, 75) argue. “In the process of pursuing a politics animated by this more inclusive class subjectivity, ‘class’ may lose the privileged ability to name the politics that emerges, but it gains a broader field of play.”

To this important critique of the poststructuralists, the response of the traditional Marxists would be to point out the ways in which a class analysis is not meant to confine struggle to simple moments of work-place wage and benefits conflict, but to help workers understand interconnected reasons for their oppressions and to sustain coherent and effective campaigns to challenge them. In the case of more exclusive class subjectivity, the traditional Marxists argue, “class” not only names but enlarges the politics that emerge, connecting workers to coherent critiques of the interconnected oppressions they face, and fueling a broader project of resistance (Cole 2003). The debate between these two perspectives is central to understanding the different kinds of union-coop labor alliances—and broader labor movements—that have emerged in the US and South Korea, and so will receive more thorough exploration in the section that follows.

## Competing Ontologies: Economic Determinism vs. The Decentered Economy

### *Traditional vs. Poststructural Marxism: Necessity vs. Contingency*

Different philosophical traditions in traditional Marxism versus poststructural Marxism are expressed in debates over the concepts of “necessity” and “contingency” (DeMartino 1992). Traditional Marxism is built on the foundation of *necessity* (according to such notions as historical development according to laws of motion, and the necessary and inevitable conflict between labor and capital in catalyzing social progress). In this tradition, industrial unions, expressing their role through class-based mobilizations of laborers against capitalists—are necessary institutions of labor empowerment, while small-scale reform efforts like cooperatives are often seen as a “dwarfish” form of resistance that can’t hope to leverage the kind of change that is needed.

On the other hand, poststructural Marxism is built on a foundation of pluralism, diversity, and *contingency*, which is shown in the concepts of overdetermination and contingent historical development. Traditional Marxist notions of inherent and necessary worker exploitation in capitalism and the subsequent necessity for broad-based class conflict between capitalists and workers to leverage social change are challenged in anti-essentialist Marxist approaches, which have room for the notion of workers becoming their own petit-communists, for example by collectively appropriating the surplus of a small-scale worker owned cooperative, even without directly challenging the larger economic system. In this non-essentialist tradition, smaller-scale worker-owned cooperatives can be seen as innovatively working their own way towards a rupture with normal capitalist processes, through diverse strategies of worker empowerment.

These two theoretical perspectives—essentialist or anti-essentialist—shape different interpretations of the nature of economic life in capitalism. From the philosophical perspective of *necessity*, for example, there is an inevitable antagonism between capital and labor, between capitalists and workers. From the perspective of *contingency*, capital-labor relations offer only “loose forms of fixity,” themselves historically overdetermined (DeMartino 1992, 7), shaping the overall contours of social and economic conflict, but in no way constituting “the mechanism underlying social and natural totality” (DeMartino 1992, 67). Nor does the supposed antagonism between capital and labor *determine* how that conflict will be structured, or how it should necessarily be resolved. Thus, while traditional Marxism starts with the concept of essential contradictions among the social forces of production necessarily leading to different elements of society expressing themselves in necessary ways (e.g., workers must necessarily mobilize against capital), poststructural Marxism dismantles the deterministic nature of these components and emphasizes the nature of “overdeterminism” in how fundamental dynamics like class identity and worker exploitation play out in practice.

#### *Traditional Marxism and Economic Determinism*

Traditional Marxism is often described as a theory of economic determinism (Hoffman 1986; also see Gibson-Graham 1996, 2003). Orthodox Marxists such as Luxemburg and Trotsky argued that “the economic aspect of social reality determined the non-economic, specifically the various political and cultural aspects” (Resnick and Wolff 1982, 32). In this traditional Marxism approach, economic forces are the first principle in explaining the “totality” of social phenomenon. The “totality” perspective in traditional

Marxism posits that society as structure guides individuals' behaviors. As much as individuals are important engines of social change, traditional Marxism advances Marx's famous statement in the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire that "men makes their own history, but they do not make it as they please; *they* do not *make* it under self-selected circumstances, *but* under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (1852).

This perspective posits that structural components of society, especially in relation to the mode of production, guide the history of capitalism in tracks along which individuals are confined. More than anything, it is the material conditions of society that provide the "determining element in history." Traditional Marxists believe that "economic relations are still ultimately the decisive ones" (Engels 1894), because "the base (i.e., the economy) precedes the superstructure (the ensemble of political and cultural relations)" (12). Due to such arguments, it is concluded by the essentialists that "Marx's theory captures the essence of social reality, and finds this essence to be economic" (Resnick and Wolff 1982). Engels (1894) provides a powerful component of such essentialist thinking when he claims that the essence of capitalism is ultimately decisive in shaping all other institutions of society:

Economic Determinism is an undisputed law of history, though by no means the only one, as many Marxists would argue. Societal institutions, the state, the economy, social classes, religion, the family, values systems and norms are to a large extent economically determined...Economic relations, however much they may be influenced by political and ideological relations, are still ultimately the decisive ones, forming the foundational dynamics which runs through all other political, social ideological dynamics (Engels to Starkenburg, 25. Jan. 1894, cited in Resnick and Wolff 1982, 48).

In capitalism, from this traditional Marxist perspective, the combination of relations and forces of production are supposed to correspond at any given moment, but the failure

to do so “signals the end of one mode of production and the beginning of another” (Cutler 1977, 174). Transition between the two modes (the old mode of production giving way to the new mode) is “effected by means of class struggle which overthrows the structure of one mode of production and installs another in its place” (Cutler et al. 1977, 174).

In this traditional Marxist approach, the laws of any given economy are directly linked to the mode of production, which, in the capitalist economic system is directly linked to the concept of private property. Marx (1844) in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, elaborates that “political economy starts with the fact of private property” because private property explains the fundamental components of human activity in a capitalist system, including “the necessary consequence of alienated labor, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.” According to Marx (1844), private property is viewed as “privately owned (by the minority), and basically controlled by the owners, used for the purpose of marking profits for the owners” (Blanc 1996, 7). The concept of private property is interpreted as the “essence” of capitalism, because private property becomes the starting point to explain the birth of wage-labour workers, which Marx calls “capital-positing, capital-producing labour” (Grundrisse 463, cited in Banaji 1977, 7). In this system, “private ownership and control over the means of production defines the mode’s relation of production from which one derives who exploits whom in society” (Resnick and Wolff 2013, 156).

Private ownership is also the basis on which the surplus value embodied in capitalist commodities is appropriated by private owners (Diskin 1996, 287). In classic Marxism, the institution of private ownership and related appropriation of surplus value are key forces moving capitalist systems towards ever larger contradictions, as capitalists are destined

through private ownership to expand and enlarge their control over means of production, and to “turn them into the powerful levers of production of the present day” (Engels 702, cited in Diskin 1996, 288).

However, it is inevitable that this ever-expanding mode of production, accompanied by the lack of correspondence between socialized forces and the private relations of production, increases class conflict and exacerbates crises in economic production. In a capitalist system, as capitalist owners are inevitably driven to expropriate surplus value in order to survive as innovators, workers will increasingly tend to receive only “the minimum wage” necessary to reproduce themselves (and their families), while capitalists appropriate the surplus that is produced from their labor power. Thus, Marx argues that “property, in its present form, is based on the antagonism of capital and wage-labor” (Manifesto of the Communist Party 1848, 138).

Another endemic aspect of exploitation of workers in capitalism lies in the fact that workers are required to take wages close to the minimum level necessary for labor to “reproduce itself at the social determined subsistence level,” as a required condition of capital accumulation (DeMartino 1992, 101). Capitalists that offer wages higher than this level will be driven out of business by the laws of capitalist competition. In this reality, capitalists never have the possibility to pay workers’ wages at a level equal to the labor performed, as the capitalist has to extract surplus in order to accumulate capital and to grow. This necessity to cut wages down to the level of minimum subsistence has to do with the need for capitalists to grow profits even in the face of a falling rate of profits, a tendency that is associated with technological development and competition in the context of capital’s need to expand in perpetuity. In this context, exploitation in traditional Marxism

represents a theory of “unpaid theft” (Wolf 2013, 159) (or “forced surplus transfer” [Schwartz 1995; Holmstrom 1977, Reiman 1987, cited in Schwartz 1995: 277]), with a view that “unpaid labor is crime” (Wolff 2013,159).

An important distinction between traditional and poststructural Marxists in the interpretation of small-scaled collective enterprises like worker cooperatives is called for here. Are such small collective enterprises best seen as “petit-capitalist” or “petit-communist”? The distinction in interpretation comes down to the tendency of traditional Marxists to see small scaled social enterprises such as a worker-owned cooperative—when disassociated from a broader class-conscious campaign to challenge capitalism—as little more than a group of “collective capitalists” (petit-capitalists) who will inevitably face the profit pressures and exploitive wages pressures of capitalism. Poststructuralists are much more likely to see such worker cooperatives as providing a meaningful alternative to the capitalist system—as a group of petit-communists even, collectively shaping both the production process and the distribution of earned surplus and opening up imaginative possibilities for sustaining different enterprise systems.

For the traditional Marxists, however, the essence of worker exploitation in capitalism can’t be easily reformed with small changes to the capitalist system—such as the formation of worker-directed enterprises (at least when disassociated from broader social movements)—but can only be changed through class-conscious mobilization to systematically challenge the “antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie” (Engels 705, cited in Diskin 1996, 289). Contradictions within the economic structure of capitalism, from this perspective, fuel the inevitable class struggle between the capitalists and the workers, a struggle which is held to be the source of all important social progress. As a result, Marx

states, “in the long run capitalism will become an impossible social order.” The inherent tension between capital and labor, as part of a set of inevitable contradiction within capitalism, “destroys its own conditions of possibility” (Wright 2004, 8).

In short, traditional Marxism argues that capitalism is a “mode of oppressive economic relations” (Callari and Ruccio 1995, 21), based on the inexorable laws of motion which convert private property ownership into ever larger private control over the increasingly large and socialized forces of production (and ever greater private control of surplus value), even while contradictions with the social base (the workers, or proletariat) grows. These economic relations, centered around certain laws of traditional Marxism, express the essence of capitalism, which shapes all other aspects of social phenomenon. In this universal, homogenous and centered capitalism system, antagonisms between capitalists and workers are necessary and inevitable, according to the law of capitalist motion that works in favor of capitalists and against workers, and these antagonisms demand sustained and self-conscious mobilization of workers on class terms.

### *Poststructural Marxism: The Decentered Economy*

In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, the prominent poststructuralist Gibson-Graham argues that “the project of understanding the *beast* [capitalism] has itself produced a *beast*.” Gibson-Graham is referring to the “beast” of essentialist Marxism, which interprets capitalism as “unity,” “singularity” or “totality,” in which capitalism alone becomes “the representation of the economy” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 253), and against which there are few viable alternatives. For Gibson-Graham, this notion of capitalism as the singular “representation of the economy” undermines our ability to recognize

alternatives to capitalism in both small and large projects, in the here and now. As an alternative to this capitalocentric view, which she finds to be disempowering, Gibson-Graham deconstructs the conventional meaning of “the economy” and “capitalism,” point towards many existing alternatives to capitalism, and assert that recognizing “multiple axes of economic diversity is an emancipatory project of repoliticizing the economy” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 126). According to Gibson-Graham (2003), when we understand that the economy is not fixed and singular but rather diverse, new opportunities of diverse economic activities that are “tentative, incomplete and experimental” can be discovered in different places. For example, many non-capitalist economies, such as worker cooperatives, community economies, local economic practices, or efforts by feminist economists to valorize the household economy, can coexist with capitalism and open up “ethical practices, processes and possibilities” (Cornwell 2011; see also DeMartino 2013).

In this regard, Gibson-Graham provides an ontological reframing that celebrates diverse economic activity and that increases “our space of decision and room to move as political subjects by enlarging the field from which the unexpected can emerge” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 8). Such efforts to expand the concept of the economy to include many other forms of economic activity beyond singular capitalism have powerful implications for practitioners on the ground, in that according to this perspective, people do not have to wait for the socialist revolution to come. Instead, there are many local actions that can offer meaningful alternatives to capitalism, anywhere, any time. Indeed, these actions are already underway, all around us. Unfortunately, our misguided commitment to reductionist, essentialist discourses often prevent us from recognizing them. According to Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2001), an overweening focus on traditional Marxist notions

of class is disempowering, because it “tends to displace competing claims and, with them, the possibility of imagining alternative distributions” (70). Such class analysis is disempowering since “the range of actions and alliances it enables is still relatively narrow and closed” (65). Environmentalists, feminists, economic localists, and other such alternative thinkers, might work together to open up new possibility for economic and community transformation, “but unfortunately the contours of traditional class politics mitigate against these hopeful possibilities” (70).

As opposed to such allegedly disempowering essentialism, a “diverse economies” analysis, in which capitalist class processes are argued to co-exist with myriad economic forms, relates to the poststructural argument that economic dynamics are “overdetermined” in general. Following Laclau and Mouffe (1980), Gibson-Graham (2003) argue that because economic dynamics are “diverse, multiply identified and complexly overdetermined” and because economic power is “diffuse, segmented and in motion, [it] opens up the possibility for local non-capitalist practices to be the focus for an invigorated economic politics” (127). In this way of thinking, the economy takes a form of “structural indeterminacy” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 103) in that “the world is not driven by deep structures that render small, achievable economic projects of emancipation unviable” (DeMartino 2013, 490).

In this regard, poststructural Marxists deconstruct the conventional, capitalocentric interpretation of the economy as essentially capitalist, by introducing heterogeneous economic worlds as real and existing alternatives to capitalism (community economies collective 2001, cited in Gibson-Graham 2003a, 126; Chowdhury 2007). Arguing that other kinds of economies and “multiple modes of production” coexist alongside the

capitalist wage labor mode, and have co-existed for centuries, Gibson-Graham present these non-capitalist economies as creative and generative. Feminist economists, for example, have highlighted the diverse economic activity performed by women in the household (including the alternative economy of cooperative care for each other's children in communal household economies, and the production of non-commodified food in family and community gardens, for communal distribution), and argue that this widespread activity cannot be dismissed as merely inconsequential froth on top of some sort of essentialist capitalist economic reality.

In this light, many community groups have established community economies and strategies for building a solidarity economy in their efforts to diversify and humanize local economic relationships (e.g., through communal land holdings, or by sharing essentials like food and housing). Pointing to such efforts, a non-essentialist perspective concludes that non-capitalist invention in the economy is possible and is able to construct different communities and societies, building upon what already exists (Miller 2002, 2016, 2011, 2013). As Gibson-Graham argues (2003b, 55, 68), “noncapitalist activities and subjects (including ones we admire) are viable and visible in the economic terrain” and begin with “a practice of respecting difference and otherness.”

In short, economic determinism within the Marxist tradition focuses on the allegedly inevitable tensions between capital and labor, which place limits on the creation of any meaningful alternative, non-capitalist economic forms in the absence of systematic transformation led by workers mobilized on an industrial scale. On the other hand, non-essentialist traditions of Marxism assert that the ways by which to address that exploitation are varied, and can include “reformist” efforts to construct alternative economic practices

within the existing diversity. Indeed, even the idea of “the capitalist system” becomes suspect in the anti-essentialist imagination since there is no central, organizing principle that determines the shape of any social entity—be it an economy, region, country or world. An economy in which there are many capitalist firms does not become “a capitalist system” on that account, since there are inevitably many non-capitalist firms and many firms operating on differing capitalist and non-capitalist principles—such as communism. By positing notions of an overdetermined, decentered economy, non-essential Marxists are attuned to the possibilities inherent in many forms of social action, and recognize the worth of many different kinds of activism in challenging the exploitations embedded existing economic practices.

### **Competing Ontologies: The Nature of “Class”**

#### *Essentialist Position: Inevitable Class Conflict and Necessary Class Consciousness*

From a traditional Marxist perspective, the concept of class is the “essence” of Marx’s analysis of capitalism, and all economic systems. As Marx (1848) stated in the Communist Manifesto: “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Marx and Engel’s concepts of class and class struggle focus on an “analysis of property-based unequal social relations,” (Blanc 1996, 20), and the key to understanding the nature of a particular social relation is in understanding “the position of people in the production process, situated according to their relation to the ownership/control of the means of production” (20).

While Resnick and Wolff (2006) summarize a standard Marxian approach defining class as “persons who share common positions in or connection to the ‘relations of production’ or ‘mode of production’” (119), competing poststructural approaches to class examine how class position can be constituted by someone’s position in multiple processes of producing, appropriating and distributing economic surplus. While poststructuralists tend to argue that a person’s position in these multiple processes often varies based on the particular economic exchange (i.e., one may be in an exploited class at work, but in a more dignified or empowered class position while gathered with friends at the coffeehouse), more traditional Marxists see class position as generally cohering (whether in the production, appropriation, or distribution of surplus), and as being centered around the concept of a collective group, enduring similar exploitation over time and place. Wright (2005) describes this as “an exploitation-centered concept of class” where “social groups formed in the field of production provide the main framework for the constitution of collective subject” (cited in 301).

The interpretation of the essential nature of “class” as emerging from one’s relationship to the means of production (e.g., capitalist owner, manager, or worker) feeds easily into the notion of inevitable antagonism between capitalists and workers due to their different class positions. Predictable antagonisms emerge over such question as who should manage the means of production, who should be able to appropriate the surplus value from the productive process, etc. (Resnick and Wolff 2006, 122). Conflicts emerging from these different class positions are inevitable, and they are also often interpreted as being the underlying essence of broader social conflicts. At particular historical moments, this class conflict is seen as potentially ushering in fundamentally new

social formations. In this classical Marxist perspective, a particularly salient historical moment is ruptured only through class struggles between the two opposing social groups (Wright 2005, 301).

In this essentialist class framework, individuals are defined by their fundamental class positions. Identities are not seen as fluid and contingent, but are discussed “only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests.” Although classes are obviously “composed of real people,” traditional Marxists consider class “not so much the qualities of the individuals but the relation of the group, qua group, to a central organizing function of the system” (Ollman 1993, 151-152; Callari and Ruccio 1996). This notion of class being understood more as “a social relation of production, not--or at least not primarily--a subject position” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 57) is expressed by Marx and Engels (1956): “The question is not what this or that man or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do” (Marx and Engels 1956, 53; cited in Ollman 1979, 4).

Thus, it is important to distinguish between this notion of “class” as defined by one’s structural position within a capitalist system (e.g., low-wage worker, middle-management, or affluent CEO) versus a psychological, subjective, or cultural notion of “class” which is tied to how people self-conceptualize their position within the broader society. In traditional Marxism, one’s structural class position determines one’s fundamental outlook on life—in other words, class is not a psychological or subjective phenomenon. Consider this statement in the *Communist Manifesto*, when Marx and Engels were writing as if speaking to the bourgeoisie of their age.

Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class, made into law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economic conditions of the existence of your class.

However, just because one's ideas are shaped by their class position does not mean that class actors are self-aware of their class-position, or of ideas that might point towards improving the prospects of those in this class. This fact is at the heart of the distinction in Marxist thought between the phenomena of "class-in-itself" vs. "class-for-itself"—vital concepts in understanding Marxist notions of class consciousness.

In traditional Marxist analysis, "the working class is defined as a class through the process of exploitation- that is, the unequal exchange of wages for labor-power that results in the production of surplus value" (Foley 2002, 28). However, this definition of "class" describes the social position of the working class "*in itself*," which does not necessarily mean that the working class has come into being as a self-aware and mobilized class "*for itself*." In fact, Marx understood that wage workers often had no self-conscious understanding of their class position—that is, they could not be said to be a "class-for-itself." Nevertheless, Marx argued, those workers are still defined by their objective class position since workers in fact have a distinct culture, lifestyle and habits, and share a "common situation and common interests," even before they become a self-aware class "for itself" (Berberoglu 2009, 21). Though members of a working class "in itself" might share certain class interests and traits, it is only through politicized class struggle that these workers may come to understand that they are also a class "for itself," struggling in common cause. Classic Marxists define the emergence of a class "for itself" as class

consciousness--“the conscious coming together of those who are similarly situated by production relations” (McIntyre 1991, 153, cited in Gibson-Graham 2006, 57).

Thus, in classic Marxism, a key element in challenging the reality of class exploitation is the process of a working “class-in-itself” mobilizing into a “class-for-itself”—which involves a process of class struggle. As Hoffman argues (1986, 349): “Separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry in a common battle against another class...Antagonistic interests aggregate individuals into antagonistic classes” (349). When a social class attains “full consciousness of its interests and goals and engages in the common political activity in pursuit of its class interest” (Berberoglu 2009, 21), the class-in-itself transforms into a “class-for-itself,” with associated political potential. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx (1847) describes just this process.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers.... The mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and continues itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, class consciousness within traditional Marxism refers to the working class developing what Thompson calls “the disposition to behave as a class” (1978) or what Crossley (2013) calls an “awareness of itself as a class...the dominated class within capitalism.” Crossley (2013) further elaborates that “When the proletariat become aware of themselves as a class and of their collective strength, Marx claims, they will rise up in revolution and overthrow their bourgeois masters.” (Crossley 2013). Marx noted that

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 211. Cited in Sharon Smith, “Marxism, unions, and class struggle The future in the present” in Issue #78. Extracted an article at International Socialist Review at <http://isreview.org/issue/78/marxism-unions-and-class-struggle>

“workers are not fully a class until they become class conscious” (1934) while Lenin added that the process for workers to achieve class consciousness requires them to go “outside of the economic struggle, outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers” and to meet with other workers in social and political struggles that enlarge one’s understanding of the reality of class oppression within the capitalist system.

The point is that an individual worker cannot develop his or her own class consciousness “through his own experience and a scientific consciousness of the actual relations at work” (Slaughter 1975). Rather, class consciousness develops only when individual workers unite with others in theoretical discussion and political actions that catalyze deeper understandings of the capitalist system. As Slaughter (1975) argues, it is only

when a worker comes into contact with the products, in political programme and action, of Marxist theory in politics - i.e., with the outcome of theoretical works produced in the first place by non-proletarian - that he can conceive of even his own working experience in terms which go beyond those of the prevailing bourgeois ideology.

In this regard, the traditional Marxian concept of class consciousness involves more than individual workers seeking strategies to improve their own economic situation, and more than workers at a specific workplace developing an antagonistic relationship to their employer. Rather, class consciousness involves an understanding of how one’s individual situation, and the position of all other similarly situated workers, is structured by a fundamentally exploitive capitalist system as a whole—and also involves a connection to a political program of action to challenge and transform that system. Developed through political and economic campaigns of class-struggle waged at the workplace, but also in

other spheres of action such as in one's neighborhood, one's school, and even one's religious community, class consciousness becomes an encompassing

kind of 'group think,' a collective, interactive approach to recognizing, labeling, coming to understand, and acting upon the particular world class members have in common. It is a set of mental moves and a store of knowledge and judgments reserved for these common situations and what these situations tap or set into motion, where the individual's fate is inextricably linked with the fate of the group (Slaughter 1975).

For Lukacs, class consciousness is "neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class" (cited in Saldanha 1988, 11). Rather, working-class consciousness is a collective spirit that goes beyond individual perspectives and that is developed only in collective struggle, "through which the proletariat develops from its identity as formed by capitalism (the mass of exploited wage-labourers, the class 'in itself') to the working class organized as a revolutionary force for the taking of power and the building of socialism (the class 'for itself')" (Lukács 1923-1924).

Gramsci further develops the concept of class consciousness by exploring the process through which it emerges, with particular attention to the role of political organizers and "organic intellectuals" in fostering a transformational class consciousness among the body of workers. Saldanha (1998) describes Gramsci's approach as the following.

The dynamics of class formation contain an in-built process of elaboration of a section of intellectuals who are organically and functionally rooted in the everyday life of the class, acting as an organizing and directing force that serves as a buffer between the influence of ruling class hegemony and the consciousness of the masses of the subaltern class (13).

Following this Gramscian tradition exploring how class consciousness develops, and how such consciousness can be shaped and directed, subsequent Marxists known as the

Frankfurt School came to distinguish true “class consciousness” from “false consciousness.” For instance, in his argument that workers’ real self-interest lies in seeking broader social and political transformation rather than just focusing on improving their own immediate economic interests, Herbert Marcuse (1964) argued that “men must come to...find their way from false to true consciousness, from their immediate interests to their real interest” (cited in Cloward 2012).

More recent thinkers in this traditional Marxist approach share this notion that “true” class consciousness entails an understanding of systematic oppression, across multiple spheres of life (workplace, neighborhood, family), and a resultant commitment to broad social change. Scholars in this structural analysis approach, though they don’t always self-identify as traditional Marxists, share the classic Marxist critique of small scale reform efforts in the absence of strategic class-based mobilizations, such as community controlled schools, community currencies, micro-lending networks, or episodes of business unionism. Such small-scale efforts are commonly critiqued as examples of co-optive reformism that are ultimately a substitute for real change (Piven and Cloward 1977; Katznelson 1981).

Thus, from a traditional Marxist perspective, class consciousness is “the first step toward an emancipatory politics” (Anderson 2004, 7). Class-conscious struggle between capitalists and workers in modern bourgeois society remains necessary, as it “has not done away with class antagonisms” (Communist Manifesto) (see also Hyman 1980, 1982, Frege et al., 2011, 214; Rutherford 2013). Workers are destined to sell their labor power to live, while capitalists are destined to exploit vulnerable workers to seek profits. Worker exploitation is an inevitable consequence as capitalists are pressured to reduce wages in order to seek profits (surplus value) and the working class is thus destined to become

revolutionary through an necessary process of becoming a “ class for itself,” challenging “the logic of capitalist reproduction” (Cohen & Howard 1979, 81).

*Poststructural Marxism: Fluid Class Positions and Diverse Economic Forms*

One of the distinguishing points of poststructural analysis is that economic “class” is no longer the essence of analysis into capitalist dynamics, because “class” is seen as just one of many possible “entry points” into analysis (Rutherford 2013). Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2001) argue that “class processes are not more ontologically important than any other social process and can themselves be seen as the expression of these other forces” (Glassman 2003: 683). Gibson-Graham similarly emphasize notions of “class diversity” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 52), and argue that the concept of “class” is simply an “entry point” into analysis, not a definitive or all-encompassing construct. In fact, Gibson-Graham repudiate the “ontological dominance of any particular class process” (DeMartino 2003, 7; see also Resnick and Wolff 1992a, 16, cited in Shin Jo Young 1997, 6). Because every individual occupies many positions in society (worker, parent, consumer, friend), and because even one’s work-related positions can vary greatly across time or stage of the production process, Class identity is argued to be “fluid, subjective and uncentered” (Gibson-Graham Resnick and Wolff 2001,18).

Since each person occupies so many possibly changing positions, and there are so many paths open for how to interpret or value those positions, one’s class identity is “less one of objective location in an economic structure and more an issue of subjective identification with a particular collectivity” (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001, 18). Because poststructural Marxists argue that “class is neither the essence of social reality

nor the essence of the structured set of Marxist theory's constituent concepts" (Resnick and Wolff 1982, 44), they argue that class is never defined by "who owns or controls means of production" nor is it explained simply in relation to who has social power (Resnick and Wolff 2013, 159)—in fact a good deal of class identity is defined by one's own subjective identification with a particular group.

While class is understood in terms of a "power relation, a relation of domination" in traditional Marxism, poststructuralists "want instead to separate and distinguish power/domination from class/exploitation, to open up their relations to the contingencies of theory" (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000, 11). Thus, poststructuralists refuse to embrace "essential forms of power" as they see power in more Foucauldian ways as stemming from a "multiplicity of force relations" (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000, 11), in which "class is only one possible discourse through which individual subjectivity can be constituted" (Mrozowicki 2011, 65-66).

Theorizing class as an overdetermined social process and not a rigid social grouping, and theorizing capitalism without a strict sense of power relations between capitalists and workers, poststructuralists broaden the concept of class to be one of many multiple identities, including the "axes of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and other forms of categorization and distinction" (Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000, 9). This broader concept of class as one force among a "multiplicity of force relations" has profound consequences for political-economic thought and social action. Laclau and Mouffe (2001, 159) claim that:

The contemporary political field is no longer held together by the struggles of the proletariat, and for some time it has been fragmented by a whole series of different and competing identities and movements-

those of blacks, feminists, gays, ethnic minorities, students, environmentalists, consumers, and so on....Class is no longer the dominant category through which radical political subjectivity is defined.

In the proliferation of such micro-politics, there are many different struggles argued to be as important as class in the generalized “struggle against domination.” For example, “new social movements,” such as movements of blacks, feminists, gay, ethnic minorities, environmentalists, consumers and anti-war activists, show that “class is no longer the dominant category.” Instead, these “new social movements have been primarily struggles against *domination* rather than economic *exploitation*” (Newman 2005, 48). By accepting a “pluralism of subjects” (Laclau and Mouffe 1981, 21), women, students, young people, racial, sexual, religious and regional minorities all become new political subjects and their enemy is defined “not by its function of exploitation, but by wielding a certain power” This power “does not derive from a place in the relations or production but is the outcome of the form of social organization characteristic of the present society” (Laclau and Mouffe 1981, 21).

In this regard, class struggle is no longer the most important social movement to consider, as society’s struggles are fragmented by different identity groups seeking freedom from a diverse range of dominations (43; see also Touraine 1988, 122; Habermas 1987). Thus, widely diverse forms of struggle share the common feature that “they seek a more socially just world but couch their demands, not in the language of Marxism, but in the language of rights and democracy” (Brown 1991, 690). The language of rights and democracy, appearing in the rhetoric of diverse economies, describes an alternative and heterogeneous economic world, where active participation of workers (as individuals) and

workplace democracy can flourish at the local level, even without industrially scaled, class-conscious mobilization of workers.

Focusing on such dynamics, poststructuralists argue that individuals do not belong to one fixed category of class, but “at one moment or over time” belong to many forms of class positions. Gibson-Graham goes even further to argue that “class struggles do not necessarily take place between groups of people whose identities are constituted by the objective reality and subjective consciousness of a particular location in a social structure” (Gibson-Graham 1995, 59). Rather, identities are based only on contingent historical conditions or unique social struggles at any particular point in time, and are largely constituted by the internal subjectivity of the individual in choosing how to enter into those struggles, or who to identify with. Therefore, individual identities are contradictory and unstable, rather than unified and stable, they are relationally defined and lack an essence, they are elements within discourse (shaped through a relational formation), and they have no inherent meaning that can be extracted by empirical investigation. From this perspective, any individual can occupy multiple class positions, as Arvidson (2000, 170) argues:

A worker in a capitalist enterprise may participate in an exploitative capitalist class process at work, a communal class process at home in a collectively organized household, and work on the weekend and evenings in an independent class process as a self-employed dressmaker.

In this context, class is no longer constituted by the conventional concept of structural power relations in the economic system, or by the empirically observable position that a group of people might occupy in the economic structure. Through such analysis, Gibson-Graham highlight how both class and non-class processes shape “any actual groupings of

person in social life” (Resnick and Wolff 2006, 137; Gibson-Graham 1996). While the class conflict model in traditional Marxism assumes “an economy centered on industry, [with] class subject positions limited to workers and capitalists” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000, 8), individuals in a poststructural analysis take on “multiple, shifting and conflicting class and non-class positions or identities” (Resnick and Wolff 2013, 159). By detaching class from an a priori social structure and power relations, poststructuralists define class relations as “unfixed and malleable” (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001, 12).

Just as class positions are malleable for poststructuralists, so too is one’s class consciousness fluid and constantly changing, since individuals can “participate in a variety of different class processes and inhabit a number of different class positions, simultaneously and over time” (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001, 18). In this floating and constantly changing class position of an individual, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff describe a very limited kind of class consciousness as “momentary and partial identifications between subjects constituted at the intersection of very different class and non-class process and positions” (Anderson 2004, 7). In *Class and its Others*, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) go further in rejecting the notion of class and class consciousness as collective group identity.

It is clear that class can no longer be understood as the organizing center of individual and collective identity. Nor can it be seen as ordained by or founded on positions in a larger social structure or as constituting social groups (class) united by commonalities of power, property, consciousness, etc. (9).

In these ways, poststructuralists divorce class analysis from “structural or hegemonic conceptions of capitalist society” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 58): the notion of “common struggle” based on group identity of the working class largely evaporates from

poststructural analysis (Anderson 2004). Wills (2008, 308) argues that “class *can* [still] be an important axis of identity and political organization, but it is not *necessarily* so.”

Another reason why poststructural Marxists do not see class and class struggles as central and determinate, as traditional Marxists do, has to do with their different understanding on the concept of exploitation. For poststructuralists, exploitation is not necessarily endemic in capitalism, because “whatever one’s position on the collectivization of the means of production, anti-essentialists see no necessary determinist consequence for class and exploitation” (Resnick and Wolff 2013, 158). Poststructuralists do not see the fundamental root of exploitation as traceable to who owns the means of production, nor to the process of “social theft” or “theft of alienated labor.” In the social theft approach associated with classic or structural Marxism, exploitation occurs “when those who produce surplus labor are excluded from the process of its appropriation” (DeMartino 2003, 5), and thus exploitation is a form of “‘social theft’ in which the surplus is wrested from its rightful owners” (DeMartino 2003, 5).

But in poststructural approaches, neither private property itself nor the capitalist fact of profit-taking (i.e., surplus value appropriation) are seen as inherent evils which must be dismantled. In fact, differing viewpoints on the topic of exploitation within the process of how surplus value gets produced, appropriated and distributed, are a key clue in distinguishing poststructuralist Marxism from traditional Marxism. For poststructuralists, “surplus is and can be not only *produced* through systems that are more or less just, but also must be *distributed* broadly through society. (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001) Although traditional Marxists focus on how the exploitive production process produces a generally exploited class of workers, whose whole social identity is shaped by

this class position, poststructural Marxists distinguish between processes of production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value, with people often filling different class positions in each of these stages, and they point to how various emancipatory projects rather other than just militant mobilization against “wage theft” can be considered emancipatory in the differing stages of production.

For example, what poststructuralists often critique as exploitive is not the private appropriation of surplus value per se (through low wages), but the fact that workers are not included in “participating” and “making decisions” regarding either the production or the distribution of surplus value (Resnick and Wolff 1987,125; also see Cullenburg 1998). In defending this broader theory of exploitation, Gibson-Graham, along with Resnick and Wolff, critique the common essentialist focus on more equitable wages as neglecting an equally important focus on the lack of participatory mechanisms to determine what equitable wage distribution might be. Simply focusing on wages themselves, without a focus on worker participation at the workplace, is “a narrowly focused theory of justice,” Burczak argues (2010, 164).

From this perspective, exploitation can be linked to inadequate inclusion of workers in shaping and managing the production, appropriation, and distribution processes, and is not necessarily inherent to the wage system in capitalism itself. In fact, one can advocate for more inclusionary business management practices without calling for an end to “market relations, monetary exchange and private ownership” (Burczak 2010, 164). And in calling for more inclusionary, participatory management practices, one goes beyond a focus on economic outcomes alone to focus on the social processes embedded in the creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value.

Thinking of the surplus not as property and prize but as the origin of distributive flows [offers] new understanding of class exploitation. The turn of exploitation is not that that something is taken from you. Rather, it is that you are cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents. Restricted to the necessary labor that sustains you, separated from the surplus that sustains the larger society, you are constituted as an “individual” bereft of possible community and communal subjectivity (The Community Economies Collective 2001, 24).

From this poststructural perspective, workers in a capitalist enterprise are deprived of the possibility of politically participating in distributing surplus because private capitalists make private decisions about how to distribute this wealth. This broader understanding of class exploitation includes a critique of the loss of one’s communal self and associated political rights in shaping the contours of wealth and investment in a society (DeMartino 2003, 24). Therefore, poststructural Marxists are likely to call for such things as the broader inclusion of workers in shaping the social distribution of surplus value (perhaps through higher progressive taxes and a more robust social welfare system) even while allowing private property and profit taking under capitalism to continue.

Thus, the antagonism between capital and labor is “never simple” or “fixed” in poststructural analysis because it all depends on contingent circumstances. The concept of exploitation is also not necessary or fixed, but is always contingent and fluid. Finally, the concept of class is one of many identities that individuals may bring to their lives, and while it is a useful entry point to social analysis (among many possible entry points), it cannot be claimed to be the most important social category.

### **Traditional versus Poststructural Marxism: Practical Consequences of Ontological Orientations**

The positions of poststructuralists and traditional Marxists on the nature of the economy, class dynamics and the relations between capital and labor are quite different. Poststructuralist focus on the nature of an “overdetermined” society and a theory of capitalism based on fluidity leads to a perspective that does not privilege class conflict against capitalist elites. For poststructuralists, important “social conflicts are not organized around a single issue- class struggle,” as social conflicts are seen as complex and contingent. Social conflicts include cultural or status struggles, as well as economic conflicts (Filc and Ram 2014, 303), and acts of liberation can include daily practices to build alternative economies through non-conflictual strategies such as sharing economies in local neighborhoods, or forms of charitable giving. Thus, the idea of class as “a priori subject” (quoted in Filc and Ram 2014,304) is no longer applicable in poststructural thought because class is no longer understood as “the organizing center of individual and collective identity” (Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000,9). Laclau and Mouffe (2001) also similarly point out that class is “is no longer the dominant category through radical political subjectivity is defined” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 159).

Hence, class struggle is no longer posited as the central, driving practice of social change or emancipation. Relatedly, even the concept of “conflict” recedes to the margins. Of course struggles of all sorts characterize any society (status and identity struggles, ideological and religious conflicts, and class-oriented struggles over the production, appropriation and distribution of the surplus). However, poststructuralists also highlight how there can also be many projects of economic collaboration and construction that are

not based directly on attacking or resisting capitalism. Because poststructuralists are interested in “constructing a new ‘language of economic diversity’” without necessarily having to resist or attack capitalism, the central role of class conflict necessarily recedes to the margins of poststructural analysis (Gibson-Graham 2006).

While Gibson-Graham and other poststructuralists advance a theory that one can avoid conflicts inherent within capitalist practices by focusing on creating non-capitalist economies in local places and in the here and now (e.g., worker cooperatives), traditional Marxists argue that the problems of capitalism can only be addressed by mobilizing sustained class conflict and uniting workplace struggles to broader campaigns of social transformation. As Rutherford (2013) describes it, “there are significant differences between Marxism and poststructuralism, in particular, the entry point for social and political enquiry” (772).

For Marxists, the entry point is class as defined by a necessary and fundamentally contradictory relationship between capital and labour, while poststructuralists often view class as subject to intersectionality and difference. Many Marxists concur that capitalism does not take a ‘pure form.’ However, they argue that Gibson-Graham’s view of capitalism as consisting of multiple modes of surplus production and appropriation weakens understanding its historically specific and class nature. Gibson-Graham and others are correct in recognizing diverse economies and non-waged labour, but Marxists stress that these are often connected by sub-contracting networks to the formal capitalist economy.

This statement highlights how Marxists and poststructuralists differ in their “entry points” for scholarly analysis—and in their theoretical and empirical arguments regarding the nature of capitalist systems and facts of economic exploitation. Though this dissertation contributes to this enduring discussion regarding entry points for analysis into capitalism, the heart of the dissertation is not to debate whether capitalism does or does not

take a “pure form” as a system of class exploitation. Rather than deeply engaging this essentialist versus anti-essentialist theoretical debate, this dissertation is more concerned with documenting the existence of the debate and then investigating the practical, political consequences of labor organizations mobilizing along strategic class-conscious lines versus taking a more “diverse economies” approach, engaging a highly diverse workforce in multiple strategies of economic uplift.

In this investigation into the pragmatic consequences of different organizing approaches, the dissertation offers an exploration of Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff’s (2001) argument that a traditional class-based approach to emancipatory politics unduly forecloses alternative approaches, limits the imagination regarding what other projects are possible, and dampens the possibility of meaningful political action in the here and now. As a response to that argument, this dissertation explores McDowell’s (2008, 505) counter-question:

Is the theoretical and practical consequences of fragmentation, the emphasis on difference and diversity, a neglect of commonalities facing a new global proletariat, making it more difficult to organize across space and scale, across differences of locality, gender and lived experience?

In his answer to that question, Rutherford (2013) quotes Tufts (2006, 358), who argues that a poststructural focus on the liberating potential of such things as non-workplace cultural activities and non-waged work spaces “may be read as labour’s abandonment of difficult workplace issues in favour of less confrontational forms of resistance (e.g., promoting a play versus striking in the workplace).”

Through such arguments, scholars like McDowell (2008), Rutherford (2013), Tufts (2006) and Cole (2003) reassert old Marxist principles that the workplace remains a prime locus where “multiple oppressions converge” (Rutherford 2013, 774)—where wage exploitation, gender bias, racial discrimination come together in a coherent system of class exploitation. These scholars argue that organizing along class-lines at this work-place, and in other community locales that are inevitably affected by class injustices, remains an important tool for unmasking oppressions of all sort, across the entire the community, and “may help reveal the power structures that maintain inequality for all equity-seeking groups” (Briskin 2008, 342).

To build and sustain such workplace organizing, the concept of “class” and the linking of this concept to broader campaigns of social transformation (for example, through worker education campaigns) have been counter-hegemonic tools throughout history. For this reason, the traditional Marxists argue that poststructural critiques too often “actually miss the point of the concept of class and thus cannot understand its purchase or possibilities” (Mann 2007, 154). Similarly, Rutherford (2013) summarizes how studies by Savage (2006) and Wills (2008) “reveal work-place and employment concerns remain critical as sources of worker grievance and in forging a collective cause and identity.”

Ira Katznelson’s influential *City Trenches* (1981) shows how the ultimate failure of a powerful wave of U.S. worker mobilization in the 1960s and 1970s fits into this framework of analyzing the practical consequences of community organizing campaigns bereft of a holistic, class-conscious organizing approach or theoretical framework. Katznelson (1981) shows how the system of neighborhood-oriented “community action programs” that were implemented after the unrest of the 1960s actually served to diffuse a globalizing upheaval

against capitalism in general into a host of small-scaled community uplift projects that could be managed and absorbed by the existing system, without fundamental changes to the broader class system. This kind of diverse localism, while it does seem to match the poststructural evolution of a fragmented economy and a diverse population, had the functional effect of fragmenting broad-based social movements into “manageable community sized components” (Katznelson 1981, 136).

Katznelson’s analysis points us towards a consideration of the practical consequences of understanding “class” as a “historical happening”—as a historically contingent force that emerges only through struggle and organizational effort and that serves to direct that struggle into widening patterns of disruption. “Class” in this sense is not a dead category of classic Marxist thought. As Katznelson argued, class is not

...a static category—so many people standing in this or that relation to the means of production—which can be measured in positivist or quantitative terms. Class, in the Marxist tradition, is (or ought to be) a historical category, describing people in relationships over time, and the ways in which they become conscious of their relationships, separate, unite, enter into struggle, form institutions and transmit values in class way (204).

In other words, “class” is a product of concrete actions—a potential historical force that emerges through “motivational construction” and that “is realized only at the level of organization and action” (206).

In comparing a classic Marxist approach to labor organizing strategies to a poststructural approach, therefore, the question is not just which “entry point” into analysis provides the most promising theoretical frame. Rather a central question is “whether and how class will exist” at all as an oppositional force in society (204). Differing theoretical

traditions undergird differing labor organizing approaches to the question of class, and in the end these differing approaches have practical consequences in terms of whether a self-conscious class of workers ever comes into being at all, and with what kind of political agenda. I now turn to an analysis of how unions and worker-owned cooperatives have approached this question of “whether and how class will exist” over time (by organizing either within the traditional Marxist tradition or the diverse economies poststructural tradition), and of the practical consequences these organizing strategies have entailed on the ground.

## CHAPTER 4

### **TRADITIONAL MARXISM AND POST-MARXISM: LABOR UNIONS, WORKER COOPERATIVES, AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT**

Renowned scholar Noam Chomsky (2012) argues that private ownership rooted in worker cooperatives is inherently problematic, as cooperatives must operate within a capitalistic market system which is nothing but destructive.

Worker ownership within a state capitalist, semi-market system is better than private ownership but it has inherent problems. Markets have well-known inherent inefficiencies. They're very destructive. ... [what is needed is to] dismantle the system of production for profit rather than *production for use*. That means dismantling at least large parts of market systems. Take the most advanced case: Mondragon. It's worker owned, it's not worker managed, although the management does come from the workforce often, but it's in a market system and they still exploit workers in South America, and they do things that are harmful to the society as a whole and they have no choice. If you're in a system where you must make profit in order to survive. You are compelled to ignore negative externalities, effects on others (Flanders 2012).

In this argument, Chomsky replicates Rosa Luxemburg's historic argument that worker cooperatives must in the end match the exploitation of their capitalist competitors to survive in a capitalist system. This perspective is shared by Marxist Phil Gasper (2011), who argues that "creating alternative economic models within existing capitalist society" is not sufficient because "economic democracy and workers' self-management is absolutely central to any genuine socialist society, but they can only be permanently

established by adopting a strategy aimed at dismantling the power of the capitalist state and expropriating the expropriators.” In this vein, labor unionists who are aligned with traditional Marxism are skeptical of worker cooperative movements, because they argue that “worker owned cooperatives are relatively small in comparison to other normal companies” and because operating cooperatives within a broader capitalist system does not “end the system of exploitation.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, poststructural Marxists reject the traditional Marxist notion that small scale economic alternatives such as worker cooperatives cannot fundamentally challenge capitalism. Rather than dismissing alternatives like worker cooperatives as “archaic, subordinate, or otherwise marginal aspects of capitalism” (DeMartino 2003, 7), Gibson-Graham and other poststructural Marxists deny that the capitalist economy is the only “dominant and most powerful form of economic life” (Gibson-Graham 2011, see also Carlone 2013). Rather, they argue that small-scaled economic alternatives such as local bartering systems, voluntary mutual-help networks, and worker cooperatives can be meaningful alternatives to an always permeable economic world.

What these multiple perspectives on unions and cooperatives indicate is that the heart of the matter isn’t so much tension between the union or worker cooperative model, per se, as a meaningful alternative to capitalism. At root, this is actually a debate between the traditional Marxist and the poststructural Marxists perspective, both ontological and political, on the nature of capitalism and on meaningful alternatives to the capitalist system. This underlying philosophical debate informs related perspectives on the virtues of labor

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<sup>9</sup> “Self-Managed Capitalism: Criticism of Richard Wolff and Workers Cooperatives.” Posted on March 28, 2013 by adamfreedom, <https://machete408.wordpress.com/2013/03/28/self-managed-capitalism-criticism-of-richard-wolff-and-workers-cooperatives/>

unions versus worker cooperatives as labor empowerment institutions. This chapter will explore the underlying philosophical debates between traditional Marxists (who adhere to a labor ontology of essentialism) and poststructural Marxists (who adhere to a labor ontology of anti-essentialism)—and will show how these underlying ontological debates inform differing perspectives regarding labor unions and worker cooperatives as forms of worker organization. While traditional Marxists seek to advance a global labor movement with an emphasis on working class consciousness and solidarity to resist and ultimately to displace essentially exploitive global capitalism, poststructural Marxists argue that the economic system is porous, non-centered, and not essentially exploitive at all moments. Poststructural Marxists therefore celebrate local economic alternatives to capitalism that may be rooted in local communities, and that don't necessarily entail a class-conscious perspective, despite sharing traditional Marxian concerns about labor exploitation. Understanding these competing essentialist versus non-essentialist labor ontologies deepens our understanding of differing perspectives on the virtues of labor unions and worker cooperatives as labor empowerment institutions, and will provide a theoretical framework for better understanding of the differences in labor empowerment strategies in the United States and South Korea.

### **Traditional Marxism on Worker Cooperatives**

Traditional Marxists adhere to a labor ontology which asserts the inevitability of exploitive labor-capital relations, an ontology which informs Marx's own claim that "I am a moral enemy of capitalism." From the perspective of being a "moral enemy" of capitalism, Marx analyzed labor organizations such as worker cooperatives and labor

unions in terms of their effect on working class consciousness and their ability to mobilize resistance to capitalism (cited in Drizno 1935, 13). For Marxists in this tradition, worker cooperatives may have some benefits in uniting workers in self-management enterprises, but in the end cooperatives are not sufficient to challenge capitalism so long as they operate within the logic of a capitalist system.

Moreover, the likelihood that a worker cooperative unattached to broader social movements might undermine the necessity of class antagonism between capital and labor is problematic for traditional Marxists. Traditional Marxists typically think that “cooperators are prone to the individualistic self-interest of the cooperative and that cooperatives are short-lived as well as politically conservative and disinterested in solidarity with the more political struggles of the left” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 111). For such reasons, many union advocates today echo traditional Marxist claims when they criticize how the cooperative form of ownership “would require workers to give up the adversarial role vis-à-vis management, and would undercut the traditional union as an organization” (Hochner 1983,347).

Though thinkers in this Marxist tradition often criticize worker cooperatives when they operate as isolated circles of “collective capitalists” within the existing capitalist system, it is important to note that Marx himself saw important potential in the cooperative movement, to the extent that it was integrated into broader campaigns for social change. Marx praised producer cooperatives in many places, asserting in his inaugural address at the founding of the First International Working Men’s Association that “the value of these great social experiments [cooperative factories] cannot be overrated” (Marx 1864, 11). Marx also saw the cooperative as a model of a democratic workplace and society: “It will

therefore do away with competition and replace it by association” (quoted in Elliott 1987, 298). Marx also stated clearly, at the First International meeting as follows.

We acknowledge the cooperative movement as one of the transforming forces of the present society based upon class antagonism. Its great merit is to practically show, that the present pauperizing and despotic system of the subordination of labour to capital can be superseded by the republican and beneficent system of the association of free and equal producers (*Marx [1894]1977, 513-4*).

For all this celebration, however, Marx ultimately regarded cooperatives in and of themselves as “the dwarfish form,” which “will never transform capitalistic society” (cited in Coates 2003, 152; also see Gibson-Graham 2003a, 136).<sup>10</sup> Cooperatives could help point the way to an alternative system of free and equal producers, and could prompt radical imaginings among their advocates, but they did not supersede the need for class-conscious industrial scale organizing of workers against the capitalist system more broadly. For example, when the cooperative gospel spread throughout both England and America in the early 1800s, under the influence of utopian socialist Robert Owen, many Marxists argued that capitalism would never be adequately challenged by the “utopian dreams” of reforms like Owen. Workers cooperatives in this tradition were criticized by traditional Marxists as being hopelessly utopian in their transformational self-help goals, especially since Owenite cooperatives were isolated from the broader industrial labor movement.

In addition, the individualistic nature of worker cooperative businesses was critiqued for weakening the emphasis on “class” and “class struggles” of the working class in favor of an emphasis on business management and competitive business practices (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007; Elliot 1987; Jackall and Levin 1984; Harnecker 2013, Jossa, 2005; Elliot,

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<sup>10</sup> Documents of the First International 1864-6, Volume 1, FLP, Moscow, 1964, pp.346-7

1987; Pendleton, Robinson and Wilson, 1995). Gasper (2011) summarized the heart of this critique: “cooperatives that are established in the context of the capitalist market must compete in order to survive, and if the rate of exploitation is high among your competitors, then you must match it” (Gay 1952, 263).

For such reasons, Rosa Luxemburg considered coops “as small units of socialized production within capitalist exchange,” and argued that coops were “totally incapable of transforming the capitalist mode of production’ (quoted in Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 656). In *Reform and Revolution* (1900), Luxemburg argued that coops could not serve as a democratic mode of production as long as they operated within a competitive system under capitalism (656), and that any such reformist models only served to extend and “perpetuate the capitalist system.” This view is echoed by the socialist founders of the British Labor Party, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who believed that worker cooperatives “must inevitably capitulate to the forces of the market and thereby follow their own interests as producers, against the superior interests of the consumer, if they were to survive in the capitalist economy.”

Democracies of producers, as all experience shows, have hitherto failed, with almost complete uniformity, whenever they themselves sought to win and organize the instruments of production. In the relatively few instances in which such enterprises have not succumbed to business concerns, they have ceased to be democracies of producers, managing their own work, and have become, in effect, associations of capitalists... making profit for themselves by the employment at wages of workers outside their association (Webb and Webb 1914, 133, cited in Mellor et al. 1988, 67).

Lenin (1923) was also critical of the limitations of cooperatives, arguing that individualistic cooperatives were nothing but “romantic, and even banal”<sup>11</sup> alternatives to capitalist exploitation. As Lenin saw it, individualistic cooperatives, following Robert Owen’s “cooperative” socialism principle, romantically dreamed of “transforming class enemies into class collaborators and class war into class peace by merely organizing the population in cooperative societies.”<sup>12</sup> Lenin believed that cooperative advocates had not taken account of fundamental needs of labor empowerment, such as “the class struggle, the capture of political power by the working class, the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class” (Lenin 1923).

Like Marx, Lenin praised cooperatives as perhaps a first stepping stone--arguing that “socialism is the regime of *cultured* cooperativists” (Lenin 1923) and that cooperatives could be “one of the definitive solutions for advancing toward socialism” (Harnecker 2013, 7). But it is important to note that Lenin’s definition of “cultured cooperativists” meant something different than just a community of individualistic cooperatives, competing for business patronage. Rather, Lenin argued that truly “cultured cooperativists” had a broader view of class solidarity and a commitment to social transformation. “Cultured cooperativists” were “conscious of the advantages of participating in the management of their enterprises and at the same time were concerned not only about their immediate, narrow interests, but also social aspects of their individuality” (Harnecker 2013, 7). Lenin was concerned with the lack of social consciousness that resulted when cooperatives sought

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<sup>11</sup> Written: January 4 & 6, 1923

First Published: *Pravda* (No. 115-116) May 26-27, 1923

Source: Lenin’s *Collected Works*, 2nd English Edition, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965, Volume 33, (p. 467-75).

Extracted an article from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/06.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the narrow self-interest of their members through business success, without connecting cooperative members to broader labor movements and political concerns.

A fundamental concern of the traditional Marxists is that the nature of decentralized worker cooperatives—in which individual cooperatives each seek to maximize their individual business successes—makes it difficult for cooperative members to develop Lenin’s concept of the “social aspect of their individuality” (Harnecker 2013,7). It was this skepticism about the ability of decentralized worker cooperatives to generate broad revolutionary consciousness and consolidated political power among workers that contributed greatly to the First International’s split between Marx’s “red” socialists (defending the need for a centralized, statist approach to the revolution) and Bakunin’s “black” socialists (defending the anarchist/localist perspective). As Rothschild (2009, 1033) tells the history:

Marx believed that to avoid a retake of power on the part of the capitalist class, the working class would need to consolidate its power in the hands of a strong state apparatus that would coordinate the economy, at least provisionally, until it “withered away.” Bakunin countered that central state control of the economy would prove to be “the most vile and terrible lie of the 20th century.” He urged, instead, a completely decentralized system in which workers would co-own and self-manage their own workplaces, with federative activity among themselves when needed. Similarly, citizens would manage their communities directly.

In the 1872 Hague Conference of the First International, Marx’s “centralization” approach won over the delegates, and Bakunin and his followers were expelled from the First International, along with their model of decentralized workers cooperatives. This expulsion “ensured the ascendancy of the idea that socialism meant strong central state authority” (Rothschild 2009, 1033). Thus, Marx and subsequent traditional Marxists

believed that “cooperativization could not bring socialism so long as capitalists control state power, which they had exercised so brutally in 1848.”<sup>13</sup> As an imagined future, Marx “envisioned a world free of domination both by capital and the state, a world of direct self-determination by “associated producers” in which states had “withered away.”<sup>14</sup> However, in order to remove the state, and reach an imagined future of “associated producers,” Marx believed that “workers must meanwhile exercise state power in a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’”<sup>15</sup>

In the end, both reformist cooperatives and reformist trade unions were criticized by Lenin and other traditional Marxists because they “rejected the class struggle, thus they saw no necessity in overthrowing the existing system” (Rudolf 2014, 20). For example, Lenin criticized worker cooperatives for adopting a bourgeois dedication to individualistic self-interest and business success, as well as trade unions which sought only to advance the economic position of their own members without challenging the fundamental nature of capitalism itself. To move beyond such reformism, traditional Marxists saw the need for “class unity” as the key to creating a condition for revolution (Laclau and Mouffee 1985, 10) because a series of small reforms “are not an interference with capitalist exploitation; they lend order and regularity to this exploitation” (Florence 1975, 95).

In short, traditional Marxism emphasizes that labor organizations, whether worker cooperatives or trade unions, if they are to be a meaningful agent of labor empowerment, need to develop a collective class consciousness among workers, adopt a strong political

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<sup>13</sup> Stone, Bob. n.d. “Why Marxism Isn't Dead (Because Capitalism Isn't Dead): The Case for Cooperative Socialism.” <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Soci/SociSton.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

component to their work, and demonstrate a self-conscious commitment to broader social transformation.

### **Traditional Marxism on Labor Unions**

The general perspective of traditional Marxists on labor unions varies, to the same extent that labor union commitment to class conscious labor mobilization and broader social transformation has varied across time and place. In general, traditional Marxists have had more affinity with labor unions as an agent of transformation than with worker cooperatives, due to the greater potential of labor unions to organize the entire working class into movements to challenge the very essence of the capitalist system. However, traditional Marxists have often been critical of labor unions, in that they typically focus more on their role in promoting the economic self-interest of their members, rather than on their broader social and political role to transform society and liberate the broader working class.

Despite the typical lack of political mobilization among labor unions, and even while recognizing the tendency of labor unions to become “bourgeoisified” and their leaders to become corrupt over time (La Botz 2013, 36), traditional Marxists have often been hopeful regarding the potential of labor unions because they serve as the most prominent opposition organization against capitalists and one of the few institutions with a pragmatic ability to redress the power imbalance between workers and employers. Hyman (1971, 4) argues that “whether or not they endorse an ideology of class division and class opposition, unions cannot escape a role as agencies of class.” For this reason, traditional Marxists have had more affinity with labor unions than with worker cooperatives because labor unions more than

cooperatives can be seen as “an essential expression of the antagonism which existed between proletariat and bourgeoisie” (Moses 1990, 21). Hyman (1971) argued that trade unionism “necessarily articulates the conflict generated by capitalist industry” and that labor unions can be a potential channel for “embodying workers’ revolt against the deprivations inherent in their role” (37-38).

From a traditional Marxist perspective, therefore, labor unions have the potential to act as a necessary organization that responds to fundamental conflicts between capital and labor. This fundamental antagonism drives the necessity to organize labor in opposition to capital, because “capitalism creates conflicts between employers and workers, while simultaneously providing the latter with a basis for challenging and changing capitalism” (Frege et al. 2011, 214). In this contradictory relation between capital and labor, unions are critical in defending and emancipating the working class, since (as Marx stated) unions can serve as “the focal points for the organization of the working class”<sup>16</sup> (cited in Dridzo 1935, 17).

Speaking of the virtues of self-conscious labor organizing, Engels (1881) argued that “organization is the most important weapon in the political struggle of the classes” (Rudolf 2014, 20), and defended the idea that a labor union or political party could become a representative of the whole working class, with the ultimate goal of the abolition of the wage system (Rudolf 2014, 20). Similarly, although Marx was suspicious of the kind of “piecemeal reform” sought by most labor unions (i.e., in the form of increased wages), Marx did believe that collective unionization of workers through a labor union helped

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<sup>16</sup>“Resolution of the I.W.A on Trade unions”, Geneva, 1866

workers lay a foundation to develop a notion of “class” and “collective rights of workers,” with a goal to move towards socialism. Because union leaders typically believe that “class relations are a reality; [and] that exploitation and insecurity are persistent features of the employment relations” (Hyman 2001, 36), unions are often theorized as “the agencies of class” –the tool through which worker class consciousness is activated and organized (Hyman 2001, 36).

In this way, Marx argued for the necessity of labor union organizing as “the necessary and unproblematic first step, establishing the necessary preconditions for an eventual generalized political struggle against the multiple oppressions of capitalism” (cited in DeMartino 1991, 30; also see Miernyk 1965, 165). Marx considered trade unions as “organising centres, centres for collecting the forces of the workers” (Dridzo 1935, 15) and “as centres of resistance against the encroachments of capital.”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Marx described labor unions as “the focal points for the organization of the working class”<sup>18</sup> (17) and asserted that trade unions can be “even more important as organized means to promote the abolition of the very system of wage labour”<sup>19</sup> (17).

In the absence of a labor union, capitalists are relatively free to cut wages in search of maximum profits. Thus, collective action through trade unions impose some constraint on capitalist encroachments, because wages are “only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx. 1865. “Wages, Price and Profit” in Karl Marx and F Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 Vol edition 1958, vol.I, p 443. The article can be found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1986/tradeunion/ch02.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Resolution of the I.W.A. on Trade Unions, Geneva, 1866.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

physical minimum, while the working man constantly pressed in the opposite direction”<sup>20</sup> (Hyman 1971,5). While capitalists force workers into competition with each other (i.e., native vs. foreign-born, skilled vs. unskilled), finding any opportunity to divide workers and increase competition among workers, the role of labor unions is that they “are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition” (Engels 1845, cited in Smith 2011).<sup>21</sup>

Thus, from a traditional Marxist perspective, labor unions are in a structurally determined position to defend workers’ wages and ultimately challenge capitalism itself. Marx, Engels, and Lenin all recognized that the immediate object of unions is typically to defend everyday necessities of workers, but they each believed unions could go beyond such workaday concerns and join in campaigns of social transformation. In his “Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council,” Marx (1866) explains that

Trade unions originally sprang from the spontaneous attempts of workmen at removing or at least checking that competition, in order to conquer such terms of contract as might raise them at least above the condition of mere slaves. The immediate object of Trades’ Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expedencies for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour (Lapides 1987, 64).

But beyond this focus on securing “everyday necessities” for workers, Marx agreed with Engels (1845), who noted that unions’ real importance was to move beyond such workaday concerns and to challenge the entire social order.

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<sup>20</sup> K. Marx, ‘Wages, Price and Profit’ ( 1865), in Karl Marx and F Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 Vol edition 1958, vol.I, p 443.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 507. Cited in “Marxism, unions, and class struggle: The future in the Present” By Sharon Smith, Issue #78: Features, July 2011.

But what gives these Unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. They imply the recognition of the fact that the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based wholly upon the competition of the workers among themselves; i.e., upon their want of cohesion. And precisely because the Unions direct themselves against the vital nerve of the present social order, however one-sidedly, in however narrow a way, are they so dangerous to this social order (Cited in Smith 2011).

Lenin also was supportive of labor unions, and urged union activists to move beyond specific workplace struggles and into broader class struggles of workers for “general emancipation” across the globe. As Deutscher (1950, chapter 1) describes a Lenin-authored resolution at the Workers International:

The resolution also stated that trade unions ought not pay their attention exclusively to ‘the direct struggle against capital’, that they ought not to keep aloof from the political and social movement of the working class. They ought not to pursue ‘narrow’ objectives, but they ought to strive for the general emancipation of the oppressed millions of the working people... The conviction that the single class struggle ought necessarily to unite the political and the economic struggle has become part and parcel of the international social democratic outlook.<sup>22</sup>

Thinkers in this tradition believed that the working class would not develop class consciousness automatically or spontaneously, but only through a process of active class struggle which could be fostered by union leadership. For Marx, the concept of “struggle was the yeast in the development of consciousness...Revolutionary confidence and commitment would be fostered by a perhaps lengthy learning process based on collective action” (Hyman 1983, 285-286). Labor unions can play a very important role in

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<sup>22</sup> Lenin, *Sochinenia (Works)*, Volume 4 (Fourth edition, Moscow, in progress), pp 158-59. Cited in Deutscher, Issac. 1950. *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Place in Soviet Labour Policy*. The Royal Institute of International Affairs (London and New York) and Oxford University Press (London). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1950/soviet-trade-unions/index.htm>

developing this class consciousness through collective action. Marx observed that “the first attempts of workers to associate themselves always take the form of combination’, i.e., trade unions.” Following from that Marx concluded that without combinations there could be no political activity: “So no combinations! No politics!” (Cited in Moses 1990, 95).<sup>23</sup> In this regard, economic struggles are interconnected with political struggles and these struggles are necessary in Marxist thought in order to move the working class from a “class in itself” to a “class for itself.”

Luxemburg similarly argued that militant class struggle is necessary to develop class consciousness, because “in capitalist society, the working class is necessarily fragmented and the recomposition of its unity only occurs through the very process of revolution” (Laclau and Mouffee 1985, 10). For Luxemburg, militant class unity and class-conscious activism is the key to transforming society, and any kind of small-scale social reforms such as worker cooperatives would not change the fundamental structural problem of capitalist system and would provide nothing but “empty promises” (Slott 1985; Gasper 2011). Though industrial-scale labor unions had the potential to build the kind of labor class unity and mobilization that Luxemburg envisioned, ameliorative institutions of reform like small worker cooperatives or community credit institutions were bitterly critiqued as “they are not, by any stretch of the imagination, a step toward socialism; they do not grant the workers a share in the control of society” (Luxemburg, cited in Gay 1952, 263).

Applying these classic arguments to the current context, many scholars aligned with traditional Marxism see neoliberal globalization as a common enemy and a common glue

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<sup>23</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels. 1972. *Werke*, [hereafter “MEW”], Berlin, vol. 6, 211.

among working people. An exponential growth of outsourcing, subcontracting and informal economic activity at the global level, accompanied by the transformation from Fordism to post- Fordism, has led to a growing decentralization of production and a fragmented industrial system (cited in Mosoetsa and Williams 2012, 5). While capital investors and the owners of production in an increasingly globalized economic world can move their capital quickly, opening and closing productive facilities around the world to take advantage of local conditions, labor has not kept up with the speed of “internationalization of capital” (Ross 2000, 89). As a result, Magoqwana and Matatu (2012) argue that “new forms of structuring work come with the intensification of exploitation and increased vulnerability” (Mosoetsa and Williams 2012, 9). As the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) views globalization as “the greatest challenge for unions in the twenty-first century” (ICFTU 1997, cited in Munck 2010, 218), many unions and labor organizations view international solidarity among workers as necessary to tackle global neoliberal economy (Bronfenbrenner 1998; Hyman 2011; Mosoetsa and Williams 2012).

Facing these current challenges, many Marxist scholars have essentially reproduced Luxemburg’s classic arguments. Scholars such as Hardt and Negri (2001), Harvey (2010), Smith N ( 1984), Swyngedouw (1997), Hirst and Thomson (1996), Herod (2001), Engler (2010) and Lambert (2010) all “see globally marshaled power as the only way to challenge globalization” (Gibson-Graham 2001, 31). For instance, Hardt and Negri (2001) argue that “local struggles are insufficiently powerful” (46), and that local initiatives and fights only fragment the “global multitude” (Gibson-Graham 2001, 5). Hardt and Negri (2001) argue that “we believe that toward the end of challenging and resisting empire and its world

market, it is necessary to pose any alternative at an equally global level.” Similarly, Harvey (1996) argues that “for resistance to capital to be effective it must be as big as capital” (cited in Woodward 2007, 12; Berberoglu 2010; Herod 2002; McCallum 2013). One of the leading international socialist movement activists, Murray Smith, argues that a global movement to challenge capitalism is necessary, and that it must be sustained by “the development of anti-capitalist consciousness”<sup>24</sup>

Though traditional Marxists believed in the transformational potential of labor unions in developing globally-scaled collective struggles and “anti-capitalist consciousness,” they also argued that unions quite often squandered this potential in their focus on the immediate economic concerns of union members. When labor unions focus on winning “day-to-day economic concessions from capital,” they can “lose sight thereby of the ultimate goal of the emancipation of the working class from wage-slavery” (Mosses 1990,142). To avoid this tendency to degenerate into mere “economism” (Mosses 1990, 142), traditional Marxists find it vital that unions bring an ideological focus on “class consciousness” to their labor organizing. For example, Lenin argued against the tendency of labor unions to display only “trade union consciousness” (a workplace-focused commitment to win better wages or working conditions at a specific locale) and urged unions to focus on a broader “class conscious” commitment to upend their entire society (Hyman 1971,13). Lenin called for union leaders to move beyond local struggles and develop a “revolutionary political science” to “interpret the wider society to the workers” so that workers would “generate this political consciousness (Wainwright 1994, 96).

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<sup>24</sup> Murray Smith. n.d. “Axes of Marxist internationalism.” *International journal of socialist renewal*. <http://links.org.au/node/89>

In short, the perspectives of traditional Marxism on the role of labor unions are both positive and negative. From a positive perspective, labor unions are seen as necessary--as potentially transformational organizations that can lead to fundamental social change, provided they organize workers on class-conscious terms for collective struggles in both economic and political spheres. However, traditional Marxists also argue that unions are fraught. Too often they focus on “economic unionism” and “trade union consciousness,” undermining the development of class struggle and class consciousness among the working class. When unions focus only on “maintaining or improving the conditions of [members’] working lives” (Sidney and Webb 1920, 1), they forestall the possible development of a radicalized class consciousness among their members, which only emerges through self-conscious worker education campaigns and associated political and economic struggles.

### **Poststructural Marxists’ Views on Worker Cooperatives**

Brown (1991, 693) describes how “Post-Marxism” (otherwise called “poststructuralism”) rejects the “economic determinism, reductionism and philosophical essentialism” associated with traditional Marxist approaches to such things as the necessity of class conflict, class consciousness, and globalized political struggle. In rejecting traditional Marxism, with its notions of the necessity of globalized class struggle, post-Marxists have an affinity with earlier economic reformers such as Fourier, Bernstein and Owen—19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers who supported worker cooperatives and diverse other local experiments in organization of economic activity.

In the early 1800s, utopian socialists such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen advanced the idea of creating cooperative communities as a society “without disorder, or

evil of any kind,” and without “even disturbing existing private properties.” Bernstein also argued that “capitalism has created a lot of freedom,” and did not believe that capitalism needed to be wholly replaced (Brown 1991). In this regard, both Fourier and Owen rejected the notion that *class struggle* of workers is inevitable in capitalism as they both envisioned that local cooperative communities could be built through a process of *class compromise*, co-existing with capitalism and flourishing without disrupting the broader capitalist system. Although traditional Marxists such as Engels pointed out that “Owen’s socialism was largely a ‘bourgeois affair,’ fraught with the prejudices of his own class,” Owen argued that “class collaboration was the route to classlessness- not class antagonism” (McGrail 2011, 289; also see Donnachie and Mooney 2007). Calling class antagonism “irrational and irrelevant,” Owen argued that “each class was the victim of its own ideology” and that no particular “class” in society was to be blamed for social ills (Harrison 1969, 67).

As Robert Owen believed that “a new system of socialism had been compromised with the old” (Royle 1998, 54), he did not believe that “any form of class struggle or political revolution” was a necessity for socialism to emerge (Royle 1998, 54). For Owen, there was no reason to destroy the existing system before building the new, because he believed that “the old system of society’ would be gradually replaced by the new”<sup>25</sup> (quoted in Harrison 1969, 67). Owen believed that important social changes can occur gradually, since “people of all classes can voluntarily adopt their plan for society if it is presented convincingly” (Draper 1990).

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<sup>25</sup> Owen, Robert. 1819. “Address to the Working Classes”, in *Life*, I, xxxii

Bernstein, a late-1800s thinker who was often called “the founder of revisionist Marxism” (Brown 1999, 693), held similar views. Bernstein supported the development of the middle class, arguing that “the development of large credit institutions, the trustification of industry and the emergence of a new middle-class” had lessened the contradictions of capitalism (Luxemburg 1900, chapter vi). Along the same lines, Bernstein rejected Marx’s emphasis on class struggle, calling it a purely abstract concept.

Let us take ‘the proletariat organized as a class.’ Just think how much ideology is required for workers to see themselves as proletarians. The proletariat as the sum total of wage-laborers is a reality, the proletariat as a class acting with a common purpose and outlook is largely a figment of the imagination (Tudor and Tudor 1988, 244).

For Bernstein, the reality is that capitalism in his time had indeed been softened by local reform efforts, and less antagonism between capital and labor had developed due to a growing middle class. Bernstein therefore concluded that improvement was possible within the general boundaries of capitalism, and that progress towards socialism could be “realized with two instruments: labor unions-or as Bernstein himself characterizes them, economic democracy- and cooperatives” (Scott 2007, 80). Bernstein’s logic for supporting both labor unions and cooperatives as socialist instruments was his belief that while labor unions suppress industrial profits (by securing better wages), cooperatives suppressed undue commercial profits (by widely distributing the profits from business sales) (80).

In this regard, Bernstein supported both worker cooperatives and labor unions and believed that both labor movement organizations could eventually lead to socialism through realistic local reforms and collaboration with forward-thinking capitalists, which could be “a means of reducing the profit of capitalists and thus enriching the workers.”

For Bernstein, local worker cooperatives were a good example of how to achieve a “just, juster and still more just” mode of production through incremental unfolding of workplace democracy (*Vorwärts*, March 26, 1899; cited in Luxemburg 1900, chapter vii).

Bernstein’s emphasis on diverse local reform efforts, and the possibilities of collaboration to achieve positive results for workers in the here and now, fits within a tradition that we now call post-Marxism, or poststructural Marxism. By deconstructing the hegemony of Marxian capitalocentric thinking—the kind of thinking that asserts the necessity of transformational class struggle against a unified capitalist system—post-Marxists introduce heterogeneous economic worlds as real and existing alternatives to capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2003, 126). From a traditional Marxist perspective, these non-capitalist alternative economies are often positioned as the “the subordinates and servants, the replications or the deficient, nonexistent or even unimaginable others of capitalism” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 35: see footnote 22). In contrast, poststructural Marxists believe that these alternative economic forms are both creative and generative.

The poststructural perspective begins by criticizing the very notion of a single capitalist “system,” to which local economic alternatives are subordinate. Rather, the poststructuralists argue that the capitalist “system” is always incomplete and open-ended, characterized by a flourishing world of non-monetized and reciprocal economies, and never just by an integrated system of wage oppression. These diverse, always-present economic practices include all manner of local experimentation, including: “worker, consumer, and housing cooperatives, community currencies, urban gardens, fair trade organizations, intentional communities, and neighborhood self-help associations” (Miller 2006,15).

Small-scaled economic alternatives such as local bartering systems, charitable programs, voluntary mutual-help networks, and worker cooperatives can be meaningful alternatives to an always permeable capitalist world, poststructuralists argue. Diverse, humanistic community economies can always sustain spaces where community needs are opened up for discussion, where people experience “ethical practices, processes and possibilities” (Cornwell 2011, 2003; DeMartino 2013; Resnick and Wolff 1989).

Poststructural approaches to the solidarity economy celebrate the logic of diversity and pluralism: “the belief that there can be no ‘one way’ of achieving the solidarity economy;” rather we must be open to “different forms in different contexts, open to continual change and driven from the bottom-up” (Miller 2010, 33)<sup>26</sup>. Just as the traditional Marxists would argue, this diverse range of solidarity economies is driven by many motives other than class liberation and social transformation, including individualistic “member benefits on the goods and services markets” (Jussila et al., 2008b and Jussila, 2007). “A plurality of motivational drives,” undergird local solidarity economies, Zamagini and Sacco (2002) argue, “intrinsic and extrinsic, monetary and non-monetary...self-regarding but also other regarding or informed by criteria of reciprocity” (cited in Borzaga et al. 2009, 14).

Rather than critiquing the reality of parochial motives, however, or the limited impact of local experimentation, poststructural defenders of local solidarity efforts describe them as a “politics of immanence” (Reedy et al. 2016, 4-5). Rather than “projecting the desired outcomes of political action into the future, prefiguration creates them in the here and now”

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<sup>26</sup> The original quotation came from the U.S. Solidarity Economy Networks, <http://www.usseu.org>

(Reedy et al 2016, 4-5). Chatterton & Pickerill (2010, 476) similarly describes such efforts as worthy moments of “prefiguration”: “everyday practices...used as building blocks to construct a hoped- for future in the present” (Chatterton & Pickerill 2010, 476; Gautney 2009; Dinerstein 2015). Thus, a commitment to prefigurative practices such as operating worker cooperatives is seen as “being more significant and attractive to activists than commitment to set ideological positions or a future post-revolutionary utopia” (Reedy et al 2016, 5). “We are trying to build a politics... that acts in the moment,” Gibson-Graham (2006, xix) explain, “not to create something in the future but to build in the present, it’s the politics of the here and now.”

While traditional Marxists have advanced the need for militant international solidarity and systemic changes, revisionists like Bernstein and Fourier and more modern post-Marxists have supported local reform efforts as a means of building something concrete in the community in which we live, even if seemingly small in scale.

Small actions can have big effects, as the trim tab does on an ocean liner. A trim tab is a tiny flap that controls the rudder, creating a low-pressure area on one side that enables the rudder to turn. It takes only a movement of the tiny trim tab to steer a large and complex ship toward a very different destination that it was previously headed for. In society, too, small actions can initiate major changes (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xxiii).

Although local labor initiatives are routinely dismissed as obscure and miniscule to many Marxists, and as wholly inadequate to counter economic globalization, Gibson-Graham rejects the notion that “the local” should be denigrated or seen as “small and relatively powerless defined and confined by the global” (Gibson-Graham 2002, 3). The concept of local “refers to agency, to the place where decisions are made about

representations, where our capacities and energies meet outside the ordering of a global or total organization” (Diskin 2013, 475). Thus, the concept of the “local” refers to that “which is not consumed by the global” (474) and because the local endures as a real alternative to “the global,” building cooperative communities at the local level can serve to defend workers’ rights in the here and now (Beers 2013).

As an example of this kind of reasoning, a poststructural Marxist analysis of the Mondragon cooperative’s success does not start by complimenting its massive scale, or presenting it as a meaningful “challenge to capitalism,” as if it were designed to resist capitalism. For Gibson-Graham and other post-Marxists, Mondragon is not a “utopian dream” pointing the way to a wholly new economy, but rather is simply a practical “guide to local practices of economic experimentation” (Gibson-Graham 2003a, 125). For them, the objective is not “a total systemic transformation that replaces capitalism by some other system” (Narotzky 2012, 246). Rather the goal is to foster practical, locally-based forms of experimentation. “Transformation comes in an ad hoc emergent manner and without a predefined structured objective” (246). Mondragon is an example of how a company can operate in an ethical manner, invest workers in company management practices and focus business operations on meeting the needs of marginalized groups in the community—in that way, the organization sets an example others can follow, in the here and now, and without waiting for the revolution to come.

Worker cooperatives like Mondragon in Spain, or The Cleveland Model in the US, have governing models allowing for broader worker and community input, thus allowing workers to make “their own decisions on how the surplus is redistributed, thus experiencing workplace and community democracy in action, while also ‘enabling ethical economies’

that actually attend to the social health of workers” (Gibson- Graham 2003a, 128; Alperowitz and Dubb 2015). In immediate and practical ways, therefore, worker cooperatives like Mondragon open up new pathways to a different economic future, helping create pluralistic and more ethical societies (Whyte and Whyte 1991, 255).

In celebrating the different kinds of “solidarity economies” built by cooperatives such as Mondragon, and through the Cleveland Model, post-Marxists demonstrate an appreciation of economic alternatives—*local difference*—in the here and now, whereas traditional Marxists often critique such limited reform efforts as not producing enough *systemic change*, now or in the long run. While traditional Marxists are skeptical of the kind of meaningful *change* that can come through such efforts, poststructuralists are pleased with the kind of *difference* such local community economic practices call into being.

### **Poststructural Marxists’ Views on Labor Unions**

In Gibson-Graham’s (2003) book, *Enabling Ethical Economies*, she argues that

The early denunciation of worker cooperativism by both the trade union and the revolutionary socialist movements has had a dampening effect on ethical debates concerning the economics of experimentation within leftist communities most engaged in a critique of capitalism” (129).

While an earlier section of this chapter detailed how radical elements in the industrial union movement (such as Rosa Luxemburg) denounced Owenite cooperatives as being socially isolated and too far removed from class-conscious labor movements of the time, Gibson-Graham offers a different perspective and analyzes how conservative labor unions also distanced themselves from what they saw as the radical utopianism of many worker

communes. Gibson-Graham (2003) shows that “as the labor movement grew, antagonism increased between pragmatic trade union aims (defense of workers’ standards of living by wage setting and factory legislation to limit working hours) and utopian socialist ‘Owenite aspirations’ (cooperative ownership of industry)” (1907,131-140). Gibson-Graham claim that this philosophical antagonism continues to divide sometimes utopian/communitarian cooperativists from the more “capitalocentric” unionists who have organized within the existing capitalist structure. Rees (1946) argues that “business unionists,” typically

...restrict their activity to bargaining over wages, hours, and working conditions, and performing certain benefit functions. They do not consider themselves agents of basic economic change...The result has been a bitter taste in the mouths of conservative unions regarding co-operatives (334; see also Bhowmik 1988, 2703).

This kind of post-Marxist critique of labor unions focuses particularly on the kind of rigidly focused business-unionism that came to characterize many US unions following WWII. By focusing only on winning wage enhancement campaigns at specific worksites, such labor unions forgo possibly creative collaborations with groups ranging from innovative worker cooperatives in their community to environmental groups and neighborhood organizing campaigns. DeMartino (1991, 35) claims that too often, “unions enter coalitions with rigid identities...and fully preformed agendas for which they seek to rally support beyond their ranks. They do this by presenting the limited goal of securing a collective bargaining agreement as a broad campaign for social justice.” As “labor unions wage solitary struggles through the practice of collective bargaining” (35), while subordinating other struggles, their purely instrumental relationships and coalition work with other social movement organizations wither and the unions become isolated from diverse community economies already existing in their own region.

Poststructuralists Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2001) go so far as to equate this alleged myopia of business unionism with the general notion of a class-based politics altogether, arguing that an over-weaning focus on “class” tends to dampen the political imagination and hide alternative social possibilities from thinkers and activists. “Viewed through the lens of class politics,” they argue, resistance movements follow a scripted, predictable and non-promising path. Unionists organize against factory owners for better wages, and “each actor’s role is clearly scripted within the reproductive agenda that has increasingly constrained and confined class politics” (70).

For these reasons, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2001) believe that a class-focused politics is typically focused only on issues of workplace equity, with the result that “the range of actions and alliance it enables, is still relatively narrow and closed.” A poststructural appreciation of diverse and complex subjectivities—of the need for individuals “to inhabit more fully and positively their identities as individuals with needs and desires for a healthy environment, a range of gender roles, a vital and diverse community, and a different future” (74)—could enhance the possibilities for human innovations and community activities in every community. Woodward (2007) also critiques traditional Marxian arguments along similar lines, very critical of the supposedly blinding effects of a traditional class-based analysis.

By deploying an aggregative theory of power and treating capital, globalization or the state as a singular entity, it neglects to recognize the multiplicity of alternate political possibilities that fly under the radar of these supposed organisms, which by necessity leave or pass over gaps that are potentially useful for minoritarian politics (13).

In this light, these scholars conclude, “the contours of traditional class politics militate against these hopeful possibilities. The reproductive strategy of traditional unionism tends

to narrow and consolidate worker subjectivity...erecting a barrier to a new politics of enterprise..." (74). Thus, poststructural Marxists put great faith in "local organizing and local political action based in neighborhoods as well as workplaces" (Johnston 2002, 257 in a book, Nissen 2002). They celebrate local economic experiments and alternatives, including everything from mutual aid networks, to community unionism, to micro-credit circles, worker cooperative and social movement unionism (Camfield 2007; Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Lopez 2004; Moody 1997; Nissen 2003, Engeman 2015). In celebrating this diverse range of political and economic alternatives, there is also a tendency to critique traditional class-based politics and analysis as unimaginative and disempowering, and in this, the poststructuralists fundamentally part ways with the traditional Marxist perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional Marxists and poststructural Marxists fundamentally part ways in evaluating the question of how labor unions and worker cooperatives have dealt with their dual roles. Labor unions and worker cooperatives have dual roles in that both are economic organizations dedicated to specific workplace improvements, but at the same time they both have seek worker empowerment through broader social transformation. Traditional Marxists find it critical that both these labor organizations should focus self-consciously on broad goals of social-transformation, while avoiding degeneration into economic self-help organizations. Alternatively, poststructural Marxists find an overbearing focus on the global project of social transformation actually to be disempowering, as it turns organizations away from supporting local self-help actions in the here and now that can

make a practical difference in improving workers' lives and in catalyzing local reforms that might in time grow into larger initiatives. While both traditions are critical of a kind of business unionism focused only on winning isolated wage benefits at specific work sites, they fundamentally part ways on the question of whether a significant focus on the notion of class itself is ultimately empowering or disempowering to the cause of empowering marginalized workers. While the traditional Marxists find a class-based focus to be a strong anchor to a coherent and sustained critique of a broad range of social ills, the poststructuralists find that it tends too often to stunt the imagination and forestall alliances with non-class focused community groups. Both these perspectives will be tested in later case studies in this dissertation.

In terms of their approach to specific labor empowerment institutions, traditional Marxists are hopeful of broad-based labor mobilization and thus have often been critical of worker cooperatives and more enamored of labor unions--because of the potential for labor unions to organize the entire working class against capitalists and because unions often maintain a useful antagonism between capital and labor. For traditional Marxists, the concept of politicized class struggle is critical in sustaining broad-based labor campaigns, since class consciousness is "a vehicle of change, linking individual consciousness of capitalist oppression to a macro-political conception of the actions that would destroy it" (Mann 1994, 156). In the end, traditional Marxists believe that labor unions, rather than worker cooperatives, have the best potential to connect workers to broad-based struggles to transform political and economic realities, and thereby to develop the kind of worker class-consciousness necessary to sustain successful challenges to capitalism. In this political vision, meaningful working class politics must ultimately

displace capitalism, which is viewed as a comprehensive economic system that precludes effective economic experimentation.

On the other hand, poststructural Marxists celebrate local experiments, such as worker cooperatives, while being critical of essentialist privileging of class-conscious labor organizing as the only real strategy for change. This is not a politics that is restricted to opposition and displacement—it seeks to exploit the opportunities that are always already there for economic innovations involving worker empowerment. For post-Marxists, worker cooperatives represent a model that rejects the ubiquity of class antagonisms, even while accepting the traditional Marxian concern with capitalist exploitation. Cooperatives offer a new path to creating diverse economies that can co-populate the economic space, alongside capitalist firms, without challenging the entire system. In this view, the notion of closed economic system is itself suspect. By putting emphasis on the virtues of enhanced democracy at the workplace and more ethical local economies, worker cooperatives and other social economy reforms represent a model that embraces a broader meaning of social justice in the community without being bogged down by the alleged necessity of class antagonism. For poststructural Marxists, local actions are a good start to producing social change without getting burdened by having to challenge the entire capitalist system of neoliberal globalization.

In short, the difference between these two camps of Marxism is driven by theoretical differences concerning the ontological nature of capitalism itself. These different ontologies yield contrasting visions regarding the role of labor unions and worker cooperatives, and regarding the need for such things as class-consciousness and class antagonism. As we will see, these distinct conceptions yield different labor organizing and

economic development strategies on the ground, and play a role in shaping relations between labor unions and worker cooperatives today.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **“THERE’S NO CLASS IN AMERICA”: THE POSTSTRUCTURAL U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT**

Imploring his audience to quit using the term “middle class,” former Pennsylvania Senator and Republican candidate for president, Rick Santorum, argued that all notions of class are out of place in the United States. “There’s no class in America,” he argued. “Since when in America do we have classes? Since when in America are people stuck in areas or defined places called a class? That’s Marxism talk” (Whitaker 2014). Just this lack of class consciousness in the U.S. led Mann (1973) to bluntly argue that “a revolution is seen as ‘inconceivable’ in the U.S.,” though the concept is a possibility across Europe.

The notion of class consciousness and associated revolutionary unionism never gained much attraction 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. Hartz argued that this liberal tradition owed much to “the absence of a feudal heritage,” which meant that Americans had little experience of mobilized class conflict to overthrow an existing aristocracy, but much deeper experience with individualistic mobility outside of a feudal structure, a history which “accounts for the failure of socialism in this country” (Cantor 1978, 4). 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 requires a “conscious and sustained self-image of working people as a class standing in opposition to other classes in society,” and this notion has never gained much ground in pluralistic American society (see also Lipset and Marks 2000)

This liberal and pluralist American political culture has shaped a tradition of moderate business unionism, has been associated with a “belief in the harmony of interests of capital and labor” and has “undermined notions of class solidarity among workers” (cited in Greenston 1967, 28). Following Hartz’s argument in his own analysis of U.S. labor history, Martin Lipset similarly argued that no feudal “carryovers,” “no rigid status groups,” a high rate of social mobility, and ethical, racial and religious cleavages all contributed to a U.S. labor movement with weak class solidarity (Cantor 1978, 4-5). Sombart (1976, originally published in 1909) also emphasized the nature of American capitalist character by showing how Americans have valued the virtue of being “rich,” more so than Europeans.

For the average American being successful means first and foremost becoming rich. This explains why that restless striving, which we recognized as an essential part of the American national character, is applied before all else to economic life. In America the best and most energetic people apply themselves to financial careers, whereas in Europe they go into politics. In the mass public an excessive valuation of economic matters develops for the same reason, namely because people believe that in this sphere they can most easily reach the goal for which they strive (Sombart 1976, 13-14).

Animated by a strong desire to be rich, Sombart also argued that American workers, in comparison to workers in Europe, have relatively better living standards, and have a

stronger sense of nationalistic patriotism than other countries—naturally turning them away from appeals calling for class conflict and social transformation (Sombart 1976, 18-20).<sup>27</sup> This “boundless optimism” that all American workers can achieve good living standards by simply working hard and abiding by the rules is part of what could be called an American “middle class ethos.” According to Bernstein, the self-conception of Americans that nearly everyone in the country is middle class is a good example of why class conflict between capital and labor is minimized. In the U.S., the belief that “we are all middle class” is strong and “the overwhelming majority of people identify themselves as middle class,” according to Bill Keller, executive editor of the *New York Times*. Relatedly, 75 percent of Americans do not believe the differing economic classes are in conflict (Fiske 2011, 4). In a U.S. survey by *Fortune* magazine, “over 80 % of the sample population” identified themselves as “middle class” (Fantasia 1995, 270).

In explaining the lack of strong working class mobilization in American history, other scholars have offered alternative theories to the Hartz/Sombart focus on social mobility and the absence of historic social stratification. Botz (2010) and Rogin (1988) have argued that racial-ethnic divisions in the U.S. labor force have long fractured working class unity, thus undermining labor power and resulting in a reality that unions must compromise with capital to achieve small gains. In yet another tradition, Ted Lowi (1984) offers an institutionalist answer. Lowi points to the vast diversity of interest groups and civic activity across America, together with the diverse structure of federalism (resulting in multiple and competing levers of power in every community), and argues that the

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<sup>27</sup> Also, see Sullivan, Dan. “Why Is [Was] There No Socialism in the United States? A Critical Synopsis of Werner Sombart’s Classic Study.” <http://savingcommunities.org/docs/sombart.werner/nosocialismus.html>

American system is designed to frustrate visions of class unity with a reality of constitutionally fractured interest group pluralism. In that same institutional pluralism tradition, Katzenstein (1985: 32, 157) argues that the institutional features of interest group corporatism are complemented by a strong feeling of social partnership in America, which “mitigates class conflict between business and unions [and] integrates differing conceptions of group interest with vaguely but firmly held notions of the public interest” (Taylor, Shugart, Lijphart and Grofman 2014, 199).

Though there are multiple theories describing reasons for the lack of class conscious social movements in the United States, the Hartz/Sombart focus on notions of social mobility and the middle class ethos is particularly relevant to understanding the lack of class conscious militancy in much of the American labor movement. Noting a tradition of moderation in the modern U.S. labor movement, Reynold (2009) argues that “There was no prevailing ideology of ‘working class solidarity’ and that ‘Marxist-style sentiments’ about the plight of the working class never became the dominant mood, contrary to some historical accounts.” In fact, union leaders tend to “refer to their members as middle class” (Zweig 2000, 20) rather than working class. For example, the President of AFSCME argued in 2015 that “labor unions helped to build the middle class” (Saunders 2015), while AFL-CIO president, Richard Trumka, claimed “it was the middle class that made America great” (Lichtenstein 2012, 10). Lichtenstein (2012) has pointed to the declining living standards for many American workers, and have urged union leaders to “stop using ‘middle class’ to depict the labor movement.” Nevertheless, the continuing reality is that “as the working class has disappeared from political conversation, the middle class has come to be accepted as the social position most Americans are in” (Zweig 2000, 20).

According to Navarro (1992), the reality is that millions of Americans are in a declining working class, not a rising middle class, and the biggest problem with labor unions' embrace of the middle class ethos is that this embrace obscures "the realities of our class relations" (cited in Kurtz 2002, 207). Similarly, Kapuria-Foreman and McCann Jr. (2012) lament that "American labor has never really developed a "class consciousness" which has undermined the ability of labor to organize vigorously to improve working class conditions. (Kapuria-Foreman and McCann Jr. 2012, 526-527). In short, the United States has a long and continuing history of enchantment with the "middle class ethos"—the notion that the United States is a nation of upwardly mobile, self-made people. A weak tradition of class and class consciousness in America contribute greatly to the fact that the ideology of individualistic job consciousness and practice of business unionism have long crowded out the ideology of collective class consciousness and practice of working class mobilization in the United States.

### **Job Consciousness and Business Unionism**

Lowi (1984, 374) describes "business unionism" as entailing "acceptance of the political system and of capitalism, coupled with a tacit agreement to work within the system toward improved wages, working conditions, and job security." Labor scholar Perlman adds that business unionism entails a kind of "job consciousness," described as follows.

A unique ideology of workers, pragmatically suited to the exceptional history of the US labor movement...Broadly speaking the American labor movement has so far shown little indication of breaking away from its Gompersian mooring [of business unionism], if taken in the sense of the basic social order it favors and of the method it employs in its political action (Cited in Peck 1978, 5).

The phrase, “job consciousness,” was coined by labor scholar Selig Perlman (1928) to describe the nature of the U.S. labor movement. According to Perlman, “US workers are primarily concerned about job security and their mentality as workers is characterized by a job consciousness rather than a class consciousness” (Peck 1978, 5; also see Brody 1991). Similar to the notion of “business unionism,” the notion of “job consciousness” describes how workers are primarily concerned with “marketing their labor in a way that would maximize their personal gains” (Peck 1978, 21). Job consciousness also entails a belief that unions exist not to leverage transformational social movements, but to “address the immediate and practical concerns of unionized workers” with a goal to “protect their members economically, primarily by negotiating and enforcing the union contract” (cited in Gregory Mantsios ed., 1998, 1779-1780). If a union experiences success in collective bargaining for better working conditions and wages for workers, in a context where workers themselves are far more job conscious than class conscious, the chance for labor unions to “imbue their members with revolutionary zeal” is unlikely (Leggett 1968, 22).

#### *Class Compromise: Business Unionism and Union-Management Accommodation*

From this “business unionism” perspective, unions function mostly as a service organization that focuses on contract administration and resolving employment-related problems for workers (Voss and Sherman 2000, 310; DeMartino 1991; Shumate 2006), while “discouraging shop-floor action and rank-and-file members’ involvement in the grievance procedure” (Chang 2005, 64; Clawson and Clawson 1999; Devinatz 2012). Observing such patterns, Edlin argues that “the business unionists simply did a better job of ‘delivering the goods’ for the union membership in the form of rich labor contracts”

(Edlin 2005, 4), thus undermining possibilities of antagonistic class consciousness among workers (see also Perlman [1929] 1966; Gulick and Bers 1953).

A key figure in the unfolding of this kind of business unionism in the United States was Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 until 1924. Gompers observed the defeats of radical labor groups like the Knights of Labor in various workplace conflicts—notably, the failed Southwest Railway Strike of 1886, the failed Chicago steel strike of 1919 and the failed 1922 railroad shopmen’s strike--and envisioned a different world where capital and labor did not always clash and endure harsh antagonism towards each other.<sup>28</sup> Gompers was cognizant of how class-conscious and capital-antagonistic labor movements in America always got crushed by repressive employers, by an interventionist state, and by an American political culture that was hostile to notions of class conflict (Robbins 2013, 322). Therefore, he believed that labor unions needed to find a more politically viable strategy. Witnessing a disheartening series of defeats by the more radical and class conscious unionists (i.e., the Knights of Labor), Gompers concluded that the fundamental role of labor unions was not to “stand outside capitalist society and challenge it” through a series of militant but unsuccessful actions, but rather unions “should seek acceptance and power within the system” (Cantor 1978, 21).

Using this accommodationist approach, Gompers led the Federation of Labor to join with the National Civic Federation (NCF), a powerful organization of employers, to seek “class collaborationism” (Cantor 1978, 21). The AFL became more conservative in terms of challenging employers, and became an organization that sought to develop the “job

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<sup>28</sup> [http://www.slp.org/res\\_state\\_hm/afl-cio81.html](http://www.slp.org/res_state_hm/afl-cio81.html)

consciousness” and wage prospects of skilled workers, even choosing to exclude many less skilled workers, such as immigrants and women, from membership. Crain and Matheny (2001) argues that “the AFL’s philosophy of job consciousness was the underlying source of its exclusionary racial and gender practices,” as the AFL sought to secure the privileges of white workers by supporting discriminatory policies against immigrants, women and African Americans (Crain and Matheny 2001, 1776).

By focusing on organizing upwardly mobile skilled workers and focusing on their individual hopes for better wages and workplace conditions, Samuel Gompers was most interested in “a fair living wage, reasonable hours and fair conditions of employment”<sup>29</sup> (The National Labor Digest 1920, vol.2-3, July. P32), and not at all interested in notions of industrially scaled class conflict, or global labor alliances. For his pragmatic business unionism approach, Gompers was awarded the Theodore Roosevelt medal for “his policy of cooperation in industry, representing the American concept of industrialism and self-reliance and fighting with success the disruptive influence of the radical element peaching communism and class war” (Madison 1950, 132). Gompers’ strong anti-communism even led to the declaration that “the American Federation of labor does not tolerate communists in its membership nor does it permit communists to hold office” (Madison 1950, 133).

Gompers’ successor, William Green (1924-1952), also took a cooperative approach towards capital, as he promoted union-management cooperation during his AFL presidency. In the late 1920s, AFL president Green advanced a vision of cooperation with

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<sup>29</sup> Gompers to Thomas Purdy, March 16, 1888, Reel 1, Vol.2, pp. 371-73, Samuel Gompers Letterbooks, Library of Congress as produced I Kauffman ( 1987, 95).

business owners (rather than supporting textile worker cooperatives as a substitute for capitalism) when as he toured a number of 1929 textile strikes across the south, and preached conciliation, cooperation and efficient production, rather than supporting worker strikes (Greenstone 1969, 28). Green argued that “the antagonistic and hostile attitude, so characteristic of the old order in industry, must be supplanted by a friendly relationship and a sense of obligation and responsibility. This is the newer concept of Modern Trade Unionism” (Madison 1950, 112). Reflecting this “new concept of modern trade unionism,” the 1929 AFL convention declared that unions should become “an agency for cooperation, for service to the union members and to the industry in which its members are employed” (Greenstone 1977, 28).

From this business unionism perspective, labor unions were not proposed as an institution for worker revolution, nor as institutions that pursued worker control at the workplace, nor as institutions seeking global labor alliances along “Marxist” or “communist” lines. Rather, the purpose of labor unions was interpreted as representing workers’ economic interests by building cooperative partnerships with management, and through site-specific collective bargaining processes, without involvement in distracting and antagonistic political campaigns beyond the workplace.

#### *Class Compromise: Business Unionism and Scientific Management*

The US labor movement focus on job consciousness rather than class consciousness was influenced by the rise of scientific management theory during the 1920s, and the subsequent embrace of the philosophy of scientific management and Taylorism by labor leaders in the post-war era as a way to compromise with capital. Although many scholars

such as Montgomery (1974), Burawoy (1979), Edwards (1979), and Braverman (1974), and Cathedi (1977) have argued that Taylorism should have provided a revolutionary impetus for “the transformation of worker consciousness” as a result of the intense and degraded level of work, the AFL contrarily considered Taylorism a mechanism to compromise with capital, rather than a tool for promoting working class consciousness (Vallas 1987, 238).

According to Nichols (1969), “the theory of Scientific management—that managers are legitimized through their necessary role in production and entitled to superior financial rewards and capitalist-class privileges--has played a large role in sustaining capitalist ideology” (Nichols 1969, cited in Bradley & Gelb 1983, 27). As a specific form of scientific management, Taylorism has been defined as “the articulate and self-conscious vanguard of the businessmen’s reform effort,” which has resulted in the growing managerial control of workplaces and “the establishment of standards everywhere” (Montgomery 1979, 33). Taylorism created a highly regulated and arguably dehumanizing workplace built around “the systematic organization of production and the best instructions and enticement of the employee to perform his specific work assignment in ‘the one best way’” (Montgomery 1979, 33). The basic elements of Taylorism include the following.

- 1) Centralized planning and routing of the successive phases in fabrication, 2) systematic analysis of each distinct operation, 3) detailed instruction and supervision of each worker in the performance of his discrete task, and 4) wage payments carefully designed to induce the worker to do as he was told (Montgomery 1979, 114).

Although the AFL’s initial attitude toward scientific management was skeptical, the attitude toward scientific management gradually changed as the AFL deepened its

collaborative relationships with business owners and managers. In particular, Taylor himself insisted that “the replacement of rule of thumb by science and the replacement of caprice by friendly cooperation between employers and workers were the two ‘absolutely essential’ elements of scientific management” (Nyland 1996, 987). In fact, just this “replacement of caprice by friendly cooperation by employers and workers” became a watchword of AFL leaders as they confronted the Taylorism revolution. AFL president Samuel Gompers became a personal friend with Cooke, an advocate for Scientific management and active member at the Taylor Society, and in 1919 Gompers pushed a resolution supporting “scientific research and the application of science to industry” (Jacoby 1983, 21).

Subsequently, showcasing their support for this kind of top-down workplace management, and placing themselves at odds with old visions of worker ownership, AFL president William F. Green actually addressed the Taylor Society in 1925, and AFL leaders often attended the Society's meetings. The Taylor Society *Bulletin* regularly carried articles on AFL experiments in union-management cooperation, and the AFL's *Federationist* published articles by well-known Taylorists. The AFL helped organize two Philadelphia Central Labor Union conferences on union-management cooperation in 1927 and 1928, and the Society was invited to participate in conferences organized by the AFL's Workers' Education Bureau (Jacoby 1983, 24).

Although it is disputable to what extent the relation between the AFL and Scientific management proponents was mutually friendly (Mckelvey 1952; Nadworny 1955; Jacoby 1983), the general trend of growing labor union accommodation to

Taylorism is clear. McKelvey (1952) describes how the relations between unions and scientific managers evolved through a series of stages.

[In the] history of the relations between scientific management and organized labor...three periods are discernable: [1] A period of unmitigated hostility between scientific management and organized labor, lasting from 1911 to 1915; [2] a period of transition during which the harsher features of scientific management were being softened and modified, extending from 1915 to 1917; [3] a period of greater mutual friendliness and understanding between the two, which began in 1919 [McKelvey 1952: 12 cited in Nyand 1996: 989].

One effect of the AFL's strong support for principles of scientific management and Taylorism was to foster distrust between rank and file workers and union officials, as union leaders seemed increasingly out of touch with traditional worker goals for autonomy, dignity, and workplace conditions that fostered worker creativity and democratic participation. Thus, the increased dedication of union leaders to professionalism at the workplace and to workplace management and control by professional elites deepened the schism between workers and union organizers, as well as between the union and worker cooperative movement—a movement dedicated at its heart to notions of worker ownership, autonomy and creativity at the workplace (Jacoby 1983).

#### *Class Compromise: Business Unionism and Collective Bargaining*

Another example of “business unionism” class compromise is the practice of professionalized collective bargaining, which emerged following the Great Depression as the most important role of a labor union in attaining fair contracts for work. Describing

this deeply institutionalized commitment to collective bargaining, Cobble (2010) describes the U.S. union movement as one of “Contract Unionism.” Collective bargaining for mutually agreeable workplace contracts can be called a form of class compromise, as Wright (2000) defines class compromise as “a situation in which some kind of *quid pro quo* is established between conflicting classes in which, in one way or another, people in each class make ‘concessions’ in favor of the interests of people in the opposing class.” (964). Collective bargaining is often defined as a “substitute for class struggle” (Holt 2007: 125-126), in that class struggle is waged in antagonistic ways and is meant to force the class opponent to make disagreeable concessions, whereas collective bargaining occurs in the context of labor peace, where professional representatives of each side come to mutual agreement as to reasonable mutual concessions. In a collective bargaining regime, the role of a union is to arrive at “contractual terms acceptable to business, and to enforce the terms of the contract, not to continue to struggle” (Holt 2007, 125-126).

Collective bargaining through “pure and simple unionism” does not imply that wage earners should assume control of industry or responsibility for financial management of a business. “It proposes that employees shall have the right to organize and to deal with the employer through selected representatives as to wages and working conditions.... [T]here is no belief held in the trade unions that its members shall control the plant or usurp the rights of the owners” (cited in Delmonte 1990, 15). In this way, collective bargaining has become a mechanism through which “workers can obtain a share of the rents through collective bargaining without paying the economic or political costs of obtaining a share of ownership.” Thus, the goal of unions is assumed to “be the highest possible wage for its members,” achieved by utilizing processes of collective bargaining with business owners,

bereft of broader concerns for enhanced workplace control or broader social transformation (cited in Delmonte 1990, 16).

For such reasons, labor economist John Commons regarded collective bargaining as important in mediating capital-labor relations, as he argued that a vital issue was "whether the labor movement should be directed towards politics or toward collective bargaining" (Weinstein 1968, 202), so as to secure better wages for average workers and a broader social peace. Commons went so far as to recommend new legislation empowering government advisory boards to forcibly "mediate capital-labor relations and channel protest into collective bargaining."<sup>30</sup> With the gradual identity change catalyzed by unions pursuing professional collective bargaining processes rather than contentious class conflict campaigns in the street, labor unions in the post-war era turned increasingly away from turn-of-the-century notions of demolishing the wage system or fundamentally transforming capitalism.

Although collective bargaining provides legitimacy to the union to represent workers as a class, it also limits the power of labor unions. Although the right of labor unions to exist was guaranteed in 1842, in the case of *Commowearth v. Hunt* (1842), the actual rights of labor unions to organize workers came with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in 1935 during the Roosevelt administration (Montgomery 1979, 158). Not only did the federal government reduce its repression of labor unions at that time, but the NLRA also "encouraged the development of collective bargaining between companies and labor unions" (163). The NLRA of 1935 clearly reshaped the nature of labor unions to

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<sup>30</sup> [http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/history\\_of\\_labor\\_unions.html](http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/history_of_labor_unions.html)

“prefer” collective bargaining as a channel “for worker representation and participation at workplace” (Kochan, Katz and Mower 1984, 3), as opposed to antagonistic actions such as workplace strikes or other work stoppages. Because of the fact that NLRA-regulated collective bargaining was based on the concept that “a duly certified union is to serve as the exclusive representative of workers,” and the concept that “duly certified unions” must have narrowly defined roles to work only on wages, hours and working conditions at specific worksites, the NLRA functioned to restrain labor union ability to organize broader political campaigns for social change (Kochan, Katz and Mower 1984, 3; see also DeMartino 1991).

Through a reliance on such limited and professionalized collective bargaining processes, unions typically focus on improving workplace conditions for their members, without challenging the ownership structure of capitalism itself, and without involvement in broader political campaigns for social change (Hyman 1971, Frege et al. 2011, 213). In fact, many scholars argue that “the willingness of unions and their members to behave ‘moderately’ provides a way to survive in capitalism. Some go even further, to argue 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). For example, Bello argued that corporate capital only became reconciled to the existence of labor unions under two conditions.

- 1.Unions must only voice demands that are realistic, that do not call capitalism into question, and that are negotiable.
- 2.Once an agreement has been bargained out, unions must stick to it and prevent the workers from breaking it (Gorz 1982, 401).

By working to insure that these conditions were met, labor unions became “permanent institutions holding legal rights and responsibilities: they became permanently structured and therefore hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations; they held tremendous bargaining power, but they also hold the power to discipline and to police reluctant workers” (Gorz 1982, 401). In this arrangement, there is no benefit to labor unions to jeopardize their self-interest by “stimulating demands and aspirations that are incompatible with the logic and the power structure of the capitalist system” (401). Rather, unions are advised by the business unionists to reject demands for enhanced worker control through militant strikes, or for democratic control of the workplace, and instead just work to “win the best wages and benefits for their members” (Engler 2010, 101).

As C. Wright Mills (1948, 8-9) classically described it, a union negotiator in this situation often acts as a “manager of discontent,” mobilizing workers in order to increase pressure on the employer, but also working to restrain workers from disruptive action in order to protect the bargaining relationship (Hyman 2001, 29; also see Cliff and Gluckstein 1986, 34). In this system, unions will often offer concessions to the employer so as to secure their place as “part of a new social partnership” by lessening antagonisms between labor and capital (Kelly 1998, 14). Professionalized collective bargaining is part of that social partnership as it serves to meet workers’ interests, but at the same time serves to meet employers’ interests in suppressing more contentious actions by workers. For capitalists, “bargaining over demands is cheaper than fighting over them,” Mills states (401). Thus collective bargaining becomes “a peaceable way” and an “effective way” for employers to achieve “expected materials and social dominance outcomes, avoiding frustration, and therefore, avoiding strikes” (Wheeler 1985, 279). In this way, a traditional

of professionalized collective bargaining processes, and union leaders' resistance to militant strikes, radical worker demands, and campaigns for broader social transformation, are part of the answer to the question of why industrial conflict is so rare in the U.S. (Wheeler 1985, 279).

With the growth of business unionism and collective bargaining, the number of United States labor strikes declined over time. In 1933, there were 1,695 work stoppages that involved 1,117,000 workers, and in 1934, there were 1,856 strikes involving 1,370,000 workers (Smith 2006, 104). The bloody textile strike and the Toledo Auto-Lite strikes of 1934 resulted in intervention from more than 900 national guard troops to rescue the strikebreakers (108). However, the number of recent labor strikes can't even be remotely compared to those years in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1980, there were only 187 labor strikes recorded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics—about 10% the number of strikes in 1933 and 1934. In 2013, strikes had declined even more dramatically, and there were only 15 labor strikes involving more than 1000 employees. The number of such labor strikes declined even more, to just 11 in 2014, the lowest in modern history (Kim, Phillips-Fein 2015).

The modern decline of labor strikes, even in an era of stagnant wages and increased instability of work, shows how labor unions in a business unionism tradition are fraught with ambivalence. As Hyman (1974) notes, unions are “on the one hand a protest and defense against the economic and human deprivations imposed on workers by their role in capitalist industry; on the other, a means of accommodation to the political economy of capitalist industry” (Hyman 1974, 257-258). As a result of this tension, collective bargaining can isolate unions from broader social causes, because of its instrumental nature

in accommodating workers to capitalism by serving union members' wage and benefit needs, even while unions steer away from notions of possible capital-labor antagonism, and remaining detached from other social movements in the community (DeMartino 1991, 35; Bray and Bray 2002, 124). Over the long run, this kind of professionalized unionism, detached from traditions of mobilized labor protest, has been correlated with a substantial decline of workplace actions in the U.S.

### **The State and Business Unionism**

The rise of job conscious business unionism, coupled with strong labor union support for scientific management theory and collective bargaining processes, while being facilitated by underlying American political culture and by the choices of union leadership, has also been influenced by state actions. While the ideology of job consciousness and lack of class consciousness may trace partially to American individualistic and pluralistic political culture, there have always been competing notions of radical class-conscious unionism in America. American political culture has never been wholly one-sided in this regard, and competing notions of proper labor movement approaches (business unionism versus radical class-based organizing) have always struggled for dominance. An underlying political culture of individualism has played its role in shaping the outcomes of this struggle, but in the end, the lack of class consciousness within the labor movement can also be attributed to the outcome of a political battle between those who sought class-based organizing and those who sought a labor movement based on business unionism principles.

Edlin (2005, 4) argues that "there is nothing natural or inevitable" about the rise of business unionism in the U.S, but rather the outcome was politically determined. Business

unionism emerged as “an outcome of power struggles between two competing models of unionism at a critical turning point in the reformation of the U.S. working class” (Edlin 2005, 4). Reynolds (2009) similarly argues that the rise of AFL occurred only as the AFL weathered political struggles and became “a survivor in this unfavorable environment,” as “experiments with political radicalism gave way to so-called ‘business unionism.’” Some scholars, such as Robert Michels (1949), have argued for the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ that inevitably bends large institutions like unions towards bureaucratized models without broad-based membership engagement.

However, Edlin (2005) turns away from such arguments regarding structural inevitability and instead argues that business unionism is an outcome of specific political battles and that choices of the state were critical in shaping labor unions to be more co-opted and compromising. Similarly, Poulantzas (1975) argued in his influential book, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, that the state consistently uses policy, laws and state policing mechanisms to weaken, fragment and disorganize the working class (see also Issac and Harrison and Lipold 2008, 10-11). As an example of this process, during the New Deal Era, the state was critical in limiting radicalism by labor unions. While the role of the state in the 1920s was relatively weak in that “the Coolidge administration took a decentralized approach in governing labor issues” and the state overall played a role as a generally passive manager or coordinator of labor conflicts, rather than resorting to legislative action, the state during the 1930s, under the leadership of Roosevelt, becomes more directly involved in shaping labor unions and the labor movement more generally (Robbins 2013, 323).

The upsurge of militant worker actions during the 1930s (e.g., The great strikes of 1934 in San Francisco, Toledo, and Minneapolis, and the sit-down strikes of 1936-1938 in rubber and auto industries), which were often led by labor leftists, communists, socialists, Trotskyists and other radicals, became alarming for the AFL and the state, and prompted creative state action to re-integrate disruptive labor into a reformed (but not transformed) political-economic system (Piven and Cloward 1977). Although many leftist organizers in the 1930s had the goal of establishing industrial unionism, building one large union that could unite the entire working class (an explicit goal of the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]), these goals quickly evaporated with growing labor compromises with the growing social welfare state. In particular, strong leadership by Roosevelt and his New Deal Compact played a crucial role in domesticating the once-militant CIO (La Botz 2010).

As a response to the Great Depression and revolutionary labor radicalism, Roosevelt built a strong New Deal assistance program to provide the poor with good wages, public assistance, and a variety of important public goods like health care and housing for the poor and elderly. Labor unions also enjoyed collective bargaining rights against capitalist owners in the New Deal. New Deal legislation such as the National Labor Relations Act

...provides that workers in those industries shall have the right to organize unions and to bargain collectively without interference by restraint or coercion by employers; that employers shall not have the right to dominate or interfere with the formation or administration of any labor organization, or contribute financial or other support to a union, or discriminate in any way against an employee for his activities or membership in a labor union (Clark and Simon 1938, 159).

Additional pro-worker legislation during this time included Davis-Bacon (1931), Norris-LaGuardia (1932), the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933), the Wagner

National Labor Relations Act (1935), Walsh-Healy (1936) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938)—all of which undermined the cause of labor radicalism. Such legislation contributed to the improvement of conditions for many workers following the New Deal era, in terms of wages, working hours, safety conditions, and prospects for retirement without abject poverty. But just as clearly, labor participation in the New Deal system came with an agreement that labor unions would not seek to revoke the current system of capitalism, such as through IWW/Knights of Labor visions of radically democratic workplaces. Moody (2012) argues that the New Deal programs of the 1930 therefore “defined the limits of the possible for most American labor leaders” (Elteren 2011). Devinatz (2012, 401) similarly claims such legislation “impeded worker self-organization as well as the establishment of social movement unionism from below”—with the result that the possibility of collaboration between labor unions and cooperatives in crafting radical alternatives to capitalism became much more difficult (see also Brody 2005; Benello 1982; Domhoff 1971; Reynolds 2009). For example, many of these legislative acts gave the state a critical role in the stoppage of labor strikes (McCammon 1994) as Issac, Harrison and Lipold (2008) argue as follows.

...legal intervention into workplace conflict through major legislative acts (e.g., the Wagner Act of 1935 and Taft-Hartley Act of 1947) and Supreme Court decisions have disorganized (by making illegal) precisely those forms of collective worker action that posed the greatest challenge to employer authority and capitalist institutions” (Issac, Harrison, and Lipold 35).

For example, the 1947 amendments to the Wagner Act, which were known as the Taft-Hartley Act, banned “sympathetic strikes, secondary boycotts, and mass picketing” (Montgomery 1976,166). The Taft-Hartley Act was detrimental in forging solidarity with

broader allies in the community as it banned “community-based strategies, such as boycotts, in which women had played a key role and by narrowly circumscribing labor’s political role” (Cited in Crain and Matheny 2001, 1794).

New Deal programs also confined labor unions to function as a negotiator and compromiser with employers through processes of collective bargaining. At the same time, elected union officers were required to sign affidavits that stated that they “were not members of the communist party” (Montgomery 1979, 166). Another important Taft-Hartley revision to the original Wagner Act was to restore the right of the state to seek “injunctions ordering strikers to return to their jobs” and to make labor unions liable for any damages made out of violation of written contracts, such as by initiating strikes in violation of contractual terms (166). The Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 also “limited the right to picket during strikes and required unions to open their records to federal investigators” (Lott 2014, 266). By imposing strict reporting requirements on unions, forbidding unions from engaging in solidarity strikes and allowing strike-breakers (“scabs”) to participate in union certification or decertification elections, the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 was detrimental to labor union power.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, citing that fact that New Deal legislation granted workers the legal rights to organize—under regulated conditions—Roosevelt urged workers to turn away from radical unionism and antagonistic approaches to the business community, as seen in a 1933 radio speech (Smith 2002; also see Preis 2015)<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://liberationschool.org/ch-13-democracy-on-the-job-not-under-capitalism/>

<sup>32</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt: "Fireside Chat (Recovery Program).," July 24, 1933. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14488>.

The workers of this country have rights under this law which cannot be taken from them, and nobody will be permitted to whittle them away but, on the other hand, no aggression is necessary now to attain these rights.... The principle that applies to the employer applies to workers as well and I ask you workers to cooperate in the same spirit.

Many labor union leaders joined in support of Roosevelt's New Deal program. During the war years, both the CIO and AFL offered "no strike" pledges for the duration of emergency, while Roosevelt offered unions a unique "maintenance of membership" arrangement in which all new employees of essential industrial automatically became union members.<sup>33</sup> Even communists encouraged their members to participate in Democratic party organizations by the late 1930s, and communists' support for FDR and the Democrats become important in shifting the direction of labor movement "back into traditional capitalist politics" (La Botz 2010). As the CIO became more active in supporting Roosevelt's reelection in 1936 through their political action committee, and as the unions entered the New Deal Coalition, however, labor unions over time lost their political independence and pre-war workplace militancy (La Botz 2010).

During the 1940s, the opening of the Cold War, accompanied by the ideology of anti-communism, played a role in further weakening the labor movement. During Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunts, the CIO and AFL joined to purge labor radicals such as the United Electrical Workers (UE) in the late 1940s and the 1950s (La Botz 2010). Some new unions, such as the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE-CIO) or the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW-AFL), adopted the rhetoric of building a new anti-communist CIO union. CIO leaders such as John Lewis

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<sup>33</sup> Wehrle, Edmund. n.d. "Labor Comes into its Own."  
<http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/se/6005/600503.html>

believed that “the working class upheavals of the mid-thirties presented a dangerous state of affairs” that might lead to “class consciousness” and “revolution” if left unchallenged (Lynd 1996, 8; cited in La Botz 2010).<sup>34</sup> Believing that the future of the CIO “depended upon a sympathetic government,” John Lewis supported Roosevelt’s re-election, despite his vision to create an independent labor party (Milton 1982, 92; also see Selfa 2012). After the merger of the CIO with AFL in 1955, the AFL-CIO cooperated with government in purging communists, most of whom were also the most militant labor leaders (Holt 2007, 122). As a result, unions during and after the New Deal Era became more of a business agent that served to cooperate with the state rather than an agent of labor radicalization.

In short, New Deal programs were “significant enough to help the working class adjust to, rather than overthrow, the existing system of corporate capitalism” (Greenstone 1977, 7). Although there were sporadic workers’ violent strikes even after capital-labor compromise during the New Deal, America’s labor organizations overall made strategic choices based on capital-labor compromises. As a result, organized labor after the World War became “part of the overall structure of ‘organized capitalism’ and was closely knit into the operations of welfare states” (Calhoun 2012, 58). The post-war domesticated labor movement was severely limited both by the state, and by labor leaders themselves, who sought to control labor union activism within the boundaries of collective bargaining. Often labor strikes were defined as illegal under the New Deal program, and labor unions’ direct alliance and compromise with the state resulted in declining strikes and weakened class consciousness among the working class.

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<sup>34</sup> Lewis is often regarded as a conservative union leader who refused communist ideology and “had much less interest in building a working class political party and no desire whatsoever to create a socialist America” ( La Botz 2010).

Thus, “the New Deal was profoundly conservative in that it aimed to protect, against violence from the Left or from the Right, the essentials of American Democracy” (Burgmann 2005, 76). In this way, despite the expansion of labor unions in the New Deal era, these unions were placed in a “subordinate position vis-a vis employers” and lost their power to maintain labor militancy based on capital-labor antagonism (Ness 2014).

### **Identity Politics and Pluralistic Labor Strategies**

While business unionism and a job consciousness ideology undermined class-conscious labor politics, especially after the turn of the century, the rise of identity politics since the 1960s has also been attributed with crowding out class politics within the labor politics. Though it has been argued that identity politics can undermine a unifying politics of class mobilization, many poststructural thinkers celebrate the rise of identity politics across society and within the labor movement itself, as it represents the kind of difference, diversity and pluralism that poststructuralists believe can open up spaces of liberation within a generally oppressive social order (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001).

In fact, the emergence of pluralistic social movements based on such identities as race and gender, has been celebrated by many as revitalizing a labor movement that had become increasingly moribund in the 1980s and 1990s (Frege and Kelly 2003). While past labor union practices were rather rigid and dogmatic, and operated within the compromised logic of business unionism, new union politics since the 1990s often have a different vision, embracing broader social and political goal to achieve social and economic justice. New leadership in the AFL-CIO, represented by President John Sweeney, has been critical in

embracing this new change. Although some unions, such as the American Federation of State, County and Multiple Employees (AFSCME) had already taken anti-discrimination measures to protect women, LGBTs, and the disabled at the workplace in the 1980s (Woods 1998, 44), it was John Sweeney and his teammates, Richard Trumka (who was committed to labor militancy) and Linda Thompson (who was committed to diversity and women's power at workplace), who were crucial in revitalizing the broader labor movement and introducing new strategies of identity organizing in the 1990s and beyond (Crain and Matheny 2001).

Sweeney, Trumka, Thompson, and their supporters, led labor to be increasingly supportive of identity organizing strategies in the last few decades, and they have been able to utilize an infrastructure of diverse AFL-CIO "constituency groups" to do so. One of the most important identity-organizing projects that the AFL-CIO embraced in the post-1960s era was to create nationwide identity caucuses, or "constituency groups" that included the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, the Labor Council on Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), and Pride at Work (PAW) for gay and lesbians (Garcia, Rueben 2002, 84).<sup>35</sup> Also, by creating a "Voice at Work" program that was designed to increase community engagement with diverse community and religious groups, the AFL-CIO increasingly made an effort to revitalize the labor movement through diversity outreach (Crain and Matheny 2001, 1785).

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<sup>35</sup> See the website, <http://www.prideatwork.org/resources/the-union-difference/>, for more information on different constituent groups within the AFL-CIO.

By 2005, the AFL-CIO reported that “the majority of new union members who are organizing through NLRB elections are women and people of color,” and that 29 percent of the total union membership (15 million people) were these groups (AFL-CIO 2005, 7). Relatedly, the AFL-CIO reported that union-authorizing win rates averaged 35% in units with a majority of white men, but are “53 percent in units with a majority of workers of color and 56 percent in unions with at least 75 percent workers of color” (AFL-CIO 2005, 7; also see Bronfenbrenner and Warren 2007). Reflecting these trends, in recent decades, union leadership among women of color also has increased, although overall numbers of remain low, leading AFL-CIO leaders to admit a need for better outreach to women and people of color (AFL-CIO 2005). As of 2015, women have a 10.6% union membership rate, while men have an 11.5% rate.

As for different racial/ethnic groups, statistics shows that black workers are more likely to join unions than white, Asian or Hispanic workers (2016 Bureau of Labor), while other research shows that people of color have more positive views of the role of labor unions in improving their life than do white workers (Milkman and Ot 2014, Kelly 1997). Data suggest that class and identity orientations—long thought to divide labor solidarity—might today actually be more likely to mutually reinforce resistance solidarity (whether on class, race or gender lines), than to undercut labor unity (Holvino 2008; Garcia 2002; Brenfenbrenner and Warren 2007).

Related to labor’s growing commitment to organizing along “identity” lines is growing labor creativity in going beyond the workplace organizing model and reaching out to neighborhood and community-based organizing campaigns. The new way of organizing workers—seen in such new labor institutions as the Partnership for Working Families—is

not to rely on labor unions solely, but also to create different forms of labor organizations such as worker centers and community alliances that connect union members to neighborhood organizing campaigns while introducing community activists to the labor movement. Whereas labor unions have traditionally organized at the workplace and focused on narrow job-related concerns (especially in the era of business unionism), community organizations such as worker centers have united union organizing with the delivery of social services, reaching out to workers' families in the community through direct service delivery, and advocacy campaigns focused on neighborhood quality of life issues--narrowing the traditional divide between work and home through efforts to organize the entire workers' family in the communities they live (Fine 2005, 2006, 2011; Black 2005; Tait 2005; Livengood 2013; Narro 2005-2006 ).

Influenced by the rapid growth of the worker center movement, growing from nearly none in 2000 to 130 in 2010 and 274 worker centers in 2013 (Aronowitz 2014, 132; see Fines 2006, 2009), the AFL-CIO has offered union membership to various community organizations since 2011 (such as the National Taxi Alliance (NTA), the National Domestic Workers' Alliance (NDWA), and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), hoping to work together with such groups to address a wide range of community issues.<sup>36</sup>

All of these changes within labor unions are leading labor leaders to increasingly see "class as one of many identities that workers hold, in addition to their other identities, such as race and gender" (Garcia 2002, 118). Labor unions in the United States are increasingly

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<sup>36</sup> See the AFL-CIO website, <http://www.aflcio.org/About/Allied-Organizations>, for the list of allied groups.

seeing race and gender not as separate from class identities, but instead as “intersecting” identities that can mobilize a comprehensive commitment to social change (Kurtz 1992, Brenfenbrenner 2007, Kelly 1997). This notion of integration between identity and class within organized labor has been regarded as an effort to go back to original labor radicalism that was based on uniting class with other identities (gender, race, ethnicity), as shown in the examples of the Knights of labor or the IWW. Lichtenstein argues that in “the hundred years that precede the Second World War, class rhetoric was as much the language of ethnicity as it was the other way round...in general a consciousness of ethnicity, race and class can hardly be divorced” (Burgmann 2005, 73).

Following the labor compromises of the New Deal, which served to elevate prospects for many in the white working class while neglecting the marginalization of other groups (for example, labor unionization rights were not extended to largely-Latino field hands in the southwest, nor to largely black sharecroppers in the south), the rise of new social movements in the 1960s played an important role in pushing labor unions to be more aligned with the progressive principle of identity movement organizing as a way to return to the old days of labor radicalism (i.e., the Knights of Labor or the IWW) and to overcome the imagery of “white working class men” dominating old labor unionism. In pushing labor unions, and society in general, to address long-neglected issues of race oppression in the United States, identity movements of the 1960s and beyond challenged racist tendencies in labor unions that undercut social solidarity.

For example, largely Latino farm workers were organized into the United Farm Workers (UFW) in California under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, largely-female teachers organized into the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education

Association, while black civil rights activists in the 1960s and 70s created internal union organizations, such as the Ad Hoc Committee of Steel Workers and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, to push for more racial consciousness within the labor movement itself. Such efforts to organize workers demonstrated a growing struggle to overcome business unionism and to create a new horizons in the labor movement (La Botz 2010). Though identity movements pushed established labor organizations to increasingly reach beyond white working class men in the 1960s and 70s, these efforts were never a central strategy of the AFL-CIO until more recent years—which have witnessed a dramatic upsurge of union activity to reach out to the increasing numbers of non-unionized immigrant laborers in the workforce (among other efforts to connect to an increasingly diverse workforce).

In short, the celebration of diversity and pluralistic labor strategies such as partnerships with worker centers and community organizations can be positive developments in building new patterns of labor solidarity. As Linda Chavez-Thompson claims: “when we let our differences divide us, our enemies win. When we respect our differences and at the same time celebrate all that we have in common, we win” (cited in Woods 1998, 44). In this regard, “diversity is not the enemy of solidarity” as Bronfenbrenner and Warren (2007) argue, but rather solidarity can be built among diverse constituents and amid diverse group identities.

#### *Potential Clashes between Class and Identity Politics*

Although the proliferation of diverse identity movements within the labor movement has helped revitalize the labor movement, there has been underlying tension between

traditions of class-based versus identity-based organizing. Certainly the Old Left and the New Left clashed over ideological difference on class and identity politics. According to Zaretsky (2014), The Old Left believed that “the emancipation of man from nature depended on building up collective institutions such as trade unions and on gaining influence and ultimately control over the state,” while the New Left embraced the diversity of identity politics and was defined by the great mass movements of the time: “civil rights, anti-war and feminism” (27). These “New Left” social movements have also been called “New Social Movements” (NSM): “this term covers a broad range of movements which originated in the 1960s and 1970s, including those against the oppression of women, blacks and lesbians and gays, as well as those organized around ecology, disarmament and a variety of other issues” (Smith 1994).

One major cause of tension between the New Left and the Old Left has to do with different views on the role of labor unions and the labor movement in general. While many in the Old Left regarded the New Left as “divisive,” New Left activists that emerged from an array of new social movements tended to see labor unions and labor movements as a “thing of the past,” as they viewed labor unions as part of an old power establishment “associated with a conservative defense of the status quo and white male privilege” (Crain and Matheny 2001, 1782; also see Zweig 2000). As unions were mostly made up of white men during the early days of the New Left, some of the antagonism toward labor unions and the labor movement had to do with an image of white male “white working class solidarity” amid male-dominated labor unions which had exclusionary racial practices (Crain and Matheny 2001, 1776).

In turn, these images of union working class politics being the exclusive domain of white men also led many in new social movements of the New Left to demonize and isolate the white working class men who were mobilized most often by unions on issues of work and class. Zweig (2000), in *Working Class Majority*, argues that:

This has happened in two ways. Sometimes the working class has come to mean white men. This is most often the case among those stuck with the image of workers on the construction sites of the sixties and seventies. Other times, in the triumvirate “race, class, and gender” class has come to mean “the poor,” who are in turn said to be women and minorities. In these formulations, white men are either irrelevant or the enemy and white working class men are stripped of their legitimate standing among those who suffer wrongs in this capitalist society. This type of politics is a recipe for alienation and anger among white men, dividing the working class and creating needless hostility towards the justifiable demands of women and minorities (Zweig 2000, 54).

The post-1960s New Left was often opposed to the traditional ways of labor unions, which were seen as excessively bureaucratic and dominated by white labor leaders who ignored diversity concerns in their organizing campaigns. The ideological difference between the New Left and establishment unionists was real. As an extreme case, AFL-CIO leader George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, was set against the rise of the civil rights movement and the gay and lesbian rights movement. Meany openly criticized the New York delegation to the 1972 Democratic National Convention, bemoaning that “They’ve got six open fags and only three AFL-CIO representatives!” (Walsh 2010). As another source of tension, bureaucratic labor leaders in AFL-CIO, such as George Meany, a product of business unionism, resisted “diversity” campaigns in the labor movement, because he chose to align the U.S. labor movement “with American business and its path of foreign expansions” (Mattson 2003, 35).

Thus, establishment unionists were more “aligned with, and invested in the status quo” (Mattson 2003, 35), while the New Left aimed to diversify social movements and go beyond workplace struggles. For its part, both establishment union leaders and intellectual thinkers of the Old Left Marxist tradition—though they were alienated from each other—believed that the New Left and its new social movements had replaced solidary notions of class politics with diverse and divided notions of identity politics, which only weakened the labor movement by erasing the concept of “class” from the labor movement. Thus, while New Left activists and others in the “identity politics” tradition have argued that a broadened focus on gender, ethnicity and race could overcome the staid limitations of “business unionism” within the labor movement, both “business unionism” leaders and Old Left labor theorists have often been skeptical of the way by which diverse social movements have undermined solidarity within the labor community and hollowed out the radical concept of “class consciousness” as an anti-capitalist organizing principle.

### *Philosophical Debates on Identity vs. Class*

There is robust scholarly attention to the ways by which labor movements have incorporated new identity concerns in their organizing approaches, and the ways by which identity movements have considered or incorporated notions of “class” in their own approaches. A key question is to what extent do class and identity movements intersect or synergetically co-exist, and to what extent do these two organizing approaches undermine each other? Although co-existence of both class and identity as vital factors undergirding social movements is theoretically possible, the reality has been quite different in the U.S. In particular, the rapid growth of identity politics of the 1960s has brought many concerns

to those who believe that identity politics have crowded out the notion of class from the labor movement.

Silver (2014) argues that “the dominant approach in the social sciences since the 1980s had been to assure that labour and class-based mobilisations are a relic of the past” (Silver 2014, 47). Silver’s point is that many social movement literatures have dropped the word, “class” from their emphasis, dismissing the concept of capitalism altogether in understanding social movements, while at the same time, “placing labor movements outside its field of inquiry” (Silver and Karatasli 2015,1). In both the academy and in the movement community, “class no longer has the same attraction that it once had as an explanatory category” (Eder 1993, 6), leading Silver and Karatasli (2015) to argue for the return of class and capitalism discourse back to social science literature.

Scholars offer different explanations as to why class has been left out of social movement practice and scholarship. Alain Touraine’s *Post-Industrial Society* (1968) argued that trade union movements and socialist politics in Europe have been “pushed into the background by new social movements oriented to non-class issues such as feminism, peace or the environment or regionalist movements combining both traditional and new preoccupations with a sub-national identity” (cited in Outhwaite 1994, 708). In these new social movements following the 1960s, the major political issues, according to Eder (1993) are “a politics of the middle classes.” Steinmetz (1994) similarly regards new social movements as “an outgrowth of the interests of the new middle class” (Kitschelt 1985, 278). This emphasis on the middle class within new social movements has also meant a shift from the emphasis on conflict over control of the means of production, as classical

Marxists would promote, to concern over “cultural expression and the maintenance of social identities” (Outhwaite 1994, 709).

In similar fashion, Inglehart (1977) argued that politics has shifted from a focus on materialistic issues (bread-and-butter issues) to “post- materialist politics more concerned with democratization and the quality of life” (cited in Outhwaite 1994, 708). A dominant theme in social science theory, in fact, has been to trace the shift from structure-based theory to cultural analysis, using various immaterial factors as the major topics of concern in analyzing society and politics. The study of culture has also influenced social movement theory as well. While traditional social movement theory focused heavily on class-based resistance movements, new social movement literature has shifted to exploring identity and issue-based movements.

As Hetland and Goodwin (2013, 91) point out, if we look to the enduring classics of the social movement literature from the 1970s and early 1980s, the dynamics of capitalism formed a central part of their theoretical frameworks, including undergirding even those studies focused on understanding what were largely *non-class-based* movements such as the US civil rights movement (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1977; McAdam 1982); second wave feminism (Klein 1984; Fraser 2013), and the LGBT movement (D'Emilio 1983; Valocchi 1999). However, more recent social movement literature, such as recent LGBT movement analysis, typically pays little attention to issues of “political economy and class,” and instead focuses on “issues of individual and collective identity construction and emotion” (Hetland and Goodwin 2013, 92). We can call this the “cultural turn” in social movement theory—a turn that has demoted the study of political-economic structures and processes of class formation into something of a darkened side alley.

Yet another explanation for the disappearance of “capitalism” and “class consciousness” in social movement theory and practice relates to the increasing fragmentation and incoherence of the capitalist system itself. According to Manuel Castells (1997, 354, 360), the definition of work itself and the role of the labor movements has been transformed with the advent of the decentralized “information age.” In a globally fragmented post-Fordist economic system, the labor movements’ ability to act as “a major source of social cohesion and workers’ representation” has steadily eroded (see also Silver and Karatasli 2015). As workers have lost their ability to transform the placeless world of global capitalism, Castells (1997) argues that the direction of social movements also has shifted to “non-class-based identity movements.”

In yet another tradition, scholars argue that the reasons for the disappearance of class in the social movement literature since the 1970s have to do with a new political reality where labor unions have lost power on the ground (Hetland and Goodwin 2013; also see Barker 2013). For example, Cobble (2005) argues that the reason academics do not pay attention to class issues is because as workers lost power in society at large in the 1970s and 1980s, “and no longer appeared capable of achieving the heroic revolution that their armchair observers desired, they became a less attractive object of study” (Cobble 2005, 56). As an alternative to focusing on an increasingly enervated labor movement that is incapable of addressing the complex challenges of broader society, Cobble (2005) argues for the need of analysis that “reflects the multidimensional and multileveled class structures in which we move today” (56).

Thus, the rise of identity politics, as Therborn (2008) argues, reflects the nature of an increasingly complex and transformed society where a class-based politics that focuses on

*necessity* can no longer apply to the reality of post-class-based politics since the 1980s where “choice” based issues have become more salient (Hetland and Goodwin 2013, 96). Thus, ‘ new’ social movements that revolve around ‘ non-material’ or ‘ post-materialist’ issues, including lifestyle, identities and ‘recognition’ have replaced old social movements that revolve around the issue of class in the labor movement (Hetland and Goodwin 2013, 92; also see Habermas 1987).

Many in the Marxist tradition have found this “cultural turn” towards a politics of democratic inclusion to be ultimately disempowering of a labor politics of industrial liberation. Bevir and Reiner (2012) argue that the failure of radical alternatives in the United States in the 1960s can be traced partly to a shift of movement activists away from “industrial democracy or working conditions” and towards notions of cultural liberation and broader inclusion through democratic pluralism (184). “American pluralists are mostly concerned with accommodating difference and ensuring inclusion,” Bevin and Reiner (2012, 184) argue. “Feminism, multiculturalism and the civil rights movements all pushed pluralists in that direction.”

But by pushing in that direction, a class-based focus on workplace justice becomes subsidiary. Piore (1995) argues that identity politics has entered into the legal realm and weakened the collective power of labor unions by emphasizing individual rights. For example, Piore (1995) describes identity politics as rightfully responding to stigmatization in the workplace through a focus on individual rights, but also argues that “these new groups have also been fostered by governmental and business policies designed [to] escape the constraints of existing social structures, particularly unions” (19) and their collective bargaining processes. Piore (1995) argues:

Before employment disputes were resolved through collective bargaining and trade unions were the only officially recognized norm of group representation. Legislated labor standards existed, but they were an extension of the system of collective bargaining. Trade unions were the key actors in the politics that governed the evolution of such standards and the standards expanded, when they expanded at all, only in response to union pressure. Title VII created a second mechanism for the pursuit of employment rights, one responsive to a different set of group affiliations.... Title VII itself became a model for addressing the employment grievance not simply of blacks and women but of all the socially stigmatized and underprivileged (Piore 1995, 57).

Thus, Piore argues that “the emergence of this second system of employment rights has diverted people who might otherwise have sought to organize unions and has encouraged them to seek [judicial remedy] instead, thus weakening the labor movement” (Piore 1995, 57). In this way, the individualistic claims of identity politics have arguably undermined the need for collective unionization and have undermined the trade union movement. Because these identity groups are not defined by their relationship to economic structures, Piore argues, they are not consistent allies in the labor movement’s struggle to reform capitalism.

Instead of focusing on class position as uniting working people of all stripes against an oppressive capitalist system, Bevir and Reiner (2012, 183) argue that poststructuralists “focus on identity other than class” and emphasize the importance of different identities in a world where class is “but one process among the many that constitute social life” (Resnick and Wolff 1987, 115). An important challenge that these alternative identities pose to notions of class solidarity is the fact that these identities commonly express themselves as “different” from others—not as existing in class solidarity with others. For instance, feminist scholar Nancy Fraser has noted the importance of the “recognition of difference” within traditions of “identity politics” (Burgmann 2005, 2). Jeffrey Escoffier

(1985) similarly argues that “the politics of identity must also be a politics of difference... The politics of difference affirms limited, partial being” (Smith 1994). For them, the rise of identity politics signals the end of the era of “universal discourse” and “lays the basis for building a new left based on a different theory” (Smith 1994). Laclau and Mouffe highlight multiple antagonisms in different spheres of society, which requires the “autonomisation of the spheres of struggle” (Smith 1994).

In this theory, “the working class plays no central role, and the class struggle is but one of many articulations of antagonism” (Smith 1994). Through such notions of fragmented and “autonomous spheres of struggle”—and spheres in which “the working class plays no central role”—there is clearly the potential for deep schisms with those who focus on identity politics as the source of the most important oppressions, and class-based mobilization as the means to address them. Consider, for example, the analysis of Jeffrey Escoffier (1985) who summarized identity politics as follows: “the politics of identity must also be a politics of difference... The politics of difference affirms limited, partial being” (Escoffier 1985, 149). For Escoffier, arriving at this conclusion involves a conscious repudiation of working class agency, and an accompanying sense of demoralization at the 'flawed vision' of socialism:

We are now in a period of decline and discouragement. We have no objective guarantee that the working class recognises capitalism as the cause of the injustice and inequalities of American life. The recent history of the American working class clearly shows that it lacks the organisational and political capacity to struggle effectively for the fundamental transformation of society (Escoffier 1986, 319).

Facing this extreme criticism, many scholars who align themselves with class politics see identity politics as an inevitable enemy that has crowded out class politics. Whether or

not “identity” itself has crowded out “class” from social movement activism, the clear task appears to be how to bring the notion of class back to discussions of social movements in general and the labor movement in particular. As Burgmann (2005) argues “we need a class theory that recognizes the diversity of the working classes; but a cross-class movement will never dismantle class hierarchies” (74). Thus, the rise of identity politics in the labor movement in the U.S. has introduced new opportunities to reach out to diverse groups and build a new labor movement, but it also introduces the challenges of disempowering the labor movement by hollowing out notions of “class” itself, and turning activists away from a focus on the capitalist system and towards a focus on multiple, even conflictual, identities.

### **Conclusion**

Labor unions in the U.S. have shown weak class consciousness, due to the U.S. “liberal tradition” of a middle class ethos, due to the pluralistic nature of the labor movement itself, and due to traditions of business unionism which rose out of mid-century’s struggle between labor militancy and labor compromise—a struggle which ended with organized labor compromising with capital through the New Deal system of business unionism. Labor leaders in the New Deal era chose capital-labor accommodation strategies by focusing on job consciousness rather than class consciousness. Though cultural traditions of individualism and a middle class ethos certainly shaped these choices, the state was also critical in shaping the nature of labor unions to be less confrontational and to restrict their labor activism to state-approved processes offered as part of the New Deal

Compact between capital and labor (e.g., tightly regulated collective bargaining processes, and abolition of sympathy strikes). The rise of identity politics of the 1960s also played a role in creating a labor movement based on pluralism principles and on a language of individual rights and inclusive democracy, but with a diminished focus on class solidarity. In criticizing white male dominated business unionism, identity politics opened up new opportunities for labor unions to be inclusive and more diverse, fostering broader coalitions with diverse community groups. However, in its focus on diversity and “autonomous spheres” of struggle in which class plays no central role, identity politics also can undermine traditional bases of labor power.

For this multiplicity of reasons, labor unions in the U.S. continue to lack a strong notion of class. While the realities of a complex society and the demise of communist society played a role in minimizing the role of class and class consciousness in general, the hidden tension between class and identity politics today resembles the different ontological views within Marxism discussed earlier in this project. While classical Marxists would align with class politics more so than with identity politics, arguing that “class consciousness” is the common glue to strengthen the working class and, ultimately, to overcome other forms of oppression (such as racism or sexism), poststructuralists align with identity politics and emphasize a respect for the difference and diversity among social groups as a way to create effective social movements that go beyond the labor movement. While this ongoing tension between class and identity politics divides the intellectual left, the U.S. labor union movement itself has not shown many signs of bringing notions of class back to the labor movement, as it is filled with middle class rhetoric that undermines notions of class conflict between labor and capital.

Although many unionists see “class as one of many identities that workers hold, in addition to their other identities, such as race and gender” (Garcia 2002, 118), the challenge of how to articulate the central importance of ‘class’ as a core identity persists. Pritchett observes that “class identification will rise when institutions are created, or revitalized, that make arguments about working-class exploitation central to their program,” but it is doubtful as to what extent labor unions believe in presenting working class exploitation as a key issue (Burgmann 2005, 72). Until U.S. unions move beyond traditions of business unionism, and attachment to a “middle class ethos,” it is unlikely that they will “reassert the significance of class” in a way that working class issues might “become properly incorporated within future movements for social and economic justice” (72). And without such changes, the U.S. labor movement might be described as a labor movement without class, something of an oxymoron from a classical Marxist perspective, but perhaps well-situated to respond to poststructural calls for diverse practices of economic innovation in local communities.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **FROM RADICAL TO BUSINESS COOPERATIVISM: WORKER COOPERATIVES IN THE U.S.**

Shaped by the cultural and institutional milieu in which unions have operated, the general nature of the U.S. labor union movement over the last 100 years has been a business unionism pursuit of workplace-specific, individualistic wage-gains that has limited the transformational potentials of collective labor action. How has that same cultural and institutional milieu shaped the trajectory of worker-owned cooperatives in America? Just as they shaped the union movement, these factors have shaped a landscape of cooperatives infused with an individualistic, business-like pursuit of members' pecuniary self-interest and largely disassociated from broader campaigns for social change.

Just as we use “business unionism” to describe individualistic union labor empowerment strategies, so shall the same patterns be termed “business cooperativism” here. This chapter will explore how and why worker-owned cooperatives in America, like labor unions, moved from a period of radical opposition to capitalism in the late 1800s into a period of job-conscious accommodation to the broader economic system. As unions and worker-owned cooperatives today increasingly build new partnerships to confront growing economic challenges for labor, the lessons of this chapter will shed light on the likely trajectory of the new partnerships to come.

### **Radical Roots: The Class-Conscious Cooperative**

Labor unions and worker owned cooperatives share radical roots as a direct-action, worker-empowerment response to the “emergence of industrial capitalism and the triumph of laissez-faire ideology” (Wetzel and Gallagher 1987, 517). While it is well known that unionization efforts dramatically expanded during the mid- to late-1800s, with the founding of several storied labor organizations such as The National Labor Union (1866), The Knights of Labor (1869), the American Federation of Labor (AFL, 1886) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, 1905), what is less well known is the close affinity between many of these union movements and the concept of worker owned cooperatives.

Like labor unions, a founding idea of cooperatives is “rooted in the struggles of working people to emancipate themselves from wretched conditions” (Thornley 1981, 10). Influential Theorist John Dunlop argued that both institutions were activated by “common ideologies” of resistance to the existing “industrial relations system” (Dunlop 1958, cited in Wetzel and Gallagher 1987, 518; see also Staples 1954). The alliance between unions and coops during the early industrial era led to substantial organizational alliances and shared initiatives. During the mid- to late-1800s, when trade unionists “aimed at nothing less than the supersession of the capitalist employer,” a number of cooperative workshops were set up by trade unions, “as a means of affording, to a certain number of [their] members, a chance of escape from the conditions of wage-labour” (Gibson-Graham 2003, 320; also see Wright 2014 ). Cooperatives were often formed to support striking union members, or to help them survive when strikes had failed, providing workers with an

alternative to starvation when they were displaced from their workplace (Wright 2014: 74; also see Curl 2009).

Examples include a union-catalyzed Philadelphia shoemakers cooperative manufactory in 1806, several tailor's cooperatives in Buffalo, NY in the 1850s, and many union cooperatives of "barrel-markers, silver-platers, puddlers and boilers, as well as iron-molders" in New York City (Curl 1980; also see Wright 2014: 74). Iron molders near Cincinnati who went on strike during the winter of 1847-1848 set up various cooperative stores and foundries (Foner 1947: 178-180, cited in Estey 2011: 350). New England Tailors united to found the cooperative Boston Tailors Associative Union in 1849. Pittsburgh expanded its iron worker cooperatives during this period, and Boston, Philadelphia and Providence all saw seamstresses form worker cooperatives as well (Giddings 1888; Foner 1947, 180-181, cited in Estay 2011: 350; also see Curl 2009). The president of the International Molder's Union at this time, William Sylvis, who was one of the founders for the National Labor Union, was a vigorous advocate for worker ownership and worker control over production "to protect union members against the predations of privately owned capital" (Estey 2011, 351). He led the "International Molder's Union" to change its name to the "Iron Molders' International Protective and Co-operative Union of North America (Foner 1947: 419-420, cited in Estey 2011, 351).

The ground-level alliances that emerged between unions and worker cooperatives during this era did not go unnoticed by labor theorists, including the Marxists of that era. Belgian delegates to the Brussels conference of the First International in 1868 pointed to such developments and argued that:

The embryos of the great workers' companies will one day replace the capitalist companies with their thousands of wage-earners...As has been shown by recent strikes, union funds may be used for setting up co-operative productive society...thus forming a NEW CORPORATION [that will] be organised equitably, founded on mutuality and justice and open to all.

The most powerful examples of U.S. unions and cooperatives coming together to build a cooperative alternative to capitalist relations are the efforts of the Knights of Labor and the International Workers of the World (Voss 1993, Schneirov 1998, Wright 2014). First organizing in 1869 under the principle of labor unity, the Knights united a broad cross-section of American workers, skilled and unskilled, white and black, male and female, catholic and protestant. The Knights of Labor reached a membership of 750,000 at the local and national level by the end of 1886, marking what Kim Voss calls a critical “moment of working-class formation” (Leikin 2005, xix).

The goal was to establish “cooperative institutions such as will tend to supersede the wage system, by the introduction of a cooperative industrial system” (Curl 2009: 75-761; Leikin 1993; Wright 2014). Kim Voss (1993) describes how the Knights of Labor were America’s very first sustained “class-based alliance,” rather than craft unionism which was based on skill divides. Montgomery (1979) similarly describes how the increasingly class-conscious Knights of Labor organized broad sectoral labor struggles against the notion of capitalism itself, and that “the sectoral struggles of workers involved more people than ever and often met more violent resistance from employers and the state than ever before” (Montgomery 1980: 211). Between 1881 and 1900, approximately 23,000 strikes occurred

in railroad, steel, mining industries which often required federal intervention to stop the labor strikes.<sup>37</sup>

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was one of the most well-known national strikes, in which workers launched a strike in response to a 10 percent wage cut by one of the four largest railroad companies, Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The strike became national in scope, drawing nearly 100,000 workers into numerous rail strikes across the nation, and at one point stopping half the nation's rail freight from moving.<sup>38</sup> The Great Railroad of 1877 resulted in the deaths of over 100 people, the intervention of hundreds of federal troops, millions of dollars in profit loss to the railroads, and brutal hardship for striking workers.<sup>39</sup> Knights of Labor leaders argued that the challenges of the 1877 Railroad Strike proved that “new forms of organization were necessary to incorporate the unskilled laborers and factory hands who had taken to the streets and presented demands without formal organization” (Schneirov 1998, 76).

As a result of the 1877 Railroad Strike, Knights leaders decided not to be a secret organization but to take a more active role in “creating the kind of organizations that could counter employers and even challenge the new industrial companies.”<sup>40</sup> In specific, the Knights redoubled their commitment to building worker-owned cooperatives as an immediate alternative to capitalism (Voss 1993; 75-76), as was announced in the preamble to the constitution of the Knights of Labor from that time.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.apstudynotes.org/us-history/topics/rise-of-unions/>.

<sup>38</sup> Domhoff, G. William. “The Rise and Fall of labor unions in the U.S.” Retrieved on April 1, 2015 at [http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/history\\_of\\_labor\\_unions.html](http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/history_of_labor_unions.html)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

The overarching purpose of the organization is to associate our own labors; to establish co-operative institutions such as will tend to supersede the wage system, by the introduction of a cooperative industrial system (cited in Wright 2014, 83).

In this way, the Knights of Labor was a broad-based labor movement of labor unions as well as cooperatives (Leikin 1999, 1). Although there had been many attempts to set up cooperatives in the 1830s, they were typically small in scale and only seen as “a way to uphold customary production practices and to provide artisans with competencies,” rather than as a radical alternative to the existing capitalist system altogether (Voss 1993, 83). As opposed to this small, artisanal view of the role of coops, the Knights of Labor argued at the annual convention of the National Trade Union (NTU) in 1836 that cooperatives could entirely “end the division of workingmen into employers and journeymen,” and provide a comprehensive alternative to wage-slavery in the service of an industrial boss (Voss 1993, 33; Leikin 2005; Curl 2009, 75-76).

Another vital labor organization of the Pre-New Deal era that demonstrated the possibility of union-coop collaboration was the International Workers of the World (IWW). Like the Knights of Labor, the IWW supported cooperative movements as a way to build worker solidarity and transcend capitalism by altering the wage system and eliminating the need for non-worker management. Not all scholars share this view that the IWW offered substantial support for the idea of worker owned cooperatives. Chris Wright (2014), for instance, argues that “from the 1890s to the 1930s, worker cooperatives were almost entirely ignored by the labor movement. Neither the AFL nor the IWW had much interest in them; nor did the socialist or the community parties, nor even the Cooperative League” (Wright 2014, 94).

Conclusions like this might be driven by the fact that labor scholars often examine the theories and strategies of broad-based industrial organizing that groups like the IWW participated in on the state-wide or national level, without careful enough attention to the myriad ground-level partnerships that the IWW created with small scaled worker cooperatives, advancing goals of worker empowerment in specific places. The fact is that in ground-level practice, the IWW in the U.S. embraced worker cooperatives as the key to altering the capitalist wage system (Clark and Simon 1938, 76). In America, at the IWW's very foundation in 1905, trade unionists from all over the country united to declare that

...the growth and development of this organization will build up within itself the structure of an Industrial Democracy—a Workers' Co-Operative Republic—which must finally burst the shell of capitalist government, and be the agency by which the working people will operate the industries, and appropriate the products to themselves (cited in Sullivan 1909, 27).

The role of labor unions was critical in the IWW's efforts to challenge capitalism on an industry-wide scale. Many socialists, communists and anarchists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century viewed labor unions as “a means of destroying the capitalist system and of creating a new economic and social order” (Clark and Simon 1938, 70). Thus, industrial unionism began to merge to organize “all the workers engaged in any one plant into a single local union,” as opposed to the craft unionism of AFL (70). Industrial unionism was appealing to many radicals because of the idea that a large working class organization, organized under one roof, would provide a foundation to make the “unions political in character and use them to fight the rapidly developing capitalist system” (73; Oreilly and Hawthorne 2011, 4).

In seeking to build an entirely new social and economic order, the IWW relied on local, worker cooperatives to provide a model of the possibilities. Thus, when the W

utilized strategies such as “the quick and unplanned strike” (Clark and Simon 1938, 76), cooperatives were often set up during the period of labor strikes to provide workers with the experience of autonomy beyond the workplace and to provide for daily survival needs of workers. On a bigger scale, and as a specific strategy of advancing the broad goal of “worker direction of industry,” the IWW incorporated the idea of “the Co-operative Commonwealth.” A manifesto issued in January 1905 described the goal as an organization which would “build up within itself the structure of an Industrial Democracy--a Workers' Co-Operative Republic--which must finally burst the shell of capitalist government, and be the agency by which the working people will operate the industries, and appropriate the products to themselves.”

The IWW’s idea of “the Co-operative Commonwealth” relates to Marx’s anarchistic ideas of a society where workers’ self-organization is strengthened. Just as Marx viewed workers’ self-organization, and the “economism” of anarcho-syndicalism as the key to replacing capitalism, the IWW also supported anarcho-syndicalism, through which self-organization and self-activity of worker cooperatives were encouraged (Wright 2014, 244). Anarcho-syndicalist, Emma Goldman, for instance, viewed worker cooperatives as a “revolutionary form” and some IWW inspired socialist labor parties at the time organized worker cooperatives. Vermont’s Socialist Labor Party Hall, known as “Barre’s Old Labor Hall” and built in 1900 by Italian immigrants, operated a Union Cooperative Store in the basement of the Hall, providing foods and ingredients for Italian immigrants.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.uvm.edu/~histpres/HPJ/NR/barrelabor/statement.html>

The creation of such cooperative institutions of labor empowerment were built on a notion that through cooperative alliance, it was possible to build a voluntary network of worker's institutions that could challenge the capitalist system from below. The founders of the modern workers cooperative movement, Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, advanced just such cooperative ideas starting in the 1860s. Concerned with the abuses of industrial capitalism and free trade, Owen and Fourier envisioned a world of cooperation—such as Owen's New Harmony, Indiana utopian commune--where a new social world could be realized through setting up series of “voluntary” cooperatives (Cole 1944; Crosser 1941, 180).

Radical labor groups like the Knights of Labor and IWW which sought to fundamentally transform capitalism shared such goals of transformational “working class republicanism” (Leikin 1999; Gourevitch 2015). These labor groups were not organizing primarily to improve workplace conditions, such as by improving workers' wages or reducing working hours, rather they had a more radical view that the wage system itself was unnatural because it violated natural principles of freedom and reduced the worker to the status of rented animal. Therefore, unions and worker cooperatives found common alliance against the existing capitalist system.

### **State Action and the Rise of Business Cooperativism: The New Deal Legacy**

Chapter five of this dissertation detailed the process by which the rise of New Deal state institutions, together with a post-war landscape of robust economic growth, created fertile terrain in which deep strains of American individualism flowered into a repudiation

of pre-war radical labor movements. Just as the American labor union movement was influenced both by individualistic political culture and by the enduring legacy of state action shaped by the New Deal, so too has the cooperative movement been shaped by those same forces to be job-focused, rather than a politically charged movement of worker control and social transformation. Despite its significant contribution to creating better living conditions for average workers by supporting various housing and consumer cooperatives, for example, the New Deal program undermined radical visions of worker cooperatives replacing wage-based capitalism, and also worked to ensure that cooperative movements, wherever they did emerge, remained a job-consciousness focused movement, without political implications.

As a response to the Great Depression and revolutionary labor radicalism, Roosevelt built a strong New Deal assistance program to provide the poor with good wages, public assistance, and a variety of public goods like health care and housing for the poor and elderly. The Knights/IWW conception of needing to build a self-sufficient cooperative community of worker-owners to oppose the barbaric capitalist system withered in the face of the growing welfare state, which resulted in a declining interest in cooperatives (Leikin 1996). Labor unions also enjoyed collective bargaining rights against capitalist owners in the New Deal (guaranteed under such as acts as the NLRA), so that the sense of a need for cooperative ownership of businesses was further undermined.

Clearly, conditions for many workers in the post New Deal era substantially improved in terms of wages, working hours, safety conditions, and prospects for retirement without abject poverty. But just as clearly, labor participation in the New Deal system came with an agreement that neither labor unions nor worker cooperatives would seek to revoke the

current system of capitalism, such as through IWW/Knights of Labor visions of radically democratic workplaces. For example, while Roosevelt's programs supported rural, farmer and consumer cooperatives during the Great Depression (under the Federal Emergency Relief Act) "urban cooperatives were not a significant part of the programs. Above all, industrial worker cooperatives were excluded" (Curly 2010, 19; see also Wright 2014). During this time, as well, California imposed strict rules on "self-help worker cooperatives," (Jones and Schneider 1984, cited in Cook 2009, 6) with a rule that no cooperatively produced goods could be sold on the open market, in competition with privately produced goods. As a result, during the Depression years, "a self-help economy was created with functioned separately from the open-market economy. These rules reflected the government's desire to allow the cooperative sector to operate as long as the free market was not disturbed" (Jones and Schneider 1984, 59).

Challenging this system was an uphill battle. Although Upton Sinclair won the Democratic Party nomination to run for governor of California and supported the development of worker cooperatives as part of his "End Poverty in California" (EPIC) campaign, his goals were undermined by national leaders in his own party. For example, when Sinclair appealed to President Roosevelt for endorsement to turn "idle California farmland and factories into a network of worker cooperatives," Roosevelt withheld his endorsement, helping to doom Sinclair's campaign (Rothschild 2009, 1033).

Moody (2012) concludes from these facts that the New Deal programs of the 1930s "defined the limits of the possible for most American labor leaders," and that the possibility of collaboration between labor unions and cooperatives under such limitations became much more difficult (see also Elteren 2011). Thus, New Deal programs were "significant

enough to help the working class adjust to, rather than overthrow, the existing system of corporate capitalism” (Greenstone 1977, 7). With the rise of the AFL, which accepted and participated in the legal arrangements created by the New Deal, the labor movement largely made the “choice” for accommodation, which necessitated a growing estrangement between the forces of business unionism and the vision of meaningful cooperative control of the workplace.

Telling evidence of the growing estrangement is that the number of AFL resolutions supporting or collaborating with worker cooperatives shrank dramatically in the New Deal era. In 1917, the AFL strongly endorsed and sponsored the cooperative movement, arguing that “the two movements are twin remedies” (Cited in Daniels 1938, 364). In the 1937 AFL Convention, the Executive Council submitted an extensive report on the subject, highlighting the success of the American cooperative movement, and calling for labor unions’ participation in the movement, establishing or joining cooperatives in their local community, under the assumption that “these cooperatives recognize trade unions, bargain collectively with them, and as far as possible, carry goods which bear the union label” (Daniels 1938, 365). Also, there were many union-supported consumer and housing cooperatives, as well as hundreds of cooperative banks and credit unions operated by AFL unions before and throughout the New Deal years (Galor 1992, 6). Some unions, such as the Garment Workers Union, invested in housing cooperatives.

However, almost all of these collaborations with cooperative communities disappeared by the 1950s. Despite multiple pre-New Deal resolutions calling for more collaboration with cooperatives (e.g., resolutions endorsing cooperative store creation throughout the West by the Arizona state Federation of Labor in 1919), labor unions

gradually ended their resolutions to support cooperative formation as the 1950s wore on. By the 1960s, therefore, most efforts by labor unions to establish cooperatives from among their members had failed, and the worker owned cooperative movement was just a shell of its old Knights of Labor days.

*Cooperation through Collective Bargaining, not Workplace Control*

In the late 1920s, AFL president Green represented labor's growing new vision of cooperation with business owners (rather than supporting worker cooperatives as a substitute for capitalism) when as he toured a number of 1929 textile strikes across the south, and preached conciliation, cooperation and efficient production, rather than supporting worker strikes (Greenstone 1967, 28). In this way, the old vision of the need for labor cooperativism, which grew up out of a distrust of capital and its power to control the state, "led finally to a belief in the harmony of interests of capital and labor" (cited in Greenstone 1967, 28). Correspondingly, the lead strategies of labor unions shifted to represent workers' economic interests through processes of collective bargaining, but not political interests through enhanced control of the workplace.

With the gradual identity change catalyzed by the right to bargain collectively, labor unions no longer worked on demolishing the wage system. Instead, a growing distrust of the Knight of Labor's broader social change goals emerged among elite labor leaders, and the AFL adopted a "pure and simple" labor union principle to improve workers' wages and working conditions. Collective bargaining—not cooperative principles of workplace control—became the major vehicle to guaranteeing better wages for workers (Delmonte 1990). According to Gitelman (1985, 154):

Pure and simple unionism may be defined as the variety of trade unionism which limits its activities to servicing the immediate needs of its members through collective bargaining and political action, and without more than an indirect regard for the following: the structure of, or the distribution of power within, the source in which such unionism exists; the long-range interests of union members regardless of how those interests are defined; and the welfare of workers who do not belong to the organization, except for those who readily fall within the recognized jurisdiction of a union but have not yet been organized.

Collective bargaining through “pure and simple unionism” does not imply that wage earners should assume control of industry or responsibility for financial management of a business. Delmonte (1990) argues that

It proposes that employees shall have the right to organize and to deal with the employer through selected representatives as to wages and working conditions.... [T]here is no belief held in the trade unions that its members shall control the plant or usurp the rights of the owners (15).

For this reason, collective bargaining became a mechanism through which workers could obtain a share of the rents through collective bargaining without paying the economic or political costs of obtaining a share of ownership. Thus, the goal of the unions evolved to focus on winning higher wages and benefits for members of specific unions, by utilizing processes of collective bargaining, and without raising issues of enhanced workplace control or broader social change.

As Hochner (1983, 347) describes the situation, since the New Deal: “AFL-CIO unions have historically avoided alternative forms of ownership, such as worker cooperatives, in favor of collective bargaining within capitalist enterprises.” In light of these developments, it is little surprise that, over the years, “worker cooperatives became disassociated from the labor movement” (Hochner et. al. 1988, 16). The process of

workplace specific collective bargaining, in fact, limits the ability of labor unions to ally with worker cooperatives in the community, or to work on broader campaigns of social change. As structured by the Labor Relations Act in 1935, collective bargaining with private employers, and not principles of workplace cooperativism, is presented as the legitimate channel “for worker representation and participation at workplace” (Kochan, Katz and Mower 1984, 3). Through a focus on limited collective bargaining processes, unions came increasingly to focus on improving workplace conditions for their members, without challenging the ownership structure of capitalism itself, and thus became increasingly disassociated from old, radical visions of workplace control through worker-owned cooperatives.

### **Post-War Economic Gains and the Cooperative Degeneration Thesis**

The unfolding of New Deal state institutions undermined the more radical elements within both cooperatives and unions by offering an institutionally preferred path to meeting moderate labor expectations for better wages and workplace conditions. At the same time, the post-War unfolding of a growing economy in which many workers could see a path to individual economic ascent tapped into deep American traditions of job-conscious individualism which run counter to cooperative principles of collective workplace management and egalitarian distribution of income and profits. This development also undermined earlier traditions of cooperative radicalism and pointed post-war cooperatives in the direction of “business cooperativism.”

The post-war fate of America’s first large worker-owned plywood cooperative is a case in point. In 1921, the Olympia Veneer plywood cooperative began operations in the

Pacific Northwest, when 125 workers invested \$1,000 each to become worker-owners of their own cooperative, committed to the idea of replacing traditional capitalism with an egalitarian and participatory worker-managed company (Zwerdling 1980; Stephen 1984; Lindenfeld and Wynn 1995). At Olympia, all workers, from floor-sweepers to plant managers, were paid the same rate and received an equal vote in important company decisions. The successful cooperative soon inspired around thirty other plywood cooperatives to open across the Pacific Northwest, operating with similar principles. By 1974, 18 plywood cooperatives were operating in the Northwest, accounting for 12% of all U.S. plywood production (Berman, 1982).

However, by the mid-1980s, almost all of these cooperatives had went out of business, with many of them being bought out by larger, privately owned corporations like Weyerhaeuser. One of the first to go, decades earlier, was Olympia itself, which arguably became a victim of its own business success. At Olympia, as the company grew larger in the post-WWII years, the company began to hire non-member workers when the original founding members left the mill, cashing out substantial equity as they left (Gunn 1980, Stephen 1984). Like at other plywood coops, Olympia coop owners became increasingly focused on their own economic interests, which were often enhanced by strictly limiting the circle of new coop owners, and giving new owners less of a stake in the cooperative.

Reflecting on this strategy of many plywood cooperative owners, Bernstein argues that “the most basic reason non-owning workers are not brought in as equal partners is that shareowners are reluctant to devalue their stock by adding more shareowners” (Bernstein 2013, 29). For these worker owners, adding additional new worker-owners meant “you’d be cutting the melon into thinner slices,” so worker owners began to hire

non-owners for part-time or seasonal work, which resulted in higher profits for worker-owners, but also in growing tensions between worker-owners and non-owners at the workplace.

At the same time the initial share price that a new member had to pay to become a member of this plywood cooperative became too high for new worker owners to afford. The price of by shares to join the coop jumped from an initial \$1,000-\$2,000, to a price of \$25,000 to \$50,000. Thus, “*precisely because they were so successful,*” it became easier to sell company shares to outside investors, who were not workers, rather than to new worker-owners. “New young workers did not have the money to buy into the co-op, so retiring members found it easier to sell their shares to capitalist lumber companies that wanted to acquire their very profitable business” (Lindenfeld and Wynn 1995; Bernstein 2013; Gunn 1980). By the 1980s, almost all plywood cooperatives had been sold to larger, traditional corporations like Weyerhaeuser, as older worker-owners retired and cashed out their equity, leaving only a handful of cooperatives, who were themselves run by professional outside managers and operated by a growing number of non-owner employees.

In this way, although the plywood cooperatives had started with notions of equitable pay and fully shared management, over time the opportunities to enhance the founders’ incomes and the demands of business competition led to stratified income levels, sales of ownership-shares to outside parties, and multiple tiers of workers—not unlike other capitalist firms. The growth of this traditional market orientation among coop owner is linked to the fact that these worker-owners are “in a situation where short-term self-interest is tied to the economic well-being of the enterprise based on market performance” (Slott 1985, 87). In his survey of the remaining Northwest plywood cooperative owners in the

1980s, Slott (1985) found that they did not identify primarily as non-capitalist innovators, but as members of the middle-class, seeking an effective and profitable business model.

Similarly, Greenberg (1986) surveyed plywood coop owners seeking evidence that cooperativism might be tied to anti-capitalist radicalism, but concluded that “empirical evidence gathered in the Pacific Northwest Plywood Cooperatives offers no support for the proposition that workplace democracy fuels the escalation of political class-consciousness” (Greenberg 1986, 151). The reasons for no correlation between workplace democracy and political consciousness is that worker-shareholders in many producer cooperatives--such as the Pacific Northwest Plywood cooperatives—“have more affinity with classical liberal values such as individualism, competition, equality of opportunity but not condition, limited government and the like” (Greenberg 1986, 151). These worker-owners were also more likely to identify themselves as members of the middle class, rather than the working class.

Greenberg further noted that members at the Northwest Plywood cooperatives did not think of their model as something that others should follow because of its egalitarian principles such as workplace democracy, but simply as an economic model that might work in some other limited circumstances to make a business more competitive in the capitalist marketplace. As a strategy for improving incomes for workers, these Plywood Cooperatives were seen by worker-owners as “part and parcel of the private enterprise system,” and membership became a strategy of individual self-improvement (Abrahamsen 1976, 11-12). Because the plywood coop owners did not see their model as offering a critique of the broader capitalist system, the majority of coop members in fact did not believe that “other people could or should organize their enterprises on a cooperative basis”

(Greenberg 1986, 152). In the end, these worker-owners “didn’t have any greater sense of political efficacy than regular workers” (Greenberg 1986, 119; Wright 2014, 53), and did not believe workers in other sectors should necessarily involve themselves in labor activism or cooperative business activity.

There are many examples replicating the trajectory of the plywood cooperatives. Hoedads, a successful reforestation cooperative based in Eugene, Oregon, was founded in 1969 with a strong commitment to egalitarianism and workplace democracy. However, the company grew more rapidly than owners were prepared to handle. By 1978, the cooperative had 515 members, which contributed to the fact that “the cooperative had lost its ‘family feeling’” (Levinson 2014, 9). Hoedads eventually reduced its members to 200 members in 1982, but then wholly disbanded in 1994 as a result of business failure (Levinson 2014; Jackall 1986).

Another example of rapid growth undermining cooperative values is Burley, an Oregon-based worker cooperative founded in the 1970s that made bicycle trailers, but which ended up failing in 2006 after years of successful cooperative operation based on democratic principles (Shoening 2010; Maus 2010). Although the reason for its failure was partially due to fierce global competition, the major problem for Burley had to do with too rapid growth and the need to hire more workers to keep up with market demand. The sudden growth in the number of worker owners that resulted from hiring more worker-owners without appropriate training, and without sufficient time for testing out newly hired members, became a major problem later on. Normally, Burley had a six month trial period to test out workers before voting for full membership, but waiting on a new worker-owner

for six months became an obstacle when the company grew rapidly, which put them in urgent need to hire more workers.

As a result of including new worker-owners without appropriate training, Burley started having problems, including growing rifts between original coop owners and new workers who did not share the same level of commitment to cooperative principles. As these rifts widened and Burley lost some of its original sense of social mission, values of economic self-interest began to drive many worker-owners. According to Schoening (2010), a sociologist who was also a member of the cooperative, Burley's practice of bringing in new members "fundamentally altered the cooperative's culture and created rifts that prevented it from effectively responding to market changes" (Semuels 2015). And Burley was more concerned with "protecting its dividends, and individuals prioritized the security of their own wealth rather than the general health or mission of the collective" (Semuels 2015). In the end, Burley failed.

O & O markets in Pennsylvania is another case where a divisive two class system resulted in a worker cooperative reintroducing "capitalist exploitation in another form" (Lindenfeld and Wynn 1995). At O&O Markets, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) assisted workers in purchasing and democratically operating six worker-owned cooperative supermarkets in the Pennsylvania area in the 1980s. Though these supermarkets provided worker-owners with 200 stable jobs for several years, by 1989 all but one of the cooperative stores had been sold or closed. The problems at two of these cooperative supermarkets were described by Lindenfeld and Wynn (1995):

Worker solidarity was weak. The workers at Roslyn and Parkwood Manor developed a "worker capitalist" outlook. They were unwilling to accept new employees as full owners because that would have

diminished their share of profits. These stores developed a two tier system of more privileged full time worker owners, and less privileged part time employees who were not owners. The *Directory of Workers' Enterprises* (1991) lists 9 worker-owners and 28 non-owner workers at Parkwood Manor.

In this way, many worker-owned cooperatives in the post-war era have not actively maintained their originally strong social mission agendas, as such goals have often been crowded out by immediate economic needs for job creation and job security, and by an underlying “middle-class consciousness” among worker-owners. Pencavel (2012, 110) claims that such worker-owned cooperatives have lost their original identity, and “degenerated into a capitalist firm,” by selling ownership shares to outside investors to make profits, and by introducing a divisive two class systems within cooperatives, with the result that not all workers have equal power or equitable incomes. Degeneration also can occur when cooperatives face competitive pressures to “outsource” and make operations more efficient, and whenever cooperatives face the reality of maintaining profits by accommodating to the existing capitalist system by sacrificing some of their founding principles, such as commitment to participatory management.

In describing the natural pressures of coop owner self-interest that drive such tendencies to degenerate, Vanek (1977) calls it a “self-extinction force, while many others describe this tendency with the “degeneration thesis” (i.e., Potter 1891; Webb and Webb 1914, 1921; Meister 1974, 1984; Cornforth 1988; Doucouliagos 1990; Chiplin and Coyne 1980; Horvart 1982b; Rosner 1985; Ben-Ner 1988, Cornworth 1995; Cheney 1999). According to this “degeneration thesis,” degeneration of a worker cooperative is likely to happen when the social principle of workplace democracy becomes weaker and less important within the cooperative, thus resulting in more emphasis on the economic goals

of the cooperative (i.e., increasing worker wages) rather than on its social/political dimension (i.e., its potential to facilitate a broader critique of the existing economic and social system). According to Hochner (1978, 207), degeneration of a worker cooperative can happen in many different forms:

Transforming the cooperative into a simple profit-making, profit-seeking business, indistinguishable from a private enterprise; exploiting a monopoly situation, often to public disadvantage (as has happened in Israel); closing off of cooperative membership; raising the cost of membership to a prohibitively high level; and resorting to the anti-cooperative device of taking on hired labor.

One factor that creates pressure on coops to conform to the values of capitalism and that undermines principles of membership equality and democratic management is the economic egoism and profit-seeking that naturally motivates job-conscious worker-owners. Self-interested job-consciousness can lead to a significant gap between coop founders and subsequent members. Quite naturally, founders have a tendency to view subsequent members as subordinate and less deserving of business profits, thus resulting in friction.

Just as there is often some natural friction between the two classes of members, there is also a tendency for original founders of a successful cooperative to capitalize on their venture and hire more non-member employees (retaining more profits/wages for themselves), thus resulting in a trend toward a conventional firm with less participation of workers. Political economists Sidney and Beatrice Webb argued that

When a group of cooperative members increase their reliance on non-member workers, they stand to consolidate profits among a smaller group of owners but also to decrease the democracy of the firm; this results in what they identify as ‘degeneration’: the replacement of democracy with conventional models of capitalist ownership and management (Schoening 2010, 41).

In fact, this tendency to degenerate may be stronger in the United States than elsewhere, in that the United States has long been infused with an ideology of liberal individualism, in which individualistic job consciousness and a desire for individual economic gain are far more prevalent than hostility to the overall wage system or than a philosophical commitment to the principle of worker control of business operations. This tradition of individualism and job consciousness makes American worker-owned cooperatives a good example of the “degeneration thesis,” which posits that worker-owned cooperatives over time will tend to abandon goals of workplace democracy and worker participation in favor of goals of business efficiency and income maximization. The United States experience with Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs)—an ostensible but much degenerated form of worker ownership-- provides a good case study.

### **Cooperative Degeneration: ESOPS in the 1970s-1990s**

A revealing case of how the modern labor movement has parted ways with old visions of workplace control is the example of how Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPS) have recently been popularized as a way of enhancing worker “ownership” of the workplace. First passed in 1974, ESOP legislation “allowed companies to set up employee stock ownership trusts and to use up to 15 percent of payroll to buy stock in the company for employees” (Whyte et al. 1983, 137). Unique features of U.S. tax and retirement codes allowed workers to invest in such ESOP stock trusts with pre-tax income, leading ESOPS to become the preferred form of worker ownership of businesses in America. In fact, between 1974 and 1987, government policy allowed for \$15 billion in tax expenditure support for budding ESOPs (Dickstein 1991).

The introduction of ESOPs in the workplace--often by labor unions themselves--was one attempt to save jobs for workers in the late 1970s and the 1980s. By the 1970s, the optimistic days of union growth in the 1930s-1950s had come to an end. Growing competition from a global marketplace, a period of late 1970s economic stagnation, and the rise of conservative power in the 1980s, combined to undermine the foundations of union strength in the United States. As American unions shed members and faced the challenges of de-industrialization, plant closures and factory relocations, new models of worker empowerment were sought. One of these models—the Employee Stock Ownership Plan, or ESOP—was built loosely on cooperative ownership principles and brought the unions back in the business of promoting worker ownership of the workplace.

Facing an increasing number of shuttered factories in America, the ESOP was presented as a way for workers to purchase substantial ownership of a company through stock ownership, and became a leading alternative to prevent plant closing and to provide more company profit-sharing options to workers (Eiger 1996). Although this mode of capital sharing through the ESOP was viewed by many union members as an management attempt to combat labor unrest, large unions like the UAW and the USW increasingly supported the ESOPS as challenges of deindustrialization and union decline grew in the 1980s. From 1980 to 1988, as the USW lost more than 382,000 members (McAdams 2010, 1), ESOPs were represented by union leaders as a way to increase capital sharing opportunities for workers and maintain the relevance of the union. During this time, the USW president, Lynn Williams (1983-1994), embraced ESOPS and their promise of partial participation of worker owners in their businesses to prevent further factory closing. This was a shift in opinion from the 1970s, when the position of the USW on ESOPs was rather

hostile. Describing the 1970s anti-ESOP period, James Smith, Assistant to three USW presidents, expressed that “we thought it was intended for anti-union purposes” (LaBo 1995: 2). By the 1980s, however, the USW had changed its view of the ESOP program.

The USW was desperate to save manufacturing jobs during this time. As Williams puts it, “rather than sit idly by and permit our members to be savaged by leveraged buyouts and shutdowns, we decided that an ESOP was, in many situation, a much better alternative” (McAdams 2010, 30). Furthermore, Williams viewed that the ESOP concept of buying workers into shared ownership and shared profit plans was well suited to the American labor movement, which he believed was far less militant in its anti-capitalist sentiments than workers elsewhere. Williams put it this way.

The American labor movement among world labor movements is the least ideological... in most of the advanced capitalist countries... you have labor movements that tend to be of the democratic left and active politically... and in that context for them to think about government ownership or employee ownership or more social ways of managing ownership isn't nearly as radical a notion as it is in America (LaBo 1995, 14)

With the USW following the reasoning of leaders like Williams, by 1995, “USW members participated in 35 ESOPs: 24 of these were led by the USW itself (i.e., the USW showed substantial leadership in the formation of the ESOP) and in 14 ESOPs, USW members held majority ownership” (LaBo 1995, 15; see also McAdams 2010). By 2014, more than 13.5 million employees, with 7000 companies, were covered by an ESOP.<sup>42</sup> Today, it is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of the companies in the US are actually “employee-owned,” including “some of the Fortune 100 companies such as Exxon Mobile,

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.nceo.org/articles/esop-employee-stock-ownership-plan>

Chevron, ConocoPhillips, GM, Ford, Intel, UPS, Amazon, Coca-Cola, Cisco, and Morgan Stanley” (McElwee 2014).

ESOPs have often been presented as a bold new tool of “worker control,” whereby workers could purchase controlling stock in their companies through pooled stock plans, and thus have the right to elect Boards of Directors, share in company profits, and shape worker wage and benefit plans. Brennan (2005, 41) describes ESOPs as part of a “fiduciary capitalism” model in which “fiduciaries of institutional funds, such as pension funds, control a significant portion of the total capital in financial markets.” In this fiduciary capitalism model, he argues also that “If labor, as a class, could assume more control of pensions, it could direct financial capital in ways that serve workers’ best interests by leading to higher wages and greater job security” (41).

However, as Brennan (2015) also notes, the fact is that ESOPs were never seen as a tool of shop-floor empowerment, nor as a tool to reshape capitalist processes in cooperative directions. Rather, they have more typically been presented as a strategy to defuse possible worker militancy in the face of growing economic challenges like globalization, outsourcing, and deindustrialization, and to accommodate workers more fully to the capitalist system. The founding father of the ESOP model, Louis Kelso, believed that the formation of ESOPS, by diversifying stock ownership, would “increase the number of people who regard themselves as capitalists...” (cited in Bruno 1998, 79). In his book, *Capitalist Manifesto*, Kelso defended the benefits of diminishing the power of unions and expanding the pool of capitalists through ESOPs. Kelso argued that capitalism provides “the good life for all men” (Kelso 1958, 160), and that ESOPS could play a role in minimizing the antagonistic role of labor unions in challenging capitalist owners.

The potential for employee ownership through ESOPs to weaken the power of labor unions is shown in the statement of Senator Russell Long, who introduced the ESOP bill in 1974. Long argued that “the labor unions will obviously not be needed as an instrument of power” once their role is altered in the ESOP era (Kelso 1958, 157). ESOP supporters like Kelso and Long believed that ESOP cooperatives and stock ownership plans would encourage the demise of trade unions: “the cooperative experience could turn workers into budding capitalists” Senator Long argued (Carter 2003, 3). For such reasons, it is not surprising that ESOPS have usually been first proposed or established by corporate managers or business owners, and not by workers themselves (Ellerman 1985, 59).

While ESOPs are clearly “designed to align more closely the interests of employees and employers” (McHugh et al 1999, 536; Klein, 1987; Rosen 1983), they did not pursue this goal by actually increasing the power of workers on the shopfloor, nor by advancing a goal of egalitarian distribution of wages and profits. In fact, most ESOPs have not resulted in improved worker conditions and many actually came with requirements that workers accept wage concessions. In addition, though ESOPs extended stock ownership options to workers, these plans rarely entailed changed levels of worker control at the workplace. Simply put, the creation of an ESOP did not result in “much change to the labor-management dynamic or to the workforce” (Hansen and Adams 1992, 9).

In point of fact, much of the authorizing legislation shaping the ESOP model explicitly constrains the potential of ESOPs as a tool of worker empowerment, broader economic transformation or social critique—and points ESOP stakeholders towards a strategy of reproducing and expanding normal capitalist processes. For example, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA: the key legislation allowing the

investment of worker pension funds in corporate stock) imposes rules requiring union pension fund fiduciaries to invest funds only to maximize short-term financial gains of worker-investors, and “for the exclusive purpose of providing benefits to participants and their beneficiaries” (US Congress 1989, 28). The act specifically disallows attention to such things as a company’s working conditions or its social mission (Brennan 2005).

Other legislation insulates corporate boards from responding to worker-shareholder wishes even when broadly felt, through such mechanisms as super-majority voting rules, “poison pills, classified boards, dual-class stock, and antitakeover state legislation, which entrenched existing boards of directors despite unsatisfied shareholders” (Brennan 2005; Hawley and Williams 2000). When worker-shareholders have brought concerns for better wages or broader social policy issues, they have found these issues dismissed by Securities Exchange Act rules requiring “social policy issues” to be excluded from corporate decisions (in favor of attention to maximizing rates of return for shareholders). Though that specific exclusion has recently been now overturned, shareholders are still restricting from intervening in the “ordinary business” of a corporation, which includes “the management of the workforce, such as hiring, promotion, and termination of employees, decisions on production quality and quantity, and the retention of suppliers” (Brennan 2005; S7-25-97). Another restrictive rule, built into collective bargaining regulations under the National Labor Relations Act, mandates that a labor representative cannot be on a corporate board of directors’ committee which engages in collective bargaining with employees, even if a company is ostensibly employee-owned through an ESOP (Brennan 2005, 55).

Together, these kinds of state policies insure that ESOPs are not a tool of worker-empowerment but instead point worker-ownership models down a path of reproducing existing capitalist processes, including reproducing the existing class structure in which “workers have almost no voice in corporate governance, even though they are equity holders” (43).

For this reason, Ellerman calls the ESOP a form of “worker capitalism” (1985) involving “second-class ownership without control” (63). He argues that ESOPS are hopelessly limited as a labor empowerment strategy, since “ESOPS were designed to promote worker capitalism not worker democracy” (Ellerman 1985, 64). Tonnesen (2012) similarly argues that “unlike a worker cooperative, where workers directly control the firm, ESOPs provide workers with stock ownership but no correlating right to participate in the firm's governance.” Whereas worker cooperatives operate on a principle of one-person, one-vote (regardless of shares of stock owned), and bring values of broader community uplift to the table, the lack of democratic participation and broader social goals “is fatal to ESOPs' potential as a tool to empower communities” (Tonneson 2012).

For such reasons, Employee Stock Ownership Plans are described by Blasi (1988) and Dickstein (1991) as being a perfect example of “goal displacement” within the worker ownership movement, as the ESOP concept has “fallen far short of its intended purpose of broadening capitalism,” since ESOPs are simply “exploiting the cooperative structure for private gain” (18). For example, one study of 6,000 ESOP companies showed that most companies used ESOPS not as a way to increase worker influence in management, but as a strategy to “gain certain tax advantages” (Slott 1985, 88). In the worst cases, once workers became the ostensible “owners” of the business, ESOP plans were used as a way

of “forcing concessions in the plant, which, in turn, could be used to pressure workers in other parts plants to make concessions” (Slott 1985, 90). Instead of actually democratizing control of the workplace, therefore, many companies have used the ESOP as a way to “wring concessions out of workers, or worse, to undercut the wages and benefits at their competitors” (Witherell 2013, 5; Slott 1985).

For these reasons, many worker coop advocates have retained their skepticism for ESOP employee ownership, which is thought by some to co-opt labor militancy by turning workers into shareholders without real power, to undermine pay and workplace conditions as workers accept lower pay in exchange for the illusion of workplace ownership, and to devalue the role of worker control of the workplace in general (Bell 2006; Birchall 1999). Some might criticize this reflexive tendency of skeptics to criticize ESOPS from this class-theoretic tradition. For example, poststructuralists like Gibson-Graham have critiqued class-centric thinking for stultifying discourse and forestalling the development of experimental economic alternatives like ESOPs, which can introduce small ruptures in capitalist processes and offer practical ways of reshaping economic dynamics in the here and now.

However, Brennan (2005) argues just the opposite and finds that compromised “fiduciary capitalism” reforms like ESOPs have hidden biases against non-capitalist processes built into their authorizing legislation—biases that privilege corporate investors and undermine notions of worker equity and control. Without an explicit class-sensitive analysis of such policies, Brennan (2005) argues, ESOPs become a tool of managing and controlling worker discontent, turning workers away from imagining better alternatives, and towards implicit support of existing corporate processes. This “semi-conscious

acceptance of existing class processes” built into the ESOP model “undermines the progressive discourse on pensions, making a more explicit acknowledgment of the role of class beneficial” (41).

In fact, older and more radical “class-sensitive” notions of worker ownership have always remained an alternative to such strategies as professionalized collective bargaining and compromised ESOPs; and as workers face growing economic challenges in the new global economy, those older traditions of union-coop alliances for meaningful workplace democracy are emerging once again. The next section of this chapter reviews some of those new developments, which are opening new questions as to the future of union-coop partnerships in the U.S.

### **Unions and Cooperatives Face the New Economy: The USW- Mondragon Initiative & New Era Windows**

While formal unions have found their strength eroding in a globalizing system of mobile capital and the growing “precariat” (Standing 2011), decentralized worker cooperatives have grown rapidly, partly because their organizational model matches the decentralized and fluid dynamics of today’s global world. 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, moving assistance, landscaping, child care, taxi driving), and with an especially notable growth of immigrant worker cooperatives (Ji and Robinson 2012). In Cleveland, city, university and business leaders have united behind the innovative “Evergreen Initiative,” a well-funded plan to build an expanding network of worker cooperatives across the city (Alperovitz, et. al.2010; Johnsen 2010). The growth of union interest in supporting coop development is

paralleled by the rising support of many urban leaders. Cleveland, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh have all launched initiatives to support worker cooperatives with city funds. In New York, under the leadership of Mayor Blasio, \$1.2 million in city funds have been pledged to support cooperative development. This funding is expected 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). In Madison, \$5 million will be added to the 2015 budget to support coop development and Jackson (MI), Richmond and Reading (PA) and Cincinnati (OH) have also dedicated city funding to worker cooperatives (Scher 2014).

Labor unions have gradually stepped up to support these growing worker owned cooperatives. For example, the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) has actively supported the Detroit cooperative Grocery Store Coalition, AFSCME is building deeper connections between their unions and local cooperatives, and the executive board of the Maine AFL-CIO issued a resolution of support for worker cooperatives in 2009. The Cincinnati Union Cooperative Initiative (CUCI) launched in 2012 with a goal to expand union collaboration with worker owned cooperatives. Pittsburgh has recently initiated the Clean and Green Laundry Cooperative in collaboration with USW and with the Steel Valley Authority (SVA), which is a publicly funded initiative in Pennsylvania to provide new jobs to 100 workers (Dean 2013).

#### *USW and Mondragon Initiative*

The most marked example of growing union-coop unity in America is the collaboration between the United Steel Workers and Spain’s Mondragon network of

worker cooperatives (boasting 100,000 worker owners with annual sales of \$25 billion) (Ron Ridenour, June 29th, 2014). In 2009, the largest union in America, the United Steel Workers with 1.2 million members, signed an agreement with Mondragon to collaborate in developing worker-owned steel producing cooperatives in America (Clay 2013: 2; also see McFellin 2013; Witherell 2009). The vision was to develop a series of worker-owned manufacturing facilities with a commitment to economic democracy shared by both unions and the Mondragon coops. The unionized cooperatives envisioned under this partnership are ones in which “worker-owners all own an equal share of the business and have an equal vote in overseeing the business...one worker, one vote” (Witherell et al. 2012: 6). As opposed to ESOPs, where labor unions used worker ownership of company stock as a strategy to prevent factory closing, the recent collaboration between the USW and the Mondragon is a more transformational effort to more broadly empower workers as equal owners and managers of all business operations. Alperovitz compares the new partnership to the Knights of Labor because of its emphasis on “primacy of labor” through a unionized “social council” (Alperovitz 2012).

Under the agreement, the new worker coops would feature unions as a social council in the coops, insuring that worker concerns were always brought to the front-line, even if a worker-owned cooperative grew to demand increasingly formalized management structures.<sup>43</sup> In the USW resolution, it supports the “prudent investment of workers’ capital” in these kind of worker ownership business models and that union-coop principle can result in “improved, self-reinforcing, virtuous cycle worker and customer satisfaction through

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<sup>43</sup> [www.usworker.coop/node/427](http://www.usworker.coop/node/427).

higher accountability, productivity and efficiency” because the union cooperative model is assumed to “share common goals, and adhere to common principles and practices that broaden the definition of value beyond the “bottom line” (Whetherell, Cooper and Peck 2012). For the USW, this union-coop partnership is also a necessary response to growing problems of neoliberal globalization as the president of the USW explains as follows.

To survive the boom and bust, bubble-driven economic cycles fueled by Wall Street, we must look for new ways to create and sustain good jobs on Main Street.... Worker-ownership can provide the opportunity to figure out collective alternatives to layoffs, bankruptcies, and closings (Flander 2012).

Faced by brutal international competition and massive job losses in manufacturing and steel worker sectors, the USW has naturally been on the frontline to save jobs for workers.

#### *The New Era Windows Factory Takeover*

While the USW-Mondragon alliance highlights attempts by union leadership to advance the goals of workplace democracy through coop partnership programs pushed in elite negotiations, there are also examples of union-coop alliances growing due to grassroots activism. For example, the nationally recognized case of the New Era Windows cooperative in Chicago showcases how direct-action factory takeover by workers on the shop floor has catalyzed an alliance between the United Electrical Workers Union and a self-started workers cooperative.

Chicago’s New Era Windows cooperative emerged from a bottom-up approach when workers self-mobilized to take over their factory in order to save jobs and to create a new ownership structure. In 2008, after decades of operation, the owner of Chicago’s Republic Windows and Doors company declared bankruptcy and shut down the operation with no

prior warning to workers. Unionized workers were told their jobs were immediately terminated, with no backpay nor severance pay, and with immediate termination of medical benefits. At the same time, the company continued to run a profit and owners of the family business were busy opening new window factories across the region, hiring non-unionized temp workers through low-wage labor agencies. The owners also ended up in court fighting allegations of financial fraud in their allegations of bankruptcy.

It was a perfect example of the global challenges of factory shutdowns and relocations, the growing de-unionization and informalization of labor, and the financial malpractice that has come to define the essence of global capitalism—such a good example, in fact, that the situation drew the attention of President-elect Obama in 2008. “The workers who are asking for the benefits and payments that they have earned,” Mr. Obama said, “I think they’re absolutely right and understand that what’s happening to them is reflective of what’s happening across this economy” (Davey 2008). In response to the crisis, and without prior authorization by their national union, 270 Republic Window workers decided to occupy their factory floor and went on six days of strikes to demand severance pay and lost wages from company executives. As workers mobilized on their own to gain control of the factory, the United Electrical Workers union (UE) came to their aid, and a massive unionized sit-down strike captured the attention of Chicago and the nation for six days. At the end of it all, the Republic Window workers won their demands from the owner, including payment of lost wages and \$6000 each in severance pay.

A second owner, Serious Energy, soon took over the factory with the condition to keep the union in place, but changes in leadership within the company led to declining profits and a second factory closure notice in 2012. This time around, workers mobilized to take

over the company entirely, by becoming the owners themselves. With strong support from the community and \$500,000 in funding from the Working World (a non-profit organization that provides investment capital and technical support for worker cooperatives), Republic Windows workers were able to purchase their company, reopening as a unionized worker-owned cooperative (New Era Windows) in May, 2013.

As a unionized coop, sixteen worker owners and one associate owner of New Era Windows have since participated actively in running their business directly. The workers are committed to sharing profits equally, to paying a living wage, to running their operation democratically (one worker, one vote), to remaining in the Chicago area that is their home, and to producing high quality, energy efficient windows in Chicago, as part of their “green” commitment to a sustainable community.<sup>44</sup> When the unionized workers of the New Era Windows took to the factory floor and forged a new model of unionized worker ownership, therefore, therefore, they weren’t just substituting one group of owners for another. Rather, as described by their progressive funder, Working World (2012), they were offering their community a different model of how to run a company with concern for broader social health.

In many ways, this is not the story of a few workers, but of all of America. The old window factory was closed despite being profitable, its workers sent into unemployment despite their immense potential.

As we watch our once proud workforce dismantled and impoverished by forces and motivations not of their own, we ask if these crises present opportunities. The workers of New Era want to succeed not just for themselves, but for their country, to show that downsizing does not have to be the end of the story, that there is way forward if we take our fate into our own hands. The possibilities that are emerging within the walls of this new factory have potential to flower across the country.

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<sup>44</sup> For more details on the New Era Windows story, see <http://newerawindows.com/about-us/our-story>.

In these broad and transformational goals, the unionized worker-owners of New Era Windows are represented by their union (UE), a union which is “democratized to become more responsive to the needs of the rank and file and less prone to be incorporated by the employers with whom they negotiate” (DeMartino 2000, 32). Whereas typical American unions have been mostly run by professional staff and therefore worker ownership campaigns have often not been well supported by union leadership (Early 2008; Tillman and Cummings 1999), the UE has strong leadership by rank-and-file workers. The president of the UE is a rank-and-file worker who participated in a workplace takeover himself, and UE workers are the sole decision makers in running their local union and its business.

Richard Bensinger, Director of the AFL-CIO organizing institute, describes the importance of such rank and file leadership in bringing a more comprehensive movement philosophy to the union world: “We need more staff, and unions need to hire more organizers. But I think unless the fight is owned by the membership, and unless union leaders give ownership to the membership, it won’t succeed” (cited in Robinson 2002, 125). This call to action is what Kim Moody calls a “rank and file strategy,” which argues that organizers today should orient themselves toward the strata of worker activists at the base of unions, who are most engaged in shop-floor militancy and resistance to management, rather than “attempt to gain influence by sidling up to the incumbent bureaucracy or its alleged progressive wing” (Moody 2007, cited in Early 2008).

In workplace takeovers like New Era windows, rank-and-file workers and their union representatives have turned away from both “business unionism” and “business

cooperativism” and instead have built up a culture of working class militancy, focusing on leadership development and mobilization of workers. In a personal interview, UE local 1000 organizer, Leah Fried (2014) concludes that

This plant takeover could happen because already leadership of workers was in place even before taking over the plant. I am doubtful if this kind of worker takeover would happen to other unions unless there is strong worker leadership coming from the bottom. Having a rank and file culture within the union is critical in making this kind of worker takeover possible” (Personal interview, March 10, 2014).

The president of the UE Local 1000, Armando Robles, similarly believes that

Our workers have been very active with the union for the past four years and we learned of many social struggles. The option of worker ownership was not available in the beginning. But, when the second owner failed, we thought that we could be our own bosses and we were ready because we have been receiving so much education for the past four years” (interview, March 10, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The case of the USW-Mondragon initiative and UE’s New Era Windows cooperative illustrate that the current era of the union-cooperative collaboration may presage a new direction for the labor movement—an era of union- labor collaboration in which labor unions find common ground with the radical notion of worker control embedded in worker cooperatives. During an era of harsh industrialization (the 1860s-1920s), the antagonism

between capital and labor was clear and brutal, fostering a broadly felt class consciousness among labor activists that led unions and coops to collaborate in practical efforts to build worker-owned alternatives to the capitalist system. But by the 1950s, New Deal initiatives had built a reformed economic system in which some labor activists saw opportunities to cooperate with business and state leaders in the management of the capitalist system, and to enjoy a higher level of wages and benefits whether through professionalized collective bargaining or highly compromised ESOP plans, wherein traditional values of cooperative workplace control had degenerated.

Today, however, unions and worker-owned cooperatives are rediscovering old alliances beyond the boundaries of collective bargaining agreements or ESOP plans. Confronted by an increasingly harsh work of global capitalism that looks more like the world of 1890 than 1950 (from the standpoint of workers' prospects), unions and cooperatives are rediscovering their old common principles. Though the trajectory and impact of these new alliances is unclear as yet, the next chapter in this dissertation will seek clues to the future through a case study of a recent taxi-driver union-coop partnership, emerging in Denver, Colorado.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CASE STUDY OF DENVER'S TAXI DRIVER UNION-COOP RELATIONS**

This chapter examines to what extent union-cooperative partnerships might revitalize local labor movements in the United States. The chapter highlights two taxi union-cooperative collaborations that have been established in Denver Colorado, uniting largely immigrant taxi drivers in a taxi-driver worker's cooperative, with support from the Communication Workers of America (CWA) union. The focus of the case study is to examine to what extent union-cooperative relationships in Denver have been shaped by essentialist notions of necessary class conflict versus pursuing poststructural practices of constructing local economic alternatives without necessarily engaging in direct conflict with capitalist powers. The case of Denver's immigrant taxi union-cooperative shows that although recent labor leaders have called for the possibilities of radical social change through such innovations as the Mondragon-USW alliance, the enduring US tradition of accommodational job consciousness influences both union and cooperative leaders.

In Denver, a pattern of business cooperativism aligns well with patterns of business unionism to result in a taxi-driver unionized cooperative with very limited potential as an agent of labor empowerment. In this case study, leaders of both the labor union (CWA 7777) and of the worker cooperatives (Union Taxi and Green Taxi) have embraced an ontology that turns away from notions of class or class-consciousness among workers and

instead puts more emphasis on securing the individual economic gains of worker-owners by creating a competitive taxi business through such tactics as resisting the entry of new cooperative drivers into the industry and allowing coop worker-owners to profitably subcontract their taxi-driving licenses to lower-wage drivers.

In this regard, the emerging union-cooperative partnerships in Denver, Colorado have more affinity with poststructuralism in that it has allowed taxi drivers to create a cooperative economic alternative to working for corporate taxi companies, without engaging in militant class-conflict with the company. However, in the absence of a coherent narrative promoting worker solidarity and engaging workers in broader campaigns of social justice for immigrant transportation workers in general, these cooperatives have quickly degenerated from their original “solidarity economy” change goals and have remained disconnected from wider community change campaigns—just as essentialist Marxist thinking might predict.

### **The Harsh Life of Taxi Workers**

Taxi driving is often regarded as a "poor man's gateway to mainstream America" (Dao 1992), 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.”<sup>45</sup> 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 (Lazo 2014). Drivers commonly work over 70

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<sup>45</sup> April 13, 2013. <http://blog.priceonomics.com/post/47636506327/the-tyranny-of-the-taxi-medallion>

hours a week, earning poverty wages, and most have no health insurance or other work benefits (Blasi and Leavitt 2006).

These dismal taxi-driver working conditions are associated with the logic of “flexibility” and “disorganization” in the era of informalization of labor (Luedke 2010, 3). Although many workers buy into the dream of “flexibility” and the “American dream,” the realities of low-wage taxi driving, with workers largely controlled by a small number of licensed taxi companies, can be more accurately described as “a sweatshop on wheels,” or a “penal colony” which requires “tremendous toil without providing any true security” to taxi workers (Luedke 2010, 4). Though local municipalities commonly regulate such things as how many drivers are allowed to be licensed, and the kinds of clothes drivers must wear, officials generally do a “poor job of protecting taxi workers from exploitation by their companies” (Blasi and Leavitt 2006, 5) and there is very little oversight of the work relationship between drivers and taxi companies. Many of these drivers are unattached to American labor institutions and are working as contingent, “independent contractors” in the taxi industry (Schwer et al. 2009, 22). Enduring these work conditions, approximately 45% of drivers are foreign-born immigrants (Palmer 2015, 8; Schwer et al. 2009). This number of foreign born taxi drivers is much higher in New York, where 92% of drivers are foreign born in 2014, whereas 64% of New York taxi drivers were US born in the 1960s (Flegenheimer 2014).

Many of these drivers are unattached to American labor institutions and are working as contingent, “independent contractors” in the taxi industry (Schwer et al. 2009, 22). But being classified as an “independent contractor” can exacerbate the workplace difficulties faced by taxi drivers. While the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) guarantees a

minimum wage, regulated hours, and overtime pay for employees in most industries, “independent contractors” are excluded from those guarantees, thus resulting in independent contractors lacking minimum wage protections, as well as “employer-provided health insurance, paid vacation and sick days, pensions and other benefits” (Milkman 2014, 6; Blasi and Leavitt 2006). With no guarantee of minimum wage protections, independent contractors are often described as working with “zero hours contracts,” where “the employer is not obliged to provide any minimum working hours, while the worker is not obliged to accept any work offered”<sup>46</sup>

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 medallion and leasing system was first introduced in New York City in 1937 to regulate the number of taxis on streets (Hodges 2007; Vidich 1976; Inamdar 2013). Today, many cities utilize the medallion system, and prices for medallions vary greatly from city to city. Purchasing a licensing medallion costs \$250,000 in San Francisco (Said 2015), \$700,000 in Boston (Newsham 2015) and \$270,000 in Chicago as of 2015 (Madhani 2015), a jump from its previous value of \$150,000 in 2008 (Luedke 2010,11; also see Bruno 2009, 9). 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; Inamdar 2013). Although there has been a trend of lowering medallion prices after the introduction of car sharing programs such as Uber and Lyft, the price for medallions is still high.

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<sup>46</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero-hour\\_contract](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero-hour_contract)

### **The Uber and Lyft Taxi-Driver Solution: Cooperatives without Class Consciousness**

The dramatic rise of ridesharing services like Uber and Lyft has been celebrated by many as a welcome challenge to the old model of exploited taxi drivers, controlled by monopolistic private cab companies. Emerging from the kind of creative economic innovation celebrated by poststructuralists, Uber and Lyft originally were based on the idea of expanding the “sharing economy” through a shared ride strategy, freed from corporate taxi control. Some have celebrated the way Uber drivers are part of a cooperative peer network of independent drivers, so that they “set their own hours and aren’t subject to the whims of dispatchers” (Burke 2015).

Classified as “Transportation Network Companies (TNC)” made up of independent car-driving contractors who use Apps like Uber or Lyft to connect with customers—and not as individually owned businesses with employees—Uber and Lyft have used “the networking potential of the internet to bring together its drivers and customer alike, both on their own initiative” (Searles 2015). When surveyed, the substantial majority of drivers for these RideShare services voice a preference for the flexibility and autonomy of companies like Uber rather than enduring the corporate rules of working for a traditional company, such as a taxi company. For example, 87% of Uber drivers voiced a preference for “being my own boss,” while 85% stated that Uber allowed for more flexibility and “work-life” balance than working for a taxi company (Hall and Krueger 2015).

Capitalizing on this desire for more workplace flexibility and autonomy, Uber and Lyft are examples of what Adam Thierer calls “permissionless innovation”—a concept that fits with poststructural notions of immediate economic innovations including “the freedom

of entrepreneurs to experiment freely with new technologies” (Searles 2015). Taking advantage of this “permissionless innovation,” Uber has experienced explosive growth over the past five years since its foundation in 2009, and has recently been “valued by investors at \$50 billion” (Zhang and Gerry 2015). Uber now controls up to “10% of the international market,” operating in 45 countries (Palmer 2015, 8). Under a shared ride principle, Uber has been a threat to conventional taxi driver companies. In 2016, the largest taxi company, the Yellow Cab cooperative in San Francisco, filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the face of a host of challenges, including a steep decline in ridership and competition “from newer app-based ride-sharing services, namely Uber and Lyft, which have also increasingly poached Yellow Cab drivers” (Corrigan 2016).

Some scholars such as Hall and Krueger (2015) see the sharing economy of companies like Uber and Lyft as opening new financial opportunities for workers and argue as follows.

The availability of modern technology, like the Uber app, provides many advantages and lower prices for consumers compared with the traditional taxi cab dispatch system, and this has boosted demand for ride services, which, in turn, has increased total demand for workers with the requisite skills to work as for-hire drivers, potentially raising earnings for all workers with such skills” (Penn and Wihbey 2016).

Beyond allegedly rising job and income prospects for individual taxi drivers, freelance operations like Uber and Lyft are sometimes hailed as being an excellent example of cooperative self-help networks. Professional conferences featuring such “solo self-employment” companies commonly feature the traditional buzz-phrases of the cooperative movement. As Schneider (2014) summarizes such conferences, “the same words come out over and over: ‘trust,’ ‘community,’ ‘network,’ ‘passion,’ ‘collaboration’ and a good deal of ‘love.’ ...For them, a desire to change the world for the better was almost obligatory.”

Celebrated as a cooperative peer-marketplace, worker networks like Uber are said to “hold out the prospect of self-management and variety, with workers taking on diverse assignments of their choice and carving out their own schedules. Rather than toiling at the behest of some faceless corporations, they work for their peers” (Singer 2014).

It certainly sounds like a modern variant on the old model of worker cooperatives and mutual aid networks as a radical tool of economic transformation, and it certainly fits with poststructural notions of liberatory economic innovations that do not necessarily involve mobilized class conflict. However, a closer look at the actual reality of much of the solo self-employment model demonstrates its limitations as a labor empowerment strategy—and sheds light on the limitations of any cooperative model based on individualistic job consciousness in the absence of a collective labor solidarity. Part of the problem with self-employment networks like Uber is that they begin with the notion that the individual “free agent,” if set loose from company control to make their way in a free-market economy will be liberated (Bollier 2008, Hall and Krueger 2015). A founder of one car-sharing marketplace (RelayRides) notes that drivers “really value the independence and flexibility” (Bollier 2008) of working on their own, and argues that this model is a positive transformation for most workers. Conaty (2014) similarly notes that even when such solo self-employment entails greater uncertainty and risk, most surveyed workers note that value the greater autonomy enough to accept the higher risk. Surveys in both the United Kingdom and the United States also found that people valued the independence in this kind of work, and that they much preferred it to conventional work structures, even with higher risks (Hall and Krueger 2015; Conaty 2014, 26).

The problem is that while workers express support for autonomy and individual opportunity and conjecture about the possible advantages of cooperative self-employment networks, in practice these networks are not delivering anywhere near the kind of progressive liberation promised to individual workers, a reality that is exacerbated by the very isolation and individualism celebrated by job-conscious supporters of the Uber cooperative self-employment model. The reality is that celebrating the voluntary choice of “freelance” work in the Uber model whitewashes the fact that many Uber and Lyft drivers never really “choose” to enter into such cooperative driver networks in the first place. Profound economic insecurity and outright unemployment has motivated almost half of Uber and Lyft drivers to take on these positions (Conaty 2014).

Furthermore, these workers are hardly engaged in a transformational “cooperative” business model in which the workplace is democratized, economic gains broadly shared, and the health of the broader community prioritized. Rather, just as individual rideshare drivers are above all driven by a job-conscious desire to maximize their own income through flexible and independent driving, so too are the powerful investors behind the Uber and Lyft apps seeking to maximize their own stock gains, in a wholly traditional way. Although the advocates of such ride-sharing platforms commonly speak the language of a sharing economy and cooperative principles, the reality is that these platforms are increasingly financed by venture capitalists seeking traditional profits: “the sharing sector of the conventional economy built on venture capital and exploited labor is a multi-billion dollar business, while the idea of a real sharing economy based on cooperatives, worker

solidarity and democratic governance remains too much of an afterthought” (Schneider 2014).

What we find in the world of ride-sharing cooperative networks, is that while many innovations emerge in unexpected ways among truly local self-help networks, the serious investment capital behind the operations that succeed and grow ultimately come from some of the world’s richest individuals and investment firms (e.g., Goldman Sachs, Google Ventures, Enterprise Holdings, and David Bonderman of TPG Capital) (Schneider 2014). These investors have poured more than a billion dollars into the top ride-sharing cooperatives in the last few years, not for the purpose of transforming the taxi sector into a democratically controlled and egalitarian worker-owned cooperative, but for the purpose of “gobbling up” the disruptive ridesharing upstarts and then finding a way to maximize profits from the new businesses (Schneider 2014). In the same individualistic formula, individual ride-share drivers have sought to maximize their own economic benefit in the new business model by selling personal shares or maximizing personal gains through driving, but without connection to any kind of broader campaign of cooperative economic transformation, labor solidarity, or collective political action.

The results of such an individualistic job-conscious labor strategy have not been positive for individual workers or for the surrounding communities. Most immigrant taxi drivers have found their economic position worse off than before the arrival of Uber and Lyft, due to heightened competition from the less regulated and less immigrant-accessible world of these free-market ride-sharing platforms (Schneider 2014; Bollier 2008). The new model of flexible ride-sharing has allowed companies to “essentially channel one-off

tasks to the fastest taker or lowest bidder...pitting workers against one another in a kind of labor eliminating match” (Schneider 2014). Workers in this competitive network of independent contractors receive no workplace benefits like health insurance or retirement programs. In this way, managing piecemeal and disorganized workers into a ride-sharing network of “cooperative” and “independent” workers allows companies like Uber to have it both ways: “behaving as de facto employers without shouldering the actual cost burdens or liabilities of employing workers” (Schneider 2014). These companies can avoid complying with state regulations, can externalize “costs like gas, insurance, payroll, etc., so that profits are maximized and expenses as close as possible to nonexistent” (Bollier 2008), effectively “shifting risk from corporations to workers, weakening labor protections and driving down wages” (Asher-Schapiro 2014; see also McBride 2014; Palmer 2015).

Clearly, the “sharing economy” of companies like Uber offer a cooperative model emerging from poststructural innovation that may indeed maximize the autonomy and flexibility of the individual worker, but in no way are these cooperatives built on principles of democratic workplace control, egalitarian distribution of profits, or community health. In fact, by undermining competing taxi companies, the new ride-sharing cooperatives actually undermine public infrastructure (as they pay less in taxes and fees to local jurisdictions who must maintain roads, police and fire service, etc.), and reduce the ability of localities to democratically regulate their industries (for example, by bypassing local regulations on taxi company fleet’s carbon emissions) (Bollier 2008; Rogers 2015).

Conaty (2016, 27) concludes from such facts that “cooperative” self-employment networks therefore are not at all tools of labor empowerment, but rather are simply a new mechanism for “investor-owned corporations to extract value from the ‘precariat.’”

Although the sharing economy of cooperative peer networks like Uber began with notions of worker liberation, communal trust, and transformation of the broader economy, they have quickly degenerated into simply another version of profit seeking corporations able to exploit vulnerable labor. This result was not inevitable—a different path might have been possible if ride-sharing networks had been built by workers united into some sort of collective labor organization, with a self-conscious political will to resist investor takeover. As Schneider (2014) shows in his investigation of ridesharing programs, investor takeover “is by no means a ‘natural’ process. It’s politically determined as to what kind of economy we want, and how the rules of the economy will distribute wealth and income and provision for public goods.” Because the workers of the ride sharing cooperatives have focused more on individual autonomy and flexibility than on labor solidarity and class conscious worker activism, the result was that they built a series of fast-growing companies with truly transformational potential, only to be consumed in the end by powerful investors.

Companies like Airbnb and the ride-sharing platform Lyft used to be social enterprises, but have since gone from something transformative to something disruptive—merely replacing one set of profiteers with another...The sharing sector of the conventional economy built on venture capital and exploited labor is a multibillion dollar business, while the idea of a real sharing economy based on cooperatives, worker solidarity, and democratic governance remains too much of an afterthought (Schneider 2014).

These dynamics offer important insight into the potential limitations of any worker cooperative movement. There is transformational potential whenever workers come together in cooperative networks to build new business models promising to liberate workers from toiling in poor conditions for profit-seeking employers—but the extent to which that potential is realized depends greatly on the mix of job-consciousness versus

class-consciousness that undergirds the particular labor campaign. In Conaty's (2016) report on the cooperative movement among self-employed workers, he concludes that the problems of isolated self-employed workers must be addressed by a more strongly united labor movement, and he calls for "the cousins of the labor movement—cooperatives, trade unions and mutual organisations—once again to come together and help form cohesive institutions to unite the self-employed precariat, as illustrated in the model of a 'solidarity economy' partnership" (4).

Unions and cooperatives face profound limitations when their role is limited mostly to facilitating material gains to individual members—seeking good wages and benefits however possible within the existing system—as the Uber and Lyft cooperative networks have interpreted their role among independent drivers. Perhaps a different rideshare model would have emerged if the drivers had organized "around a logic of mutual aid, which emphasizes that, like an extended family, the union is a corporate entity whose members have multiple obligations to one another and share a collective responsibility for the well-being of one another" (Bacharach, Bamberger, and Sonnenstuhl, 2016, 73). These very same lessons can also be seen in the case of recent taxi worker organizing in Denver, Colorado, and related earlier taxi worker organizing in Los Angeles, California.

### **Union Organizing of Denver's SuperShuttle Transportation Workers**

The Communication Workers of America (CWA) have a long history of labor militancy in organizing communications and media workers. The predecessor organization of the CWA, the National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW), was founded in 1938

with 31 telephone organizations that represented 145,000 workers, and the Communication of Workers of America (CWA) was established in 1947 (CWA 2015). Though CWA has a long and successful history of building union power through local organizing (Nissen 1999), in recent years CWA has faced obstacles due to rapidly growing global outsourcing, thus resulting in rapid decline in membership. Katz et al. (2003) show that union density among “all employees in the telecommunication industry fell from 56% in 1983 to 24% in 2001” (576), while network technician’s unionization rates fell from “82% in 1983 to about 57% in 2001” (576), and unionization rates for customer service and sale workers fell from “66% to 26%” (576). During the last two decades, communications sectors have experienced the fastest decline in union membership, with a 23.6 percent decline in membership between 1988 and 1996, and another 23.7 percent decline in membership between 1995 and 2002.<sup>47</sup>

Denver’s local union, CWA 7777, is no exception to this trend, in that membership in CWA 7777 decreased in recent years to just 2,000 members, from a high of 7,700 members in the 1980s ( interview, December 10, 2014).<sup>48</sup> While CWA 7777 continues to organize communications and media companies such as AT&T, Avaya Century Link, and Dex One, it also has sought to expand and diversify its shrinking membership base in recent years by organizing the administrative staff of a different union (SEIU Local 105), Denver Public School food service employees (Terry & Carey Catering)<sup>49</sup> and transportation sector workers (taxi and SuperShuttle drivers). While Denver’s CWA 7777 has struggled to

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<sup>47</sup> <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1743-4580.2004.00002.x/full>

<sup>48</sup> An interview with Lisa Bolton, president at CWA7777, Dec. 10, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

extend membership, the following two recent cases of SuperShuttle worker organizing project and the recent formation of a union-cooperative for immigrant taxi drivers show efforts by a local union to support innovative and diverse strategies of economic uplift, with mixed successes and failures.

### *History of SuperShuttle*

One of the most difficult organizing campaigns has been the effort to organize SuperShuttle workers. CWA 7777 was successful in organizing approximately ninety independent SuperShuttle drivers in Denver into a labor union in 2011 after two years of struggles, but workers voted to withdraw from CWA 7777 in 2015. The major reason for the organizing failure had to do with SuperShuttle's aggressive anti-labor strategies which resulted in very long delays in coming to wage agreements and finalizing workplace contracts, delays that were exacerbated by the union's reliance on a professional collective bargaining framework, which was not effective in building deep community ties with workers, or in mobilizing labor union power to confront the company in disruptive ways.

Intriguingly, SuperShuttle actually traces its roots to the hopeful creation of several worker-owned taxi cooperatives in California in the 1970s and 80s. L.A.'s cooperative taxi-driver movement kicked off following the sudden shutdown of the private Yellow Cab company and almost all Los Angeles taxi service, in 1976-77. Questionable financial practices and insurance problems led Yellow Cab into sudden closure, an event which inspired taxi workers to successfully win official approval to open two new non-profit worker-owned taxi driver cooperatives as an alternative to the destructive business practices and harsh labor conditions at Yellow Cab.

Though the initial impulse behind these new cooperatives was a progressive hope to transform the taxi industry and build a spirit of egalitarian collaboration among taxi workers, these hopes quickly were overrun by a competing vision of individual ownership and maximum profit seeking among taxi drivers (Blasi and Leavitt 2006). In fact, although the original bylaws for the Los Angeles cooperatives defined the “specific and primary purpose” of the cooperative as establishing a coalition of “owner-operators” who would democratically govern their business (Blasi and Leavitt 2006, 61), it was only a few years after opening that amendments were made to the cooperative bylaws to allow for absentee “Investor/Shareholders,” who could invest in the company and gain internal influence by purchasing stock shares, even though the investor might not be a worker him/herself.

Following this change, a Las Gambling Vegas tycoon (Eugene Maday) purchased majority ownership of Yellow cab, while affluent investor Mitchell Rouse—who had founded the private SuperShuttle airport shuttle company the year earlier--purchased a separate taxi cooperative known as LA Taxi (LA Taxi) (Bruno 2009, 62). Both Maday and Rouse cited competition from Supershuttle (Rouse’s own company) as requiring a new business model for the taxi cooperatives, and both investors pushed to reclassify cooperative taxi drivers as “independent contractors” rather than “employees” of their cooperative, in order to reduce the cooperatives’ tax and employee benefit obligations. All taxi workers in these now majority outside-investor owned cooperatives were subsequently recategorized as “independent contractors” by the new managers, and came to work “without benefit of minimum wage, workers compensation, or other protections afforded employees” (63).

Soon after this change—which scholars would call evidence of “degeneration” from the original cooperative hopes—evidence started to amass that taxi driver workers were “owners” of their cooperative in name only. Few of them were familiar with the lengthy legal documents they were asked to sign as the cooperative launched, and in fact all important business decisions were made by a cooperative president, often with little input from workers themselves. As Blasi and Leavitt (2006) report, following their interviews with taxi driver cooperative owners: “we were struck by how poorly these coop members understood the nature of what, if anything, they owned.” For their part, cooperative presidents often lived in homes costing millions of dollars while average taxi-drivers could barely afford a tiny apartment (67).

Other evidence of the degeneration of the original cooperative model is that, in a complicated business arrangement, each individual taxi cooperative in Los Angeles has virtually no management staff, no offices and no relationship with suppliers. Rather, each cooperative contracted for management services from an umbrella cooperative (Administrative Services Cooperative, largely controlled by the same private investor--William Rouse--who had previously purchased several taxi cooperatives in Los Angeles). The Administrative Services Cooperative (ASC) “contracts in turn with private, profit making enterprises, most of which the Rouse family controls” (Blasi and Leavitt 2006, 89). Though individual taxi cooperatives are allowed to examine the financial affairs of the ASC to track overall funds paid in and out of ASC, cooperative taxi drivers “are not afforded the right to examine the financial affairs of ASC or the transactions between ASC and the companies with which it deals, many of which are ordinary corporations controlled by the Rouse family.” Though this business arrangement bred suspicion among taxi

workers, while making the Rouse family very wealthy, Rouse argued that this business model was necessary in order to compete with SuperShuttle (a company that Rouse also owned), and that in any case these business arrangements were disclosed to taxi-drivers “when they purchased a share of the Yellow Cab cooperative (in a 138 page legal document)” (Blasi and Leavitt 2006, 90).

This case history shows that the Los Angeles taxi cooperatives of the 1970s began with a transformational vision of labor empowerment but soon came to be characterized by growing divisions between average taxi workers and their well-paid managers, by private investor profit-taking from the cooperatives, by employment rules that undermined work conditions while increasing company profits, and by a lack of transparency and democratic control regarding business practices. Taxi drivers had once united with a vision of economic improvement through cooperation, but their cooperative businesses were not built as collective institutions of labor empowerment.

Instead, soon after founding, the cooperatives amended their bylaws to allow for outside investors to purchase company shares—a strategy that brought capital into the cooperatives, but also undermined worker control. In this way, “a seemingly liberal, progressive combination of collaboration and entrepreneurship” degenerated quickly. “Although born a noble birth thirty years ago, the ideal of a cooperative of independent owner-drivers has in many instances degenerated into a creative system for exploiting those who toil on our streets and highways, to the benefit of few and the detriment of the many” (Blasi and Leavitt 2006).

*From Cooperative Degeneration to Organized Union Workers: Denver's SuperShuttle Union Organizing Campaign*

Veolia, a French transnational corporation, has come to operate the SuperShuttle business in 23 cities in the U.S., including Denver, Washington, DC (Baltimore), Los Angeles, New York, and Austin—while also operating a water privatization business.<sup>50</sup> As the largest private transportation and water privatization business in the world, Veolia has long been under attack by numerous labor, water rights and environment activists.<sup>51</sup> Indicating the company's long anti-labor record, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) recently charged Veolia with 18 unfair labor practices (Rogers 2014). For instance, in 2011, the NLRB cited Veolia for conducting “illegal activity including refusing to bargain in good faith with union bus drivers in Phoenix and Tempe, Arizona” (Rogers 2014). Other legally questionable anti-labor practices include that fact that in Boston, Veolia locked out workers and fired leaders for organizing a labor union (United Steelworkers Local 8751), violating labor contracts.<sup>52</sup>

In the case of Denver, SuperShuttle workers are regarded by Veolia as franchisees (independent contractors), and soon after Veolia purchased Supershuttle in 2002, the company contracted with an increasing number of franchisees. As a result, drivers began typically to put in more than 60 hours driving each week, working six or seven days each week (Andersen 2014). Under the franchisees agreement, workers are required “to

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.airportshuttles.com/supershuttle.php>

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.globalexchange.org/economicactivism/veolia/otheroffenses>. Veolia is also being operated under different names such as various names for Veolia exist under the same umbrella: US Filter, Apa Nova, United Water, PVK, General-Des-Eaux, Onyx Environmental, Dalkia, Veolia Water North America, Connex, etc.

<sup>52</sup> Between July and October, 2014, the union filed 175 grievances about Veolia's contract violation. See [http://www.cwa7777.org/index.cfm?zone=/unionactive/view\\_article.cfm&homeID=368951](http://www.cwa7777.org/index.cfm?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&homeID=368951)

purchase a vehicle costing between \$20,000- \$25,000 or more, and are subject to paying \$400 a week for SuperShuttle's vehicle lease, insurance and company franchise fee."<sup>53</sup> Workers pay their own taxes, and pay vehicle maintenance costs, including gasoline. Workers are also required to pay from 28% to 38% of their daily fare revenue to the parent company, depending on whether their shifts are in higher or lower demand periods, often resulting in drivers earning less than minimum wage for their shift (SuperShuttle International Denver, Inc. vs. CWA, case number 27-RC-8582 (16)).<sup>54</sup>

Deteriorating conditions at SuperShuttle paved the way to union organizing among SuperShuttle's driver employees in Denver. In 2011, over 94% of Denver SuperShuttle drivers voted to form a labor union, joining with CWA 7777. Subsequently, CWA 7777 engaged in a long process of negotiation and collective bargaining with SuperShuttle, seeking to craft a contract that would increase the wages and benefits of Denver's SuperShuttle drivers. However, SuperShuttle dragged its feet on accepting a contract for several years, and developed a record of retaliating against those who were pro-union workers.<sup>55</sup> After several years of contract negotiations, in 2014 SuperShuttle declared negotiations at an impasse and gave a "final and best offer" of a contract that featured a 30% wage cut, and required all drivers to reapply in order to keep their existing jobs.

Under the proposed contract imposed by SuperShuttle, wages would start at \$10 an hour with a \$0.25 increase every year, up to the maximum of \$12.00 for workers working

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<sup>53</sup> Read more at: [http://www.cwa-union.org/news/entry/supershuttle\\_drivers\\_move\\_closer\\_to\\_justice](http://www.cwa-union.org/news/entry/supershuttle_drivers_move_closer_to_justice).

<sup>54</sup> United States Government before the National Labor Relations Board Region 27. SuperShuttle International Denver, Inc. and Communications Workers of America. Case No. 27-RC 8582.

<sup>55</sup> <http://blog.workingamerica.org/?s=supershuttle&x=0&y=0>

for five years, and leading workers to an average salary of under \$24,000 a year—30% less than they had earned as “independent contractors,” before forming a union (interview, December 11, 2014)<sup>56</sup>. Although 93% of workers rejected this “final and best offer,” the new wage system was imposed unilaterally in March 2014, in the face of a series of small protests by workers and union organizers, typically involving about 30 people (interview, Dec. 11, 2014).<sup>57</sup>

It is not clear that SuperShuttle’s actions were legal, in that the companies record of several years of recalcitrant bargaining with the union and then subsequent “final offer” of a contract that was almost wholly unacceptable to workers may not meet the National Labor Relations Act’s requirement that both management and labor must to engage in “good faith” bargaining over key issues like wages. SuperShuttle arguably avoided any “good faith” bargaining, and instead simply offered a harsh “last, best and final offer” to workers-- a “take-it-or-leave-it” strategy that has become a powerful way to exert pressure on unions to act upon management’s final offer, no matter how unattractive the deal might be to workers<sup>58</sup> (Twarog 2008).

Many workers felt ill-served by their union in wake of this contract process. One worker stated that “the money negotiated by the labor union on our behalf was not enough for us to survive and we were not happy with how little we would get under the new contract. It is better for us to be independent contractors because at least we used to make

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<sup>56</sup> An interview with Al Kogler, CWA District 7 Administrative Director, occurred on December 11, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.massnurses.org/labor-action/labor-education-resources/negotiations/p/openItem/1205>. The original quotations were taken from an author, Charles Loughran 2003. *Negotiating a Labor Contract: A Management Handbook*. Washington, D.C. : Bureau of National Affairs

than \$10 an hour” (interview, July 27, 2015). Another worker responded that “we used to make better money with no union.” As a result of workers’ growing discontent with their union, some workers established a drivers’ association which collected a petition to abandon the labor union within SuperShuttle, and the petition won support from the majority of workers. As a result of this worker uprising against their own union, workers voted to leave CWA 7777 in January, 2015.

This example shows the difficulties of organizing flexible taxi and shuttle drivers (who appear in some ways as independent contractors), in the face of anti-labor union threats from companies, and in the context of structural difficulties associated with collective bargaining absent a well-mobilized community of solidary workers, and where union density is so low. Al Kogler, CWA District 7 Administrative Director, argues that “it is so difficult to organize workers into labor union because of too many flaws that go along with the NLRB. Relying on a current NLRB system makes it harder for labor unions to organize workers such as independent contractors.” Kogler also noted that

It might be better and easier to organize them in a worker cooperative like Union Taxi or Green Taxi because workers are less hostile to the idea of a worker cooperative than to a labor union. We spent more than a million dollars for the past four years trying to organize SuperShuttle workers, but failed (interview, December 11, 2014).

This skepticism regarding the collective bargaining system is shared by the former president of the CWA, Larry Cohen, who argued that “the path to collective bargaining has been shut down in the U.S.” (Meyerson 2014, 40).

In short, the failure of labor organizing at Denver's SuperShuttle (and the earlier failure of the Los Angeles taxi driver cooperatives to dismantle the Supershuttle business model) is an example of how difficult it is to organize independent workers through a collective bargaining strategy led by a labor union serving as a kind of business-union broker or representative of workers. Taxi and shuttle drivers are isolated from each other by nature of their job, and notions of the independent contractor or self-employed entrepreneur may naturally inspire workers as they shape their approach to building cooperative networks (as they have with Uber and Lyft drivers), though such notions can actually feed into business models that undermine work conditions and economic prospects for drivers, long-term. Furthermore such notions can turn both cooperative owners and union organizers away from collective labor mobilization strategies that might be necessary to confront and overturn exploitive business practices in the taxi industry.

### **From Union to Worker Cooperative: New Directions in Taxi Driver Organizing**

It is notable that two leaders of Denver's CWA 7777 union have both critiqued the traditional process of union organizing through collective bargaining, and have instead pointed to the empowering potential of organizing taxi workers into a worker cooperative. These leaders suggest that the most successful labor organizing strategies for taxi workers may not be traditional labor union approaches, but may lie in organizing workers in through "non-NLRB strategies" such as forming a taxi-worker cooperative to upend traditional models of business ownership (Waldinger et al. 1998, Lepie 2014). Although the idea of a Denver unionized worker cooperative was initiated much earlier, in the 1970s by Denver's Yellow Cab, the recent emergence of unionized taxi worker cooperatives in

Denver and in Portland, supported by the CWA, have the potential to reinvigorate taxi driver organizing and local unionism.

Out of a total of eight taxi cooperatives in the United States, only two are currently unionized—Union Taxi and Green Taxi, both in Denver, and both organized by CWA local 7777 (Ji 2014, Palmer 2015). Organizing taxi drivers into a union-cooperative has been well received by workers on the grounds that this cooperative model matches workers' American Dream of being a business owner. Theoretically, this emergence of collaboration between labor unions and a worker cooperatives in organizing taxi drivers to confront their harsh workplace conditions can be an example of what Witherell (2013) calls “an emerging solidarity” among labor organizations. However, as a closer examination will demonstrate, the enduring American tradition of job-conscious labor organizing without broader political engagement is a powerful contextual factor that structures the actual path these collaborations are likely to follow, and that constrains their transformational potential.

### *Union Taxi in Denver*

The very first taxi union-cooperative that was organized by CWA 7777 was Union Taxi. Although there was a previously unionized taxi cooperative, Yellow Cab, that was founded in 1979 with the help of an independent nonaffiliated union, the Independent Driver Association (IDA), it filed bankruptcy in 1993 (Levinson 2014; Gunn 1986). Union Taxi emerged as a response to the continuing problematic working conditions faced by Denver taxi workers.

Denver taxi workers, defined by their companies as independent contractors, are subject to high monthly leasing fees to private companies, ranging from \$2,000-\$3,200. As

independent contractors, Denver taxi drivers have to cover gasoline, car maintenance fees, and all other expenses related to running a car (PUC 2008). For instance, Denver workers owe the Metro Taxi company \$127 every day for vehicle leasing, even when a worker is too sick to drive (Interview, July 10, 2014). “The moment we ignite our car in the morning, we owe the company money,” explains “Juan” (Interview, July 10, 2014). Many companies have fired workers on the spot for any attempts to protest the company’s fees, arguing that “Mohammad comes, Mohammad goes” (Interview, September 11, 2015). One worker stated that “I worked 15 hours a day for three days but I did not make a penny for these three days because I had to pay all to the company” (Interview, September 6, 2015). After excluding all such expenses, an organizer at CWA 7777 argues that “an average wage for a taxi driver is estimated to be about \$3.75 an hour” (Interview, July 10, 2013).

As a response to such conditions, the effort to organize a taxi cooperative with labor union support originally came from a previous Communication Workers of America (CWA) 7777 president, Duncan Harrington (Interview, December 10, 2014). Harrington did not drive and thus he relied on taxis for his work.<sup>59</sup> While using a taxi as his transportation, Harrington discovered the plight of taxi workers associated with long hours of work, little protection and little pay. Harrington helped taxi workers organize a taxi association in 2005, Pro Taxi, which became instrumental in creating Denver’s first union-cooperative, Union Taxi in 2009. Before the new taxi coop could begin operations, however, it was necessary to gain the support of the Colorado Public Utilities Commission (PUC), the agency which decides which taxi companies can operating in the state.

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<sup>59</sup> An interview with the president, Lisa Bolton, president at CWA 7777, on December 10, 2014.

The Colorado Public Utilities Commission (PUC) was established in 1913 to control “entry into the taxicab market and to regulate the fares that taxis could share.” The original condition for any taxi company in order to obtain a taxi certificate (or taxi “medallions”) is to demonstrate that “adequate service is not being provided and that the existing companies cannot provide adequate service” (Kramer 1993, 4). In Denver, three taxi companies, Yellow Cab, Zone Taxi, and Metro Taxi, have operated since the 1930s and no other companies have been allowed to operate since 1947<sup>60</sup>. Kramer (1993, 5) calls the Denver taxicab market an “oligopoly.” Although there have been many attempts by new taxi companies to enter Colorado’s taxi industry, the Colorado Public Utility (PUC) has typically denied new license applications. Although there was pressure for the CPU to change its industry focus in 1994 from seeking a “regulated monopoly” to seeking “regulated competition,” this Colorado legislative effort failed (PUC 2008, 3).

In 2007, a new taxi “deregulation” bill was introduced in the state legislature to eliminate some monopolistic regulations in the industry (PUC 2008). One of the big changes was to shift the burden of proof from a newly proposed taxi company to an existing taxi company, in terms of proving that allowing a new company would or would not harm the public. Instead of a newly proposed company being required to prove that their new business would not harm the public, the new standard was that “existing carriers wishing to contest a new applicant’s application should be required to prove that granting the applicant authority to provide service would harm the public” (PUC 2008, 13).

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<sup>60</sup> <http://ij.org/case/jones-v-temmer/>

The CWA 7777 union was crucial in providing four years of political lobbying support to pass this new legislation that allowed new companies to break the Colorado monopoly in taxi business, and in 2009 the new Union Taxi cooperative opened shop. The Union Taxi cooperative was awarded 262 licenses to distribute to the new taxi-business worker-owners<sup>61</sup>. Union Taxi worker owners also became CWA 7777 members, paying dues of \$28 a month, and renting CWA 7777 space.<sup>62</sup>

Each of these cooperative taxi drivers pay a monthly fee of \$700-\$800 to maintain administration of their coop, which is significantly lower than the required monthly payment of \$2,000- \$3,500 that taxi drivers must pay to competing, non-coop companies. According to an organizer at CWA7777, workers bring 75% of their income back home, as a result of being part of a union cooperative (interview, July 10, 2013). Though Union Taxi coop workers take a much greater portion of their fare earnings home as wages than did taxi workers with non-worker owned Denver taxi companies, the Union Taxi company still earns solid profits. Union Taxi had an annual revenue of \$13 million as of 2014, and Union Taxi purchased their own building and moved out of the CWA 7777 building in 2014 (Interview, Feb. 10, 2014)<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> When Union Taxi was granted 262 licenses from the Colorado Public Utilities Commission (PUC) in 2009, competing taxi companies such as Metro Taxi has 492 licenses, and Yellow has 450 licenses, Freedom Cab has 250 licenses, Liberty taxi has 150 licenses.

<sup>62</sup> An interview with a worker, on the street, between May 2015 and September 2015.

<sup>63</sup> An in-depth open interview with a member at Union Taxi occurred in Feb. 10, 2014 and this information about Union Taxi's finance was provided at this interview.

*Green Taxi: A Second Union-Coop*

In 2014, workers who wished to leave their traditional private taxi companies—but who could not acquire one of Union Taxi’s limited taxi licenses--decided to form a second unionized taxi company in Denver. Workers who had grown tired of paying high leasing fees to their existing private companies (Yellow, Metro, Freedom), and of what they saw as undignified treatment by taxi company managers, decided to form a new company by themselves, when they realized they were not enough licenses at the existing Union Taxi coop to allow them to leave their current companies. “It was our dream to be part of Union Taxi, because leasing fees are only \$800 a month... not \$800 every week to private owners,” said a Metro Taxi worker (Interview, October 25, 2014).

The idea of joining CWA7777 to resist such work conditions came from meetings where worker leaders expressed interest in joining a union as a way to get political support for their new business coop idea, following the successful example of Union Taxi. Within a month of first proposing the co-op idea among themselves, more than one thousand taxi drivers joined CWA 7777 in October, 2014. Taxi workers viewed the labor union as their main ally in their struggle, which matched survey data that shows that “immigrant workers have more favorable attitudes toward labor unions than do U.S. born workers” (Milkman 2012, 244; Milkman and Ot 2014). CWA 7777 responded quickly to workers, drawing on the union’s previous experience in creating a union-cooperative, Union Taxi. The principles, bylaws, and all other administrative and political matters were articulated in the past with the case of Union Taxi, and this second round of forming a new cooperative followed a similar process as during the Union Taxi campaign.

Following successful political lobbying to win support for Union Taxi in 2009, CWA 7777 once again pushed through legislation in 2015 to help workers open a new unionized taxi cooperative in Denver in 2015. The legislation allowing this new company was different than previous laws regarding the taxi business, because the bill (HB 15-1316) simplified the process by not requiring newly proposed companies to provide evidence that there is “a public need for the service.” Rather the Public Utilities Commission was only charged with ascertaining “whether the applicant is operationally and financially fit to provide the proposed taxicab service.”<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the bill was sponsored and supported by members of both parties (Republicans and Democrats) who aimed to allow taxi companies to enter business so that it would lead to “ free market competition, expanded consumer choice and improved quality of service” (40-10.1-203; also see Buni 2015)<sup>65</sup>.

In support of free competition among taxi companies, a union organizer at CWA 7777 argued that “If Union Taxi dies from competition, so be it... If we cannot compete, we deserve to die” (Blake 2016). As a result of support from both political parties, the bill passed and became law on June 6, 2015. Subsequently, the new workers cooperative, Green Taxi, received a permit from the PUC in May 2016 and began to operate in July 2016 with 800 worker-owners--the largest taxi cooperative in the United States (Stearn 2016, Blake 2016, Proctor 2016).

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<sup>64</sup> <http://www.legispeak.com/bill/2015/hb15-1316>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.google.com/search?q=HB+15-1316+sponsors&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiFutmqxNrOAhUG-GMKHUZmAwEQvwUIGygA&biw=1408&bih=649>

## **A Unionized Worker Cooperative in Practice**

Union leaders and workers alike have celebrated the model of a union-cooperative as an effective strategy to protect vulnerable independent contractors like taxi drivers. Labor unions can arguably enhance the political lobbying power of taxi drivers as a group, and a worker cooperative is a well-established path to achieving the American dream of becoming an independent business owner. From this perspective, a union-cooperative collaboration is a “perfect marriage” to accomplish multiple goals of building the political power of workers, protecting workers against exploitation by private taxi companies, and allowing workers the chance to secure their own economic independence. However, in reality, this perfect marriage in the form of a union-cooperative has experienced many obstacles, in terms of building labor power in Denver.

### *Economically Driven Worker Cooperatives: “We are Owners, not Workers”*

Though some have celebrated alliances of unions and coops as a new strategy of labor empowerment, the case of Denver taxi cooperatives shows that unionized coop members have sought little more than individual economic benefit through their new coop, and have shown little evidence of collectivist values, appetite for collective labor action, or concern for broader social issues. Evidencing a strong sentiment of individualistic ownership, 59% of cooperative members (41 members) interviewed by this author claimed that they did not think of themselves as “working class,” or as a member of any class, while just 25% of workers (17 members) interviewed did think in such class terms. The majority of workers interviewed agreed with the claim that “I do not think of myself in working class terms. I am just an individual owner” (interview, Sept 10, 2015). One worker described this sense

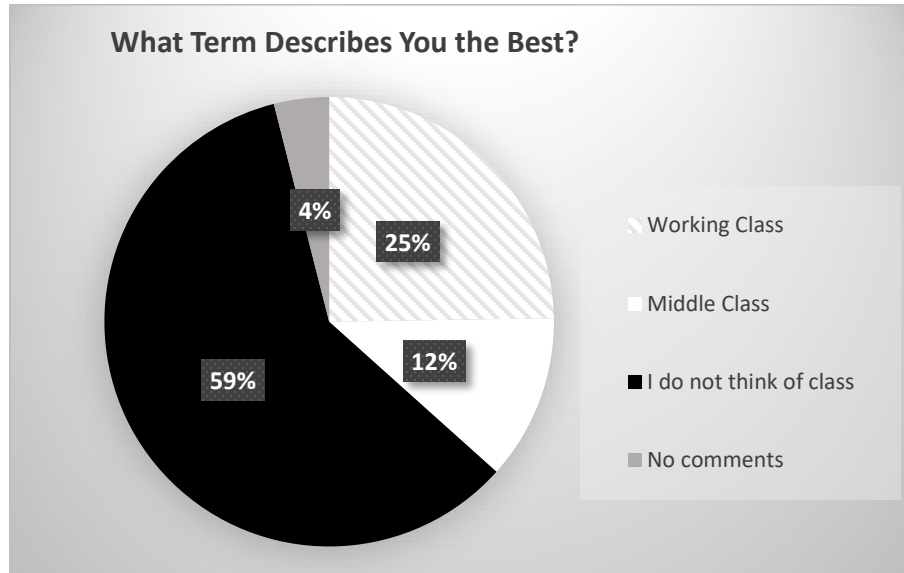
of being an individual business owner, rather than a member of workers' collective, in the following interview.

It was my dream to be an owner of business in America. So, of course, I am proud to be the owner of this taxi company and I feel like I achieved an American dream already. My life was miserable when I worked at Metro Taxi. But, now, no one can boss me around because I am one of the owners. But, I have never thought myself in class terms, because I don't know what that means (interview, September 5, 2015).

Below, chart one presents the results of all interviewed workers (69 total workers). When workers were asked to describe what term best described how they thought of themselves, 59% reported that they didn't think in class terms, while 25% thought of themselves as "working class" (12% of these very low-wage workers actually thought of themselves as "middle class"). These data are especially interesting when compared to how similarly situated South Korean bus drivers describe themselves in much more working-class terms, a pattern which will be explored subsequently in chapter ten.

Evidencing entrepreneurial aspirations, the desire to become and identify as a business owner is strong among Denver taxi workers. Many cooperative owners claimed that "we are all here with an American dream of becoming business owners" (Interview, September 12, 2015).

**Chart 1. Denver Taxi-Drivers' Self-Identified Class Position**



(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers)

One member of the Union-Taxi worker cooperative, Ahamed, describes the benefit of being the business owner.

I was an accountant in my country but when I came here, there was no job. I went to a community college to keep studying but at the same time I drove the taxi to make money. Being the owner of the UnionTaxi was good because we are the bosses and that we only pay \$700 a month to UnionTaxi, which is much less than what other workers would pay driving at Metro Taxi. I became the owner when the previous owner sold his spot to me (Interview, February 15, 2015).

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 is seen by taxi drivers not as a tool of class solidarity, but as a mechanism for attaining middle-class identity.

In Denver, the consequences of individualistic business ownership undermining notions of class solidarity were 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.<sup>66</sup> This concern among Union Taxi workers was described in the following interview.

I was lucky to be the member of Union-Taxi, and has made some improvement in my income as I do not pay that much monthly fee to the company. When I heard that there would be another taxi company like Green Taxi, I got immediately worried. Because there are not many people using taxies, while there are too many taxi companies in Denver.<sup>67</sup>

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 subleased their personal work licenses to

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<sup>66</sup> An interview with Lisa Bolton, the president at CWA 7777, December 10, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> An interview with a worker occurred on September 10, 2015 at the Denver International Airport (DIA), while a worker wait in line to get a customer.

entirely new tax drivers—in order to maximize their own material gains by siphoning off some of the earned income of the new drivers (Interview, September 27, 2015).

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” (exactly this problem undermined L.A. area cooperatives, which ultimately fell under the control of outside investors).<sup>68</sup> However, a potential problem lies in the tendency of such individualistic trading and pursuit of wealth-building to undermine notions of working class struggle by over-emphasizing how labor unions in the U.S. can facilitate economic ascent into the middle-class. Michael Zweig argues that “when the working class disappears into an amorphous middle class, the working poor--more than forty-six million strong--drops out of the picture”(Lichtenstein 2012, 11).

Exemplifying this utilitarian approach to worker cooperative ownership as an entrepreneurial tool of economic ascent, Denver’s Union Taxi is organized such that individual taxi drivers can 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, and there is no broader broader group involvement in reviewing such transfers (Interview, September 5, 2015). This author interviewed drivers who paid to lease their cooperative taxi license from another coop member, and found that none of those who leased their cooperative license were familiar with what a worker cooperative was or how it was meant

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

to function. Many workers interviewed stated that they were just leasing a car from a cooperative member (owner) and paying that owner between \$1,000-\$1,500 a month for driving a car (that owner then would pay the cooperative itself \$800 a month for the taxi license, keeping the difference as personal income). One worker interviewed stated that

I did not know that UnionTaxi was a worker cooperative. I do not know what a worker cooperative is. I just lease this taxi and pay \$1,500 a month to the owner. The owner went back home to visit his families and that is why I am only using his taxi while he is gone for a while (Interview September 10, 2015).

Another worker, M, sub-leases his union taxi medallion from his cousin who is a cooperative owner of Union Taxi, and who he pays \$1,500 a month to in order to drive the taxi.

While Union Taxi worker owners focus greatly on their personal economic improvement through their worker cooperative, there is little attention to broader social and political reform potentials that sometimes are associated with a worker cooperative. For instance, Union Taxi members voted to withdraw entirely from the CWA 7777 union after they had built a record of business success and were able to purchase their own building in the fall of 2014. Previously, Union Taxi members had paid union membership dues of \$28 a month to CWA 7777, which also covered office space rental fees and a parking lot for their business from 2009-2014. The vice president of CWA 7777, Linda Harris, explains that “They got their own building and decided they didn’t need us anymore” (Blake 2016).

In essence, taxi coop owners saw the CWA union as a “business enterprise, effectively selling their members services for a fee” (DeMartino 1991, 34)—the very essence of the instrumental business unionism tradition in the U.S. Union Taxi coop owners had essentially contracted with the CWA Local 7777 to secure important services like political lobbying to secure a business license, technical assistance in setting up their business, and office and parking space during the coop’s early years. But as the business became self-reliant, the need to continue as dues-paying union members evaporated, since the union-as-vendor no longer had important goods and services to provide (DeMartino 1991, 34).

Although CWA 7777 continued limited forms of political lobbying, and arranged for political meetings as needed to defend the interests of taxi drivers even after Union Taxi was established, Union Taxi workers came to view that the labor union simply did not do enough for members to continue to justify the monthly membership dues. Thus, Union Taxi left CWA 7777 in 2015. This example illustrates the lack of a deeper labor ideology, worker solidarity, or transformational political commitments on the part of Union Taxi cooperative owners, who seemed to view their coop as mainly a tool of individual economic ascent and not as a strategy of political or social change.

#### *Governance Structure at the Unionized Cooperative*

Emphasis on the economic role of the worker cooperative in the case of Union Taxi and Green Taxi can also be seen in the clear separation between management and labor in the cooperatives, and in the way by which the cooperatives are run is similar to conventional companies. Average workers are not involved in company governance, as they depend upon seven elected board members to take care of management-related

business concerns. With a clear distinction that taxi drivers are simply workers, while elected board members should make all important decisions, workers are not expected (or allowed) to participate in many affairs at their cooperative. In interviews, many workers argued that it was the responsibility of board members to know how to run the business and to understand the principles and rules governing worker cooperatives. “Worker cooperative education is not given much time at our cooperative and it is okay,” said one worker. “Cooperative education is for board members only. Isn’t it?”<sup>69</sup> Confirming this view, there are no workers’ committees established to work on various issues at Union Taxi in Denver—workers are simply not involved in collective efforts to sustain business growth, to build alliances with other workers across the region, to engage with lobbying or other political work, or to develop worker education or leadership within the coop.

Instead of showing interest in (non-existent) workers committees, interviewed workers expressed the view that managers at their companies should have the power over almost all administrative affairs. Over 50% of taxi coop owners interviewed believed that they needed “bosses” (meaning managers) in order to run the coop effectively. One worker interviewed emphasized the need to have a hierarchical structure to have a well-run company.

I think it is important for us to have someone with skills and experiences to manage the company. We are owners of this taxi company but it would be a disaster if we do not hire a manager to run the company. So, I consider those managers in administration as bosses. That is why I

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<sup>69</sup> An interview with a taxi worker on a street, September 20, 2015. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 69 workers in Denver’s streets.

answered that we need a boss in the survey (Interview, September 20, 2015).

Correspondingly, 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. In the case of Union Taxi, 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, the ways by which Union Taxi members can be engaged in political issues or in broader labor mobilization campaigns are rare, except for a few occasions of participating in taxi worker protests against rising business competition from Uber and Lyft. Rather, Union Taxi is run like any other typical company, with no expectation of broader political or social engagement on the part of worker-owners. This may pose a threat of Union Taxi falling into a “hierarchical and managerial model” (Reedy et al. 2016, 5), resulting in “the near inevitability of degradation” within the unionized worker coop (5).

#### *The Role of Labor Unions: Political Lobbying vs. Leadership Development*

Similar to their approach in supporting Union Taxi, the CWA 7777 union has interpreted its role almost entirely as a supportive lobbying group for the Green Taxi coop. CWA 7777 convened meetings of taxi coop owners only when there was a need for workers to participate in political hearings related to taxi business. The ways in which union organizers work with coop leaders on a regular basis are quite limited, as CWA 7777 defines their supportive role for taxi coops as being limited mostly to professional political lobbying. CWA President Lisa Bolton stated that “we do not run their business. Our job

is to pass legislation so that they can open a taxi business” (2015). In this regard, the approach of CWA 7777 has been to limit its role to professional advising with a small circle of coop owners, and to political lobbying before official licensing bodies. This emphasis on political lobbying as the most important role of a labor union in supporting the emergence of a union-cooperative reflects upon the tradition of business unionism where labor unions do not present themselves as vessels of social movement, but instead offers specific goods (such as higher wages) and professional services (such as professional lobbying or technical assistance) to union members, in exchange for their membership dues.

Palmer (2015), in his taxi-industry report for the Worker Cooperative Industry Research Series, describes the weakness that comes with such a political lobbying focus and the associated danger of a cooperative model “degenerating” from its original goal of worker cooperative.

Political strength is possible as well through a sustained focus on lobbying efforts and the maintenance of strong ties to allied organizations with a history of political activism. But a worker cooperative in the taxi industry that does not take these issues seriously will not fare any better than conventional firms...” (7).

A similar criticism of the union’s focus on professional political lobbying is well shown in the statement by United Steel Workers’ Union president Leo Gerard who argues that there is a natural outgrowth of the American worker tendency to trust their system to deliver the goods more than workers do elsewhere.

I actually believe that Americans believe in their political system more than workers do in other parts of the world,” Mr. Gerard said. He said large labor demonstrations are often warranted in Canada and European countries to pressure parliamentary leaders. Demonstrations are less needed in the United States, he said, because often all that is needed is

some expert lobbying in Washington to line up the support of a half-dozen senators (Maisano 2013).

As much as labor unions have become one of the strongest political lobbying institutions in the U.S., spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year for political lobbying and electoral work, it has presented some difficulties as excessive focus on political lobbying can result in less organizing on the ground. In 2014, the AFL-CIO spent “a fifth of its \$200 million budget on politics and lobbying”<sup>70</sup> and spent another \$45 million for political lobbying in 2015.<sup>71</sup> The possibly counterproductive emphasis on political lobbying is shown in the case of the Change to Win Coalition, which split from AFL-CIO (in 2005) to focus more on membership organizing campaigns. The Change to Win, Coalition which was formed in 1995, aimed to focus on organizing workers instead of political lobbying in favor of the Democrats, as it stated a goal to “build a growing, independent voice for working people in politics based on economic issues, not on party”<sup>72</sup> (SHRM 2005, 7; also see Roof 2007, 247). However, the fact is that even the Change to Win Coalition in 2014 “spent more money on political activity than they did before the split” (Hodges 2011, 893).

The argument here is not to reject the necessity or virtue of political lobbying. In fact, the largest union-cooperative, Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) which has 1,100 worker owners (out of the total 2,300 members) (Flanders 2014), was critical in

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2015/8/union-members-have-a-choice-and-they-dont-even-know-it>. For more information on the split between AFL-CIO, read an article, “Interview - Andy Stern” September 24, 2005. Statesman. <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/162826>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/indus.php?id=P>

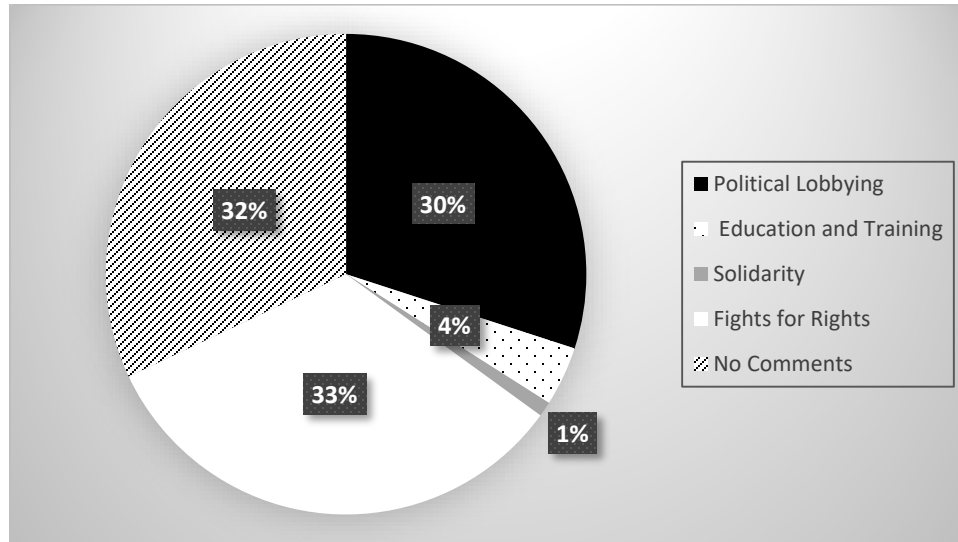
<sup>72</sup> Workplace Visions, No.4, 2005. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/labor-market-and-economic-data/Documents/Visions1005.pdf>

passing legislation to improve the life of low wage workers in the entire home care industry. The management of the cooperative worked in tandem with a labor union, SEIU 1199, to “raise the floor” for all home care industry workers (Kennelly and Odeko 2016, Witherell, Cooper and Peck 2012, 17). It is also notable that CHCA had strong collaboration with SEIU 1199 since 1987, long before it joined SEIU in 2003, as the senior management from CHCA had consistently encouraged workers to attend various rallies and volunteered at the SEIU 1199 to support home care organizing (Berry and Schneider 2011, 12; Burns 2013).

In the case of Denver’s taxi workers, 30% of workers surveyed regarded political lobbying as the most important role of a labor union, followed by 33% of workers who argued for the fights for workers’ rights as the most important role of a labor union. Interestingly, almost 30% of workers expressed no comments on the questions implying that most were not familiar with the role of a labor union as well. Also, in a question of what they would like a labor union to do the most, 42% of workers surveyed expressed a strong desire for a labor union to work on political lobbying to stop Uber from doing business.

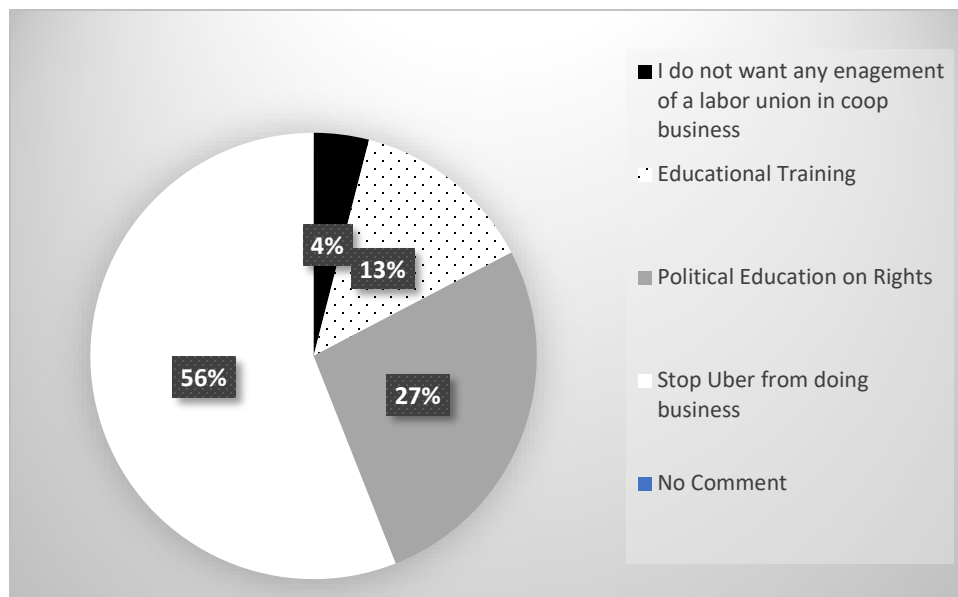
Also, workers were less aware of the role of a labor union to build solidarity with other workers as only 1% of taxi workers in Denver pointed out the emphasis on solidarity building, which shows a contrast with Korea’s Woojin union-cooperative, where more than 30% of workers surveyed regarded building solidarity with other community groups as the most important role of a labor union.

**Chart 2. What is a role of a labor union?**



(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers)

**Chart 3. What would you like a labor union to do the most?**



(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers)

In this regard, Denver taxi workers' perception on labor union being a political institution that works on political lobbying illustrates some of criticism on the limitation

of political lobbying role that a union plays. According to the first general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), political lobbying by a union is not enough to empower workers. Rather, what is needed are union commitments to providing worker education campaigns to “build worker control, collective experience and understanding, deepening working class consciousness. Education should ensure fullest discussion amongst workers, thus building democracy. Education is a weapon for shaping mass struggles of the present and the future of our class” (COSATU 1986, cited in Cooper 2007, 185). From this perspective, an important role of labor unions is to encourage workers’ participation in ongoing union activities to help workers deepen their political understanding and develop their class consciousness, which helps them to build and sustain their own identity as workers (183). Furthermore, through such efforts, workers’ learning and worker identity can be strengthened through “participation in a community of practice” (Cooper 2007, 190) or through “active engagement in organization as a collective political project,” in Marx’s phrasing (Ready et al. 2016, 4).

Unfortunately, in Denver, CWA 7777 did not take on this kind of leadership development role, but rather presented itself as a professional business partner to the taxi-drivers’ cooperative—able to win specific goods for workers (such as a business license), but not focused on catalyzing a grass-roots campaign to fundamentally challenge the existing taxi-driver system. By undermining the importance of rank-and-file leadership development and by “explicitly *limiting* the field of contestation to a narrow field of concerns” (Perlman 1928, 232, cited in Dubb 1999, 94; Hodget 2011; DeMartino 1991), CWA 7777 also limited the range of possible changes that the unionized cooperative might introduce to Denver.

The limited role of the labor union in supporting workers on the ground may have played a role in the growing skepticism towards the union that Denver taxi coop owners have expressed over time. Despite the fact that 59% percent of immigrant workers (41 members) interviewed by this author early in their organizing campaign expressed receptiveness and a positive attitude toward a labor union, some of taxi workers from Union Taxi union-cooperative in Denver have since changed their positive view to disappointment and skepticism about their labor union as time has passed (thus replicating a common trajectory among workers in terms of their changing views towards unions, as described by Milkman [2014]). In a second wave of interviews by this author, many workers at Union Taxi expressed discontent that “they [the union] did not contact us. The union provided us with nothing. No education. No contact. Nothing” (Interview, Sept. 11, 2015).

Another worker claimed that “they did nothing to stop Uber. While Uber gets what they want, the labor union could not stop them from doing business in Denver.” Another worker from Union Taxi argued that “the union did nothing for us for the past six years after we opened the cooperative. They only took my money (\$360) per year. Why should I pay the money, when they do nothing for us?” (Interview, Sept. 11, 2015). Thus, workers at Union Taxi were pessimistic about their roles in the union and perhaps unrealistically expected the labor union to resolve many problems related to their taxi business—such as preventing the rise of Uber. In any case it appears that some workers felt neglected by their union and did not believe the union was interested in deeper engagement with workers other than taking membership dues and helping the company receive a business license to operate.

Although Bruno and Jordan (2005) argue that “education should emphasize a discourse of class and insist on class as the organizing reality of contemporary life” (466), this kind of class consciousness education certainly was not offered by CWA 7777 at either Union Taxi or Green Taxi. Thus, the 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...” (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 union<sup>73</sup> (Holt 2007, 99).

This lack of education of rank and file workers fosters excessive dependence on professional organizers in getting things done. CWA 7777 heavily utilized a professional organizer in the creation of two union-cooperatives. Although there was a genuine effort among workers to explore the option of democratically creating a taxi cooperative in the beginning stage of development, CWA 7777 took over the entire process once members decided to approach CWA 7777 to ask for help in creating a union-cooperative. It is true that professional staff efforts are, at times, necessary to move forward organizing campaigns, but too much reliance on professional union staff can become a problem, because “in many cases, the staff became the be-all and end-all of organizational change” (Fletcher 2008, 61; see also Cummings and Tillman). In this case, taxi drivers’ expressed desire for a deeper relationship between union organizers and cooperative owners never

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<sup>73</sup> 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.

came to fruition, because the now-defunct Union Taxi-CWA partnership was nothing more than instrumental and mechanical.<sup>74</sup>

## **Conclusion**

CWA 7777 was critical in the formation of two union-cooperatives in Denver, with union organizers joining with workers to show innovation and persistence in organizing independent taxi workers. Their innovation in organizing workers has received a good deal of national attention from those unions working with taxi workers or other transportation workers (Palmer 2015). However, the successful creation of a unionized taxi-drivers' cooperative does not necessarily mean that a union-cooperative works as a progressive form of labor organizing. Rather, one possibility is that this union-cooperative alliance can fit within the conservative framework of business unionism, without being connected with other community or social justice issues. For example, Union-Taxi members were not mobilized by union leaders to become active in any other political causes other than running their own taxi business. In this case study, neither union organizers nor taxi drivers themselves prioritized the development of working-class identities or solidary class power among the drivers. Neither party saw the drivers' cooperative as "the bedrock on which wider political action is built" (Spear 1989, 566), and unsurprisingly such wider political action never came to be. It is unclear what might have developed had union organizers and coop owners come together around a union-cooperative model that was self-consciously

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<sup>74</sup> For case studies of similarly limited "instrumental" unionism, see Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl, 2001 and George DeMartino 1991.

political in nature, but in the subsequent case study of Korea's (Woojin) bus driver cooperative, some of those possible alternative paths will be explored.

## CHAPTER 8

### SOUTH KOREA'S CLASS CONSCIOUS LABOR MOVEMENT

In South Korea, a tradition of labor militancy has imprinted itself on local labor struggles, and plays a formative role in the composition and political assertion of the Korean working class. Korean labor militancy is well-established, especially as compared to nearby neighbors like Japan and Taiwan, with Korea's "strike intensity exceeding that of any industrial country" (Yoon, Bong Joon 2005, 205). Lee's (2011, 1) influential investigation of Korean labor mobilization calls Korean workers "militant, radical and confrontational." Bello and Rosenfeld (1990, 23) similarly concluded that the Korean labor movement has "evoked images of the European working classes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: rebellious, uncompromising, and passionately class consciousness" (see also Koo 2001). The *New York Times Magazine* (2003, 9.8) describes Korea's violent labor militancy as "striking to death," while the 2004 social index rates Korea's antagonistic capital-labor relations "the world's worst" (also see Kwaak 2014). 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 their willingness to engage in direct confrontations with capitalists, has not much changed (Suzuki 2012,10; Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2012; Rowley and Bae 2010; You, Hyung-Geun 2012).

This chapter argues that Korean labor movements have not only been militant and confrontational, but have also quite often adopted an explicitly class-conscious—even

traditionally Marxist--approach to their work, and have done so for years, placing a strong emphasis on the necessity of class antagonism between capital and labor. Whereas the labor movement in the US has more affinity with poststructural or pluralist traditions in which rigid notions of class are regarded as a thing of the past, and according to which “class” is simply one among many possible entries into social analysis, the labor movement in Korea has more affinity with traditional Marxism in that class struggle and the concept of “the working class” continue to be the beacon of the labor movement. This tradition of traditional Marxist analysis that informs the perspectives of many Korean labor leaders and organizations engenders a very different kind of Korean labor movement than in the United States, and shapes the relationships between unions and worker cooperatives in unique ways.

Korea’s particular political, economic and social context has fostered the influence of traditional Marxism on the local labor movement. First, Korea’s militant labor movement has been shaped by the opposition of a powerful state that has long been a powerful obstacle in achieving labor rights and the resultant antagonism between unions and the state has continued to date. Second, Korea’s strong labor militancy is shaped by a long tradition of class antagonism between capital (controlled by tightly managed and powerful chaebols) and labor (whose leaders have consistently been ignored, fired, or politically repressed). Third, Korea’s labor union movements have been influenced by a student movement which developed an oppositional consciousness and explicitly Marxist ideology in their revolutionary struggles against the authoritarian state during the 1980s. Student leaders from this era have continued to play vital leadership roles in Korean labor organizations, shaping the nature of the Korean labor movement to be militant and oppositional.

## **The Authoritarian State and Labor Antagonism**

The nature of the Korean state in general, and of state policies vis-à-vis labor in specific, have played a critical role in shaping labor-capital relations in Korea and associated Korean labor militancy (Upchurch and Mathers 2011; Gray 2008; Jessop 1994; Kelly 1998). In terms of the general nature of the Korean state, a long history of an authoritarian state with few mechanisms of pluralistic political participation by civil society groups has fostered a tradition of contentious and militant labor organizing as a strategy to force state recognition of labor concerns. Though participatory mechanisms have expanded since the democratic transition of 1987, the government's commitment to these participatory mechanisms has been weak and underfunded since 1987, and there has been only limited time to develop robust and participatory practices throughout Korean civil society (Kim 2009; Lee 2011).

In addition, the Korean political party system since 1987 remains unstable and under-institutionalized, in that major political parties consistently change their names, dissolve into one another, realign and disintegrate. A tradition of political party reliance on "charismatic leadership and regional bases" for support, rather than coherent and consistent policy platforms, has made the parties themselves ineffective vehicles for the advancement of labor ideals or policies. As a result, "frustrated by amorphous political parties with unclear visions and options, South Korean citizens continue to rely on civic engagement focused on direct action and popular protest" (Kim Sunhyuk 2009). This reliance on disruptive direct action distinguishes the Korean labor movement from America's, and reflects the very different institutional milieu in which Korean labor is situated. As Kim Sunhyuk (2009) argues, "confrontational legacies, ineffective participatory mechanisms,

and underinstitutionalized political parties have all collaborated to engender a democracy in which contentions and confrontations, rather than consultations and compromises, have become a routine and the ‘rule of the game.’”

Specific Korean state policies vis-à-vis labor align with this general framework of a state authoritarianism. It was not until 1987 that the state even allowed labor unions to organize independent of state control. Even though independent unions were legitimated in the late 1980s, the state remains profoundly unfriendly to labor organizing. Soon after the 1987 democratization period, Korea experienced the economic crisis of 1997, which was followed by a host of neo-liberal economic restructuring policies that profoundly undermined the position of labor in Korean society, such as deregulating the labor market (allowing minimum wage to fall and unemployment to rise, and legalizing lay-offs of permanent workers and their conversion to temporary status) and restructuring of the public sector (privatizing many state utilities and reducing government employment). Also following 1997, an increasingly conservative Korean court system began to interpret almost all labor union strikes as illegal under the Trade Union Act (for example, because they allegedly violated “public order”).

Taken together, the general nature of the Korean state (with underdeveloped mechanisms for popular participation) and the specific nature of Korean labor policies (with a long and continued tradition of delegitimizing union activity) have fostered a militant and class-conscious labor movement in Korea, especially as compared to the American context. Geary (1981) concludes that “state and employer repression was associated with greater political and industrial militancy on the part of labor” (Frege & Kelly 2004, 11), while Evans argues that Korea’s developmental state intervention to

“deepen industrial development” catalyzed antagonism among the working class, “producing labor militancy at factories” (Evans 1995, 229). Deep antagonism between labor and the state is embedded in Korea’s labor history, because labor unions typically have to militantly force their way onto the civic stage, and have been “developed in the process of resistance against the military government and employer” (Kwon, Sung Ho 1997, 270; Yoon Bong Joon 2005).

### *The Developmental State and Labor Exploitation*

Korea’s economic miracle has been viewed as one of the most successful cases in the world of a nation that reduced extreme poverty within a short period of time; it is often called an “Asian Tiger’s miracle” or “the Miracle on the Han” (Woronoff 1986, cited in Yun, Yin Bao. 2002, 45). In 1954, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$1.5 billion and per capita GDP of only \$70 (Heo, Uk, et al. 2). In comparison, US per capital GDP stood at \$2,449 in 1953 (Cho, Mu-hyun 2015). However, Korea rapidly emerged to become the world’s 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy by 2015, with a \$1,393 billion GDP, and per capita GDP of \$27,513.<sup>75</sup>

Some attribute Korea’s economic miracle to such factors as the external “emergence of a new international division of labor” (Frobel et al 1980) which allowed developing economies opportunities as export-platforms, or to the normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan (and associated benefits from the ending of the Vietnam War) (Cumings 1987), or to the abundance of skilled but poorly paid labor in Korea (Kum, In-

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<sup>75</sup> <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/projected-world-gdp-ranking.php>

Sook 1997). For all these attributions, however, there is no denying that a critical player behind Korea's rapid economic growth was the Korean state itself, which is a well-studied example of the successful application of "developmental state" policies to serve as "an engine to accelerate development" (Shin, DongMyeon 2003, 18; Amsden 1989; Wade, 1990; Chang, 1993; Evans 1995; Nam 2003).

President Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) was particularly important in shaping the Korean development state, directing and mobilizing a wide range of national resources to achieve rapid economic development. Park believed that the role of the state was to direct national energies to achieve fast development, "overcome our backwardness and catch up with the advanced countries" (Faith 1981, 502). President Park had a sense of urgency in overcoming Korean "backwardness" as he state that "while we were sleeping, the world witnessed astounding progress... Unless we can establish an 'economy first' consciousness, our dream of building a strong nation state will end in a dream and nothing more" (C.H. Park 1970, 248-249, cited in Ha, Yong Chool 2007, 371).

In order to overcome Korean "backwardness," Park Chung-hee adopted a policy of building a labor-intensive, export-oriented economy. To achieve this goal, Park initiated a set of business-supported policies, which included government identification of a set of privileged conglomerates (called chaebols), which were protected from both domestic and foreign competition by government policy, and which were relied upon to develop business expertise by delivering a wide range of government-supported initiatives, including new steel factories, shipyards, freeways, and vast factory districts of low-wage export industries (i.e., textiles and cheap

electronics). These government-selected chaebols were subsidized and protected by government policy, and were allowed to run operations featuring “poor wages, unsafe working conditions, long hours, and other forms of labor exploitation” (Ra and Chung 1992, 233; Chung, Kae H. et al. 1997, 218; Kearney 1991). Park also nationalized banks, granted investment priorities to manufacturing and export-oriented industries, expanded diplomatic ties to facilitate foreign loans and investment, channeled banking capital into targeted industries, gave exclusive licensing and tax privileges to exporters, modernized agriculture, and mobilized human resources behind strategically targeted initiatives and industries (Amden 1989; Kim, K and Roemer 1979; Jones and Sakong 1980; Mason et al. 1980, cited in Kim, Eungi and Gil-sung Park 2003, 40).

Other evidence of state developmentalism came in the form of state support of industries in crisis. For example, in the aftermath of the first oil shock of 1974, Hyundai industries received a dramatic boost in support from the government, receiving contracts for nearly 70% of all government orders in its field between 1975 and 1980 (Kwon, Seung Ho and O’Donnel Michael 1999, 280). The Vietnam War also helped Korean chaebols develop heavy industries by supplying war-related products to the United States, and the development of semiconductors by Hyundai electronics industry in the 1980s came with the fifth Five Year Plan (1981-1985) (280).

The policies of the Korean developmental state have been “one of the locomotives that contributed to South Korea’s economic growth” (Heo, UK et al. 7), and are commonly attributed with lifting an impoverished nation into highly developed status (Haggard, Kim and Moon 1991; Kearney 1991). But a closer look reveals the reality that millions of Korean workers never benefitted from the macro-economic

competitiveness that their long work hours and low-wages fostered. Namhee Lee (2005) explains the reality of labor conditions in much of South Korea before the democratization movement of 1987.

The lives of the majority of the South Korean working class evoked the Dickensian image of a “blighted patch of humanity”: “murderous” low wages; harsh working conditions; crammed “chicken coop” housing; and the ever-present threat of being fired, maimed, or imprisoned. According to an FKTU report in May 1985, the workers’ fixed wages, averaged across all areas, reached only 44 percent of the minimum cost of living; even with overtime pay and bonuses, wages reached only 54 percent of the minimum cost of living (919).

In supporting the rise of powerful chaebols as agents of national uplift, regardless of their labor abuses, political leaders called average Korean laborers “warrior workers,” standing together for the good of the national struggle for global pride (Kearney 1991; Koo 2001). Though leaders promised workers a rising standard of living in exchange for political and labor quiescence (a political “deal” that scholar Chang Kyung-Sup calls “developmental citizenship”), in reality millions of workers remained impoverished into the 1980s, and some of the biggest industries were sweatshops of ill-repute, such as textile and wig manufacturers. Millions of workers lived in poorly made squats, and leading jobs included sweeping the streets and gathering up the ever-exploding waste of others, since half the city of 9 million had no running water or sewage pipes even into the 1970s.

In this way, millions of average Korean workers endured low wages and significant workplace exploitation to allow the privileged chaebols to grow as Bacon (1997) describes: “Workers paid for the Korean economic miracle by giving up their labor rights” (Bacon 1997; Hart-Landsberg 1993). Krugman (1994) similarly argues that “the Korean miracle

was due solely to the enormous mobilization of regular industrial labor by ‘perspiration’ rather than ‘inspiration’” (cited in Kim, Wonik 2010, 516).

### *Anti-labor Laws*

Widespread labor exploitation fostered a perennial undercurrent of labor unrest (Koo 2001), to which the state responded by enacting various anti-labor laws, which were especially strong in the pre-1987 era, but elements of which remain in place today. While before democratization in 1987 the state outright illegalized the right of labor unions to form independently, important anti-labor state strategies *after* democratization included deregulating labor by undermining minimum wage laws, judicially reinterpreting labor law to allow for more effective corporate strike-breaking, and revising employment law to allow for easier dismissal of regular employees and for the rapid growth of an irregular workforce.

During the Park Chung-hee regime and before the 1987 upheaval, President Park amended the Trade unions Act in 1964 to “restrict the presence and political activities of multiple unionism in the workplace. He also passed the Special Act for National Security Act (1971) to allow “public security agencies such as police and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) to be used to suppress industrial conflict” (Kwon, Seung Ho 1997, 277). KCIA agents not only monitored union activities at the workplace, but also played a prominent role in selecting leaders of all major unions, including the leadership of the national affiliation of unions, the FKTU (O’Neill 1991, 389; also see Minns 2001; Huang 1999). During these pre-1987 years, labor activists were commonly “defined as a communist, and thus arrested, tortured, and imprisoned” (Kum, In- Sook 1997, 92).

Emergency decrees prohibited labor and student organizing, stripped people of speech rights and the right of association, and illegalized collective bargaining and strikes (Huang 1999). These restrictions, and the arrests of hundreds of labor organizers as suspected communists, had the effect of “crushing workers’ struggles for the right-to-live” (Kim, Soohaeng and Seung-ho Park 2007, 194).

After Park’s assassination in 1979, the next military dictator, Chun Doo Hwan, also oppressed labor and passed a new wave of anti-labor laws. The Chun government enacted the Labor Management Council Act of 1980, barring third party support of trade unions, illegalizing industrial unionism (efforts to build unions representing workers across an entire industry), and replacing labor unions with the concept of a “labor-management council” (Watson 1998). In establishing labor-management councils as the legal form of labor organizing rather than unions, the act required all companies with more than 50 employees to promote cooperation between managers and workers. Employers were required to report to the council regarding business plans and results, capital investment and production levels, manpower, and financial performance. For their part, workers were required to forgo unions and instead channel their labor activism into institutional structures that gave management substantial power and were required to cooperate with management in fostering a competitive business (Kwon, Seung-ho and O’ Donnell 2001; Watson 1998).

Chun Doo-hwan continued to illegalize collective bargaining, and further legitimized the monitoring of labor by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. New policies allowed government authorities to intervene in a dispute between a company and its laborers and to decide an arbitration award. If unions did not accept the government’s ruling, and went

on strike in response, they become violators of the law. As a result of harsh control of labor, the first independent labor union, the Chungaechun Garment Workers' Union (organized after the public self-immolation of labor activist Chun Tae Il) was crushed in the 1980s, and another fourteen dissident unions were forcibly disbanded by 1986. By the mid-1980s, all independent labor union movements were forced underground "to escape from the reach of state intelligence" (Kang, Wuran 1993, 101).

### *State Repression of Labor after Democratization*

Following the public upheaval and subsequent democratization of 1987, labor conditions changed substantially in that independent union organizing became legal, but still the Korean state has continued to use various anti-labor laws to suppress labor. Even though Korea elected its first non-military, civilian president starting in 1993 (e.g., Kim Young-sam [1993-1997]), and although all subsequent civilian presidents have proclaimed a "hands-off" policy in labor and management relations, the reality is that many anti-state labor policies (such as the judicial hostility to union organizing) have continued (Minns 2001). In addition, Korean presidents over the last thirty years have all supported various laws to speed up the neoliberal globalization process and establish flexible employment structures, especially following the economic crisis of 1997.

President Kim Young-sam (1993-1997) was committed to neoliberal policies such as developing a more flexible labor market (i.e., fewer long-term/permanent workers and more temporary employees, easier employee dismissal processes, more freedom for companies to pay lower-wages) and opening up Korean financial and capital markets to foreign investors (Sonn, Hochul 2006, 27). In the beginning of Kim's administration,

labor disputes were minimized because of Kim's "hands-off" policy, resulting in only 23 arrests of trade unionists in 1993 (Kim, Jin kyoon 2000, 497 ). Yet, he gradually changed to intervene in labor disputes on the side of management. For instance, the state intervened in Hyundai Motor Company's labor strike with over 1,000 riot police raid in May, 1993 when the company planned to lay off 100,000 workers, forcing workers to accept this mass layoff without labor disruption (Ho, Keun Song 1999; Dicker 1996). Also, the government utilized riot police to forcibly remove and arrest workers in a sit-in during the Seoul Subway workers' strike of 1994 (Huwang 1999, 183) and intervened Korea Telecom (KT)'s strike in 1995 with massive police intervention (Dicker 1996).

Kim Young-sam also enacted laws that legalized at-will dismissals, legalized replacement hires for replacement workers, and legalized temporary employment agencies so as to add flexibility to the workforce (Chun 2009, 38; Ranald 1999, 303). His administration continued restrictions on recognition of multi-unionism and industry-wide unions, refused to recognize a new, independent labor federation (the KCTU), refused to allow public employees and teachers to organize, and restricted labor unions from participating in electoral politics (KCTU 1997, Kwon & O'Donnell 1999, cited in Ranald 1999, 303). In the end, it became clear that "Kim Young-sam's approach was still traditional authoritarian labor policy to control and circumvent the militant labor movement" (Susan Kang 2012, 77).

Following Kim Young Sam, President Kim Dae-jung (1997- 2002) continued similar anti-labor policies. Although Kim Dae-jung was a democracy activist with a long history of promoting the social protection of workers, once in office Kim immediately faced the challenges of the 1997 economic crisis and was pressured to adopt a range of neoliberal

economic policies, with deleterious effects on labor organizing. Although Kim Dae-jung had entered office professing that “the chief causes of industrial conflict stemmed from the authoritarian labour-management practices of employers,” (Kwon, Seung-Ho and O’Donnell 2001, 29), in the end, the tradition of Korean state genuflection before chaebol power, coupled with the demands of global investors, led Kim to largely adopt the IMF’s neoliberal restructuring demands.

The IMF set strict layoff targets in order for Korea to receive a 1997 bailout package. As a result, nearly 300,000 Korean workers were fired every month in a round of neo-liberal “labor-shedding,” including a massive reduction in public sector jobs. The Korean middle class, which constituted 64% of the nation in 1996, dropped to 39% in 1999, as income levels polarized. Interest rates, which hit homebuyers and small borrowers particularly hard, were allowed to rise to around 30%. To help fight inflation and budget deficits, the public workforce and public spending on such things as education and social services substantially declined. State owned utilities such as telecommunications and electricity had to privatize and raise rates. The workforce was restructured to allow for lower wages and increased “flexibility” (meaning fewer unions and more temporary workers), in order to improve corporate profitability. To facilitate this change, new government policies allowed for easier dismissal of “permanent” employees and increased reliance on temporary or contingent employees, who work longer hours than regular workers but only earn about half the pay (Park, Bae-Gyoon 2001, 70; Suzuki 2012, 23). Korea’s largest unions were also pressured to share the “burdens of pain of economic restructuring” by accepting wage reductions and mass firings (Koo, Hagen 2001, 245).

When various unions protested these developments, hundreds of unionists were arrested and imprisoned by the Kim Dae-jung government under its new “National Security Law” and Trade Unions Act, which made it a crime for unions to obstruct business and which was drafted as a requirement of the IMF bailout package (Korea Herald July 31, 2002). In the court system, increasingly conservative judges adopted a new judicial philosophy that most strikes were illegal violations of the Trade Unions Act, which meant that businesses were increasingly allowed to seize the wages and assets of workers and their families, whenever the workers went on strike (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004b). Although Kim’s government did finally recognize the legitimacy of the radical-tilting Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in 1999, and brought this progressive labor organization into peak government-business-labor negotiations, the participation of the KCTU in negotiations did not prevent Kim Dae-jung from enacting measurements that resulted in easier “dismissal of workers in the case of mergers and acquisitions or when corporate situation became critical” (Ranald 1999, 304). Kim Dae-jung also legitimized temporary worker agencies and enacted reforms to make it easier for companies to replace full-time workers with temporary workers (Park, Bae-Gyoon 2001; Suzuki 2012).

Similar approaches were adopted during the subsequent presidency of Rho Moo-hyun (2003-2008). Although Roh had a history as a pro-labor human rights lawyer, he argued in 2004 that Korea had “risked losing competitiveness to rival countries because of labor militancy and rising wages” (*Financial Times* Jan. 14, 2004). During his first eight months in office, Roh arrested 190 union activists (Hart-Landsberg 2007, 211). The Roh administration also called upon businesses and the court system to utilize the “provisional seizure” aspects of the Trade Union Act, which allows companies to “seize the assets of

union officials and workers and to garnish up to 50 percent of an employee's weekly earnings" in order to recover damages for losses caused by "illegal" strikes—with such seizures being allowed "provisionally," even before a strike was over or the courts had ruled on its legality (Cook 2003).

By using civil court asset seizures, chaebols increasingly "put union funds and worker salaries under temporary attachment while they wait for final court rulings about the legality of labor actions" (Hart-Landsberg 2007, 210-211; Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004a, 2004b). Provisional seizures expanded substantially during the Roh administration, and the scope of temporary attachments was extended to "laborers' salaries, real estate, cars and, worst of all, deposit money for the lease of their house" (Jang 2004b). Assets of union members, their families, and the personal guarantors were regularly seized. According to the KCTU, by 2003, unionists at 46 workplaces faced "indemnity suits amounting to more than 140 billion won (about \$US110 million), including claims worth 40 billion won filed by the government's own public transport sector." Companies have seized millions of dollars of worker assets through this mechanism, leading Jang (2004a, 275) to conclude that "over-use of civil suits is a capitalist tool to repress the labor union movement."

One extreme case is shown in a court decision that allowed for the corporate seizure of \$10.2 billion won (about \$9.6 million dollars) from one union leader. In another case, 139 workers at Ssyangyong were ordered to pay a total of \$2.8 million dollars to the company for holding unauthorized strikes for three months in 2009 (Yonhap News Agency 2015). The proliferation of these compensation suits and temporary attachment orders has resulted in numerous cases of suicides by union leaders and activists (Jang 2004). One leader (Juik Kim), at the time of his suicide, only received "120 thousand won (less than

\$100) a month,” due to wage garnishments, while his ungarnished monthly earnings were about \$1,250.00 (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004b). Another worker leader, who committed suicide at Korea Heavy industries and Construction Co, left a note expressing his desperation with provisional seizure of his assets: "Payday is two days off. I was not paid for more than six months, but there is no money that I can receive" (Korea Joongang Daily 2003, January 16).

These same anti-labor legal provisions have continued under the current presidency of Park Geun-hye, who has pushed for new reforms to “increase labor flexibility on a scale that is unprecedented since the country’s adoption of International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed structural adjustment policies in the late 1990s.” Though her party has not yet been able to enact many of the reforms in the General Assembly, President Park has pushed for reforms to make it easier for companies to shorten work hours, outsource labor, and to base wages more on merit rather than on seniority or union contract. Proposed reforms “would also relax conditions for the termination of workers, increase the use of temporary contract workers, reduce job security in all labor sectors, and allow employers to change their employment regulations without worker consent” (Lee and Elich 2015).

The proposed new regulations would allow a company to hire a part-time worker into a four year contract (rather than restricting part-time employees to two years, before they must be made a “permanent” employee with better wage, hours and benefits protections). The new law would also “allow the situation where a company can hire a person for four years, fire them temporarily and then rehire them again for another four years” (Lee and Elich 2015). Proposed reforms would also replace an existing law that requires for employers to “pay severance of at least 30 days’ wages for each year of service” with a

new law that allows for dismissal of long-time employees without any financial compensation at all (Lee and Elich 2015). Also, Park Geun-hye has proposed a peak-wage system, where wages of workers would be automatically cut when a worker reaches age 55 (Lee and Elich 2015). All of these proposed labor law changes fit in Korea's long tradition of anti-labor, neoliberal economic policies that have shifted the workforce to becoming more contingent and informal, with lower wages, fewer benefits and more precarious working situations.

In summary, the role of the state has not changed much since democratization in 1987. The state used anti-communism strategies and a "growth first" developmentalist ideology to repress labor before democratization in 1987, and the state has continued to utilize a neoliberal economic competitiveness ideology to promote "flexible employment structures" and undermine union efforts since 1987. This on-going repression of labor unions and labor activism has made Korea into one of the worst countries in the world, in terms of worker protection (Kwaak 2014). In a 2014 International Trade Union report, Korea was ranked "below most of 139 countries surveyed in terms of workers' rights." (Kwaak 2014). The reports concludes that "workers are systematically exposed to unfair dismissals, intimidation, arrests and violence often leading to serious injuries and death."

### **Consequences of State Institutions on Labor Organizing Patterns**

In response to the history of labor repression by an authoritarian state, the labor movement in Korea has developed a class-conscious and broad-based critique of the Korean political-economic system, and has generally sought social justice goals which go

beyond immediate economic benefits for workers (Ra, Jong O and Chung, Eun Sung 2005; Kim, Yunjong 2015, 118; Johnson 2001). The pattern of continuing state hostility to labor organizing, even after democratization in 1987, has fostering an enduring, confrontational labor politics of disruption rather than pluralistic bargaining. As Bong Joon Yoon (1999, 6) argues, the Korean government has long “failed to encourage development of an autonomous labor relations culture in which labor and management could resolve mutual conflicts through dialogue and bargaining.”

The absence of normalized institutionalized channels through which labor activists could organize to advance their concerns as one interest group among many has fostered a radicalized labor movement in Korean, in which “the confrontational legacies bequeathed from the transitional period remain still influential” (Kim, Sunhyuk 2009, 21). The fact of the state’s authoritarian labor control strategy, which allowed few legitimate channels to incorporate labor and forced Korea’s labor movement to remain an “institutional outsider” (Liu 2012), had much more to do with shaping a militant labor movement than did the actual economic oppressions faced by workers. Similar labor oppressions were shared by Japanese workers and Taiwanese workers who nevertheless adopted a much more acquiescent and compromising approach to their organizing (Yoonkyung Lee 2005, 2011). The key difference between these three nations is that Japan and Taiwan built institutional channels for labor participation in formal politics early on in their development process, whereas Korea fully excluded labor from legitimate participation until 1987, and continues to be exceptionally hostile to the organized voice of unions. As Yoonkyung Lee (2011, 6) argues:

Because partisan allies are able to provide access to labor policy making and channel material rewards to organized labor, unions with partisan allies are more likely to pursue institutionalized methods of interest articulation under democratic governments...If union actors have no political agent to take their voices into formal political process, they tend to continue to resort to outsider tactics—for example, militant mobilization.

In just the way that Adroin and Apter (1995) argue that political repression and coercion can heighten the political activity of oppositional groups, Korea's workers have responded to their hostile institutional milieu by joining together to build a confrontational labor movement that has been "one of the most powerful dissidents" in Korean society (Kim, Yunjong 2015, 118). In her review of Lee's work, Yiu (2012, 210) summarizes how this historical institutional model helps explain Korean labor militancy.

During the authoritarian period, Korea's scheme of labor control, both repressive and exclusive, expelled organized labor from formal politics and prohibited the formation of party-union linkages, which forced labor unions to take the fate in their own hands and induced long-standing distrust against the existing party machinery. The outcome of this militant mode of labor mobilization was that Korea's labor movement remained an institutional outsider...Korea's labor movement is explained by the marginalized status of organized labor and its limited political influence, problems yet to be resolved...

Continued waves of confrontational labor disruptions by Korean unions is one manifestation of this militant labor solidarity (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004; Koo 2001). A substantial number of politically motivated public suicides by labor activists who feel without alternative, and who engage in suicide as an act of "strong resistance" to inspire future labor organizing, is another (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004b). Investigating the meaning of some of these suicides shows that one consequence of Korea's statist anti-unionism has been to catalyze a union movement that is passionately class conscious and willing to

engage in the most disruptive of actions to improve the living conditions of their working class “comrades.” Jang (2004) cites common labor activist suicide notes reading such things as the following.

If we are defeated in this struggle, many people including me cannot escape death. But if my death can rescue many comrades, I must choose that road.” Or, in another note: “Dear union member comrades...! You must continue this struggle, no matter what happens. And you must achieve victory. Only by that, can we defend the labor union and protect our right to live.

Jang (2004a, 2004b) concludes from such missives and the generally passionate nature of Korean labor organizing that Korean workers have a deep class consciousness and that “these suicides can be interpreted as an expression of a great class struggle, similar to that of the developed countries during the Great Depression in the 1930s” (286).

Indeed, examination of the intellectual roots of Korean labor leaders show that they often have embraced traditional Marxism/Leninism as a major ideological foundation of their organizing efforts. Traditional Marxism/Leninism theories, such as dependency/world-system theory, have been powerful among Korean intellectuals and labor leaders because they have witnessed how the Korean state has “exerted its power over all aspect of society,” in a form of “neo-colonial state monopoly capitalism” (Yoon, So-Young 2005). For example, So-Yong Yoon, a theoretician involved in a leading Korean labor faction (the PD), commonly deploys a Marxist-inspired theory of “monopoly *cum* deepening dependency” (Jeong, Seongjin 2010, 200) to describe the reality of powerful chaebols (family owned conglomerates) which arose with support from the developmental state. In response to such a situation, many Korean labor theorists and activists alike have come to believe that the way to overcome the monopoly state is to focus

on the “organizing of the working masses” (Park, Mi 2008, 105) and to develop workers’ consciousness for revolutionary social change (106).

Because any struggle for economic and social change necessary involves political struggle, it is always the case that the state itself becomes a “major object and arena of struggle,” (Koo 1991) and that the nature of the state shapes the nature, strategies and tactics of the underlying struggle. In Korea, the state’s direct and labor-hostile intervention in labor disputes, even after democratization in 1987, has contributed to the class-conscious and militant politicization of workers, a reality that continues to shape labor strategies today (Choi, Inyi. 2005; Bellin 2000; Tilly 2004; Kim 2007; Kim, Wonik 2010). In the next section of this chapter, I offer a detailed examination of just how that class-conscious politicization occurred, both before and after Korean democratization.

### **Worker’s Movements before Democratization in 1987**

Long before 1987, the labor movement in Korea was influenced by the external history of Japanese colonization and the development of an authoritarian regime soon after independence in 1945—which provided fertile ground for the development of Marxist thought among intellectuals and labor leaders. Although Marxist literature was illegal until the end of 1980s, Korean scholars and activists living in Manchuria and China and fighting for Korean independence before 1945 were deeply impressed with the rise of communism in the Soviet Union in 1918, providing hopes for Korean activists. The very first Communist party was formed by those activists living in foreign lands in 1921, and the first Communist party in Korea was established in 1925 (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 112; Cho, Hee Yeun 1997). The Korean Labor Federation (KLF) was formed in 1925 as well, in

collaboration with the Communist party, and the KLF proclaimed to “liberate the working class and to build a completely new society; to fight with the capitalist class with the collective power of the workers until a final victory is won, and to fight for better welfare and economic improvement of the present working class” (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 113).

As industrial development grew more advanced into the 1920s and 30s, the numbers of workers increased rapidly in Korea, while at the same time, there was growing discontent among workers about long hours with little pay. In response, the KLF instigated many labor strikes, reaching a peak in 1929-1930. The most well-known labor strike was the 1929 Wonsan labor strike which lasted for three months, although it was crushed by the Japanese military, which arrested many leaders (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 114).

Even before independence in 1945, the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI) was organized by the Communist party, and by the end of August that year, “approximately 145 CPKI committees functioned to ensure the peace” (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 119). The Communist-inspired KPF “Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence” called a national congress in Seoul to establish the Korean People’s Republic (KPR), electing an executive committee, and authorizing the formation of a broad-based coalition government, which looked to be along communist lines similar to what was developing in China and Russia (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 120; Cumings 2010).

Yet, all of these plans quickly dissolved, when the U.S. arrived in Korea in November 1945, taking away the power of the “Korean People’s Republic (KPR),” elevating a pro-Western capitalist military leader as unelected leader (Syngman Rhee), and supporting the arrest and incarceration of many labor leaders and Communist party members, filling the walls of the infamous Soedaemun political prison, only recently vacated by the Japanese.

President Truman's special advisor, Edwin Pauley, warned that "communism in Korea could get off to a better start than practically anywhere else in the world" (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 122). Deeply concerned with the influence of communists and socialist-leaning labor leaders, the U.S. quickly aligned with pro-business military leaders in Korea and supported brutal anti-socialist campaigns (Cumings 2010; Minns 2013). Subsequently, the Korea peninsula was divided into two countries, north under the tutelage of the Soviet Union, and the south under the tutelage of the U.S.

In the South, following the end of the Korean War, President Park Chung-hee soon rose to the (unelected) military presidency, and Korea's great leap forward under the anti-labor leadership of the developmental state began. Under the Park regime, collective rights of workers to organize a labor union and the right to strike became illegal. Only a government sponsored labor federation, FKTU, was legal, and labor activists who tried to organize independent labor unions were arrested and tortured.

Despite these obstacles under dictatorship, independent union organizing efforts continued. The major force for organizing labor in the 1970s was women in the textile and manufacturing industry (Lamoureux 2002; Kim, Seung-Kyung 1997). Despite the fact that women were often alleged to be obedient and subordinate, powerful attempts to organize an independent labor union occurred at Dongil textile company from 1972 to 1975 provide a good example of Korean labor militancy and emerging class consciousness among women workers. In her study of how Korean sweatshop workers become mobilized "sweatshop warriors," Louie (2001) points to episodes like the Dongil worker uprising, which helped seamstresses move from a sense of being "dirty, worthless workers" to a sense of being noble, conscious "warrior workers" (Louie 2001). Similarly, in his study

of the formation of Korean class consciousness, Koo (2001) examines the role of militant uprisings like Dongil in catalyzing a moral transformation among workers. Koo (2001) cites worker remembrances of how such uprisings changed their self-consciousness:

I am a nodongia (worker). I am not ashamed of the word 'Kongsuni' (factory girl). My line would be in great trouble if I were absent. If so, if everybody in our line is absent, the company won't be able to operate. However pompously the office workers behave in front of us, they will starve without us. So I have pride. We have power. Although we are weak as individuals, we can overcome anything if we are united. Yes, I am a kongsuni."

"Previously I was afraid to be disclosed that I was a worker. But now I can say to others with confidence that 'I am a worker.' And now I have pride and satisfaction in being a respectable member of society as a worker." (142).

Although labor strikes were formally illegal, an increasingly confident and self-conscious workers movement continued to organize through the late 1970s and up to the great upheaval of 1987. Labor strikes increased from an average of 662 in the 1970s to an average of 1433 a year in the 1980s, before democratization in 1987 (Yoon, Bong Joon 1999, 27). In 1987 itself, the number of labor strikes increased to 3,749 (27).

A key ally of this labor upheaval was the co-temporal Korean student movement, and college students activists came to played a critical role in dissipating the ideology of traditional Marxism throughout the labor movement (Prey 2004; Shin, Gi Wook 1995; Park, Mi 2007; Kim, Pyong-Guk and Vogel, Ezra 2011; Chang, Yun-Shik 2009; Haeweol Choi 1991; Hyaeweol Hoi 1991). Students were the beacon of national independence movement under the Japan's occupation for 35 years (1910-1945), and were also critical in overthrowing the autocratic and anti-communist Syngman Rhee regime in April in 1960, which is also known as the student-led "April Revolution" (Hart-Landsberg 1993, 134;

Hyaeweol Choi 1991, 176). The April Revolution arose in response to Rhee's cruelty in ordering an extreme right wing organization, the Korean Anticommunist Youth Association, to "lynch student demonstrators," following which students rose against the Rhee dictatorship, which resulted in the death of at least 130 students and injuries of 1000 more (Kim Sunhyuk 2000, 36). This April uprising, or what is often called "Bloody Tuesday," forced Syngman Rhee to resign from his post on April 26, 1960.

The fact that these student uprisings and labor actions occurred in the context of an authoritarian and repressive state deepened the sense of oppositional class consciousness and Marxist reasoning among workers and students. The events surrounding the subsequent Kwangju uprising of 1980s and the subsequent flowering of the people's "Minjung" movement in the years right before 1987 show this pattern well. Kwangju was an uprising against Korea's general economic development strategy and against the growing globalization/industrialization movement that threatened to consume local culture and reduce many autonomous small businesspersons and farmers into surplus, impoverished labor in a world economy. The uprising was dominated by the lower-income working class, and included many small farmers, small business owners, and the displaced homeless, reduced to desperate lives in the Kwangju informal economy. Evoking clearly "anti-capitalist" goals, in a statement released on the one-year anniversary of the uprising, a people's committee of Kwangju recalled the goals of the movement as including protection of the dignity of all workers and farmers, equality between social classes, free unions, and dissolution of most private property. In its appeal to a classless utopia, beyond all existing social relations, and out of reach of state control, some scholars have compared the Kwangju community to the romantic Paris Commune in French

history.<sup>76</sup> And like the Paris Commune, it all ended in brutality, as elite paratroopers of the Chun government invaded the city, and turned machine guns on the people, injuring tens of thousands and killing somewhere between 200 and several thousand residents (estimates vary wildly between official and community-based reports) (Plunk 1985).

Kwangju was not just an uprising against a single authoritarian leader (President Chun), it was an uprising against Korea's general economic development strategy and against the growing globalization/industrialization movement that threatened to consume local economic practices in Korea and reduce many autonomous small businesspersons and farmers into surplus, impoverished labor in a world economy. A diarist of the uprising remembers that the majority of the protestors "were from the working class and the poor: carpenters, construction workers, waiters in clubs, as well as shoeshine boys, rag pickers, and wanderers."<sup>77</sup> Choi concludes with an analysis of how Kwangju represented a growing "class consciousness" amid marginalized Koreans everywhere.

It was precisely those marginalized in the traditional community existing prior to the uprising who actively participated in the 'absolute community' [of Kwangju], who became aware of themselves as possessors of state authority, who became intoxicated with a sense of liberation and an overwhelming sense of unity. In the absolute community, all citizens were equally endowed with human dignity... [though] it seemed that those belonging to the working class had become endowed with a greater degree of dignity than others.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>George Kastiafacas. 2000. "Remembering the Kwangju uprising," speech delivered at the Global Symposium on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Kwangju Uprising, "Democracy and Human Rights in the New Millennium," Chonnam National University, Kwangju Korea, May 15-17.

<sup>77</sup> Hwang Sok-Yong, as quoted in Choi, op. cit. p. 270.

<sup>78</sup> Choi, op. cit., p. 271.

Now remembered as a critical, radicalizing moment in Korea's march towards democratization, many scholars have noted that Kwangju was a critical turning point for Marxist thinking to rise among students and radicals (Kim, Insook 1997; Lee, Namhee 2007, 295). The Kwangju massacre became a turning point for students to realize "an inseparable relationship between the dictatorial Chun government and the United States" as they began to believe that the power of the U.S. on the Korea peninsula is the "root cause of almost all the political economic and cultural problems confronting South Korea" (Dong 1987, 237). Thus, students considered "revolution" as "the only viable option for redressing the situation of South Korea" (Mi Park 2005, 265-266), and Marxism became the "language of anti-colonial movements" (Therbon 1996).

The spirit of revolutionary ideas for Korean society lodged itself in a growing alliance between radical university students and the vast industrial working class growing in cities like Kwangju and Seoul, who together built a radical critique of existing capitalism in Korea and pursued an alternative philosophy known as the "Minjung" (people's) movement of the 1980s (Minns 2001, 183).

Minjung was a philosophy positing that the central thread running through Korean history is the oppression of the laboring masses and that the true national identity of Korea can be discovered in the lives, culture, and struggles of the Minjung - the locked out, exploited, down-trodden, and have-nots. As a movement, Minjung represented people as both the victims and agents of history. Chai (1996) similarly describes Minjung as an appeal to Korean populist folk-roots, but also advancing fundamentally Marxist principals since the essence of the Minjung movement was "an increase in workers' self-esteem and class consciousness" (Chai, Goo Mook 1996, 285).

In diffusing these radical ideas, Korean students allied with workers to advance Minjung through popular culture, “such as films, various visual art works, cartoons, popular songs, novels, and even poetry” (Shin, Gi-Wook 2002, 376-377)—seeking to develop a revolutionary ideology among the people (Choi, Hyaeweol 1991, 176).

Working mostly in urban industrial areas, the Minjung movement sought to create cultural and educational worker centers where workers could learn traditional songs, perform local community theater about their experiences, educate each other about the injustice of their lives, and develop a collective spirit of resistance and “more revolutionary ideologies” (Ilsongjeong 1988, 29). Cho (1991) connects the Minjung movement with a larger class movement of workers as follows.

Their sociopolitical goal was to liberate the Minjung from the culture of the foreign and dominant classes...They believed that political, economic, and cultural domination by the foreign and ruling classes had distorted the true identity of the Minjung. They argued that the Minjung had been oppressed throughout Korean history and that a true culture for the Minjung had to be developed via their struggle against the dominant class.

While the student movement was directly intertwined with populist Minjung movement, it also developed deeper linkages with labor movements and a deepening commitment to revolutionary social change. Students took the role of “being the revolutionary force” (Choi, Hyaeweol 1991, 178), with Gill & DeFronzo (2009) defining Korea’s student movement activism as a “structural revolutionary movement” (211).

This revolutionary student movement, which aimed to “create a democratic political system” (Gill & DeFronzo 2009, 215; Kluver 1998, Brandt 1987) is shown in the following statement by one of the flagship student organizations.

Student activism should take a role as being the principal revolutionary force along with labor movement. Student activism needs to be a leading power in the political struggle... Its long-term objective should support the labor movement, which is the fundamental force in the revolution (Kim, Minho 1988,103-104, Cited in Choi, Hyaeweol 1991, 178).

To support the “force in the revolution,” many student leaders chose in the 1980s to enter factories as student-turned-worker, with a specific goal to practice “labor praxis” and to “promote class consciousness among the workers and help them organize unions” (Koo 2001, 104; Yu, Kyung Soon 73). Namhee Lee (2005) describes the underlying ideology of the student-to-factory movement.

Intellectuals also inverted the received societal representation of workers. Workers, who had previously been disdained by society as *kongsuni* and *kongdori* (derogatory terms denoting “factory girls” and “factory boys”) without their own class consciousness or subjectivity, were seen as having acquired class consciousness and subjectivity through their resistance to exploitation and oppression in the workplace and in society at large. Their resistance also became a legitimate basis for their place in society as a significant economic and political actor (922).

Several thousand student leaders—perhaps as many at 10,000 students--illegally entered the factories as such “hakchool” students-turned-workers in the 1980s (Joonang 1989; Park, Mi 2005, 2007; Kim, Y-S 1999; Kim, Kwang et. al. 1991). Some of the most well-known labor strikes, such as Dongil textile strike in 1978, the Daewoo Motor strike in 1984, and the Kuro strike of 1985, were all organized by these student-turned-workers (Huang 1999). All these strikes featured students organizing with workers through educational campaigns to develop a radicalized “workers’ political and class consciousness” (cited in Shin et al. 2007, 32; Yi 2004, Koo 2001; Ra and Chung 1992, 236).

Many student activists who didn't choose to enter factories as organizers went on to organize night schools for factory workers with a specific goals of deepening workers' general education, while also developing class consciousness. Students were self-aware of these radical goals, with leading student organizations calling themselves either part of the "PD" camp ("People's Democracy"—committed to traditional Marxism) or the "NL" camp, which advanced an ideology of North Korean Juche (which means "independent stand" or the "spirit of self-reliance") (Choi Hayeweol 1991, 180; Kim, Hye-in 2008; Ilsongjeong 1988, Mi Park 2007). In this way, students became a critical ally in supporting the rise of worker activism in the 1980s, and these same student leaders later came to play a key role in organizing a radical new labor federation, the KCTU, in the years following the "Great Workers Upheaval" of 1987 which brought down Korea's military regime (Kim, Iggy 2000).

#### *Great Workers' Struggle: 1987*

The struggles of 1987 are now known to have been "a general insurgency on the part of workers in every sector and every industry" (Park, Mi 2007, 322), and have been described as the "resurrection of civil society" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1988, Valenzuela 1988, 3). The clashes that erupted regularly between the military government of Chun Doo-hwan and the democratization forces led by Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam (leaders from the days of Kwangju) ultimately led to the transformational 1987 government agreement to allow Koreans to elect their own democratic president, and catalyzed a burst of worker organizing leading to several thousand new unions across the country.

Labor strikes multiplied, so that by 1987 almost 4,000 strikes (13.6 times more than one year previously) mobilized millions of Koreans into the street (Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2010, 214; Yoon, Bong Joon 1999). According to the Ministry of Labour (1988), “the largest number of strikes in a single month in Korean history was in August 1987 (2, 469), with 880 strikes in a single week, 17-23 August” (Ministry of Labour 1988,17, cited in Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2010, 214). Some of major labor strikes during this time occurred in leading chaebols, with the result that Hyundai became the very first unionized Chaebol (with the Hyundai Engine workers’ union in Ulsan being recognized on July 5, 1987) (cited in Kyoon, Kim Jin 2000, 492; Katsiaficas 2012). Following the success of the Hyundai Engine Workers union, 12 branches of Hyundai firms were organized after a 128 day strike in 1988, the longest labor strike in Korean history (Koo 2001; also see Shin, Kwang-Yeong 2010). Chaebols such as Daewoo, Sunkyung, Kia and Ssangyong also soon recognized unions on their work-floors (Koo 2002, 176), and a growing class solidarity among Korean workers nationwide became evident to the organizers.

In describing the success of these strikes and unionization efforts, Hyundai workers organized a massive demonstration in 1987, claiming that "August 18 was the day on which Hyundai workers and the entire nation of the workers were reborn, overcoming their han [depression], [becoming] the masters of the nation, and [leading] a great solemn march into the future of truly humanlike life." Subsequently, union membership grew by 186% (Suzuki 2013, 22), and union density increased from 12.3 percent of the labor force to 18.6 percent after the democratization period (22). The number of labor unions grew from 2,658, with a total membership of about one million prior in 1987, to 7,698 local unions with a

membership of 1.8 million by 1990 (Kwon, sung-ho and O'Donnell 2001: 204; also see Yoon Bong Joon 1999).

### **Labor Movements after Democratization: KCTU and Labor Militancy**

This history of radicalized labor organizing in Korea continues to shape labor politics in the post-1987 era, not least because the same leaders who built those radical traditions continue to be active today. The labor movement in Korea continues to be characterized by a strong tradition of labor antagonism, with frequent labor strikes and direct public action against both the state and employers (Buchanan and Nicholls 67; Roett 1997; Lee and Yi 2012).

Whereas United States labor organizations have focused largely on winning job-based economic improvements in a civil society dominated not by the state but by private employers, Korea's labor organizations were necessarily part of broad-based social movements against the state and even against the nature of civil society itself, as the civil society they faced was always thoroughly penetrated and regulated by the state (Koo 1993). As Burmeister (1999,110) notes that "hardly anything socially consequential in South Korea is left untouched by the regulatory actions of the state, and few groups in society exist without some kind of state sanction," civil society organizations in Korea, including labor organizations, are always explicitly political in nature (Koo 1993).

Therefore, when independent civil society forces arose in 1980s democratization movements, they did not do so under the influence of a "plurality of interests" dominated by an independent bourgeoisie (as in the United States, resulting in business unionism). Rather, Korea's independent civil society "rose not under the leadership of the bourgeoisie,

but in opposition to it.” To put it differently, Korea’s civil society arose “as a nationalist political reaction to the nature of state power” (Koo 1993, 248), which allowed “anti-hegemonic forces to penetrate and mobilize” civil society institutions like unions more easily than in the United States (Koo 1993, 246).

As part of this anti-hegemonic rise of civil society, Korean labor unions established a tradition of fighting for changes “in the context of the whole society, not merely within the arena of labor management relations” (Lee, Changwon 2005,1). The Korean labor movement developed not just to protect “workers’ rights in industrial relations, but also to promote the social justice of the working class” (1). This history resulted in a unique labor militancy which aims to go beyond improved economic conditions for workers and seeks to achieve broader justice for the working class and social justice in general. This kind of struggle of the working class to achieve broad-based social change can be seen in the history surrounding the founding of an independent labor union federation, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), following the Great Workers’ Struggle of 1987.

### *The KCTU: The Persistence of Working Class Struggle*

In Korea, there are two national labor federations that guide the direction of the labor movement: the conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the radical (even Marxist) Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The first labor federation, FKTU, has long been a conservative force, as it was the only labor federation allowed under the authoritarian state, and it was charged by the state to be an agent of labor peace and management-labor cooperation. The conservative FKTU was set up under the Rhee government (1948-60), and was reorganized by the Korea Central Intelligence Agency

under the Park government (1961-1979) (Buchanan and Nicholls 63). All FKTU leaders were appointed by the government in consultation with leading chaebols, and FKTU member unions were barred from any political involvement (Eder 1997, 8; Mi Park 2007, 320). Although the FKTU was forced to better accommodate the needs of workers after democratization in 1987, it has continued to advance a conservative and compromising position vis-a-vis capital, in its pursuit of harmonious relations between labor, management and the state.

On the other hand, the foundation of a second labor federation, KCTU, developed with a strong influence of traditional Marxism from the very start. The majority of early leaders within the KCTU were Marxists (as many continue to be today), as the KCTU was organized by “the most advanced militants, including many trained in Marxism during their student days” (Iggy, Kim 2000; Sonn, Hochul 1997; Stevens 2009). In its early years after 1987, many student leaders went into the KCTU after their graduation and armed it with the Marxist influence they had developed through many years of opposition to the authoritarian state. Still today, many of these same KCTU leaders are active, while new leaders typically share the organizational ethos that interprets class conflict between capital and labor as a vital and necessary organizing tool of the labor movement (Sheppard 2000).

Moses (1990) describes these KCTU Korean labor leaders as steeped in traditional Marxism, with an associated commitment to class-conscious “revolutionary” activity.

The majority of labor unionists follow the revolutionary approach by Marx, and the majority of labor unionists and labor leaders do not compromise their belief. As there is a phrase that it is “better get one by a struggle than two by a compromise,” this explains the reality of non-compromising union leaders as the majority of labor unionists and labor leaders in Korea, as their “belief” for revolution is too strong to be compromised at any cost (Moses 1990, 2, cited in Park, Duck Jay 2009).

As many of Korea's labor leaders in the last 25 years have experienced the great uprisings of the 1980s, or otherwise been part of the Marxist PD (People's Democracy) movement, it is not surprising that these leaders have adopted a radical stance committed to broad-based transformation of the current capitalist system (Shin, Gi Wook 1995, 528). Influenced by a theoretical Marxism, and facing a traditionally authoritarian state system with "underinstitutionalized, dichotomized, paralyzed and immobilized" mechanisms for pluralist participation (Shin, Gi Wook 1995, 528), union leaders have often been uncompromising in their beliefs, and appreciative of radical energies (Sunhyuk Kim 2003,104).

Drawing on such roots, the KCTU has radical social change goals, rejecting "cooperation between labor and management" as a project of business and government elites who wish to maintain the status quo (Kang, Soonhee 1998). Although the KCTU was founded in 1995 and became recognized by the government in 1999, with "866 unions with 410,000 union members" (Kim, Jin Kyoong 2000, 499), its preceding organization (the National Council of Trade Union [NCTU]) was already set up in 1990 with 14 regional labor union committees, two industrial organizations, and 600 labor unions with over 200,000 workers (Chunnohyup). Refusing the conservative FKTU's offer for a merger, the goal of the more radical KCTU was to engage in "active political participation," guided by "revolutionary and socialist ideology" to achieve "the liberation of labor" and a "society run by workers" (Huang 1999; KCTU Educational material 1, 2002, cited in Choi, Inyi 2005, 90). The first president of KCTU, Kwon Young Gil, describes the class- focused organizing principles of the KCTU as follows:

We continued to emphasize this class struggle as the driving force of history. We continued to collaborate with the advanced workers even though militant activists were scattered. It was this process that led to the formation of the KCTU. In a sense, we grew up through activity among the workers (Iggy Kim 2000).

Driven by such ideology, KCTU has used labor strikes and militant forms of labor protest as “a centre of the working class struggle” (Ho, Keun Song 1999, 13), and not just as a tool for winning better wages at a specific worksite. For example, during the time of the Great Workers’ Struggles in 1987, Hyundai Engine Union, which formed the very first independent labor union announced a goal of organizing to achieve much more than better working conditions. One leaflet defined the strike as “not simply a struggle of the Hyundai Heavy industries union but a major fight with the dictatorial regime with the trust and pride of the twenty-five million workers at stake” (Koo 2001, 173). Koo Hagen (2001) argues that “pride and fidelity of the working class were the overriding values that strikers at Hyundai attracted to the meaning of this collective action, and this was a general characteristic of the working-class struggle in South Korea during the post 1987 period” (Koo 2001, 173).

This kind of militant class consciousness continued to shape the Korean labor movement after 1987, not least due to the continued influence of the cadre of labor leaders originally radicalized in the 1980s struggles. In his study of the influence of such leaders, Kwon, Soon Sik (2013b) finds that they typically have an “antagonistic social psychology against military government” (265), and that new union members are strongly influenced by the ideological stances of these leaders—thus shaping a continually militant Korean labor movement.

For example, in December 1997 and January 1998, there was a massive four week nationwide strike in South Korea in protest against newly passed labor laws which gave employers more power to lay off employees, increased the legal work-week by 12 hours, made it easier to hire temporary/strike replacing workers, and put off allowing multiple unions to be formed at a given enterprise. This general strike resulted in the mobilization of three million workers, which shut down auto/ship production, and disrupted hospitals, subways and television. The strikes grew into the largest in national history, 600,000-700,000 workers walked out of their jobs in successive days of action, in actions estimated to cost 176 firms cost \$2.3 billion dollars in lost productivity. Worker strikes continued to increase from 78 in 1997 to 250 in 2000, and “the number of workers involved in strikes rose from 43,991 employees in 1997 to 177,969 in 2000” (Kwon and O’Donnell 2003, 363; Aleman 2005). In November of 2003, the KCTU similarly organized a general strike as a response to neoliberal economic restricting, engaging over 150,000 workers to protest the government’s “flexible labor” legislation (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004a and 2004b). In 2015, a November protest organized by the KCTU was estimated to be the largest protest since 2008, when 80,000 people protested against labor reform and state-issued textbooks.

This emphasis on general strikes is similar to how traditional Marxists define transformative strikes. For traditional Marxists, labor militancy accompanied by public mobilization is necessary as a “better guarantor of union survival and recovery” (Kelly 1996, 79) and this sense of public mobilization through the general strike (versus job-site specific strikes with specific wage or benefit demands) is influenced by the Marxist view that uprising and social disruption are necessary to “guarantee redistribution of wealth from the upper class.” Indicating their commitment to such social disruption through labor

actions, 90 percent of total Korean labor disputes are estimated to take place at KCTU-affiliated unions' workplaces. Reviewing their commitment to such general strikes, the Korea Herald (2011) argues that "the KCTU seems to have a policy of no-compromise" (November 21).

This notion of rejecting cooperation between labor and management is well shown in the current leadership at KCTU. KCTU's recently elected new president, Han Sang-gyun, embodies the KCTU commitment to labor militancy as a key for the labor movement. Han ran for president of KCTU in 2014 with a principle of supporting direct actions and militant protests. Han believes that "without a fight, what's left of organized labor, the only means to defend the rights of workers, can ultimately become obsolete" (Goulet 2015). In this regard, Han argues that "we lay a foundation for building politicization of the working class only with fights and struggles and without fights and direct confrontation, there is no way to build a way to politicize workers" (Go, Min-tak 2015). With these principles in mind, Han has advanced disruptive general strikes against the state as one of major goals for the upcoming years. Han claims that he wants to make the KCTU "Park Geun-hye's greatest fear" (Lee, Hyun 2015), which is a real threat in that as of 2015, the KCTU was sub-divided into 16 industrial sector federations as well as 16 regional branches, and has a total number of 800,000 members within just its metal workers' federation, and 150,000 members within its public sector federation.<sup>79</sup>

Before being elected as the KCTU president, Han was the head of the SsangYong Motor branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union, where he was jailed for three years for

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<sup>79</sup> KCTU Blog. 2015. "The KCTU- Committed to the Class Struggle for Workers' Rights." November 17. <http://andreasbieler.blogspot.com/2015/11/the-korean-confederation-of-trade.html>

leading “900 workers in a 77 day occupation of a Ssangyong Motor plant to protest mass layoffs” of 2,646 workers at Ssangyong (Lee and Elich 2015; also see Lee, Hyun 2015). When released from jail in 2012, Han occupied a “124,000 volt electric transmission tower 164 feet in the air, for 171 days” with other comrades in 2013, seeking to force presidential candidates to take positions on the Ssangyong dispute (Lee and Elich 2015; also see Goldner 2009). Han’s KCTU presidential election slogans were “Fighting Labor Unions (KCTU),” “Defeat the Park Gyun-hye government,” and “2015 general strikes” emphasizing his commitment to the importance of labor militancy and the need for “the representation of the worker class” through direct organizing and general strikes (Jang, Yui-jin 2014). In this regard, efforts among union leaders to use direct action strategies- including general strikes- are driven by an ideological standpoint where union leaders view conflicts and antagonism with capital and the state as necessary to enhance working class consciousness and interests.

### *Industrial unionism*

The emphasis on workers’ struggles and the necessity for general strike solidarity is argued by the KCTU to create a foundation for industrial unionism. KCTU has promoted industrial unionism to advance “the politic-economic interests of the working class” and to increase worker solidarity across an entire industry (Barbash 1967, cited in Lee and Yi 2012, 479, Lee, Byoung Hoon and Yi, Sanghoon 2012).<sup>80</sup> While enterprise unionism (organizing workers at a specific worksite, with work-site specific demands) can be an

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

obstacle in organizing workers for broad social change as single-firm organizing results in decentralized union and bargaining structure, industrial unionism is an alternative strategy to strengthen class solidarity (Kwon, Hyunji 2015).

Until 1987, only enterprise unionism was allowed in Korea, due to the government policy that unions should only organize employees at a single firm. However, following democratization in 1987, it became legal to establish industrial unions in Korea (Kim, Dong-one and Seongsu Kim 2003). At the same time, the KCTU established industrial unionism as a way to centralize collective bargaining processes in the heavy manufacturing and chemical industries in the 1980s (Huang 1999). During this time, both the Korean Metal Workers Union and the Korean Financial Industry Union (both affiliated with the KCTU) transformed from multiple enterprise unions into united industrial level unions (Kwon, Hyunji 2011, 15). Another 20 industrial unions were subsequently formed between 1998-2000 (Kim, Dong-one and Seongsu Kim 2003, 364).

Although industry-level bargaining is only happening in a limited number of sectors--such as education and banking--total industrial union membership in Korea accounts for 32.8 percent of the all union members (Kim Dong-One and Kim Seongsu 2003, 364; see also Choi, Sukhwan 2006). The strength of the industrial union tradition in Korea may prove useful to union organizers as they face an increasingly contingent and part-time workforce. For instance, while enterprise union density of large firms with more than 300 workers is 35.5%, enterprise union density at small firms with less than 30 regular employees is just 3.8% (Lee, Byoung Hoon 2011, 329; Lee, Joohee 1997, 138). Chun (2009) shows how difficult it has been to organize unions at small enterprises with less than 100 workers as their unionization rate decreased from 9.5% in 1989 to just 1.1% in

2000 ( 31). These patterns are a real challenge for union organizing, as the number of subcontracted and irregular workers grew to 16.5% in 1996, up from 8.5% in 1990 (Yun, Aelim 2011, 158).

### **Labor Militancy: Organizing Irregular Workers**

The KCTU's turn to industrial union organizing, and the continued influence of militant class-conscious labor organizing, may offer a productive response to the challenge of organizing an increasing number of Korean casual and contingent workers. According to *The Financial Times* (July 15, 2013), Korea has "one of the highest rates of temporary employment among members of the Organization for Economic-Co-operation and Development, at 32.3 per cent of the total workforce compared with the OECD average of 25 percent." In some fields, like construction, more than 70% of all workers are precarious employees, with no written contract (Yun, Aelim 2009, 4-5).

The wages of these rapidly growing temporary workers is just 50-60% of what regular workers earn, despite the fact that their skills are often equivalent than regular workers. They are subject to longer hours of work and worse hourly shifts that regular workers do not prefer, and are typically given harder and more intense work (Yun 2011; Jang 2004). Over 70% of these irregular workers are not covered by any type of insurance, such as national health insurance, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, and the national pension plan, which need to be provided by employers to all permanent workers (Kim, Y.S. 2004, Chang, Dae-oup 2007; Hart-Landberg 2007; Chun, Jennifer 2013). Such

numbers have led the president of KCTU (Han, Sang-gyun) to describe contingent and disposable workers as “moths forced to wander about, drawn towards our death.”<sup>81</sup>

Though they face exceptionally troubling workplace challenges, most informal workers have not been mobilized by traditional labor organizing. Union density among precarious workers is merely 2.1% (Yun, Aelim 2014). In fact, it is clear that companies have increasingly utilized irregular workers not only to decrease labor costs, but to undermine workplace labor organizing. The usage of subcontracted workers in many factories in Hyundai Motors, for instance, started in the early 1990s immediately following the success of regular Hyundai workers in winning a union contract with generous benefits. Subsequently, the number of subcontracted workers grew to 16.5% in 1996, up from 8.5% in 1990 (Yun, Aelim 2011, 158). Similarly, the number of precarious workers at Kia in 1997 was just 131, but grew to 3,151 in 2001, during a time of unionization efforts at the company (Yun 2011, 167).

The enterprise unionism model has not been an effective tool to organize these increasingly contingent and part-time workers. In fact, the enterprise unionism model has been criticized for producing “different interest structures between organized and unorganized workers” (Lee, Byung hoon 2011), as the model does not easily allow subcontracted, contingent, or unemployed workers to join in general union organizing efforts. Industrial unionism models can overcome this limitation by organizing workers across an industry, whether they are tied to a specific workplace or not. Promoting just this strategy, Dan Byung Ho (President of Korean Metal Workers Federation) affirmed the

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<sup>81</sup> Han, Sang-gyun stated on Dec. 10, 2015, before he was arrested for initiating a general strike in 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/kctueng/posts/485758888260607>

organization's commitment in 2000 to serve as "the genuine representative of all working people, including those workers in irregular employment, the unemployed, and the vast array of workers in small enterprises" (cited in Chun 2009, 69), while KCTU leaders identify the "abolition of irregular employment" as one of their main goals (Chun 2007, 23).

The current KCTU director of organizing irregular workers, Kyungran Kim, describes three stages of the campaign to organize irregular workers.<sup>82</sup> During the first stage (2006-2009), KTCU hired 23 professional organizers following the model of SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in the U.S. The KCTU program included extensive training of irregular worker organizers, and a 2006 "fundraising campaign aimed at a total of US \$4 million for organizing initiatives for irregular workers" (Chang 2012, 37, cited in Chun 2013, 8). The second stage of the campaign (2010-2013) focused on organizing workers in service and construction sectors in the Incheon airport and Seoul Digital Complex in Guro. Successful initiatives to organize irregular workers at HomePlus, E-Mart, and Galaxy resulted from these efforts. The third stage of the campaign (2014-2017) has focused on winning policy reforms to protect all workers, including irregular workers. For instance, KCTU has recently launched a campaign to increase the minimum wage to \$10 an hour, in an effort to improve working conditions for all low-wage workers including irregular workers (Yun, Yaelim 2014).

In response to such campaigns, workers at a growing number of small workplaces have approached the KCTU for affiliation. One hundred and fifty-three newly organized

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<sup>82</sup> An interview with Kim, Kyungran, the director of irregular worker organizing at KCTU occurred in July 2013.

unions, covering 15,207 irregular workers, affiliated with the KCTU in 2000 (Kim, Dong-one and Kim, Seongsu 2003, 363) and the KCTU Seoul Regional Centre has emerged as “one hub of the irregular workers’ movement” (Chun 2007, 37). In short, industrial unionism represents a growing trend in the Korean labor movement, together with its ideological standpoint that class-based industrial unionism is a way to strengthen solidarity among regular and irregular workers.

One unique characteristic of irregular worker organizing is the waging of prolonged labor strikes and diverse public drama strategies taken by irregular workers to showcase the seriousness of worsening labor conditions. For instance, E-land workers union, one of the first unions to accept irregularly-employed workers as members in 2000, waged a 265 day strike in 2000 demanding the improvement of working conditions. The campaign started when 180 dismissed workers connected with KCTU’s irregular employee organizing projection launched a strike in 2007, and occupied E-land’s flagship Homever store in the World Cup Stadium shopping complex for 21 days (Chun 2013). Regularly facing down riot police, the union called for a consumer boycott of all E-Land products, receiving support from various civic organizations and international unions like UNI Global Union which represents over 15 million commerce workers and 900 affiliate unions. As a result of 510 days of worker struggles, 174 members were ultimately rehired and returned to work (Chun 2013, 13).

Another example is shown in the Korea Telecom (KT) Fixed-Tier Workers’ Unions’ struggle where workers went on strike for 517 days between 2000 and 2002. The case of Korea Telecom’s efforts to organize irregular workers through this lengthy strike ended up in failure, however, partly because the regular union (KTX) did not recognize nor support

the irregular workers' union. The company did not reinstate the workers who went on the long term strike (Chun, Jennifer 2011; Taylor 2013; Chun 2008; Chang, Dae-oup 2009). Similarly, Kiryung Electronics Workers' Union, engaged in 1,895 days of strikes by irregular workers between 2005 and 2010 (Chun 2013, 11). Irregular workers at Korean railroads also engaged in strikes for 1,000 plus days between 2006 and 2009. All of these long strikes have shown the resilience of irregular workers in demanding their rights at the workplace, while at the same time, these dramatic public gestures have sometimes been effective in meeting workers' demands by winning more public awareness and support (Chang, De-oup 2011, 224).

### *Public Drama Strategies*

Public drama strategies have been used actively as a way to demonstrate labor militancy in Korea. Chun (2005, 2009, 2013) refers to the "public drama strategy" as "the consolidation of a fairly prescribed array of extreme symbolic tactics for militant workers and unions" that includes strategies "such as head shaving, three steps, one bow, hunger strikes and tower scaling" (Chun 2013, 20). These symbolic tactics of occupations, head shaving, scaling towers, hunger strikes and worker suicide are all aspects of "militant protest cultures that frame struggles in terms of a binary conflict and a struggle to the death" (Chun 2013, 9). By showcasing extreme public drama strategies, Korean labor unions have interpreted many of their actions as "an expression of a great class struggle" (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004a, 286), and "all or nothing" battle in which the "militant union and the broader KCTU-led labor movement have vowed not to compromise their struggle for the abolition of irregular employment" (Chun 2011, 112).

Also, Self-immolation is one of the most extreme forms of public drama strategies, and has frequently been used in Korea as “symbolic, emotional resources by fellow activists for movement purposes” (Kim, Sun-Chul 2012, 19; Huang 1999). Decades ago, the dramatic self-immolation of a young garment worker, Chun Tae-ill in 1970, became critical in igniting the Korea’s labor movement in the 1970s.<sup>83</sup> Chun Tae Il left powerful words that “the laborer is also a human being...Don’t let my death be for nothing.” This action ignited students and workers to rise together against the state to fight for workers’ right, and the diffusion of self-immolation in many labor actions since then coincides with the “ascending phase of a protest cycle” (Kim, Sun-Chul 2012, 2; Jang 2004a, 2004b; Denney 2015). Through the dramatic act of self-immolation, and subsequent militant labor protests that this action sparked, the death of Chun “marked the transition in the labor movement from the more experimental and cooperative labor politics of the 1960s to a confrontational politics of the 1970s” (Nam, Hwasook 2013, 880).

Labor activist suicide continues to be common even today and is regarded as “an action of strong resistance by brave people against injustice” (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2004a, 271). For example, more than 11 self-immolations occurred in the spring of 2004, calling for “changes in the policies governing irregular labor” (Kim, Sun-Chul 2012, 19). As of 2016, the number of worker’s deaths from suicides just among laid-off workers from Ssyangyong rose to 28 workers since the launch of labor strike in 2009.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Chon Tae-ill, douse himself with kerosene and set himself on fire on November 13, 1970, protesting against the lack of the government in protecting low wage workers. Chun uttered these last words: “The laborer is also a human being. Honour the labor law...Do not exploit workers... Don’t let my death be for nothing” (Chang, yun Shik 2009 , 99)

<sup>84</sup> [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201510171357051&code=210100](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201510171357051&code=210100)

Although not all of these extreme public drama strategies have generated empathy among the public, one successful case in maximizing public support through dramatic strategies is shown in the struggle of Hanjin Heavy Industry union leader, Jinsook Kim. A union leader, Jinsook Kim staged a protest on top of a 30 meter crane, no. 85, on January 6, 2011, and stayed there for 309 days in protest against massive layoffs of 400 workers (Baca 2011; Chun 2013; Lee, Yoonkyung 2015).

This public protest became successful through growing sympathy for the union leader over time, as seen through the “Bus of Hope movement” which was organized by a poet, Song Kyung-do, as an alliance between civil society organizations and labor unions. When 185 Hope buses with 7,000 supporters arrived in Busan, on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011, in support of Kim’s 185<sup>th</sup> day in the crane, police formed a blockade to keep the “Hope Bus Riders” from crane #85 (Robinson 2011; Baca 2011a, 2011b; Jeon, Jong-hwi 2014). The total number of participants for this Hope Bus Event was estimated over 15,000, and 7,000 police had a difficult time keeping them away from the crane (the Hangyoreh August 1, 2011). The July protest ended up with violence as Hanjie’s private security forces used water cannons and tear gas to block the protesters. Facing a subsequent wave of negative public pressure, Hanjin Heavy Industries Co. conceded in November, and accepted almost all demands of the labor union by withdrawing civil and criminal suits, dismissing the responsible managing director and reinstating dismissed union leaders (Jang, Sang-Hwan 2014a, 290; Heo, Whanju 2012). Hoping for similar successes, Korean militant labor organizing strategies in the era of neoliberal globalization have waged many similarly confrontational and symbolic labor protests, as part of a continuing tradition of Korean labor militancy.

## **Conclusion**

In comparison to the U.S. labor movement, the Korean labor movement is more antagonistic to both the state and the business community, and has a far deeper emphasis on the necessity of class conflict between workers and capitalists, and between workers and the state. In Korea, labor organizations and leaders have embraced tenets of traditional Marxism as a foundational ideology to defend working class' interests. The external reality of an authoritarian state and long years of labor repression by the state were crucial in shaping a labor movement that is politically natured and ideologically oriented. Ineffective participatory mechanisms, under-developed political parties, and the absence of developed institutional channels to bring labor, the state and management together in moments of bargaining, consultation and compromise, have worked together to engender a labor movement in which radical confrontation and oppositional class consciousness rather than pluralistic bargaining or collaborative business unionism are standard fare. Although the ideological commitment to traditional Marxism may have eroded over time, especially since democratization in 1987 and the recent development of a disorganized and irregular "precariat" (Standing 2011) in the place of the vast, industrial "proletariat" of the pre-1997 era, the perseverance of traditional Marxism continues to shape militant labor unionism in Korea and its approach to organizing newly contingent workers.

The Korean labor movement, following doctrines of traditional Marxism, has overthrown an authoritarian government, mobilized millions of workers in dramatic public episodes to challenge recent neoliberal economic policy reforms, and has begun to build a model of industrial unionism to organize increasingly contingent workers across the economy. But in what ways is continuing influence of traditional Marxism empowering

or undermining current labor organizing efforts on the ground, especially growing efforts to organize worker-owned cooperatives as new agents of worker empowerment? To answer this questions, subsequent chapters will examine the emergence of worker owned cooperatives as a new labor institution in Korean society, and evaluate examples of Korean labor unions disregarding or uniting with these cooperative movements, and to what effect.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **THE WORKER COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN SOUTH KOREA**

In his analysis of Argentine worker owned cooperatives, Dinerstein (2007) describes two distinct political types of workplace democracy. One type can be described as a “Worker Recovered Company” (WRC), such as when Argentine workers took over hundreds of failing companies with a slogan of “Occupy, Resist, Produce,” following the economic crisis of 2001. Such WRCs typically involve militant worker activism (e.g., taking over entire companies, typically without legal authority, without business owner approval, and without financial support from lenders). Labor activists engaged in these takeovers typically voice broad goals of worker empowerment and social transformation. Ozaraw and Croucher (2014, 11) describe how activists in this tradition often see “worker recovered companies” and self-managed worker cooperatives “as a tool for a working class revolutionary strategy and demand the elimination of exploitation and capitalist social relations.”

The other type of worker cooperatives are created with support from the state and often involve support from financial institutions that finance these cooperatives. This second kind of worker cooperative movement is supported by political and financial leaders as a job creation strategy. Self-management of workers in such cooperative worksites is presented as “an end in itself” (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 1001), and a strategy of pure

and simple job creation and income maintenance. The emergence of these kinds of worker-owned cooperatives has been described as offering a “parallel solidarity economy” that does not involve contentious relations with the state (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, 1001; see also De Paula and Dymski 2005; Quintela 2003). Leaders in these worker cooperatives have a very different perspective than the contentious orientation of “Worker Recovered Company” activists. They tend to see the state as a positive force and prefer dialogue and collaboration with state and economic leaders, in order to sustain and grow support for worker cooperatives (Dinerstein, 2007; Ozarow and Croucher, 2014; Ranis, 2010; Upchuch, Daguerre and Ozarow, 2014).

This analysis of different types of worker cooperative movements can be applied to understanding the worker cooperative movement in Korea, and to the relationship between Korean labor unions and worker cooperatives. This framework helps to explain why relationships between unions and worker cooperatives have typically been frosty in Korea, especially since the 1997 crisis, after which the Korean government became actively engaged in supporting depoliticized, job-creation cooperatives, while the labor movement as a whole remained oppositional and militant in its stance vis-à-vis the state. Though Korean worker cooperative movements before the 1997 financial crisis were more politically natured and partnered better with a similarly contentious union movement, unions and cooperatives in Korea have generally parted ways since then.

The diverging paths relate to the fact that while the Korean state continues to actively resist and repress labor unions, that same state has been a major player in promoting worker cooperatives as an economic development and job creation strategy since 1997. The exponential growth of cooperatives (more than 8,000 cooperatives started between 2000

and 2015), even while labor union membership is shrinking, is partly the result of active state support for cooperatives rather than unions as a legitimate tool of labor empowerment. While labor unions have continued to experience significant state hostility, as they did before the economic crisis, and have therefore continued a pattern of contentious relations with the state, worker cooperatives following the financial crisis in 1997 have received substantial state support, which has shaped their positive orientation regarding collaboration with political and economic leaders, contributing to their chilly relationships with militant labor unions.

This section of the dissertation argues that the worker cooperative movement in Korea in general has more affinity with poststructural Marxism, in that the expanding cooperative sector is part of a rapidly diversifying civil society which features new forms of a “parallel solidarity economy” as a peaceful alternative to traditional capitalism, and because these cooperatives have collaborated with the state in diversifying the economy. Thus, cooperatives and the state have emerged as partners, whereas labor unions and the state continue to regard each other mostly as enemies. Relatedly, current relations between labor unions and worker cooperatives in Korea are underdeveloped, due to their different ontologies regarding capital-labor relations and labor-state relations.

### **The First Stage of Worker Cooperative Development: 1910-1950**

Original Korean cooperatives in the modern era were started as an integral part of the labor movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These first-stage cooperatives were established to support the national independence movement during the Japanese colonial era, and to

support workers who were in labor strikes (Park, Seungok 2011; Ok, Sejin 2014). Although most independence-oriented cooperatives were repressed by the Japanese occupiers, an important labor institution supporting these cooperatives was the national labor union, Chun Pyong (Chosun National Labor Union Association) which was founded on April 11, 1920. As described in the organization's own literature, the goals of Chun Pyong went beyond enterprise organizing at specific work sites and were broad-based and politically natured.

- 1.To establish schools and educational institutions to recruit members for the labor movement.
- 2.To provide lectures, regional lectures, and editing of newspapers in order to raise the consciousness of the working class.
- 3.To investigate and to expand various labor movements, youth movements, and women's movements
- 4.To purchase daily necessity products collectively for the members through establishing a consumer cooperative (Park, Seungok 2011).

With more than 16 labor union branches, Chun Pyong established “728 factory committees with over 88,000 members as of November 1945” (Seoul National University Independence Proclaim, cited in Kim, Yong-Won 2008, 43). Chun Pyong was ideologically communist, and utilized cooperatives as a way to undermine capitalist power and to support national liberation movements (Park, Seungok 2011, 36). Chun Pyong saw cooperatives as a key component of the struggle to replace capitalism with a more humane economic order and as important institutions in providing striking workers with cheaper supplies and medical supplies, as well as with other living materials. For example, in the case of the Wonsan Strike, a cooperative emerged to support the striking workers. The cooperative consisted of 23 branches with 200,000 members in the 1930s, providing cooperative members with 20-40% cheaper daily products, and a Korean alternative to

buying Japanese goods (Hart-Landsberg 1993).<sup>85</sup> The Wonsan cooperative supported various labor strikes until it was crushed by the Japanese administration at the end of 1937 (Kitae Kim n.d.; Seungok Park 2011, 37).

Although this radical version of a union-cooperative alliance against existing political and economic powers was terminated in 1937 by Japanese force, the cooperative movement continued. After independence in 1945, the old alliances between radical labor unions and cooperatives quickly resurfaced as national independence movement activists became engaged in a movement to transform Korea's economic structure.<sup>86</sup> "Many workers took over factories and contracted out managerial positions to those with experience and expertise and shared profits among themselves" (Minns 2001, 177). The radical union, Chun Pyong, organized various committees to allow workers to self-manage their companies (e.g., "factory committees," "self-management committees," and "operations committees") (Kim, Yong-Won 2008, 42).

As the first labor union federation that embraced the concept of "self-management" to empower workers under Japanese rule, Chun Pyong continued this stance in its official statement of November 1945, advocating for worker self-management of major businesses: "Let the factory committee (management committee) take over companies that were owned by Japanese imperialists or Korean betrayors who were for Japanese, so that workers can participate in the management of the company" (Kim, Yong-Won 2008, 42).<sup>87</sup> Guided by

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<sup>85</sup> [Ecoseoul.or.kr/xe/?document\\_srl=1895350](http://Ecoseoul.or.kr/xe/?document_srl=1895350)

<sup>86</sup> Ha, Yusik. N.D. "Autonomous plant management Movement"  
[http://busan.grandculture.net/Contents?local=busan&dataType=01&contents\\_id=GC04205152](http://busan.grandculture.net/Contents?local=busan&dataType=01&contents_id=GC04205152)

<sup>87</sup> For more information on the involvement of Chun Pyung's self-management in Korea, see Kim, Nak Jung, 1982. "Korea labor history- after independence", Chungsa, p 57 (Korean).

Chun Pyong, it is estimated that 728 factory worker self-management committees were established in 16 different industries soon after independence, involving 88,000 workers (Kim, Yong-Won 2008, 43; Whalshin Kim 2014, 14). Representative self-management factories in just one city, Busan, included: Chosun Textile Corporation, Busan Chosun Heavy Industry Company, Dong-Gwang Rubber Corporation, Chosun Transportation Company, and the Chosun Ship Company.<sup>88</sup>

However, the U.S. military authority soon made such cooperative visions illegal by supporting the arrest and incarceration of radical labor leaders, and by turning once-Japanese owned property and businesses over to the authoritarian Korean state and its conservative business partners (Dae-oup Chang 1987, 84; see also Kim, Mu-yong 1994). Due to its connection with communists, Chun Pyong was especially oppressed by the American Military government (AMG), and as a result, the numbers of labor unions were rapidly reduced to just 13 unions with 2,465 members (declining from 1,980 unions with 553,408 members), following American entrance into Korea in 1946 (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990, 30, cited in Eder 1997, 8; see also Rauenhorst 1990). With the demise of the national Chun Pyong union, cooperatives gradually disappeared in Korean society (Kim Sangon 1988: Kim Yong- Won 2009, cited in Kim Hwalshin 2014, 14). In short, although Korea's cooperative movement in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was short-lived, these first stage cooperatives existed as a compliment to support a radical labor movement and to support the national independence movement. In this regard, the very first stage of the cooperative

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<sup>88</sup> [http://busan.grandculture.net/Contents?local=busan&dataType=01&contents\\_id=GC04205152](http://busan.grandculture.net/Contents?local=busan&dataType=01&contents_id=GC04205152)

movement in Korea can be seen as a class-conscious “product of ideology” (Kim, Shin-Yang 2015, 82).

### **The Second Stage of Worker Cooperative Development: 1980s-1990s**

The second stage of the Korean worker cooperative movements emerged in the 1980s, as a second wave of worker-owned cooperatives began to flourish with the growing anti-state student-labor movement of the time. Similar to post-independence Korean cooperatives, most cooperatives at this time were politically natured and voiced oppositional ideology, as these cooperatives were part of a broader wave of anti-state civil society activism in the 1980s. State authorities did not engage nor legitimate these emerging worker cooperatives, so the growth of the cooperative movement occurred independently, and was shaped by anti-state social movement leaders.

In the 1970s, many worker cooperatives were created as a way to support the growth of labor unions by educating workers regarding workplace self-management, and to provide union activists with basic human services. Youngdungpo Industrial Church established the very first workers finance cooperative in 1969. In the 1970s, a labor union of low-wage women working at textile factories, Won-Pyung, also organized a finance cooperative for union members. Although the very first consumer cooperative, Poolmoo School Cooperative, was established in 1959 (in the Hongseon area of South Korea), a much larger wave of consumer cooperatives were started by student and labor leaders in the late 1970s and 1980s (Lee, Dong Ho 2015; see also Whang, Sunja and Choi, Youngmi 2012,135).

A good example of these cooperatives was the Hansalim coop, founded in 1986 as part of a farmers' movement to protest neoliberal "free trade" agricultural policy (Lee, Dong Ho 2015). Hansalim had a goal to "make a movement among consumers and producers" that "went beyond mere market transactions to one of understanding each other's conditions" (Ahn and Muller 2013). Accompanied by the passage of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade agreements of 1986, which resulted in greater liberalization of agricultural trade, Korean farmers initiated a trade protection movement with a slogan of "Save Our Wheat" (Lee, Dong Ho 2015).

Just as the Hansalim cooperative represented increasingly low-income and desperate farmers, the Korean worker cooperative movement of the 1980s was part of a broader "poor people's movement" (Kim, hwalshin 2014; EA Lee 2013 ), united in resistance to a wide range of state urban renewal and redevelopment projects of the 1980s that were displacing the urban poor in the name of global economic competitiveness. In the face of forced displacement of the urban poor in Seoul, many Catholic leaders such as Father Lee, Gi-Woo, Father Kim, Hong Il and Father Song, Kyung Yong organized "committees for urban poor" and established various cooperatives for low-income workers, including a finance cooperative (Myung-rae cooperative in 1993), a sewing cooperative (Sol-sam coop), a fashion cooperative (Nongol Fashion) and a construction cooperative (Mapo Construction coop), which were all meant to resist forced displacement of the poor, and to develop a sense of "self-sufficiency" and "cooperation among the poor" in the community (Yu, Yong Hun 2015, 169; Lee UnGu 2012).

Worker cooperatives were established as a means to reduce poverty and resist displacement of low-income workers, through a strategy of collective, grass-roots power.

For instance, leaders of a construction day laborers' cooperative (Durae), a sewing cooperative (Thread and Needle), and a construction cooperative (Sharing Construction Worker Coop) all lived and worked with day laborers in shanty towns. Similarly, approximately six small sewing cooperatives were established by leaders living in a heavily industrial area, the Guro region, and one joint coordinator was hired to form a network of these worker cooperatives and to develop marketing, branding and management of the sewing coops collectively (Interview, November 12, 2015)<sup>89</sup>. The goals of leaders of these cooperative networks were to “live the same life as the poor” and to create a sense of collective pride and power through worker cooperatives (Kim, Seung-oh 1993, 388-390; Kim, Hwalshin 2014; Choi, Ingi 2012).<sup>90</sup>

Many members of these cooperatives were radicalized through night school programs organized by college student leaders as part of the Minjung movement (see previous chapter), and together these student and labor leaders presented cooperatives as a means to “recover the important value of labor and to promote welfare, while making efforts to build a creative family-like workplace and create a production relation that further aims to create a just social construction through collaboration and ally building” (Kim, Sungoh and Kim Gyutae 1993, 402). One of the leading Catholic leaders in this poor people's movement, Father Song, argued that “we learned about self-management principles at night school. We knew about worker cooperatives through Japan, but also we

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with Lee, Sungsoo occurred on November 12, 2015. Lee, Sungsoo is one of the original leaders in supporting worker cooperative movements in the early 1990s.

<sup>90</sup> <http://m.blog.daum.net/lsak21/6090496>

later studied the case of Mondragon at night school, which gave us the hope to create similar kinds of worker cooperatives.”<sup>91</sup>

While student leaders worked with cooperative leaders in their home communities, in radical night schools, and in other programs of the Minjung (People’s) movement, labor unions during this era also became active supporters of emerging worker cooperatives. For example, when Seoul Jupa coil and tuner workers mobilized to take over their failing company in 1992, a labor union quickly mobilized to support workers and train them in strategies of worker management. Working together, the Jupa workers cooperative and a supportive labor union were able to win substantial wage increases and ultimately take over the entire company through a worker “self-management system” with a goal of creating humanistic working conditions at workplace and increasing “self-worth” and “self-autonomy” of workers (Kim Seung oh and Kim Gyu tae 1993,423).

Other cooperatives, such as Gang-dong Taxi in 1988 and Sin-ah Josun, were similar cases where labor unions took over a majority of company shares (100% and 53% of company shares, respectively), and converted the businesses to worker-owned cooperatives.<sup>92</sup> Also some small-scale worker cooperatives, such as Oh-Nu-Ri, Han-back, Mapo Construction, Sung-Nam Worker Cooperative, Hyup-sung Production Commune, Bak Sang Towel, and Jung-Ang Call Taxi, were all established by labor unions in the mid-1990s.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with Father Song, Gyung Yong, an original leader in the worker cooperative movement, on August 1, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> <http://m.blog.naver.com/stupa84/100004018345> (in Korean)

<sup>93</sup> <http://viva100.com/mobile/view.php?key=20140909010000868>

Gu, Jain (2004) argues that all of these worker cooperative movements in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated characteristics of a “small collective commune (community) movement,” with ideological goals of forming strong worker class consciousness and a commitment to self-sufficiency (Gu, Jain 2004). Common characteristics of these worker cooperatives were “putting emphasis on direct human relations within the inside of a commune and seeking to create complete equality of ownership, production and consumption” (Gu, Jain 2004). Shaped by the democracy movement of 1987, the worker cooperative movement of the late 1980s and 1990s sought to create a “collective awareness” and a politicized consciousness among workers who focused on broader social justice issues such as national poverty, housing challenges and urban development strategies, and not just on work-place specific issues (Defourny and Nyssens 2012).

However, many of these small-scaled and radicalized worker cooperatives were not able to survive the financial crisis in 1997 and the following wave of neo-liberal economic restructuring (Interview, November 12, 2015)<sup>94</sup>. In fact, the kinds of worker-cooperatives that emerged after the economic crisis of 1997, when the Korean government itself began an aggressive campaign of supporting a new wave of worker cooperatives, were very different than the second-stage, democratization-era cooperatives, which helps to explain why these cooperatives and Korean labor unions have tended to part ways in the post-1997 era.

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<sup>94</sup> An interview with Lee, Sungsu, a worker cooperative advocate, November 12, 2015.

### **The Third Stage of Worker Cooperative Development: 1997- Present**

Kim, Shin Yang (2015) describes current trends in the Korean “social economy” as a period of “socialization” (83) in which there is growing visibility and public support for social economy initiatives such as worker owned cooperatives. It is certainly the case that worker cooperatives have substantially expanded in South Korea since 1997, and that these cooperatives are gaining increasingly visible support by civil society and state leaders who celebrate growing pluralism within Korean society and who believe worker cooperatives can be a useful social economy enterprise to improve workers’ lives (Chung, Moo-Kwon et al. 2011). For example, immediately after the economic crisis broke in 1997, the Korean state established an “Employment Ownership Transfer Center” to assist failing companies in transferring ownership to employees. While some of these transfers resulted in direct ownership of the company by employees, most of them simply became employee stock ownership companies (ESOPS), in which employees held a large number of company shares, but which otherwise operated and were managed in traditional ways (Song, Taegyung 2006).

Though the Employee Ownership Transfer Center was closed in 2003, as the wave of post-1997 failing companies waned, the interest among state and civil society leaders in worker owned cooperatives has continued to grow. But, as exemplified by the dominance of ESOPs as the worker-ownership model preferred by the Employee Ownership Transfer Center, these modern-era cooperatives are very different than cooperatives of the pre-1997 era. In general, the worker cooperative movement after the financial crisis has demonstrated more traits of a “job consciousness” ideology (focused on individual

economic gains within the existing system), rather than a radicalized political ideology (committed to fundamentally changing the economic system).

*The Modern Korean State and the Expanding Social Economy*

While state and union relationships have been contentious throughout Korean history, and continue to be so, state-cooperative relationships have been increasingly collaborative. Even before significant new pro-coop state policies were adopted following the economic crisis of 1997, there were some limited efforts by the state to foster worker cooperatives that could advance worker self-interest without challenging the overall economic order. But these state-supported cooperatives (as opposed to the oppositional cooperatives supported by unions as part of an effort to challenge and reformulate Korean capitalism) were never autonomous or self-sufficient institutions, due to the strong role of the state in shaping these state-approved cooperatives, including a state role in appointing coop leaders.

For instance, Saemaul Undong (“The New Village Movement”) was a cooperative initiative set up by the government in the 1970s to unite village residents in projects of community uplift and infrastructure development, in order to “reduce the gap in income and living standards between the rural and urban populations” (Cited in Baldus 1981, 293-294). This cooperative movement was deeply shaped by the Park Chung-hee government, which funded its efforts and appointed its leaders, and who guided the focus of the New Village Movement towards such projects as laying rural infrastructure (e.g., roads and bridges), building housing for industrial workers in the villages, and clearing ground for private industry to move into rural areas. This New Village Movement was not a movement to politicize workers and engage them as oppositional forces against the state

and powerful corporate chaebols—but it was a tool to break down “old fashioned, unproductive habits and ways of thinking,” and to bring traditional economic development projects to rural villagers with the support of the village activists themselves (cited in Baldus 1981, 293-294).

Agricultural cooperatives in Korea were another example of strong government control over the cooperative sector. Although Korean agricultural cooperatives (united in the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation [NACF]) have been rated as the 9<sup>th</sup> largest cooperatives in the world with 2.4 billion members and the total gross sale of \$154 billion in US dollars (Lee, Eun Ae and Youngsi Kim 2013, 6),<sup>95</sup> these large, institutionalized agricultural cooperatives were never built as tools to empower local farmers to resist or reform global agricultural practices. Rather, they were developed by the state itself in the 1960s, as tools to most effectively unite and mobilize the energies of local farmers around collective farming projects that could be ompetitive on the national or international agricultural markets. These NACF agricultural cooperatives were authorized and heavily regulated by the state (the state also played a role in selecting coop leaders), and had only very limited autonomy (Jung and Rosner 2015, 96).

Burmeister (2006) shows how the term “cooperative” is actually a misleading term for these organizations, as “unlike a real cooperative, this organization’s formation was not anchored in any grassroots political action or economic mobilization effort by farmer members” (67). In fact the NACF had no process for individual farmer-owners to engage in the process of establishing or dissolving local coops, or in discussing and deciding upon

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<sup>95</sup> The NACF, founded in 1961, has 3,800 member (branch) organizations with 30,000 employees (Lee, Eun Ae, Kim, Young-sik 2013, 6).

coop rules, policy priorities, or production goals. These issues were all decided centrally, by state-appointed cooperative officials. In this way, the NACF was established primarily as a local “implementation arm of other central government agencies,” (67) integrating rural farmers into centrally determined state agricultural production goals and pushing state policy and production priorities into local communities. “Farmers were, in essence, drafted to support strategic industrialization initiatives” (67), which is to say the NACF worked as a state-approved tool to introduce and “adjust” centrally determined policies into local communities, and not as a tool of local worker empowerment vis-à-vis remote state or economic powers.

Top priorities of the NACF became such state-defined goals as introducing fertilizer more widely into rural areas, converting rural farmers into mono-crop rice exporters, and completing massive dams and irrigation projects. For such reasons, Burmeister (2006, 2012) calls the NACF a “parastatal organization,” with features such as: state managerial control of coop officials, production and policy goals matching the goals of state leaders, and a focus on expanding national wealth and economic activity rather than the empowerment of local workers (120; also see Burmeister 1999).

However, this historical, top-down approach by the state to controlling Korean cooperatives has gradually loosened since democratization in 1987, in that the state now pursues more flexible partnerships and collaboration with civil society organizations, a trend that has accelerated since the 1997 economic crisis and subsequent liberalization of the Korean economy (Jang Jongik 2013). Even with loosened control, however, the state continues to play an important role in expanding the social economy, which is often interpreted as showing an increased openness to the full participation of Korean workers

in politics and society. However, just as state influence of “parastatal” cooperatives like the NACF in the pre-democratization era fostered a highly compromised cooperative movement with limited ability to empower workers or improve their lives, it can similarly be argued that the current role of the state in promoting social economy initiatives serves the conservative function of “depoliticizing radicalized action by assisting the workers and making their needs a priority” (Dinerstein 2007, 538).

*The Rise of Korea’s Social Economy and the Depoliticized Worker Cooperative Movement*

“Social economy” activities are typically defined as “putting people before profits,” and often are mobilized by “third sector” institutions (e.g., non-profits, religious organizations, cooperatives, foundations), as “an innovative approach to contribute to social integration, social innovation, and community development for which the results of market and state approach are not satisfactory” (Monzon and Chaves 2012, cited in Jang Jongik 2013). Brown (2008) defines social economy activities as follows:

Rooted in local communities and independent from government, Social Economy organizations are democratic and/or participatory, pull together many types of resources in a socially owned entity, and prioritize social objectives and social values. While they may intend to make a profit, they do so in a context that sees profit as a means to meet social goals, not primarily as a means to create individual wealth. They may rely on volunteer labour as well as, or instead of, paid employees. The Social Economy is characterized by mutual self-help initiatives, and by initiatives to meet the needs of disadvantaged members of society.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> <http://www.msvu.ca/socialeconomyatlantic/English/whatisE.asp>

In the case of Korea, a long history of authoritarian state control meant that social economy activities were long repressed (or allowed in form only, through large “parastatal” organizations like the NACF, penetrated and controlled by state authorities) and have only been allowed to flourish in the last twenty-plus years (Burmeister 2012; Bidet and Um 2011). Democratization pressures in the post-1987 period have contributed to the growth of independent social economy activities, as has the state’s search for innovative strategies of economic uplift following the economic crisis of 1997. Following the crisis, the Korean government sent delegates to Western Europe to study social economy activities, and subsequently passed several important social economy initiatives to support worker cooperatives, non-profit organizations and mutual aid associations as strategies to deliver “jobs or social services to vulnerable social groups (vulnerable social groups: low-income brackets, the aged, the handicapped, victims of prostitution, long-term jobless, women with severed career, etc.)” (Kim, Jong-Gul 2015, 15; Bidet and Um 2011, Dafourney and Kim 2011). The model for many of these programs was borrowed from Korea’s worker cooperative movement, which steadily expanded following democratization in 1987, when community leaders created various worker cooperatives to promote self-sufficiency of the poor. Following the 1997 economic crisis, some coop leaders became critical in drafting and implementing several new laws in Korea that supported the growth of the Korean social economy and Korean worker cooperatives in specific (Interview May 15, 2015).<sup>97</sup> The three most critical of those laws were the National Basic Livelihood System Act

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<sup>97</sup> An interview with Kim, Seung oh, director at a self-sufficiency center, occurred on May 15, 2015. Kim was one of the initial leaders in helping the government to implement various self-sufficiency programs in the late 1990s.

(NBLSA 2000), the Promotion of Social Economy Act (2006), and the Framework Act on Cooperatives (FAC, 2012).

*The National Basic Livelihood System Act (2000)*

The 2000 passage of the NBLSA was pushed by dozens of civil society organizations, such as the Work Together Foundation, to address growing unemployment for the poor (Ea Lee and Young-Sik Kim 2013, 10).<sup>98</sup> The NBLSA can be described as a “productivist welfare” program that provides a government monthly allowance to those living below the poverty line (Bidet 2012, 1222; also see Hahn and McCabe 2006, 316; Goodman et al. 1998), but that also requires work-capable beneficiaries of the NBLSA to enroll in a “work integration scheme to get the full NBLS allowance” (1222). Some of the most common work integration programs were simply daily labor, at minimum wage, in short-term public works projects.

Initial NBLS efforts to promote “self-reliance” on the part of low-income and unemployed workers were underfunded and unavailable to most impoverished Koreans, and thus showed very little success in changing workers lives in Korea’s post-1997 years of economic recession (Kim, Jisun 2008). Furthermore these efforts were mostly focused on encouraging workers to somehow “adjust” to the increasingly low-wage Korean economy following the 1997 crisis, without much public spending and without encouraging social movement activism or innovative economic alternatives. In fact, the main job creation projects under the NBLSA were “self-support programs” certified and

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<sup>98</sup> [http://www.cssf.or.kr/new\\_home/bigsub1/sub1/sub1.asp?no=1](http://www.cssf.or.kr/new_home/bigsub1/sub1/sub1.asp?no=1)

funded by the National Ministry of Health and Welfare, which prioritized programs that best met traditional market demands (e.g., preparing workers to meet private employers' low-wage labor needs), rather than programs that adopted a social change mission. Yang (2010) concludes that most of these employment support programs were “a mere excuse to encourage market-oriented activities and discredit the initiatives with social mission because the performance of the projects was evaluated mainly in terms of profits from trade in the market” (4; also see Hahn and McCabe 2006).

Nevertheless, even this limited government support for community self-support programs laid down seeds that later grew into a more flourishing social economy, with a wider range of economic alternatives, such as mutual aid associations and worker cooperatives. One of the preferred “work integration” initiatives that workers were encouraged to pursue under the NLBSA was to join a “self-sufficient community enterprise project,” such as a community services cooperative, which could receive up to 1 million won (\$100,000) in government support, over a period of five years, and which were eligible for other government support such as pre-social enterprise planning grants of up to \$5,000 (Bidet 2012, 1222; Lee, Eun Ae and Kim Young-Sik 2013,10; Kim, Jisun 2008, 90). The NLBSA funded thousands of these self-sufficiency programs--programs which later grew into a broadening network of cooperatives, mutual aid associations, and non-profit community organizations, and can now be seen as “a pioneer step of the social enterprise phenomenon” (Bidet and Eum 2015,4; see also KASPA 2005, in Yang 2010).

### *The Social Economy Act (2006)*

The growth of community organizations committed not only to job creation, but to pursuing community purposes such as delivering social services or challenging corporate ethics, “had a certain impact on policy makers and led them to take into account [these organizations’] importance as economic actors” (Yang 2010, 5). As a result, Korean officials broadened their understanding of anti-poverty programs to include not just efforts to help individuals get jobs, but also to include “social enterprise” projects with a potential to deliver community services and leverage social change. These shifting viewpoints resulted in passage of a second important law expanding the Korean social economy--the Social Economy Act of 2006-- which made Korea the “first Asian country to officially enact a specific law supporting and labeling social enterprises” (Bidet 2012, 1223).

With a self-stated goal to enhance social unity and the quality of life of citizens by supporting social enterprises in the creation of new job opportunities, the Promotion of Social Economy Act contributed to the emergence of social enterprises that were certified and subsidized by the government (Defourny and Kim 2011, 91). Under the article 2 of this law, a social enterprise is defined as “A company which does business activities of producing and selling products and services while pursuing such social purposes as providing vulnerable social groups with social services or jobs to improve the quality of life of the local residents.”<sup>99</sup> Any organization wishing to be labeled as a social enterprise under this law must adhere to government social enterprise standards and be certified as such by the government. Upon certification, a social enterprise becomes eligible for a

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<sup>99</sup> [http://www.socialenterprise.or.kr/eng/info/What\\_is.do](http://www.socialenterprise.or.kr/eng/info/What_is.do). Also see Bidet 2012, 1223.

range of government benefits including: “management support; financial support; tax cuts and social insurance support; preference in public procurement; preference in commissioning of government's provision of social services; [and] tax exemption” (Lee, Eun Ae and Kim, Young-Sik 2013, 17).

Following enactment of this law, many local municipalities—both large metropolitan regional governments and small cities—enacted their own ordinances and established task forces to promote social enterprises. By 2011 Seoul had elected a Mayor with a long history in social economy activism (Park Won-soon), and more than one hundred other local Korean governments had introduced policy initiatives to support the social economy (Lee and Kim 2013, 120). In addition, Lee and Kim (2013) argue that

Some ministries of the central government started their own policy programs for fostering social enterprises, apart from those of the Ministry of Employment and Labor...Examples include the Local Community Job Creation Project (Ministry of Administration and Security), the Community Business Pilot Project (Ministry of Knowledge Economy), and the Rural Community Company Program (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Food) (12).

As a ripple effect of the growth in social economy initiatives in the wake of these efforts, the Korean Alternative Enterprise Network was established in 2007, with 105 social enterprises with over 2,000 workers.

#### *The Framework Act on Cooperatives (FAC, 2012)*

This “Alternative Enterprises Network” played an important role in passing a third important social economy law in 2012--the Framework Act on Cooperatives (FAC). This 2012 law “stipulates the basic principles of establishing and operating cooperatives to

promote independent, self-reliant, autonomous cooperatives, thereby contributing to the balanced development of the national economy and facilitating social integration” (Lee and Kim 2013, 18; see also Song, In-Bang 2013). The law differentiates “business” cooperatives (cooperatives organized to deliver traditional business goods and services) from “social cooperatives” operated for community service purpose, such as non-profit organizations cooperatively organized to provide social goods to disadvantaged individuals or marginalized communities. According to the FAC, the definition of a social cooperative is “a cooperative that carries out business activities related to the enhancement of welfare of local residents or provides social services” (Jang Jong Ik 2013, 8). To meet the threshold for “social cooperative designation,” non-profit organizations are required to provide at least 40 percent of their goods or services for the “public good” (Kim, Jasper 2012) and such social cooperatives must “emphasize the collective nature of the economic activities to be organized” (Jang Jongik 2013, 6).

Under the FAC, both “business” cooperatives and “social” cooperatives are provided with a government registration system and with various government supports under the act (e.g., tax incentives, government support for labor costs, preferred government contracts). Taking advantage of government support under this law, many employment assistance and other community self-help programs have converted from social service agencies to becoming business-oriented social cooperatives. For instance, Do-u-nu-ri, a social caring cooperative for the elderly, disabled, and infants switched its status to a social cooperative in 2013, and developed a cooperative business model resulting in the rapid expansion of the organization to include three branches with 185 cooperative members by 2013 (Wu, Misook 2015).

With regard to worker cooperatives, FAC also increased the legitimacy of establishing a worker cooperative as part of a general cooperative. Although there are no specific regulations as to how a worker cooperative can be formed under the FAC's definition of a cooperative, worker cooperative advocates have found that Article 1, Clause 15 of the Act establishes a low-threshold membership requirement (at least five persons are required to found a new cooperative). Start-up worker cooperatives can reasonably meet this low threshold of five initial worker-owners, so the law has resulted in a recent flourishing of worker-owned cooperatives in the Korean social economy (Kim, Jong-gul 2015, 6).

The reduced membership requirements to form a coop are a substantial change in Korean policy. Previous cooperative laws required a large membership base to form a cooperative. For instance, before the FAC, there were eight special cooperative laws in Korea that allowed for coops in different economic sectors, but each law required large membership to found a cooperative.<sup>100</sup> The Agricultural Cooperative Law required at least 1,000 members to form a new coop, while the Credit Union law required at least 100 members, and the Consumer Cooperative law required 300 members to form a consumer cooperative. By changing these membership guidelines and allowing cooperatives whenever as few as five persons are involved, the FAC provides small worker cooperatives with much greater legitimacy.

As a result of these laws, the number of cooperative social economy enterprises grew from 509 in 2007, with 3,245 workers, to 1339 enterprises in 2015, with 7,776 workers

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<sup>100</sup> The eight special cooperative laws were: the Agricultural Cooperative Law ( 1957), Fishery Cooperative Law (1961), Cooperative of Tobacco Producers ( 1962), Small and Medium Enterprise Cooperative Law ( 1963), Credit Unions Law ( 1972), Forest Cooperative Law ( 1980), Community Credit Cooperative Law ( 1982), and the Consumer Cooperative Law (1999).

(Self-Help Center Report 2015). These coops populate various sectors, especially construction, care services, cleaning, recycling, agriculture, and manufacturing. The largest number of these social enterprise was in the cleaning sector (293), followed by construction and repair (256), food (203) and caring social services (152). Social coops are also prominent in agriculture, recycling and light-manufacturing (Self-Help Center Report 2015).<sup>101</sup>

Worker cooperatives make up a large number of these “social enterprises.” Originally excluded from the eight special cooperative laws,<sup>102</sup> and thus allowed no legal method for officially registering as cooperatives, very few worker-owned cooperatives operated in Korea before 2012. After the passage of the 2012 FAC, however, the number of worker cooperatives grew quickly to 216--8% of all Korean cooperatives in 2013.<sup>103</sup> Many of these worker cooperatives were small, as 91 of these cooperatives (42% of all worker cooperatives) had only 5 employees in 2013. In addition, there were 82 worker-cooperatives involving from 5-9 worker-owners (38% of all worker cooperatives), and 20% with more than 9 worker-owners (2013 Korea Cooperative Research Center, 2-3).

Another pre-FAC obstacle to forming a worker cooperative was the fact that worker cooperatives were excluded from being defined as small to medium sized “self-sufficiency programs,” which prevented them from obtaining loans. But with the passage of the FAC, any new worker cooperative could be defined as a small to medium sized social enterprise, making them eligible for bank loans. Although 73% of Korean worker cooperatives were

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<sup>101</sup> “2015 Self-Help Center Report” Introduction by executive director, Sim, Sung Ji (page2).

<sup>103</sup> There were 2943 registered cooperatives in 2013. Business cooperatives consisted of 1830, multi cooperatives consisted of 575 (20%), worker cooperatives consisted of 216 (8%), consumer cooperatives consisted of 183 ( 7%), and social cooperatives consisted of 128 (4%). Korea Cooperative Research Center, October 2013.

established with self-funding collected among members, this change of status for worker cooperatives made it easier for a small worker cooperative to gain access to traditional loans. The growth of worker cooperatives in the wake of the FAC led worker cooperatives to come together in 2014 to form a national worker cooperative association, the Korean Federation of Worker Cooperatives (KFWC), which began operations with 22 members (6 official members, 9 members in preparation to become full members, and 7 associate members (Lee, Daehee 2014).

The last twenty years—and especially the last decade--has seen a rapid and compacted growth of the social enterprise sector in Korea, including a boom in worker-cooperatives. Yet it is an open question how to interpret the meaning of that “social enterprise boom” (Yang 2010, 7). For example, what kinds of relationships might be expected to evolve between these newly emerging social enterprises and the established labor unions of Korea, and what does that portend in terms of the direction of future Korean labor activism? Can we expect these new social enterprises to join with traditionally militant Korean labor unions in challenging the nature of Korea’s chaebol-dominated economy, or will new social enterprises tend to adopt non-confrontational and “diverse economy” strategies of job creation and social service provision that don’t entail militant conflict with existing political and economic leaders?

### **Relations between Third-Stage Worker Cooperatives and Labor Unions**

An answer to the proceeding questions begins with a recognition that the rise of civil society and social economy initiatives after Korean democratization has generally not

occurred in a framework of antagonism towards the state, nor has it been framed by a spirit of capital-labor antagonism. The thinness of civil society organizations prior to Korean democratization, together with the state's active role in certifying, funding, and shaping social economy civil society organizations after democratization, has led to a social economy sector that is accommodating to existing political and business leaders in Korea.

Social enterprises in Korea are relatively young, have little pre-existing network of civil society organizations on which to rely, and have been dependent on the state itself “for their survival and development” (Yang 2010, 8). In such a context, “when civil society isn’t organized, individual social enterprise can’t be equal to public force...leading [social enterprises] to adapt themselves to the requirements of the government” (7). In such a context, Yang (2010) concludes, policy-makers tend to “reduce the very nature of social enterprise to instrumental purposes,” seeking to make use of social economy organizations “simply as government agents for implementing policy measures in the field of job creation and social service provision... This, in turn, can raise obstacles to innovation of civil society actors in more extended fields to fully exploit their potentials” (1).

Considering these dynamics, it is not surprising that the bond between traditionally militant Korean labor unions and state-supported social enterprises, including worker cooperatives, has not been strong. While Korean labor unions have typically adopted the logic of a classic labor movement, with militant mobilization used to express contentious relations with state and economic leaders, most social economy initiatives emerging in Korea in the last decade belong to a less politically engaged and more accommodational camp that seeks programmatic amelioration of social ills in their field of expertise, without adopting a broader-based social critique.

These kinds of divisions are long-standing in Korea. According to Bae and Kim (2012, 10), civil society organizations have long been divided into the “people’s movement” camp and “the citizen’s movement” camp. The “people’s movement” camp is confrontational and militant, advancing such radical goals as overthrowing the government in the 1980s, seeking to drive elected presidents out of power still today, and dethroning corporate chaebols as lords of the Korean economy. The “citizen’s movement” camp, on the other hand, aims at more peaceful, ameliorative civil movements to change society, and supports movements in which “both the haves and the have-nots can participate” (cited in Koo 2002, 42; see also Yang 2010, 3).

In the case of relations between labor unions and worker cooperatives, labor unions belong to the radical “people’s movement” camp, while most post-1997 worker cooperatives belong to the accommodationist “citizens’ movement” camp. While the people’s movement camp continues to see conflict with the state and capital as necessary, the citizen’s movement camp, including many worker cooperatives, pursues the expansion of social economy initiatives that do not necessarily entail contention with state or business leaders. Often, labor leaders speak from a “people’s movement” perspective that is very critical of the more accommodational “citizens’ movement.” Sunhuck Kim (1997, 81) describes how many labor leaders believe that “supporters of ‘civil society’ shut their eyes to the basic contradictions of capitalist society and instead misleadingly focus on the consumption arena. They contend that this might eventually undermine the labor movement, impairing the unity of the labor class.”

Citizen’s movement activists see the situation differently, as they focus on the benefits of expanding the universe of civil society organizations working on various social issues,

even though many of these organizations might not be tied to traditional class-oriented labor campaigns (Kim, Sunhyuk 1997, 85). For example, citizen movement organizations include environmental organizations (e.g., the Korean Federation of Environmental Movements), feminist organizations, and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, which focuses on improved transparency in governance and broader economic issues such as chaebol reform and corporate governance reform (Koo 2002, 42-43).

Many of the more radical labor unions dismiss such efforts as uninspired and without potential, to the extent that these efforts occur in the absence of militant struggle and seek only pragmatic reforms, with government support. The director of People's Solidarity for Economic Democracy (a network of Korean cooperatives), Taegyung Song (2013) is, in particular, critical of labor unions as follows.

Labor unions have never agonized over the question of how to develop relations with cooperatives. Despite the fact that there are many things that labor unions can learn from the history of cooperatives, it is deplorable that labor unions have purposely avoided or ignored those lessons (Gu, Eun Whae 2013).

In criticizing unions for ignoring the potential virtues of cooperatives, Kim, Wonik (2010) argues that unions' labor radicalism (such as is evidenced by the KCTU labor affiliation) has alienated the middle class as a possible key ally of labor in its struggle to humanize the economy. Some of the reasons for leaders in the citizen's movement camp distancing themselves from union affairs is because "maintaining public support was important for these organizations" and they also often disagree with confrontational labor union strategies such as labor strikes, workplace occupations, or public self-immolations, as such tactics sometimes turn off the Korean middle-class (Shin, KY 2010: 226).

In fact, many civil society organizations, such as the Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ), the Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (KFEM), or the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), were specifically established to build stronger middle-class constituencies in support of various social change efforts, including the expansion of consumer and work-owned cooperatives.

Many of these social change efforts do not fit in the older traditions of class-conscious labor organizing that once dominated civil society activism in Korea. Kwang Yeong (2010, 225) argues that most recent civil society organizations in Korea have engaged in "non-class issues, such as human rights, consumer rights, housing issues, water pollution, social welfare and tax justice." Sunhyuk Kim (1997) even argues for the necessity of these recent civil society organizations to seek cooperation and avoid conflicts with the state, arguing that "civil society in South Korea should learn to restrain, not only resist, the state" (95). According to him, civil society organizations need to "learn how to check, control and influence the government with specific and constructive policy options and through appropriate mediating mechanisms and procedures" (95).

In this regard, the expansion of civil society organization has been critical in bringing attention to new social issues (environmental concerns, civil rights, feminism, village sustainability and self-sufficiency, etc.) (Cho, Myung-Rae 2011), but at the same time, civil society organizations have become less ideological and confrontational over time. In terms of economic reform, many of the worker cooperatives that arose after the financial crisis sought above else to develop new jobs for the 1.7 million people who were unemployed in 1998, without an associated focus on class-conscious militant labor

organizing against business leaders. As described by a representative from the Korean Federation of Worker Cooperatives (KFWC): “For us, job creation is the biggest problem that we have faced right now. For me, the issue of antagonism between capital and labor that is embedded in capitalism is not that important.” Rather, the coop federation representative argues that the most important issue is simply to assure that adequate jobs are available for all workers, which can be better assured by peacefully expanding the network of worker-owned cooperatives rather than angrily organizing against government or business leaders.<sup>104</sup>

In this context, worker cooperative leaders argue that the relationship between cooperatives and labor unions can be difficult and strained due to different perspectives on labor-capital relations, and the related necessity (or not) of a militant social activism. Worker cooperative leader Inchang Song (2015) argues that “Labor unions do not have interests in worker cooperatives because KCTU is militant and politically natured, while we worker cooperatives focus more on economic progress.”<sup>105</sup> In this clear distinction between the two organizations, worker cooperative leaders offer a softer perspective on capital-labor relations, while describing a difficult relationship with labor unions due partly to the militancy of those unions. This different labor ontology between labor union and worker cooperative leaders is described by Father Song Gyung-yong, one of the leading founders of the worker cooperative movement in the late 1980s.

Society has changed so much but [labor leaders] are still advancing  
dogmatic Marxism, like in the 1980s. Still labor unions leaders are

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<sup>104</sup> An interview with the first president of the KFWC, Inchang Song, on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

talking about the concept of ‘class’ and they have no real connection to or knowledge about what is really happening on the ground (Interview, May 13, 2015).

As much as worker cooperatives are critical of labor unions that maintain classical Marxism as an organizing principle, labor unions are also critical of worker cooperatives for their accommodational stance. It is true that leaders in some Korean Trade Federation regions (such as the conservative Busan region) have sought to foster a softer image of the labor movement by creating and supporting consumer cooperatives. For example, the president of the KCTU in Busan, Choi, Yong-I, has established consumer cooperatives and production coops in order to “increase the realm of the labor movement in Busan and to create a progressive collective community” (Choi 2013, 153). However, many KCTU leaders view worker cooperatives in a mostly negative light, arguing that such cooperatives are far too small in scale and moderate in stance to bring about broader social changes (Yang Gyuhyun 2015; Rho, Junghyup 2013). One interviewed KCTU official argued that “Worker cooperatives can happen at small workplaces and it is good. But they can’t change the capitalist system” (Interview, July 6, 2013)<sup>106</sup>.

This difference in ontological stances and organizational tactics between unions and worker cooperatives can be demonstrated in actual cases of antagonism between the two organizations. For example, there was extensive interest among the workers of Daewoo Chosun in taking over their failing automobile plant in 1998, and converting it to a worker-owned cooperative, in response to the financial crisis in 1997. However, this discussion

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<sup>106</sup> An interview with a researcher, at KCTU, Lee, Changwon, was held on July 6, 2013.

ultimately went nowhere, largely because “labor unions were opposed to the idea of a worker cooperative” (Interview, April 28, 2015)<sup>107</sup> and particularly opposed to the idea of using the retirement fund of workers to finance conversion of the factory to a worker cooperative. Such a strategy of investing workers’ funds in purchasing business ownership was seen as ill-suited to the labor union identity, and likely to undermine workers’ militant solidarity against management (Kim, Eunnam 2013). This opposition of labor unions towards the concept of a worker cooperative in this case was described by Sahoong Park, President of the Service and Transportation Workers Union under KCTU.

It is important to have a clear distinction between capitalists and workers, so that the role of a labor union can continue to be to oppose capitalists. Without this distinction between workers and capitalists, how can we organize workers?” (Interview, May 13, 2015).

In this regard, it is not surprising that collaborations between the worker cooperative community and labor unions of the KCTU federation have been weak in the post-1997 era. If there is to be deeper collaborations between labor unions and worker cooperatives in Korea, we can predict that collaborating unions may come from the FKTU (the conservative labor union federation originally constituted by the Korean government), rather than from the KCTU (the militant labor union federation, long opposed to the FKTU). A representative of the Korean Federation of Worker Cooperatives (KFWC) described just this dynamic in explaining the relationship between labor unions and worker cooperatives.

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<sup>107</sup> An interview with Choi, Yae Jun occurred on April 28, 2015. Choi was the interim president to launch the Korean Federation of Worker Cooperative. Choi runs a worker cooperative, Actus, which is a IT company.

I visited both the KCTU and FKTU to talk about worker cooperatives. It appears that KCTU has lots of internal conflicts, and it is almost impossible for the KCTU to collaborate with or support cooperatives because they have little room to do so. On the other hand, the FKTU appears to show more interest in worker cooperatives, and a FKTU labor representative also came to congratulate us on the opening day of the KFWC.<sup>108</sup>

Historically, the FKTU has had more friendly relations with cooperatives than the KCTU. Recently, the FKTU established a sub-committee to discuss worker cooperatives on a regular basis, in response to the new reality of the rapid growth of social economy organizations in the 2000s. The FKTU's more friendly attitude toward social economy cooperatives (as compared to the more frosty response of the KCTU) is a logical consequence of the reality that both the FKTU and many social enterprise organizations trace their roots to state projects to foster compromise between labor and capital and to create a more harmonious workplace through depoliticized social service projects. The consequence of this history, for both the FKTU and many social enterprises fostered by recent government policies, is that "asymmetry of power between government and civil society entails institutional isomorphism of social enterprises leading [them] to adapt themselves to the requirements of the government" (Yang 2010, 7).

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<sup>108</sup> An interview with Choi, Yae Joon, ACTUS worker coop representative, occurred on April 30, 2015.

## **Conclusion**

Differing patterns of either antagonism between labor unions and worker cooperatives (as seen in tension between the KCTU and the KCFW) or cooperation between these two groups (as seen in friendly relations between the FKTU and the KCFW) reflects the dichotomy between the radical “people’s movement” camp and the reformist “citizen’s movement” camp in Korean history. Underlying this dichotomy is the conflict between “job conscious” and “class conscious” labor organizing, in that Korean worker cooperatives fostered by state social enterprise initiatives since 1997 have had more affinity with a job conscious ideology of improving economic prospects for individual workers, while labor unions in the KCTU camp (who trace their roots to oppositional organizing in the pre-1987 years) have more affinity with class conscious organizing approaches. In Korea, the recent rise of the worker cooperative movement has been largely catalyzed by government social economy policies which prioritize private market job creation without political agitation or increased public spending, which means that cooperatives have been more “job conscious” than “class conscious,” and which has shaped their relationship to Korean labor leaders of various camps.

The third-stage worker cooperative movement in Korea is still young and undeveloped, and post-1997 cooperatives remain heavily influenced by the public policies which originally shaped their emergence into Korean civil society. While second stage worker cooperatives of the 1987 democratization era were small in number and largely part of the radical “people’s camp” labor movement, the worker cooperatives that have emerged in Korea following the 1997 financial crisis have more typically embraced a

depoliticized job consciousness ideology, as essentially required by the state policies which certify and fund these organizations under new state “social enterprise” policies. As Korean civil society and social economy enterprises rapidly expand in the wake of such laws as the Promotion of Social Economy Act (2006) and the Framework Act on Cooperatives (2012), they are doing so in the context of a state-shaped pluralistic civil society which is allowing new forms of social enterprise to flourish, but is shaping them in ways that accommodate, rather than challenge, the broader capitalist structure of Korea.

Thus, current worker cooperative movements are generally embracing what could be called a poststructural political-economic analysis as the key strategy to expand their social base by developing a depoliticized and accommodational social movement. This approach of the worker cooperative movement conflicts with the Korean labor union movement with its militant and uncompromising labor organizing strategies, rooted in an ontology of classical Marxism. Sharply different labor ontologies concerning such things as the inevitability (or not) of capital-labor and state-labor conflict, and the related necessity (or not) of class-conscious militancy has put Korean labor unions of the KCTU variety and the recently emerging worker cooperatives on fundamentally different paths towards worker empowerment.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **CASE STUDY OF WOOJIN BUS WORKERS' UNION- COOPERATIVE IN SOUTH KOREA**

The rise of worker cooperatives after Korea's 1997 economic crisis confirms Fischer's (2002) observation that "cooperatives thrive in the midst of scarcity" (see also Birchall and Ketilson 2009; Smith and Rothbaum 2013). Similar to the worker takeover of failing companies like New Republic Windows in the United States during the 2008 crisis, and to the worker takeover of numerous Argentina factories in the wake of their 1998-2002 economic crisis, the rise of Korean self-management factories following their 1997 crisis can be viewed as a survival strategy and a tool for political change (Dinerstein 2007). But there are multiple paths workers may pursue in their efforts to survive through worker ownership. Worker owners may conceive of themselves as enterprising business owners—adopting commercial strategies to improve their economic situation in a depoliticized, welfarist way--or as mobilized class warriors, seeking a radical transformation of industrial relations (Ozarow and Croucher 2014). These differing self-conceptions shape substantially different kinds of local labor institutions and movements.

What distinguishes the Korean union movement is its affinity to class-conscious, traditional Marxism. Though this militancy has typically driven many labor unions away from alliances with Korea's traditionally state-influenced, accommodating, and capitalist-

friendly worker-cooperatives, there are intriguing counter-examples of Korean unions joining forces with some unusually militant and class-conscious worker cooperatives. It is true that a pattern of alienation between class-conscious unions and more business-accommodating worker cooperatives in Korea confirms the poststructuralists' argument that orthodox class-conscious thinking in the Marxist tradition can undermine collaboration between diverging labor organizations. Still, Ozarow and Croucher (2014) may also be right that many accommodating social enterprises in the post-structural tradition do not in the end offer much hope as a tool of labor empowerment, so those who are dedicated to a powerful labor movement may be wise to avoid such collaborations.

Ozarow and Croucher (2014) argue that many social enterprises have become dis-embedded from notions of "class" and a wider social critique of the industrial system, and in this way have marginalized radical voices in the labor movement. As a competing model, Ozarow and Croucher (2014) celebrate class-conscious, radicalized worker-controlled companies for offering "transformatory potential as a sustainable alternative production model that fosters new non-capitalist subjectivities among workers involved" (993).

Exploring just this possibility, this chapter investigates the potential of alliances between labor unions and worker cooperatives in Korea built along radical, class-conscious lines and investigates what these alliances teach in terms of whether traditional Marxism does or does not offer potential in guiding the cause of labor empowerment. To investigate these questions, this section presents a case-study of Woojin Traffic Inc., (hereafter "Woojin"), a unionized worker cooperative in the Chungju area of Korea whose strategic approach fits within the tradition of orthodox Marxism.

In the wake of Korea's financial crisis of 1997 and the economic downturn that followed, Woojin was one of many privately held Korean bus companies to struggle on the verge of bankruptcy. Some bus companies that could not pay workers' wages for months were confronted by workers' labor strikes, arrests of company owners, and closure of operations. At the Woojin bus company, workers mobilized through 171 days of labor strike to ultimately take over their company and turn it into a worker cooperative. Workers at three other bus companies examined in this chapter (Samsung Bus, Citizen Bus, and Dalgubul Bus) drew from the example of Woojin, and engaged in similar processes of strikes, public protests, and occupation of their bus companies and of city offices, resulting finally in the conversion of their bus companies to worker cooperatives. All of these worker cooperative bus companies were established through the leadership of the Minju Bus Labor Union, which is affiliated with the more militant branch of Korean labor affiliations, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Although class-conscious collaboration between labor unions and worker cooperatives is not typical in Korea, the case of Woojin shows that union-coop collaboration can be militant and confrontational vis-à-vis existing political and economic elites, and that this kind of collaboration can result in meaningful forms of labor empowerment that look very different from the welfarist goals of more accommodational business unions and entrepreneurial cooperatives—such as are very common in the United States. Woojin (and other worker cooperative bus companies that have followed the Woojin model) match what Ozarow and Croucher (2014, 992) call “cracks” or “quotidian moments of rebellion or autonomous spaces in capitalism,” illuminating how a militant

commitment to class-conscious worker control can contribute to building a strong labor movement in Korea.

### **Privately Owned Korean Bus Companies and Worker Exploitation**

Korean Bus companies have traditionally been privately owned, with very few labor-law protections for bus drivers. According to Korean labor law (Article 59), bus drivers are exempted from the maximum working hours of 40 hours a week and from the law that a worker has to be given a rest break for at least for 30 minutes for every four hours worked, or a one hour rest break every eight hours of work (KCTU report 2016, 17; Park, Sangjae 2014). Bus drivers, on average, work 11.7 hours a day (more than 58 hours a week), with few breaks. Their average salary is only 87%, and their hourly wage only 62%, of other service sector workers (KCTU report 2016, 18).

As a result of private bus owners seeking maximum profits in an industry without labor protections, conflicts between workers and bus companies over low wages and working conditions have been on-going since the 1960s. Like other episodes of Korean labor activism, many of these labor conflicts were very militant. The very first bus driver labor union was formed in 1961 as a national bus drivers' labor union, in the tradition of industrial unionism (The Ewha Weekly, 1996, March 25).<sup>109</sup> However, President Chun Doo-hwan dismantled the national bus drivers' labor union in 1981, and replaced it with enterprise unionism, in an effort to forestall the disruptive potential of a national, industrial bus drivers' union.

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<sup>109</sup> <http://inews.ewha.ac.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=5338>

As a result of President Chun Doo-hwan's action, bus driver unions allowed by the Korean state in the 1980s were all allied with the conservative Korean labor federation—the FKTU. These state-sanctified unions worked as tools of political clientelism for state officials, and focused on incremental improvements to workers lives (primarily in the form of winning moderately higher wages), without advancing demands such as greater worker control of the workplace or socializing ownership of their companies. During these years, therefore, the enterprise-level bus company unions were easily incorporated into the existing capitalist system, and—like similar state-sanctified cooperatives studied by Ozarow and Croucher (2014) in Argentina—had “depoliticized workers’ stated aims of autonomy, self-management and solidarity and [had] partially demobilized the movement as a political force” (997).

Following the democratization upheavals of 1987, however, new and independent unionization efforts arose among bus drivers as they did elsewhere in Korean society—with the more militant and confrontational unionists forgoing the passive FKTU and instead joining with the KCTU labor affiliation, with its commitment to industrial scale unionism and aggressive, direct-action labor campaigns. With the establishment of KCTU's bus organizing unit 1997, more workers began to join KCTU bus unions in the 2000s, and although the number of FKTU-affiliated bus drivers is still almost twice as many as KCTU-affiliated drivers, growing numbers of bus drivers have opted for the KCTU since the 2000s (Park, Hyuckjin 2013).<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Between the two labor affiliations, the number of overall bus driver union members in 2010 was 82,726, which is 79.8% of all Korean bus drivers.

For example, Seoul's Minju (People's) labor union, a militant bus labor union, was officially established in 1997, building on the foundation established by the informally organized Seoul Driver's Association, which was established in 1988 as an independent union, with a commitment to agitational, direct-action campaigns in the cause of bus-driver empowerment (Labor Department Report 2011). The locally organized Seoul Minju bus union merged with the nationally organized Minju Bus labor union of the KCTU in 2010, and became a subcommittee of KCTU's industrially-scaled national public transportation social service labor union in 2011.

The Minju Bus Labor Union—originally a direct-action, “wildcat” union of Seoul bus drivers, and later part of a KCTU industrial union of bus drivers--traces its heritage to Korea's radical “Minjung” movement of the 1980s, and advances similar goals of class-conscious emancipation of workers from an oppressive capitalist system. The organizational declaration of Minju Bus labor union states that

Public bus social service workers fight for the defense of basic labor rights and for strengthening the nature of public work... We also fight to maintain the tradition of democratic labor movement and autonomy, and fight for the emancipation of the working class and for Minjung (people's) solidarity.

Driven by these kinds of emancipatory goals, the Minju Bus labor union initiated a series of major bus strikes in the 2000s, seeking to win more autonomy and dignity for bus drivers while also establishing the right of bus workers to break away from the conservative and government led unions of the FKTU, and the right to belong to a democratic union federation (the KCTU) without company interference.<sup>111</sup> According to union leaders, the

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<sup>111</sup> <http://bus.nodong.org/>

goal of the Minju Bus labor union is to “strengthen social fairness and to accomplish the public owned bus operation system.”<sup>112</sup> The union’s demand for a publicly owned or worker-managed bus system has caused antagonism between private bus companies and bus labor unions, and between the government and the labor unions, as neither private companies nor most governing officials believe that public or worker-ownership is superior to privately owned bus companies in the traditional capitalist model.

When declining bus companies’ revenues threatened many companies with insolvency following the economic crisis of 1997, government officials did initiate discussions over converting private companies to partial public management, but these discussions did not aim at increasing either the management role of workers, or their individual economic prospects. Instead, when government officials initiated efforts to create “quasi-public” bus companies in Seoul (and five other large cities) in 2004, these efforts were framed as a response not to labor conditions, but to the problem of congestion and inefficiency on the bus lines, thus leading to declining ridership and revenues (Lee, Youngsoo 2014, Kim Kwang Sik and Kim Gyeng Chul 2012, Kim, Kwang Sik et al. 2014).

A messy panoply of unregulated private bus companies had led to a situation of overlapping bus service on profitable routes, no services in unprofitable areas, inefficient and constantly changing routes, routes that didn’t integrate with other metro transit systems, lack of coordinated transit transfer centers, and a confusing, congested bus system across the city. When governing officials introduced what they called a “quasi-public” reform of the bus system in 2004, state-mandated changes focused on improving this

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<sup>112</sup> <http://bus.nodong.org/>

situation for bus riders, including: reorganization and systematic color-coding of routes, designation of different kinds of bus lines (express, neighborhood, etc.), synchronization of fares between private companies and with the subway system, and designation and maintenance of centralized transfer stops (Kang, Sangwook 2011; Allen 2011).

This quasi-public management system for bus lines did not improve conditions for workers. A 2011 report from Korea's Employment and Labor Department noted that the average income of workers at a workplace with more than five employees is \$3,722 a month, but that bus workers had to work 97.1 more hours each month than average workers in order to receive that same level of income (Kim, Yunna 2012). The Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union (KPTU)'s Newsletter (2010, number 5) reported that the average hourly wage for bus drivers in the Chungju region where the Woojin bus takeover would later occur was less than the national minimum wage of 4110 won an hour (the equivalent of \$4 an hour).<sup>113</sup> As a result, area bus drivers received between \$1000 and \$1,500 a month, working more than 12-15 hours a day (Kim, Odal 2001).

Another problem associated with private bus ownership was that workers were under enormous pressure to shorten the time to finish a route, resulting in a high rates of accidents and stress levels among drivers. Companies also were known to fake reports to the government on workers' wages and compensation, in order to pad profits. Also, the private company owners sought to build profitability by firing many of the mechanics who repaired buses, shedding 14 mechanics for every 100 buses and shifting the responsibility for bus

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<sup>113</sup> Newspaper by the Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union (KPTU), KCTU, 2010, October 29, number 5.

repairs (and subsequent breakdowns and accidents) onto drivers (Hyu, Younggu 2016)<sup>114</sup>. For these reasons, despite the fact that some once believed that a quasi-public bus system would reduce antagonism between workers and companies by enhancing public oversight over bus companies (Lee, Hee sung 2009, 53; Gang, Munsik 2014), labor unions have not been content, because, in the words of one labor leader, “bus companies continue to find a way to abuse the system and to exploit workers” (Interview, May 13, 2015).

Such a situation has fostered conflict and antagonism between labor unions and bus companies and between unions and government officials who typically support private bus company owners. Even after converting to “quasi-public” bus operations at the start of the decade, the numbers of labor strike among bus drivers remained high throughout the 2000s. In these strikes, unions have advocated for the transformation of bus operation to be fully publicly owned, voicing goals to increase public safety for passengers and drivers, to decrease bus fares for public benefit, to create an eco-friendly environment, to increase participation of citizens and workers in managing the bus system, and to decrease the rapid growth of irregular workers.<sup>115</sup> In these labor actions, unions have consistently targeted both the state and the private bus company owners as obstacles to achieving labor rights, as the state consistently sides with bus companies in labor disputes, arresting labor leaders and mobilizing police to break up protests.

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<sup>114</sup>[http://kuprp.nodong.net/club/club1\\_read.php?code=41&idx=610&CPage=3&club\\_code=2&board\\_type=B](http://kuprp.nodong.net/club/club1_read.php?code=41&idx=610&CPage=3&club_code=2&board_type=B).

<sup>115</sup> The benefits of the publicly owned bus system are described in the newspaper by the Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union (KPTU), no. 3. 2010.

## **Worker Takeover at Woojin Bus: The Rise of a Worker-Cooperative Solution**

Emerging from a direct-action worker-takeover of a private bus company, Woojin is a unionized workers' cooperative in Korea's mid-region, Chungju. Before the Woojin workers' cooperative emerged in 2005, the Chungju area had six private bus companies, with 950 workers operating 407 buses (Hong, Jungsoon 2004). Woojin was the largest private bus company in the region. However, when the company did not pay workers' wages for two months and closed operations due to financial difficulties, workers launched a labor strike in July, 2004. Following a filing of bankruptcy, over 90% of workers voted in favor of turning the failing company into a self-management company. To achieve this goal, workers went on a 171 day long strike, occupied city hall for three days to demand arrest of the previous owner for non-payment of wages, and demanded the city to allow workers to turn the company into a worker managed company with reduced debt levels (Jang, Wonbong 2013, Bak Il 2008, Kim, Hwalshin 2014).

A local union affiliated with the KCTU actively supported these workers' strikes. A local KCTU officer, Jaesoo Kim, emerged as a strike leader and played a critical role in winning the battle. Woojin workers ultimately won in negotiations with the city of Chungju, when officials decided to allow workers to take over the bus company with a \$5 million reduction in company debt level. Each worker put down an investment of \$5,000 in personal funds and Woojin re-opened as a worker-owned cooperative in January 2005, with 300 drivers (Gang, Sudol 2012, 41; also see Kim, Hwalshin 2014). During this time, workers voted to switch their labor union affiliation to the more radical KCTU, from the traditionally state-sanctioned FKTU, and workers elected a KCTU leader, Jaesoo Kim, as

the representative of their new unionized workers' cooperative. By 2006, Woojin workers had turned the previously failing business into a profit making company, even paying off additional company debt of \$1.5 million (Kim, Hwalshin 2014, 56). In the years since, Woojin workers have been able to reduce company debt, meet all company payrolls, and steadily increase gross revenues, revenues per bus, and company equity levels.

### **The Analysis of Woojin: Strong Class-Consciousness**

#### *We are Workers, not Individual Business Owners*

Woojin is a unionized worker cooperative, with self-management governance principles that have been compared to Yugoslavia's self-management companies because of the commonality that workers participate actively in running their own companies (Bakil 2008; Jang Wonbong 2008, 2013; Kim, Yong won 2008; Whang and Choi Yong Mi 2013; Petras and Veltmeyer 2002). While conventional communism under Stalinism in the USSR promoted a state-led planned economy, Yugoslavia developed self-management companies owned by individuals to promote "self-governing socialism," based on the market socialism ideas of Tito (Edvard Kardeli, Branko Horvat; Curl 2016; Whitehorn, 1978). Companies like Woojin replicate Yugoslavia's principle of self-management by workers and not by the state, as well as socialist principles of social ownership of the production process (i.e., worker management of the business) and social ownership of the surplus (i.e., fair wages and equitable distribution of profits) (Kim, Yong-won 2008, 39).

According to Woojin's representative, Jaesoo Kim, Woojin advances a strong conviction that "cooperative members are workers, and not capitalists"<sup>116</sup> (interview, May 18, 2015). The by-laws of Woojin also reflect this principle.

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 (Woojin By-laws).

Kim further notes that "Woojin's members are workers, and not the owners of a company. We get rid of the concept of owners altogether" (Interview, May 18, 2015).

We do not emphasize the idea of "owners." This company is not about owning the company as the owner and getting an equal distribution of the profits according to the principle of n/1. Rather, it is about getting rid of the concept of "ownership" by emphasizing the solidarity of workers and the participation of workers in making decisions on their company as workers.<sup>117</sup>

In this way, Woojin focuses on maximizing "worker control" without emphasizing the concept of individual ownership (Slott 1985; il Bak 2008). This self-conscious construction of bus drivers 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-

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<sup>116</sup> An interview with the representative of Woojin, Jaesoo Kim. The interview was conducted on May 18, 2015.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

worker relationship that has a different production system,” explains a Woojin union representative.<sup>118</sup> As an example of Woojin worker managers thinking of themselves uniformly as “working class” and not in a “contradictory” way as both business owners and workers, Woojin’s labor leaders don’t express deep concern over such things as business debt or competitive position vis-à-vis other bus companies. In reflecting on his company’s debt level, the representative at Woojin, Jaesoo Kim argued that:

The notion to think of getting rid of debts first is a capitalist mentality and we do not need to buy into that logic. Once we are confused about our vision, our world view, then we could become like capitalists. The more important thing is that we put workers first and the most important value to respect and we have to focus more on building a strong worldview, a philosophy of who we are (Interview, May 18, 2015).

Avoiding the concept of “ownership” of a business has allowed Woojin to develop a company where workers have a strong sense of collective identify and a sense of community where their company exists not for the benefit of the specific individuals who belong to Woojin, but for the collective health of all Woojin workers, for the future workers who will be part of the cooperative, and for the benefit of the Korean working class more generally (Interview, May 18, 2015).

This philosophy of creating an identity of cooperative members as collective workers—and not individual business owners—matches the way many Woojin workers themselves interpret the meaning of their labor activism. In a fixed-response survey of

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

165 workers conducted by this author, the issue of worker self-identity was explored. When asked to describe their role in the company, the majority of surveyed Woojin members described themselves as “workers,” and not as “business owners.” Out of 165 surveys, 157 workers (96%) defined themselves as “workers,” while only 4% described themselves as “business owners.” These results are the inverse of how Denver taxi cooperative drivers described themselves in the same survey. The substantial majority of United States taxi coop members in Denver described themselves as “business owners” (71% of respondents, or 49 workers), while 16% of respondents (11 people) described themselves as “workers.”

This self-perception of Korean cooperative bus drivers as workers, or worker-owners, (and not “business owners”) results in a different perspective on the concept of “class” among Korean workers as compared to U.S. workers. In the U.S., the significant majority of Denver taxi cooperative workers did not view themselves in class terms. When asked if they thought of themselves as “middle class” or “working class,” or as no class at all, 70% of surveyed Denver workers stated that they had never thought of themselves in class terms at all. In perfect inversion, 70% of workers at Woojin (115 out of 165 workers) consider themselves as the “working class.”

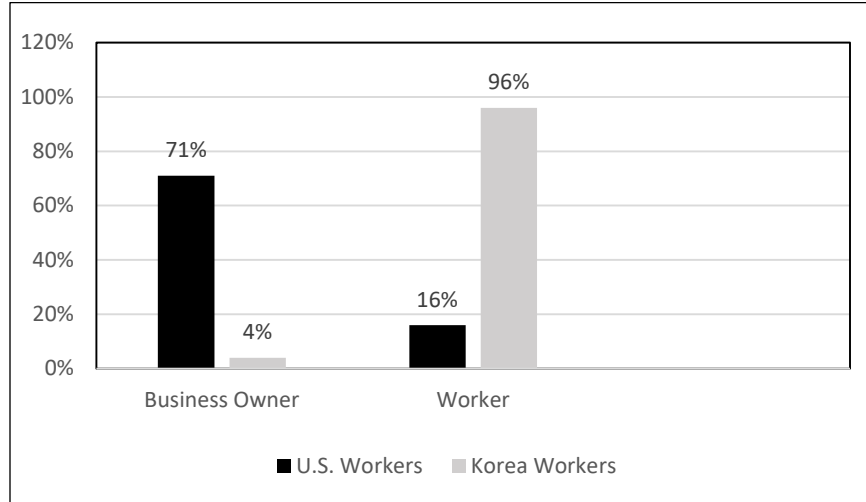
This level of class-consciousness—emerging out of Korea’s militant labor history, out of the lived experience of labor struggle, and out of strategic nurturing by union leaders—has prompted Woojin workers to prioritize notions of collective ownership of the company by workers, rather than notions of individual ownership of business shares. Responding to this author’s survey question regarding the largest benefit of a worker cooperative, 70% percent of Woojin workers (116 workers out of 165) responded “efforts

to create a collective spirit,” followed by 28% of respondents that chose “democratic and humanitarian working conditions” as the second largest benefit. Fewer than 10% chose “an opportunity to earn higher wages and income” (characterized as “economic benefits” in the chart below). The contrast with U.S. workers’ responses is stark. Taxi coop members in the U.S. regarded the best benefit of a worker cooperative as “an opportunity to earn higher wages and income” (42%), followed by “individual workplace freedom” (25%), “democratic working conditions” (7%), and “efforts to create a collective spirit” (4%).

In this regard, Woojin workers’ self-identified goals align with what Dario Azellini calls a “collective or social form of ownership” (GEO 2012), which are quite different than goals of individualistic economic opportunities and expanded workplace freedom which are largely expressed by worker owners of Denver taxi cooperatives. What Woojin promotes is the idea that “enterprises are seen not as privately owned” (belonging to individuals or groups of shareholders) but are viewed as social property, or the “common property” of the community of workers, “managed directly and democratically by those most affected by them” (GEO 2012).

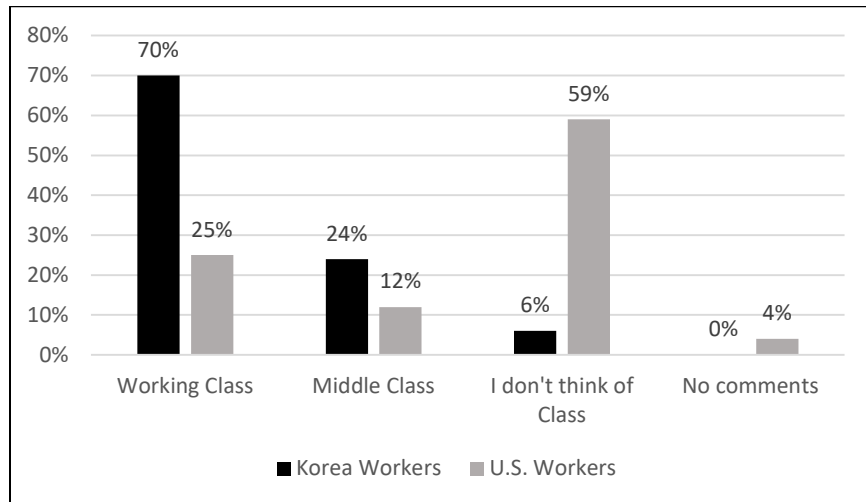
By removing the contradiction between capital and labor in this way, Woojin workers transformed their previously capitalist and privately owned bus company into a communal project, collectively owned.

**Chart 4. Korean vs. U.S. Workers' Self-Identification**



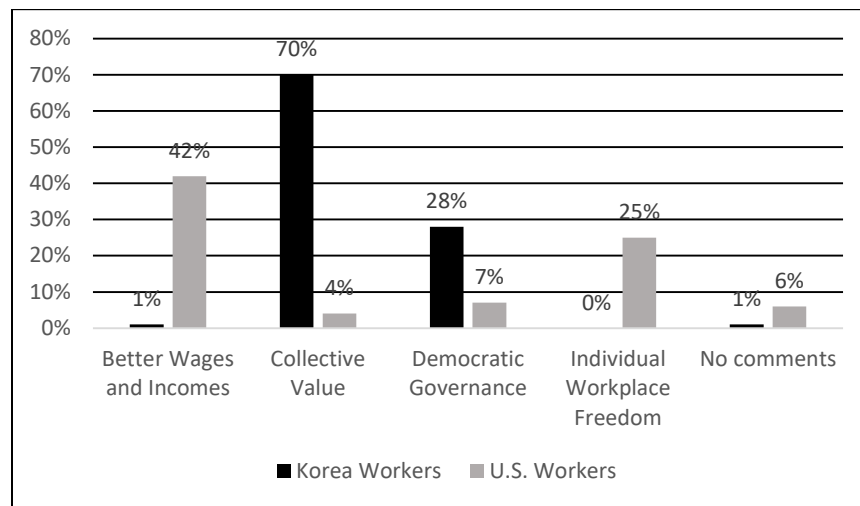
(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers and 165 Korean Woojin Workers)

**Chart 5. Korean vs. U.S. Workers' Self-Identification in Terms of Class**



(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers and 165 Korean Woojin Workers)

**Chart 6. What is the Biggest Benefit of a Worker Cooperative?**



(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers and 165 Korean Woojin Workers)

#### *Worker Control: Active Participation of Workers*

Woojin practices the cooperative principle that workers should participate in and make decisions regarding all affairs of the company. In its early days, Woojin adopted the principle of clear separation between management and labor to ensure that workers were not obsessed with the idea of “ownership” and did not engage in unproductive interference with daily management details in their company. Heegu Ji, the director of the Woojin self-management committee, stated that “we thought that a worker self-management company did not mean that workers would have to do everything. We understood that management had to come from people with management experience” (Kim hwalshin interview, Feb. 15, 2015). Sharing this line of thinking, many scholars (Kim, Yongwon 2008, Lee 2009)

promote separation between management and labor in worker cooperatives, to promote business efficiency. Lee (2009) argues that:

It is important to accomplish a balance between ownership, management and labor in order to maximize the strength of self-management. However, if ownership-management-labor becomes united, then inefficiency follows as a result of inefficiency in managing the business on a daily basis, thus the process as to who makes decisions on policy and who does practice those policies has to be clear.

For these reasons, many leaders from the Minju Bus Labor Union also advocated for the separation of management and labor in the bus cooperatives they have supported, so as to maximize business efficiency while also avoiding the complications that can emerge when rank-and-file workers begin to think of themselves as capitalists, and not workers. Upon their first formation, The Minju Bus labor union advised self-management bus companies like Woojin to establish clear separation between management and labor, with Minju union leaders serving as managers of the company, while rank-and-file workers participated in normal union activities, but not in daily management of their workplace. However, this separation of management and labor resulted in internal conflicts between workers and union leader management at the self-management bus companies, with bus drivers often seeing Minju labor union representatives as outsider management and not truly responsive to rank-and-file drivers.

Woojin also experienced internal conflicts related to worker-management separation. In its early years, Woojin adopted the principle of clear separation between management and rank-and-file workers so that (in the words of the Woojin labor union representative) “workers would not become possessed with the idea of ownership, if they did not get into

management areas.”<sup>119</sup> Managers were selected by workers themselves, but once selected, managers were part of an executive team responsible for business operations, and rank-and-file workers did not have a regularized way to continually participate in management operations.

This model fostered tensions between the new Woojin managers and the bus drivers themselves. As a result of this tension, in 2008, Woojin went through internal turmoil that resulted in the departure of sixty members, who demanded the return of their retirement funds, adding up to a total \$4.5 million in obligations owed by Woojin, and nearly leading Woojin into bankruptcy once again. However, the remaining 240 Woojin workers decided voluntarily not to take more than 60% of their salaries for six months, until they could turn the company around (Kim, Hayoung 2013; also see Kim, Whalsin 2014).

Following these internal conflicts, Woojin adopted the principle that management should not be separated from labor, and that rank-and-file workers should have avenues to participate in management in regular ways and at all levels of the company. Woojin made a dramatic shift in its governance structure and adopted education programs to help workers prepare for their new responsibility of engagement in managing the entire company (Jang, Wonbong 2013). Russell (1985) calls this principle a fundamental aspect of worker self-managed companies, rightly designed, which “base the right to participate in decision making on contributing labor to the firm, rather than contributing capital to it” (47). Such a participatory model is based not on the concept of an individual worker’s pursuit of economic gain, but on the commitment of workers to the collective health of their

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<sup>119</sup> An interview with Jaesoo Kim, May 18, 2015.

organization. “The total participation idea presumes that individuals decide to participate in the life of an organization of their own will, and that they act for a common goal” Novkovic et al. (2012, 9) notes. “Total participation describes workers who are actively engaged in the processes, structures and strategy of their organizations, and who perceive their workplaces as having freedom to act on their own for a common purpose.” (8-9; see also Novkovic et al. 2009; Prokopowicz et.al. 2008; Stocki. Et.al. 2010).

When interviewed by this author, Woojin’s representative, Jaesoo Kim, described his hopes of Woojin fostering collectivist subjectivities among Woojin workers in very similar terms.

I want workers to think of this firm as a workplace where they enjoy full benefits as the members but not as owners. I want them to think of this company as some place that members pass through but they are responsible to make a good path for the future generation of bus drivers to enjoy a better working condition (Interview May 18, 2015).

To achieve the goal of full participation of workers in managing their company, Woojin developed a number of education programs to develop worker consciousness regarding principles of self-management, as well as management skills. As Bernstein (1976) stressed that “participatory consciousness” is a fundamental precondition for effective cooperative organization and democratic management (Dickstein 2008, 14), Woojin re-shaped its governing structure to build this “participatory consciousness” and accommodate the full participation of workers.

In terms of governance structures, Woojin's final decision-making body was established as a "self-management committee," consisting of thirteen members, with eight of them being elected representatives from bus driver rank-and-file. In this model, workers hold 70% of the power in decision-making, while people permanently assigned to management (i.e., the manager/representative of the company, the labor union president) hold just 30% of the votes. All members of the company are union members except the representative of the company (Jaesoo Kim), and the income of this manager is equal to other bus drivers. Under the self-management committee, there are five sub-committees (hiring committee, self-management agreement committee, welfare committee, evaluation of hiring committee, election management committee, and a mutual aid committee) where workers meet on a monthly or bi-weekly basis to discuss and make decisions.

In addition, Woojin workers formed a bus drivers' committee which has seven members, to deal with drivers' daily issues on the ground. Following these changes at Woojin, workers became more content with their company, and Woojin has not experienced any internal crisis similar to the 2008 upheaval in the years since. Thus, utilizing a form of participatory and democratic management at Woojin, and supporting "workplace autonomy" (Coad and Binder 2014), became critical in shaping a new worker culture with fewer internal conflicts.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> [http://stumblingandmumbling.typepad.com/stumbling\\_and\\_mumbling/2014/07/why-not-worker-control.html](http://stumblingandmumbling.typepad.com/stumbling_and_mumbling/2014/07/why-not-worker-control.html)

### *Extensive Political Education*

Bruno and Jordan (2005) argue that “education can serve as a tool for building class consciousness.” This sentiment is shared by Woojin workers who have developed an extensive worker education program, including education in business management, socialist philosophy, and political-economy. Each Woojin worker goes through at least six months of this education program. Woojin union representative Kim Jae-soo describes the transformational goals of this worker education program.

You have to change the members and they can be changed through education. In other words, when you want to change the culture of workplace, you have to change the way of their thinking. Thus, changing culture is linked to changing the views and thoughts of members.<sup>121</sup>

Though Neck and Manz (1992) argue that such education program programs can develop “self-efficacy” and collective spirit among workers, there can be significant challenges in moving workers past their individualistic sentiments and into a sense of collective “working class” identity. A union representative working at the Samsung Bus cooperative, which was inspired by Woojin’s success, describes the difficulty of changing the workplace culture and philosophy of workers: “Our situation is like a drawing that has been already drawn, and we are trying to fix a new picture on top of the existing drawing, which makes it harder” (Interview, May 5, 2015)<sup>122</sup>. However, the Woojin union

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<sup>121</sup> An interview with the representative, Jaesoo Kim, on May 18, 2015.

<sup>122</sup> An interview with a representative, Samsung Bus, May 5, 2015.

representative, Kim Jae-soo advances the notion that “if the original drawing is bad, you have to completely start all over. Fixing it on top of whatever has been drawn will not work” (Interview, May 18, 2015).

To meet the challenge of developing fundamentally new ways of thinking among worker-owners, Woojin offers a series of in-depth educational programs to help members understand such principles described in Woojin’s own educational materials as “class consciousness,” “equal rights and equal obligation,” and “industrial unionism.”<sup>123</sup> Woojin has also established a “self-management school” for workers, and this school looks a lot like Yugoslavia’s workers’ universities in the 1960s and 70s, where trade unions were responsible for educating workers about self-management (Seibel and Damachi 1982, 167). The curriculum at these self-management schools and courses includes various topics such as meeting facilitation, understanding capitalism, the philosophy of labor, labor movement history, Woojin’s history, self-management philosophy, and self-management committee roles (Kim, hwalshin 2014, 82-83).

By 2016, 120 out of 300 total Woojin workers had completed at least six months of this kind of study, which also included one cultural travel course, a graduation ceremony, and graduation thesis presentation (Interview, May 18, 2015; Hwalshin Kim 2014, 82). Though some workers interviewed for this dissertation questioned the purpose of such lengthy and detailed educational programs, the majority of workers believed that the educational programs were important and desirable. One worker shared that “I did not know why I had to do this education in the beginning, but now I feel so good to finish the

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<sup>123</sup> Woojin. 2012. “We Practice the Hopes of Workers” pg. 14. Woojin produced an internal document describing its goals, and visions for the company.

entire program and graduate. I am very proud of myself. I think that it has to be a must” (Worker interview with Hwalshin Kim 2014).<sup>124</sup> In rating the worth of Woojin educational programs, workers selected “workers’ culture” as the most useful (51 workers), followed by “self-management philosophy” (47 workers).

Such education programming likely plays a role in helping workers understand the principles and practice of self-management. In this author’s survey of 165 workers, 110 out of 165 workers responded that they participated in 100% of Woojin’s management meetings, including business committee meetings and educational programming. In a survey by a different scholar (Kim, Yongwon 2008), the percent of worker participation in meetings was approximately 93%, which means that only about 10 workers out of 300 are estimated to miss four or more of the many committee meetings every year (Kim hwalshin 2014). Such numbers suggest that Woojin’s commitment to a democratic governance structure and intense educational programs has fostered a participatory culture at the workplace, and shaped workers’ consciousness and commitment to self-management practices.

### *Worker Solidarity: The Role of Labor Unions*

The extensive education programs at Woojin are an important vehicle for workers to deepen their understanding of self-management and their own class consciousness, but the “lived experience” of actualizing these principles demands something more than simply passing through education programs. Just as Luxemburg argued that “class feeling” cannot be manufactured by educational efforts and does not emerge out of isolated struggles at

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<sup>124</sup> Kim, Hwalshin conducted personal interviews in 2014 with Woojin workers for her MA thesis on self-management company, Woojin Traffic, Inc. Kim, Hwal-shin allowed me to use her interview transcripts.

individual workplaces (cited in Langford 1994, 132), Woojin has strived to build solidarity with other workers in the community through participation in labor actions, civic campaigns, and social enterprises throughout the community. In these community engagement actions, Woojin meets Peter Ranis' (2012) call that self-management companies should seek to "create a worker class community setting beyond the factory or enterprise that promotes both interest and involvement in politics."

For Woojin, partnering with labor unions has been critical in building this broader worker solidarity. The support of the KCTU labor affiliation was critical in originally establishing the Woojin cooperative in 2004, and coop members have grown their engagement in broader labor union activities over time. Since Woojin is worker-owned and managed, wages issues and workplace conditions have not been a major concern necessitating union activism at the company. Instead, the major role of the Woojin labor union has been to foster solidarity and broader class consciousness among Woojin workers and between Woojin workers and other workers in the community.

Heegu Ji, the Director of the Self-Management Committee, argues "if the labor union once focused on negotiating with employers for better wages, the labor union now focuses on 'participation and help' of the cooperative internally to make sure that all are working in harmony."<sup>125</sup> Establishing participatory wage-setting processes, educational programs, and solidarity campaigns are examples of union organizers working collaboratively with active cooperative members, and not lobbying professionally on their behalf. Although labor union representatives still negotiate on wages, final decisions on wage levels are

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<sup>125</sup> An interview with the director, Self-management Committee, Heegu Ji, on May 18, 2015.

taken collectively, in committee meetings with workers. In addition, the Woojin labor union spends substantial energy in “building solidarity with other community groups,”<sup>126</sup> which matches the trajectory of worker-cooperative unions studied by Upchurch, Daguerre, and Ozarow (2014).

The role of the union under the new conditions where the working people are taking part in the management shifted. As workers became acquainted with the process of management of production, the role of the trade union became a lever to provide solidarity work in the community (7).

Luhman (2007) similarly argues that cooperatives should focus on “place-based” community solidarity campaigns if they are to realize their full potential as democratizing forces. “Organizational democracy requires individuals, as well as groups, to have a sense of solidarity with the needs of the community in which their firm is located” (cited in Kennelly and Odekun 2016, 169).

Demonstrating just these commitments, union leaders have encouraged Woojin workers to become active in various community rallies and to support broader labor and community causes. For instance, with union guidance, Woojin has been active in several campaigns to improve the working conditions for all bus drivers in Chungju. In the last five years, Woojin has worked with community allies and other bus drivers in Chungju to extend operating hours when bus drivers can obtain gasoline for busses, to improve driver bathrooms, to improve public transit access for the broader public, and to resist municipal efforts to decrease the number of bus stops available in the city (Kim Hwalshin 2014, 89). Another important campaign taken on by Woojin and its associated national bus drivers’

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<sup>126</sup> An interview with the director of the Self-management committee, Heegu Ji, on April 29, 2015.

union was to slow the increasing number of irregular bus drivers, who only receive 43% of the income of regular workers (Huffpost April 26, 2016).<sup>127</sup> Woojin was one of the first bus companies that agitated to revoke a system that allowed bus companies to use irregular bus drivers, going so far as to occupy City Hall in 2013 to push Chungju officials to restrict bus companies from utilizing irregular workers (Lee, Sunggi 2013). In another example, Woojin was active in the broader community, playing an important role in a campaign to save a failing privately owned senior health clinic, Chungju hospital for the Elderly, by bidding to convert the clinic to a unionized cooperative in 2015 (Kim, Hyungwoo 2015).

Woojin workers embrace the concept of participating in community affairs and building community solidarity. In this author's survey, 58% of workers (96 out of 165) responded that they participate in a community rallies up to five times a year to support broader community causes, while 20% of workers (32 workers) responded that they participate in 6-10 rallies a year.

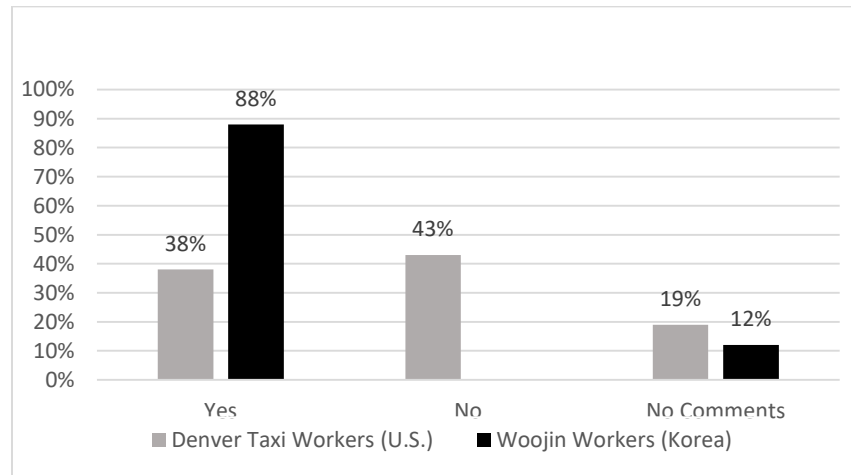
Also, over 64% of workers (106 out of 166 workers) responded that they saw the labor union as a necessary institution. 35% of workers (59 workers out of 165 surveys) responded that they considered building solidarity with other community groups as an important role of a labor union within a worker cooperative is to build solidarity with other community groups, while 45 % of workers (74 out of 165 surveys) also emphasize the importance of political fights for workers' rights as an important role of a union. And Woojin's active participations of community issues are well supported by the statement of the director at

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<sup>127</sup> Huffpost. 2016. "the monthly salary of Irregular employment is only 43% of that of regular employment."  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2016/04/26/story\\_n\\_9775492.html?m=true](http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2016/04/26/story_n_9775492.html?m=true)

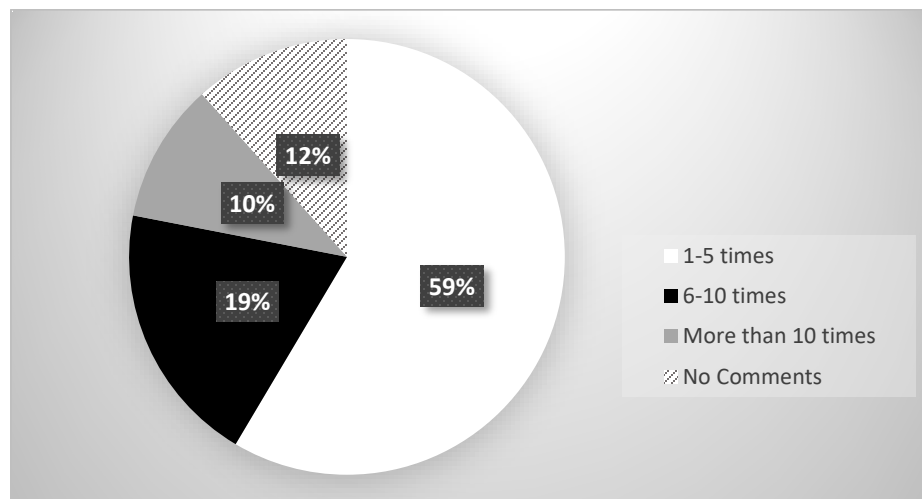
the Self-Management Committee (Heegu Ji, 2015): “we continue to carry the sentiment of the working class, and we are helping others as part of the working class struggle.”

**Chart 7. Have you been to community/labor rallies?**



(Source: Author Survey of 69 Denver Taxi Drivers and 165 Korean Woojin Workers)

**Chart 8. How many times have you participated in a rally a year?**



(Source: Author Survey of 165 Korean Woojin Workers)

### **A Growing Ecology of Bus Driver Cooperatives**

In a provocative example of how Woojin's politicized sense of itself as a community change agent has important consequences for local labor empowerment, the Chungju region has recently experienced a flowering of other bus driver cooperatives, all inspired and supported by the worker-owners of the Woojin cooperative, and all emerging in response to failing private bus companies with high debt levels and delayed worker wages (Labor Department 2011, 279). The Samsung, Citizen, and Dalgubul bus drivers' cooperatives are cases in point.

When Samsung bus went bankrupt in May 2005, workers launched a labor strike for 101 days, and engaged in public protests taking over several important Jinju city offices to advance their goal of redesigning Samsung as a worker-managed cooperative in the Woojin model. The actions were successful and Samsung reopened as a worker-managed company in August 2005, with 242 drivers owning 84% of company stock (Jang, Sangwhan 2014). The new governance structure of Samsung substantially increased worker control in that a self-management committee was established, consisting of two worker-managers representing the company, three representatives from a KCTU labor union representing rank-and-file bus drivers, and two representatives serving from the community (Jang, Sangwhan 2014b).

In similar fashion, Jinju's Citizen Bus company began operations in August 2006, as a result of a 133 day strike by workers to take over their failing company. The previously named "Sinil" bus company operated 90 buses, but the company failed in August 2006, with over \$6.5 million in debt. Workers had previously launched a labor strike lasting for

133 days, during which a worker, Jung Taebon, had committed a public drama suicide in October 2006 (Park, Soonsang 2010).<sup>128</sup> Prompted by this dramatic act, workers took over city hall, demanding the right of workers to open a new bus company without carrying over the previous debt of Sinil. In their efforts to convert the company to worker-management, Citizen Bus workers were supported by the previously converted Woojin and Samsung bus drivers' cooperatives. For example, though the Samsung bus cooperative was an ostensible local competitor in the bussing business—Samsung worker-managers voted four separate times to give the citizen bus drivers' union 10 million won to use as “struggle funds” (40 million won total, or \$160,000). Also signaling their social mission, Samsung bus drivers had previously voted to give 40 young orphans in Jinju \$50 a month in school transportation expenses. “The company was able to get started because we had help from the public,” said a Samsung official. “So we will continue to give back to society” (The Hankyoreh, March 21, 2007).

Supported by Samsung, Citizen Bus driver strikers won their battle to reopen their company as a worker-managed cooperative in December 2006, and workers opened for business in February of 2007 with the new name of the company, Citizen Bus.<sup>129</sup> One-hundred and sixty worker owners invested \$5,000 each to come up with \$800,000 to purchase 73 buses (Kim, Honil 2010). A board of directors was formed, consisting of three representatives of the company (worker-managers, chosen from the Korean Bus Workers union and other local civic groups) and three representatives from rank-and-file workers.

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<sup>128</sup> Taebong Jung a bus driver at Sin-il Bus committed a suicide on October 22, 2005, during workers' strike.

<sup>129</sup> <http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%EC%A7%84%EC%A3%BC%EC%8B%9C%EB%AF%BC%EB%B2%84%EC%8A%A4>

Workers voted to name the chairman of the National Federation of Farmers as their President. Just as Samsung workers had signaled their social mission with an orphan assistance fund, Citizen bus workers demonstrated a commitment to social mission by deciding to operate only thirty of the seventy-three buses the company was allowed to operate, because workers wished to only run buses that had been certified as environmentally friendly (The Hankyoreh, March 21, 2007).

In a third example of emerging cooperative bus companies in the model of Woojin, Dalgubul Bus opened as a worker-managed company in February of 2006 as a result of four months of labor strikes in 2005 (Ryu, Byungyoon and Woo, Taewook 2006). After the owner of the previously privately owned bus company (named “Gukyoung”) disappeared, workers launched a strike in August 2005, demanding the arrest of the owner and advocating to convert the failing company to worker management. Dalgubul workers switched membership to the more radical KCTU labor affiliation when FKTU refused to support a new workers self-management company. Following the model of Woojin, Samsung, and Citizen bus drivers’ struggles, Dalgubul took over city offices to demand the right of workers to take over their failing company. City officials acceded, and the Dalgubul company reopened in 2006 as bus worker-managed company. Dalgubul workers invested \$8,000 in personal funds each for their share in company membership, they gave up 60% of their retirement fund to cover existing company debt, and reduced company debt to \$1.6 million dollars within a year and a half (down from a total debt of \$4.2 million) (Jo, Chang-kwon 2013, 54-56).

## **Conclusion**

All of these self-managed bus companies had a commonality, which is that they emerged from episodes of labor militancy led by labor unions in forming self-management companies. Workers engaged in direct-action opposition to both the state and private business owners (taking over city buildings and shutting down city government entirely in some cases), and announced goals fundamentally at odds with the capitalist system in which they were embedded. As indicated through such industrial unionism actions as one worker managed bus company (Samsung) transferring funds to support a competing company (Citizen) in overthrowing their private owners through strikes, these worker managed bus companies were not seeking to maximize commercially successful business operations within the capitalist system, but were seeking to open fundamental ruptures with capitalist logic. In celebrating the rise of these self-managed bus companies, Korea's pro-labor major newspaper (Hankyoreh 2007, March 21) described the goals of these companies as fundamentally at odds with capitalism.

It is only a thoroughly Anglo-American style of shareholder capitalism...to worry primarily about the personal profit of corporate owners. Capitalism continues to make people in Korean society increasingly twisted, so labor-based management models are surely worth trying as a potential alternative.

By advancing such rhetoric and goals, these cooperative bus companies fit well into Ozarow and Croucher's (2014) description of transformative worker managed companies that do not measure their success "purely by commercial indicators, but first by their capacity to establish new forms of sustainable economic activity that correspond with the non-capitalist principles of solidarity, and second, whether workers produce with dignity

while creating new subjectivities” (997). Similarly, Stephens (1980, 3) describes this kind of commitment to workers participation as being fundamentally opposed “to the contribution of capital” because it assumes that business decision making should be determined by the contribution of labor power. Such a kind of privileging of labor over capital clearly “affects class relations in a society” (3).

In other words, self- management companies such as these Korean bus companies seek to enhance what one local leader in the bus drivers cooperative called “the class power of the workers” (Interview, May 9, 2015).

It is important to have a strong working class consciousness. Although we are self-management companies, the concept of “owners” itself is nothing other than having a sense of “being myself,” which can be different than a normal concept of “ownership.” It is not the idea of ownership that is important to develop in self-management, but rather the sense of ownership that comes out of “being myself” that workers have a collective responsibility and obligation together.<sup>130</sup>

The President of the Service and Transportation Workers Union, KCTU (Sahoon Park), argues in favor of a self-management company in similar terms, stating that

Self-management is the best way to achieve the politicization of workers. The power of workers within a labor union should not be confined to economic struggle but should be a political struggle. The best way for workers to achieve politicization is through self-

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<sup>130</sup> An interview with Choi, Jong, May 9, 2015. Choi, Jong is the current president at the Minju Bus Union.

management. Workers' liberation from capitalists means self-management (Interview, May 13, 2015).

In this regard, self-management is regarded by Korean labor leaders as a vehicle for achieving what Woojin cooperative leader Sahoong Park calls "the liberty of the workers" and the "emancipation of the working class" (Interview, May 13, 2015).

Labor strikes are important in achieving these goals. The Minju bus drivers labor union argues that "the labor strike is a school for workers" (Interview, May 6, 2015), helping workers to become political as part of their lived experience. One bus driver union activist describes such transformation through labor activism.

I was a small business owner and I did know anything about labor unions. When the company went on a labor strike, I was very nervous, but with time, I became okay and I realized how effective a labor strike could be in developing a "shared feeling" (Interview, May 6, 2015).

In developing a sense of "shared feeling" and consciousness of their collective power through episodes of labor activism, Korean bus workers could be said to match the process of "working class formation" famously presented by Thompson (1963, 9). "Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared) feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs."

Though Thompson did not focus on labor activism as the only path through which a working class came to be self-conscious, other classical Marxist thinkers have. Lenin himself described how workers are transformed in three different ways by a strike. First,

workers experience individual empowerment. Second, they gain insight into the nature of intergroup conflict at the workplace and a strong sense of identification with fellow workers. Third, they develop general perspectives on the class character of the whole society and on the need for the working class to unite and struggle (what can be called a generalized class consciousness (cited in Langford 1994, 111).

Langford (1994) depicts strikers such as the Korean bus drivers as a “protest community” (120) brought together through a desperate survival struggle. The case of the public suicide of a worker during the Citizen Bus Company struggle, who called upon his fellow workers to continue the struggle in his name, well demonstrates the sense of urgency and worker solidarity that characterized these campaigns. In fact, most leaders of newly emerging Korean worker cooperative movements were student and labor activists during the radical democratization movements of the 1980s and early 90s. For example, Woojin’s union representative (Jaesoo Kim), spent all of his life in the Korean labor movement—including experience in the identity-forging democracy upheavals of 1987. During all these long years of radical activism, Kim believed that the idea of creating a self-management cooperative in the midst of economic crisis comes only from workers’ “imagination.” Kim argues that a workers’ cooperative (a self-management company), rightly organized, must build upon the imaginative vision of workers to create a collective workers’ culture, where workers are in total control of the company, and where a sense of “class consciousness” (“gaeguksung” in Korean) animates worker activism.

Woojin and the other bus driver cooperatives examined here have acted on these values not only to ensure dignified working conditions for individual worker-owners of a single bus company, but to serve as collective community change agents, catalyzing worker

involvement in a wide range of labor actions and community campaigns (Luhman 2005, 2006, 2007; Rothschild 2000, 2009). Emerging from a process of militant labor struggle, all of these unionized cooperatives have sought broader goals of social transformation rather than simply welfarist goals of improving economic conditions of individual workers, and all see themselves as part of a transformational social movement challenging the corporate-dominated structure of Korean society.

## CHAPTER 11

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation is not a treatise on what class *is*, from a determinist or essentialist perspective on capitalist relations, but about how class *becomes*, as an oppositional identity, capable of sustaining effectual efforts to challenge experiences of exploitation and of fostering creative alternatives to capitalist practices. The labor histories and case studies of American and Korean transportation workers are not presented to shed light on what the orthodox Marxists would call the essential nature of capitalist processes, nor to define how class inevitably emerges in fixed ways within that system. Rather, these labor histories and case studies provide evidence of the practical effects of class narratives in fostering, shaping and sustaining projects of resistance to, and transcendence of, experiences of exploitation in different times and different countries.

#### **Beyond Class: The Poststructural Political Imagination**

This dissertation fits in the poststructural tradition shaped by influential thinkers Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 2001; see also Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006), who are not concerned with identifying *what class is*, as something fixed, to be known and understood, but with understanding how one's knowledge of their class comes to "*to be known*" (7)—through educational, political, domestic and economic activities in a variety

of spheres—and by how that knowledge comes to structure future action. In this approach, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 2001) part ways with what they call an essentialist, “capitalocentric” approach that views all economic activity as dominated by “a sameness called Capitalism” (13) and that interprets all labor action as either militantly class conscious and oppositional, or as accommodating and non-consequential.

The essentialist Marxist approach interprets the capitalist economy as defined by endemic exploitation of workers, indelible class conflict between capital and labor, and by the unavoidable necessity of organized labor to overthrow the capitalist system to create a new social system (Frege et.al. 2011; Wright 2006, 22). In this approach, traditional Marxists “emphasize the separation of the interests of labor and capital,” and present the role of class-conscious labor movements as representing the “inherently adversarial interests of workers in a struggle against the interests of capital” (Wheeler 2002, 133). Consider, for example, the words of America’s Progressive Labor Party in its call to action 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. The first leads to state power for the workers, which will end exploitation. The other means rule by a small ruling class which continues oppression, wide-scale poverty, cultural and moral decay and war (Challenge-Desafio, 1964).

Poststructural Marxists offer an alternative to that binary choice of reform or revolution, class struggle or accommodation. “We are keen to enlarge the domain of class narratives,” Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2011, ix) argue, “and widen the affective register of class politics.” Believing that traditional notions of one’s fixed class-position in a totalizing capitalist system only serve to discount many other important sources of

identity (e.g., one's identity as a spouse, friend, poet, teacher, artist or small business owner), the poststructuralists offer a language of human and economic activity that celebrates proliferating identities, "one that can connect gender, race, sexuality, and other axes of identity to economic activity in uncommon ways. Such a language has the potential to liberate a vision of economic difference, outside the theory and practice of capitalist reproduction" (Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2000).

The poststructural insight is that one's class identity, and broader social identity, is never fixed, but always contingent, and overdetermined by "the entire complex of natural, social, economic, cultural, political and other processes that comprise its conditions of existence" (7). In fact, individuals typically "participate in multiple class processes at any one time and over their life spans, all of which may (or may not) contribute to class identity" (10). Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) offer the example of a married laborer in a rural mining community, who hunts for his families' food on the weekends, assists in housekeeping and childrearing at home, and sells part of his hunted game through a community marketing cooperative. This person is part of the traditional proletarian class at work, a communard at home with his family, and an independent businessman and artisan in his weekend activities. "His class identity could be fixed in any number of ways—as a worker in a capitalist system, as a new age communard, as an independent producer—or not at all" (10). This is not to say that one never can constitute a class identity, only that such identities are always contingent and constructed—ones class position cannot be presumed, as it is constituted by fluid interactions with all those around him or herself, changes over time, and is structured by one's own intellectual and emotional self-identification.

Because class is always incomplete, open and politically negotiated, people's understanding of their own "class identity" is often something of an "emptiness." From this perspective, the job of an educator, theorist, labor organizer, or community advocate involves working with people in various settings, "creating a knowledge of class...always partially and incompletely, constructing particular understandings of the ways that specific class processes are constituted by their 'class' and 'nonclass' conditions of existence" (7).

In fostering what might be called transformational "class narratives," the poststructuralists seek a contextualized theory and politics of diversity, recognizing the multiplicity of narratives and identities that might motivate people, and discovering the hidden ways by which identifies such as gender, race, class, environmentalist, parent or artist might synergize in diverse campaigns ranging from living wage campaigns to gender justice campaigns, from racial equity movements to sex-worker organizing efforts, from worker-owned cooperatives to revitalized labor unions.

Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) hope that through such a reformed language recognizing a university of identities beyond "class"—*a language that explicitly disavows the theoretical "closures and constrictions" associated with traditional Marxist class narratives*—new linkages between the traditional Marxist concern over labor exploitation and more "modernist emancipatory traditions" can become "activated and strong." But to get there, the poststructuralists argue that we must part ways with class thinking, as advanced by traditional Marxists. To enliven a pragmatic socialist imagination in the here and now, they argue, "class can no longer be understood as the organizing center of individual and collective identity" (9).

Indeed, the tendency of leftist thinkers and activists today to hold onto those old notions of class conflict and class revolution are described the poststructuralist Walter Benjamin (1994) as a kind of “left melancholia,” shared by those whose “attachment to a past political analysis or identity is stronger than the interest in present possibilities for mobilization, alliance or transformation.” Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000; 2001) share this critique, and throughout their work describe traditional class theorists as turning away from actual projects of liberation in the here and now, and as stunting the political imagination with appeals to a “fictional” working class unity and agency that cannot in fact guide real political action. It is, Gibson-Graham (2006, xxii) argue, “a habit of thinking and feeling that offered little emotional space for alternatives and that instead focused the political imagination—somewhat blankly—on a millennial future revolution” As they describe their own encounter with this way of thinking, Gibson-Graham (2006) noted as follows.

We felt our political room to maneuver shrinking, almost as though a paralysis were setting in. In these moments of immobilization we recognized our own subjection, and that of the left more generally, within potent configurations of habit and desire that were incapable of supporting experimentation with new possibilities of being and action (3).

### **Organizing With Class: Practical Benefits of a Class-Conscious Approach**

The labor histories and case studies in this dissertation lend support to the poststructural claim that class identity is always a constructed and contingent affair, emerging differently in different contexts, and as a response to specific organizing campaigns and differing political-cultural narratives. However, it is in response to their critique of ineffectual and unimaginative traditional Marxism that the case studies and

labor-histories of this dissertation compel me to part ways with Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff's (2000, 2001) critique of traditional thinking about "class."

The case studies in this dissertation confirm the argument that people's class perspective is constructed and fluid. Denver's taxi drivers, for example, moved fluidly between identities as exploited class subordinates, as aspirational communards challenging the private model of taxi-ownership, and as small businesspersons, seeking maximum business income and profit-taking whenever possible. Korean labor activists over time moved fluidly between identities as young college scholars, revolutionary class activists in the street, state-sanctioned cooperative business managers, and militant socialists committed to worker-takeover of businesses. As Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 16) correctly note in this regard, "the stories that mobilize class emotions may be incompatible and divergent as well as diverse."

However, where this poststructural narrative is insufficient, in terms of explaining the narratives in this dissertation, is in the argument that traditional Marxists projects of class-conscious mobilization inherently constrict the socialist imagination and close down possible economic alternatives. "We would hope to move outside the closures and constrictions that have become the historical signatures of class," Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 8) argue, because grand Marxist narratives on the centrality of class have "greatly restricted its political efficacy." These poststructuralists argue that "class politics is traditionally aligned with a truncated affective regime in which anger and resentment are the preeminent emotions" (14). Quoting Wendy Brown (1995, 69), they describe a politically ineffective, hypothetical class-warrior as "dramatically impotent, s/he quite literally seethes with resentment." Such activists are allegedly motivated by simplistic

grand narratives, populated by utopian heroes and evil foes, and ultimately become alienated, resigned and ineffectual, when their class vision is hopelessly out of touch with diverse reality. Consider this poststructural description of the dismal life of those believing in a “morally authoritative form of class politics” (15):

...resignation (at least where revolutionary possibility is concerned), the tendency to focus on pain and injury rather than hope and possibility, blaming and moralizing rather than envisioning and acting. In Brown’s terms ‘resentment takes the place of freedom as a collective project’ (1995). Revolutionary possibility is relegated to the future and the present becomes barren of real possibility. It is therefore also empty of the kinds of emotions (like creative excitement, pleasure, hope, surprise, pride, and satisfaction, daily enjoyment) that are associated with present possibilities.

This is a damning critique of the political and personal consequence of traditional class narratives. But it is a straw man argument and insofar as shedding light on the narratives in this dissertation, this argument cannot make sense of the way in which classical Marxist approaches productively informed the kinds of labor activism that came to exist among Korean bus drivers. In Korea today, some bus drivers have united in a form of industrial unionism to forcefully take over highly exploitive and financially fraudulent bus companies, to occupy statehouses, and ultimately to force the transformation of their private bus companies into a form of highly class-conscious collective worker ownership. Leading activists in these bus driver cooperatives explicitly draw inspiration from traditional Marxist theory: they speak in unreconstructed class terms, advocate for “class consciousness” as the foundation of their movement, engage in militant class actions like occupations of worksite and public drama strategies (e.g., public suicide) and advance uncompromising visions of a socialized economy.

Drawing motivation and strategic direction from such visions, these workers have built a mutually supportive and sustainable network of socialized bus cooperatives. They have improved the working conditions of drivers, connected to other environmental movements in their region by refusing to operate “non-green” busses, supported the conversion of local hospitals to cooperative ownership, built social service assistance campaigns for poor orphans, and joined political campaigns to immobilize the conservative Park Gyeun-hye presidency. Traditional notions of the primacy of “class” have not constricted the imagination or closed off political action by these bus drivers. Indeed, in the absence of class narrative-informed resistance, the landscape of civil society activism outside of state sanction in Korean history has been quite barren. Instead of disempowering political imaginations, traditional class narratives have inspired and shaped the resistance that has come to exist, and given it effectual power.

Alternatively, we can see that the absence of a clear class-focused narrative in the case of the Denver taxi-drivers cooperative helped allow other identities to dominate (and identities not very friendly to the “emancipatory traditions” that Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff [2000] wish to join). Rapidly “degenerating” from collective notions of building an egalitarian and democratically managed workers cooperative, Denver taxi drivers began to see themselves only as business owners, not workers, and soon began to sell their own cooperative taxi medallions (licenses) to friends and strangers alike, in an arrangement leading the new medallion owners to continue to drive for very low wages, while turning over surplus fares to the original owner of the cooperative’s medallions. There was little effort among union leaders to help workers build or sustain a more creative vision of economic possibilities, as their union allies worked firmly in the business

unionism tradition of lobbying for legislative changes and winning new licenses for the cooperative owners, but did not engage workers with broader educational programs or seek to connect them to wider community campaigns.

In comparing these two cases, it is clear that the existence (or absence) of a class-based narrative sustained what political resistance came to be (or not be), and inspired what imagined economic alternatives came to emerge (or didn't). These cases once again confirm Thomson's (1966) classic argument, in his *Making of the English Working Class*, that class is not a fixed, structural position that one inhabits in an economic order. Rather, as a meaningful social or political force, "class" is something that happens when people come to understand or experience themselves as a class. "Class" emerges 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" (9).

But the ways by which the concept of a shared class identity happens among workers are hard to pin down. 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." Worker organizing efforts, political campaigns, or civil society activism all play their role in shaping people's understanding of their "class position" and what programmatic actions should follow from that position.

Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) certainly recognize the importance of labor organizing processes and educational narratives (rather than fixed social structure) in shaping contingent class identity—in fact, that recognition of contingency is central to the

poststructural project of critiquing orthodox Marxism. They rightfully recognize that the most compelling class-question is not “*what is my class belonging?*” but rather “*what is my class becoming?*” This contingent nature of class, and the way in which class understanding depends on existing class narratives and political projects, lead Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff to rightly ask “what new social possibilities might emerge if a class language existed to call forth identities, motivate projects, and produce desires for economic and social transformation?” (11).

In all of this, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff are exactly correct—though they unnecessarily go too far in criticizing the very notion of traditional class language as being hopelessly skeptical and politically ineffectual in calling forth new identities, motivating creative projects and producing desires for economic and social transformation. In sustaining an emancipatory project, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000) recognize the need to retain the traditional Marxist “focus on the bodily intensity of performing surplus labor and on the affective intensity associated with exploitation.” But while retaining this emotive connection, they say:

We would also like to ‘undo’ the ties that have harnessed those intensities to a limited range of emotions...We would hope to carry forward the intensity of feeling that has been politically affixed to the experience of exploitation, while unyoking this affective energy from the essentialist [class] commitments and confining narratives to which it has been contingently attached (14, 9).

Without denying that such an “undoing” of the ties between emotional intensity and traditional class narratives may prove fruitful in various circumstances (indeed, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff’s [2000] text is composed of studies of non-class-centric emancipation efforts among subordinated racial groups, sex-workers, artists and self-

employed workers), we need also to recognize the demonstrated virtues of “talking class” in the labor histories and case studies presented in this dissertation. These narratives question the universality of a desire to “undo” the ties that bind emotional intensity regarding exploitation to theories and political projects informed by traditional class narratives. In fact, as both the Denver and Korean transportation workers show, there can be deep virtues in projects that tie emotional anger to class-narratives. Such narratives can sustain oppositional effort in the face of adversity, can connect one’s effort to coherent, historically informed programs of community uplift, and can turn anger into narratizable meaning.

Though they are critical of traditional Marxist class narratives, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 15) do understand the need for some kind of narrative to make sense of one’s anger and affective intensity. They quote Tomkins and Massumi on this point, who claim that “because affect is inherently brief, it requires the conjunction of other mechanisms to connect affective moments with each other and thereby increase the duration, coherence, and continuity of affective experience.” In contextualizing and giving coherent meaning to affective intensity, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff recognize that there have been historical moments of meaningful class politics. But in today’s era of diverse identities and social movements, they conclude, “other dimensions of identity, narrative and emotional possibilities” carry more emancipatory potential than traditional class narratives, which are too often “barren of real possibility” (15).

Korea’s class warriors would beg to differ, while Denver’s taxi-driving business owners reveal limitations in forgoing the language of class while constructing narrative meaning to one’s affective experience. It is certain that one’s social position is fluid, class

is contingent, and all identities are constructed. But we need not say that vigorous class-based organizing projects, informed by tenets of traditional Marxism, are barren and filled with hopeless resentment. Rather, the evidence in this dissertation confirms the class-oriented proposals of Bruggmann (2005, 72).

I am not proposing that the Left as a whole should embrace a class-centric world vision and working-class-oriented strategies, which Cobble dismisses as “a call to resuscitate an earlier class politics that is better left in the past.” Rather, I am arguing that the labor-movement component within the broader Left, as the representative of those exploited at the point of production (whatever their other identities) needs to reassert the significance of class in order for class issues to become properly incorporated within future movements for social and economic justice.

Though diverse narratives and identities sustain differing emancipatory projects across the globe, there is good evidence that in the world of labor organizing, traditional class narratives remain powerful and even necessary. Fueled by talk of “class,” Korean workers overthrew a regime and have built alternative economic ecologies in their home communities; without talk of class in Denver, taxi drivers have driven themselves into an organizational cul-de-sac. When Denver’s impoverished immigrant taxi drivers were interpreted (and interpreted themselves) not as members of an exploited class, but simply as aspirational, hard-working small business owners, who deserved recognition and liberation from the taxi medallion system, the potential results of their labor activism unfortunately became quite limited. Bruggmann (2005) is correct on this point: “working-class people, whatever their other identities, are badly served by the displacement of the politics of redistribution by the politics of recognition, that is, by identity politics that does not also embrace class as a form of identity” (68).

We cannot “talk our way out” of exploitive practices, whether by discussion of traditional Marxist class revolutions or discussion of poststructural contingent identities. But we can build practices in the here and now that open emancipatory spaces against exploitive capitalist dynamics. In building those practices, and opening those spaces, talk of class remains a generative force, capable of uniting millions of struggling workers, overthrowing the harshest of regimes, and crafting alternative local economies. Class narratives remain a necessary hammer in the conceptual toolbox of all those committed to emancipatory projects in their community.

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## APPENDIX 1. ABBREVIATION

AFL	American Federation of Labor
AFSCME	Amer. Fed. of State, Country and Municipal Employees
AMG	American Military government
APALA	Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance
ASC	Administrative Services Cooperative
CBTU	Coalition of Black Trade Unionists
CCEJ	The Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice
CHCA	Cooperative Home Care Associates
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLUW	Coalition of Labor Union Women
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CPKI	Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence
CUCI	Cincinnati Union Cooperative Initiative
EPIC	End Poverty in California Campaign
ERISA	Employee Retirement Income Security Act
FAC	Framework Act on Cooperatives
FLSA	Fair Labor Standards Act
IBEW-AFL	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
IDA	Independent Driver Association
FKTU	Federation of Korean Trade Unions
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KLF	Korean Labor Federation
KCIA	Korean Central Intelligence Agency
KCTU	Korean Confederation of Trade Unions
KFWC	Korean Federation of Worker Cooperatives
KFEM	Korean Federation of Environmental Movements
KPR	Korean People's Republic
KPTU	Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence
KPTU	Korean Public Service and Transportation Workers Union
KT	Korea Telecom
LCLAA	Labor Council on Latin American Advancement
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
NBLSA	National Basic Livelihood System Act
NCTU	National Council of Trade Union
NDLON	National Day Laborer Organizing Network
NDWA	National Domestic Workers' Alliance
NFTW	National Federation of Telephone Workers
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NTA	National Taxi Alliance
NTU	National Trade Union
PAW	Pride at Work
PSPD	People' Solidarity for Participatory Democracy

PUC	Public Utilities Commission (Colorado)
SEA	Social Economy Act
TNC	Transportation Network Companies
UE	United Electrical Workers
UFW	United Farm Workers
USW	United Steel Workers

## **APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONNAIRE: THE SURVEY OF TAXI WORKERS, DENVER, CO, U.S.**

My name is Minsun Ji, a Ph.D candidate, at Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. I am currently writing a dissertation on worker cooperative movements in the U.S. and Korea and I am particularly interested in the case of taxi worker cooperatives. I would appreciate it if you would answer any of these following questions, and I will use this survey to collect data for the dissertation and I will not use **any names of the persons** engaged in personal interviews. If you have any questions about my research, or if you would like to be part of a personal interview, please contact me at [minsunji@yahoo.com](mailto:minsunji@yahoo.com) or 303-763-0749. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

- 1. Are you a member of**  
a. Union Taxi b. Green Taxi c. Others
- 2. How long have you worked as a taxi driver?**  
a. 1-5 years b. 6-10 years c. 11-15 years d. 16-20 years
- 3. Have you had an experience of a worker cooperative or any cooperatives in the past?**  
a. Yes b. No c. No comments
- 4. Do you think that workers run a company without a boss?**  
a. Yes b. No ( We need a boss) c. No comments
- 5. Why do you want to be a worker coop member? Or what are the benefits of being part of a worker coop?**  
a. Economic Benefits  
b. Collective Value  
c. Freedom at workplace  
d. Political Action  
e. I don't know what is a worker coop
- 6. Which Option describes you the best?**  
a. Working Class b. Middle Class c. Upper Class  
d. I don't think of class much e. No comments
- 7. If you are a part of a worker cooperative, do you consider yourself as**  
a. Worker b. Owner c. No Comments

- 8. What is your view on the creation of a new taxi cooperative?**  
a. It is a competition and it is not good for us  
b. I am fine and it is good that others set up a coop as well  
c. No comments
- 9. Have you had an experience with a labor union in the past?**  
a. Yes                      b. No                      c. No Comments
- 10. Has your perspective on a labor union been changed?**  
a. Positive to negative  
b. Negative to positive  
c. Neutral to positive  
d. Neutral to negative  
e. I have no idea
- 11. Have you been to any rallies related to taxi business?**  
a. Yes                      b. No                      c. No comments
- 12. What is a role of a labor union or what is your perception of a labor union in the US?**  
a. Political lobbying  
b. Fight for our interests and rights  
c. Training/education  
d. I don't know
- 13. What would you like a labor union to do the most?**  
a. I don't want a union to be engaged in coop affairs  
b. More educational training  
c. Political education on rights  
d. Stop Uber from doing business  
e. No comments/I don't know
- 14. What is needed for taxi drivers to improve the condition?**  
a. We need to create a Taxi association  
b. We need to create more worker cooperatives  
c. We need to belong to a labor union  
d. No Comments/ I don't know.

### **APPENDIX 3. SURVEY RESULTS: DENVER’S TAXI WORKERS (U.S.)**

**1. Are you a member of**

Union Taxi	Green Taxi	Others
30	11	28

**2. How long have you worked as a taxi driver?**

1-5 years	6-10 years	11- 15 years	16- 20yrs	Total
31	19	8	11	69

**3. Have you had an experience of a worker cooperative or any cooperatives in the past?**

Yes	No	No Comments
8	61	

**4. Do you think that workers run a company without a boss?**

Yes	No (we need a boss)	No comments
33	36	

**5. Why do you want to be a worker coop member? Or What are the benefits of being part of a coop?**

Economic Benefits	Collective Value	Freedom at workplace	Political Action	I don't know what is a worker coop
36	2	27	0	4

**6. Which Option describes you the best?**

Working Class	Middle Class	Upper class	I don't think of class term	No comments
17	8	0	41	3

**7. If you are a part of a worker cooperative, do you consider yourself as**

Worker	Owner	No Comments
9	52	8

**8. What is your view on the creation of a new taxi cooperative?**

It is a competition and it is not good for us	I am fine and it is good that others set up a coop as well	No Comments
35	31	3

**9. Have you had an experience with a labor union in the past?**

Yes	No	No Comments
25	43	1

**10. Has your perspective on a labor union been changed?**

Positive to negative	Negative to positive	Neutral to positive	Neutral to negative	No idea
5	9	35	15	5

**11. Have you been to any rallies related to taxi business?**

Yes	No	No Comments
26	30	13

**12. What is a role of a labor union or what is your perception of a labor union in the US?**

Political Lobbying	Fight for our interests	Training/education	I don't know
21	23	3	22

**13. What would you like a labor union to do the most?**

I don't want a union to be engaged in coop affairs	More educational training	Political education on rights	Stop Uber from doing business	No comments/I don't know
2	7	14	29	17

**14. What is needed for taxi drivers to improve the condition?**

We need to create a Taxi Association	More Worker Coops	Need to belong to a union	No Comments
61	0	3	5

# THE SURVEY OF WOJIN WORKERS, KOREA (IN KOREAN)

# 설문지

안녕하세요. 저는 미국에 있는 덴버대학 국제학과에서 박사 논문을 쓰고 있는 지민선입니다. 현재 저는 자주관리기업 (노동자 협동조합)에 대해서 논문을 쓰고있고, 특히 한국 버스 자주관리기업체에 대해서 여러분의 의견을 알고싶어서 이 설문지를 보냅니다. 이 질문지는 제가 쓰는 논문 목적을 위해서 여러분의 의견이 종합적으로 분석될 것입니다. 질문이 있으시면 언제든지 연락 주세요 (minsunji@yahoo.com). 다시한번 대단히 감사드립니다.

1. 총 몇년동안 버스운전을 하셨나요?

a. 1-5 년    b. 6- 10 년    c. 11- 15 년    d. 16 년 이상

2.운수 노동자들이 주인없이 회사를 운영할 수 있다고 생각하세요?

a. 예                      b. 아니요. 회사 주인이 필요해요.      c. 기타

### 3.운수 노동자들이 스스로 회사를 운영할 수 있다고 생각하세요?

a. 예                      b. 아니요.                      c. 기타

#### 4. 자주관리기업의 가장 큰 장점이 무엇이라고생각하세요?

- 경제적인 혜택
- 개인주의가 아닌 공동체 가치의 실현
- 민주적이고 인간적인 근로 조건
- 정치적으로 개념 자체가 진보적이다

5.자신의 경제적 위치가 다음의 어떤거라고생각하세요?

a. 서민층    b. 중산층    c. 상류층    d. 생각해 본 적이 없다

6.우진에서 개인의 위치가 무엇이라 고 생각하세요?

a. 노동자    b. 주인

**7.우진 교통에서 일하기 전에 다른 노조에 가입한 경험 아니면 활동한 경험이 있으시나요?**

a.예 b. 아니요

**8.노조에 대한 관념 (인상)이 어떤가요?**

a.항상 긍정적 b. 항상 부정적 c. 긍정적에서 부정적으로 d. 부정적에서 긍정적으로

**9.자주관리 기업에서 노조가 필요하다고 생각하세요?**

a.예 b. 아니요.

**10.노조의 역할이 자주관리기업 안에서는 무엇이라고 생각하세요?**

a.임금협상 b. 우리의 권리를 위해 투쟁 c. 노동자 정치 교육 d. 지역 연대 활동 e. 기타

**11.경영설명회, 직무자치 활동 등 모임을 일년에 총 몇번을 참석하나요?**

a.100% 참석한다. b. 1-5 번 c. 6-10 번 c. 11 번 이상 d. 참석해본적이 없다.

**12.일년에 몇번정도 노동자 집회에 참석을 하시나요?**

a.1-5 b. 6-10 c. 10 번 이상

**13.같이 우진에서 일하시는 동료들에게 연대감을 느끼신 적이 있으세요?**

a.예 b. 아니요

**14.다른 직업에 종사하시는 노동자분들께 연대감을 느껴본 적이 있나요?**

a.예 b. 아니요 c. 기타

**15.지금 현재있는 지도부 (이사의원, 경영대표)에 계신 분들의 지도력에 대해서 만족하시나요?**

- a.예.                      b. 아니요 ( 우리 의견을 좀더 반영할 필요가 있어요)

**16.다음 중 어떤 부분이 가장 자랑스러우세요?**

- a.우진의 자주관리운영시스템으로 경제적으로좋아졌던 점  
b. 우진의 정기적인 자주관리 교육때문에 자주관리 기업에 대해 이해가 되고  
    배운점.  
c.우진에서 일하는 환경이 민주적이고 스트레스를 덜 받는 점  
d.지역사회 활동과 노동 문제에 대해서 관심이 많아진 점

**17.우진에서 하는 교육 프로그램이 도움이 되신다고 생각하세요?**

- a.예                      b. 아니요.                      C. 별로 그렇게 도움이 된다고 생각하지 않아요.

**18. 우진 자주관리 기업 교육 프로그램중에서 가장 선호하시는 프로그램은 어떤  
것인가요?**

- a.자주관리기업에 대한 철학  
b.기업 경영 관련된 주제 ( 경영, 재정등등)  
c. 직원 (노동자) 문화에 대한 교육      d. 기타

**\*\* 감사합니다.\*\***

## **APPENDIX 5. QUESTIONNAIRE: THE SURVEY OF WOJIN WORKERS, KOREA (IN ENGLISH)**

My name is Minsun Ji, a Ph.D candidate, at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. I am currently writing a dissertation on worker cooperative movements in the U.S. and Korea and I am particularly interested in the case of taxi worker cooperatives. I would appreciate it if you would answer any of these following questions, and I will use this survey to collect data for the dissertation and I will not use **any names of the persons** engaged in personal interviews. If you have any questions about my research, or if you would like to be part of a personal interview, please contact me at minsun.ji@du.edu or 303-763-0749. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

### **Questions**

- 1. How long have you worked as a bus driver?**  
a. 1-5 years   b. 6- 10years   c. 11- 15 years   d. 16 years and more.
- 2. Do you think that workers run a company without a boss**  
a. Yes                      b. No                      c. No Comments/others
- 3. Why do you want to be a worker cooperative member? Or what are the benefits of being part of a coop?**  
a. Economic benefit  
b. Collective Value.  
c. Democratic environment at workplace: more humane treatment at workplace  
d. It is politically progressive.
- 4. Which option describes you the best?**  
a. Working class      b. Middle class      c. Upper class      d. I have not thought of it in class terms.
- 5. If you are a part of a worker cooperative, do you consider yourself as**  
a. Worker   b. Owner   c. No comments
- 6. Have you had an experience with a labor union in the past?**  
a. Yes      b. No      c. No comments

- 7. Has your perspective on a labor union in general been changed?**
  - a. Always positive b. Always negative c. From positive to negative
  - e. From negative to positive e. No comments
- 8. Do you think that a worker cooperative needs a labor union?**
  - a. Yes b. No c. No comments
- 9. What is the role of a labor union within your cooperative?**
  - a. Wage negotiation b. Political lobbying c. Providing training/education for workers
  - d. building solidarity with other groups e. others/No comments
- 10. How many meetings (committee, general meetings) do you attend per year?**
  - a. I attend 100% of all the meetings b. -5 times c. 6-10 times
  - d. 11 times and more d. No comments
- 11. How many community/labor rallies have you participated in a year?**
  - a. 1-5 times b. 6-10 times c. more than ten times a year. D. No comments
- 12. Have you felt a sense of solidarity to your co-workers at Woojin?**
  - a. Yes b. No c. No comments
- 13. Have you felt a sense of solidarity to other workers in the community?**
  - a. Yes. b. No c. No comments
- 14. Are you happy with the current leadership with your cooperative (Board Members, President)?**
  - a. Yes. b. No (They should be more engaged with us). c. No comments
- 15. What are you proud of the most about yourself being part of this union-coop?**
  - a. My income got better because of self-management principles
  - b. I got to understand and learned of the concept and value of self-management
  - c. Democratic environment and less stressful situation
  - d. I became more interested in community activism and labor issues in the community.
- 16. Do you think that extensive education program that has been offered by Woojin is helpful?**
  - a. Yes b. No c. I do not think it is that useful d. No comments

**17. What is your most favorable subject in the self-management educational program?**

- a. Philosophy about self-management
- b. Subjects related to running the company (management, finance, etc.)
- c. Education about workers' culture.
- d. Others

## APPENDIX 6. SURVEY RESULTS: WOJIN WORKERS (SOUTH KOREA)

### 1. How long have you worked as a taxi driver?

1-5 years	6-10years	11-15 years	More than 16 years
36	61	21	47

### 2. Do you think that workers run a company without a boss

Yes	No	No Comments/others
131	30	4

### 3. Why do you want to be a worker cooperative member? Or what are the benefits of being part of a coop?

Increase of income	Collective value	Democratic environment	Politically Progressive	No comment
2	116	46	5	2

### 4. Which option describes you the best?

Working class	Middle class	Upper class	I have not thought of it in class terms
115	40	0	10

### 5. If you are a part of a worker cooperative, do you consider yourself as

Worker	Owner
157	8

### 6. Have you had an experience with a labor union in the past?

Yes	No	No comments
70	94	1

**7. Has your perspective on a labor union in general been changed?**

Always positive	Always negative	From positive to negative	From negative to positive
63	9	20	69

**8. Do you think that a worker cooperative needs a labor union?**

Yes	No	No Comments
106	45	15

**9. What is the role of a labor union within your cooperative?**

Wage negotiation	Fights for Rights	Providing training/education	Building solidarity with other groups	Political Lobbying	No Comments
1	74	12	59	0	19

**10. How many meetings (committee, general meetings) do you attend per year?**

I attend 100% of all meetings	1-5 times	6-10 times	11 times more	No comments
110	3	12	26	14

**11. How many community/labor rallies have you participated in a year?**

1-5 times	6-10 times	More than 10 times a year	No comments
95	32	17	20

**12. Have you felt a sense of solidarity to your co-workers at Woojin?**

Yes	No	No comments
122	29	14

**13. Have you felt a sense of solidarity to other workers in the community?**

Yes	No	No comments/others
103	41	20

**14. Are you happy with the current leadership with your cooperative (Board Members, President)?**

Yes	No (they should be engaged in with us more)	No comments/others
101	46	18

**15. What are you proud of the most about yourself being part of this union-coop?**

My income got better	I got to understand and learned of the value of self-management	Democratic environment/less stressful workplace	I became more interested in community activism and labor issues	No comments/others
22	74	38	16	19

**16. Do you think that extensive education program that has been offered by Woojin is helpful?**

Yes	No	I don't think it is that useful	No comments
117	13	20	15

**17. What is your most favorable subject in the self-management educational program?**

Philosophy about self-management	Subjects related to running the company (e.g., management)	Education about workers' culture	Others
45	35	54	31

## **APPENDIX 7: LIST OF CHARTS**

Chart 1. Denver Taxi-Driver's self-identified class position

Chart 2. What is a role of a labor union?

Chart 3. What would you like a labor union to do the most?

Chart 4. Korean vs. U.S. workers' self-identification

Chart 5. Korean vs. U.S. workers' self-identification in terms of class

Chart 6. What is the biggest benefit of a worker cooperative?

Chart 7. Have you been to community/labor rallies?

Chart 8. How many times ave you participated in a rally a year?