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Seoul as a Site of Labor Resistance: The Spatial Representation of Inequality and Injustice

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Abstract

Under rising insecurity and precarity in the neoliberal labor market, Korean workers have protested mass job cuts and deteriorating working conditions. Although their grievances originate from the regions and workplaces where they are employed or laid off, the protest sites often move to major political landmarks in Seoul, the nation's capital, with demands for political redress. These labor protests in the capital demonstrate two distinctive features of Korean labor movements in the 2000s: protests go on for a protracted period of time with few tangible results and take extreme forms of resistance.

Approaching Seoul as a site of contentious politics, this study analyses the mutual nexus between labor protests and urban spaces with cases that appropriate various sites, such as Kwanghwamun (Gwanghwamun) Square, the Blue House, and the National Assembly, involving diverse tactics like long-term camp-ins, *sambo ilbae* (삼보일배) marches, and the occupation of structurally perilous structures. It examines which layers of inequality and injustice in the labor market, or in Korean society at large, are articulated through protest methods that spatially engage with specific urban locations in Seoul. With this investigation, the paper argues that the labor movement practices novel repertoires of resistance to neoliberal precarity by choosing the urban sites with metaphoric significance and by publicly displaying bodily torment. These new forms of contention, in turn, redefine the sense and political implication of the protest site and make the space part of the new protest repertoire.

Keywords: Seoul, labor movement, urban space, inequality, camp-in protest, sky protest

Introduction

Seoul is a dynamic megacity with multiple hubs for shopping, food, historical attractions, nature, and entertainment. It has grown into one of the global cities that showcase material affluence, high-tech infrastructure, and vibrant cultural scenes. But Seoul is also a hotbed of political contention and social protests. Kwanghwamun Square, for instance, is not only the primary spot for international tourists to begin their exploration of the capital, but also a public space of contentious politics where huge waves of so-called "candlelight protests" take place generating critical political breakthroughs in the nation. The most recent example is the case of weekly demonstrations for six months in 2016 and 2017, which resulted in the impeachment of a corrupt and incompetent president.[2] In addition to Kwanghwamun, other politically significant landmarks in the city, such as Seoul Plaza, the City Hall, or the front yard of the Blue House (presidential office and residence), and the National Assembly Building, are often occupied by various groups of protestors, like workers with acute grievances. In some corners, there are tents set up for long-term camp-in protests that almost look like permanent fixtures in the city. Not only at ground level but also on the skyline, advertisement towers and power plant chimneys are often occupied by union activists fighting for labor rights that are so conveniently violated in the neoliberal labor market.

Scholars have long studied cities and social movements in relation to each other as they are intricately intertwined. Cities and urban life create grievances and collective contention in their own right,[3] while urban spaces serve as sites for visible dissent and large-scale protest.[4] Due to the centralized political symbolism of metropoles and capital cities, citizens with non-urban issues also gather at politically symbolic places in cities to advance and publicize their rights and claims.[5] The city becomes particularly central to the discussion of social movements because it serves "as the relational conduits where movements connect and develop."[6] People with grievances and demands gather in main squares, occupy public spaces, and march toward government buildings. In this process, diverse groups form solidarity networks and experiment with new strategies and protest repertoires.[7] Public demonstrations in nineteenth-century Britain were a novel protest method enabled by increasing urbanization and the presence of the Parliament in London.[8] Erecting barricades was another emblematic repertoire widely practiced during the

French Revolution as a statement of challenging the legitimacy of the old regime and as a tactic for augmenting internal solidarity of the insurgents.[9]

Contentious politics, in this sense, is inseparable from cities, as urban spaces become part of social movement infrastructure and culture, which movement actors appropriate and reinvent their meanings. Capital cities stand out even more, because of the spatial concentration of political and cultural power with "the places where power makes itself accessible and visible—police stations, barracks, administrative buildings."[10] Social movement actors choose politically significant buildings and structures in the capital and disrupt existing spatial routines to dramatise their demands and to validate their claims to rights and power.[11] Such a form of "spatial claim making," as Charles Tilly suggests,[12] is an insightful lens through which we can analyze how space matters for defining claims and inventing new repertoires as well as how the meanings of the space are recreated in this mutual nexus of protest and spatiality. Spaces are relational because their meanings are made and remade through human practices that unsettle the existing spatial routines.[13] In the process of resistant acts, "alternative spatialities from those defined through oppression and exploitation" are generated.[14]

This study sheds analytical light on Seoul, the capital of South Korea (Korea hereafter), which has long been the epicentre of contentious politics and mass demonstrations, including labor protests. The reason for protestors to stage collective resistance in Seoul is straightforward. Korea is a highly centralized state with political power concentrated in the president and the executive office that preside over national affairs from the capital, and the greater metropolitan area contains over 25 million residents, about half the nation's entire population.[15] Thus, momentous contentious politics, such as street demonstrations demanding the removal of autocratic and corrupt leaders or pressing for democratization and institutional reforms, have all taken place in the capital city. Not only national political agenda issues but also the grievances and claims of marginalized social actors are asserted in urban protests.

Approaching Seoul as a site of contentious politics, this paper engages with the question of the relationship between urban space and protest repertoire. But unlike existing studies that have focused on popular demonstrations or the evictees' struggles in urban Seoul,[16] its attention is placed on workers' protests. It explores how different spaces and structures in the capital city are appropriated as locations of labor contention, and discusses which layers of inequality and injustice in the labor market, or in Korean society at large, are articulated through the connection of urban locations and labor protests.

The paper begins with a discussion on the background of workers' resistance by outlining the neoliberal restructuring of the labor market and concomitant

changes in workers' central demands and protest patterns. It explicates how the widened gap in power between capital and labor has led to workers' prolonged resistance and extreme protests. This is followed by a presentation of several protest sites in Seoul, which highlights workers' contentious claim making and their calling for political intervention through acts of occupation or dramatization of public spaces and commercial structures. The paper ends with a discussion on how these specific forms of labor protest and rights claims contribute to the rethinking of the relationship between cities and social movements. In the process of choosing specific urban sites and methods of resistance, the labor movement practices novel repertoires and these new forms of contentious acts, in turn, redefine the sense of the occupied place and its symbolic significance in the capital city. This study is based on empirical data collected from participatory observations and interviews conducted over the last five summers (2013–2018) and one winter (2016–2017) in Seoul, Korea.

Neoliberal Restructuring, Stratified Workers, and Divergent Labor Grievances

With the advancement of the neoliberal restructuring of the Korean economy, workers have become stratified by their employment status, leading to the diversification of workers' grievances, depending on their location in the labor market. Today, most full-time workers employed in large conglomerates are organised into labor unions and their major concern is job insecurity.[17] By citing business needs to streamline the production process, firms carry out outsourcing, subcontracting, and overseas relocation, which result in mass layoffs and factory closures. Labor unions in these firms resist the massive job cuts and plant closures with militant strikes, but courts often deem these strikes "unlawful" collective action under the amended Trade Union Act of 2001.[18] Because the reemployment of laid-off workers (especially if they are middle-aged) is highly unlikely, regular workers engage in dire struggles in order to keep their employment. Those who are laid off are drawn into the already overcrowded service sector and become small tenant shopkeepers who are exposed to low income, high debt, and business insecurity.[19] Therefore, regular workers who lose their employment from secure jobs claim that "layoff is death" (*haego nŭn sarin ida*, 해고는 살인이다) to express their desperate circumstances. This claim reflects the deep gulf between having a secure formal job in a corporation and falling into insecure and contingent work in the industrial or service sectors.[20]

Another significant aspect of labor market restructuring in Korea is the rise of irregular and precarious work. Irregular workers have grown in number

to constitute 42 percent of the labor force.[21] The division between regular and irregular employment is significant because irregular workers are subject to low wages, high job insecurity, multiple forms of discrimination, and the lack of legal protection or organizational representation. They are paid about 52 percent of the hourly wage of regular workers and are covered by social protection programs (national health care, national pension, and unemployment insurance) and other benefits (paid vacation and bonuses) at a much lower rate than regular workers.[22] Furthermore, women and young workers are located at the bottom of the labor market hierarchy and are more vulnerable to precaritization and wage differentials than men and older workers.[23] Korea's overall unionization is low at 12.3 percent of all employees, and there is a stark gap between regular workers (19.3 percent) and irregular workers (2.5 percent).[24]

As such, the central concern for irregular workers is securing stability in employment and decent material remuneration for their labor. Those who are protesting for their rights are often the irregular workers who experience conspicuous discrimination in their wages, benefits, employment security, and rights entitlements by working side by side with regular workers in the same workplace and performing almost the same labor. Consequently, the protests of irregular workers occur with demands for the conversion to full-time regular employment and the right to form labor unions to negotiate employment terms.[25] But it is challenging for them to organize effective collective action in their workplaces, because their precarious and insecure employment status leads to a swift termination of contracts when a labor protest erupts.

In short, the central issues raised by labor movements since the 2000s have diverged into two groups. First, Korean workers demand job security against massive layoffs and plant closures caused by capital's strategy of outsourcing and overseas relocation. Second, irregular workers struggle for the elimination of discrimination and the conversion into full-time jobs to vindicate the worth of their labor and employment stability. My participant observation of labor protests in the last few years confirms that securing jobs and reducing irregular employment have been the most frequently chanted slogans. Protesting workers often hold banners reading "Layoff is death" or "Abolish irregular employment," which represent their core demands.

Korean workers bring these grievances and stage their contention in central plazas in Seoul because they recognize these labor market issues as structural problems that require a political intervention by the national government. Figure 1 shows a national labor rally organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in Kwanghwamun Square on June 30, 2018. The unifying title of the rally was "Abolish irregular employment" and participating workers

Figure 1 KCTU rally in Kwanghwamun Square in June 2018

Source: Photo taken by the author at Kwanghwamun Square on 30 June 2018.

were wearing union vests with this slogan printed on their backs. Particularly eye-catching in the rally was the participation of a large number of irregular school workers (substitute teachers, administrative and information-and-technology staff, nutricians, and school meal preparers), who work side by side with regular school teachers but who are separately organised into the teachers' union.[26]

Resisting on Tilted Ground: Empowered Capital and Divided Workers

There are several reasons why workers bring their labor grievances to the capital city and demand political adjudication by the central government by appropriating politically symbolic or structurally perilous sites. First, Korean workers have encountered immense difficulties in securing meaningful concessions through collective action or negotiations with their employers in the context of the neoliberal restructuring of the economy. Neoliberal deregulations have led to a growing imbalance of bargaining power between capital and labor, which had already been skewed in favour of powerful corporations.[27] With increased freedom of movement, Korean firms close their domestic factories and move their facilities abroad to avoid labor unions and high labor costs. The prolonged protests by laid-off workers of Hanjin Heavy Industry and Cort-Cortech Guitar factories exemplify the fate of workers when firms opt for overseas relocation. There are also cases when foreign capital acquires Korean firms and cuts jobs in the name of managerial efficiency. This was the reason that fuelled fierce resistance by the employees of Ssangyong Automobile, Hydis Electronics, and GM Daewoo Automobile. Under these conditions, local workers, even if they resist through labor strikes, can hardly achieve meaningful gains against transnationally mobile capital. Building cross-national labor solidarity to confront spatially unfixated capital is daunting and costly for resource-limited labor movements when unions have difficulties organizing even at the local or national level.

Second, corporations have continuously lobbied for labor law reforms that would benefit their business interests while labor unions have been unsuccessful in building solidarity among the stratifying workforces. The revised stipulations in labor laws relaxed the conditions of hiring irregular workers and firing workers in mass layoffs (the 1997 revision), while excluding job cuts from the list of lawful reasons for labor strikes (the 2001 revision).[28] In the name of business rationalization, employers can easily fire workers and close factories and reorganize their production and service systems within a highly complex hierarchy of subcontracting and outsourcing. With massive job cuts, factory relocations, and outsourcing, workers are constantly exposed to insecurity

and subjected to internal hierarchies. Under stratified employment structures, workers are not only divided between regular and irregular workers within the same firm, but also between workers employed in the primary firm and those in subsidiary or subcontracting firms, who are further split between regular and irregular workers.[29]

When the traditional industrial sector is shrinking and the workforce is fragmented, it is hard for labor unions to expand their organizational bases, to build solidarity among stratified workers, and to organize meaningful labor strikes. Only a few powerful and resourceful labor unions of regular workers, such as the ones at Hyundai Motor and Kia Motor, have been able to secure meaningful collective bargaining vis-à-vis their employers who cannot completely eliminate the domestic manufacturing lines. However, because these powerful unions dominate the KCTU, even this progressive labor center has been criticized for its failure to build broad solidarity between regular and irregular workers. Hyejin (pseudonym), a labor activist who worked for the Korean Metal Workers' Union for fifteen years (1995–2010), offered a critical assessment that "in essence, the Hyundai Motor Union dominates the Korean Metal Workers' Union and in turn the Korean Metal Workers' Union moves the KCTU. The most powerful unions that control the KCTU are basically the most powerful enterprise unions of regular workers and they don't want to open the union door to irregular workers."[30] Thus, irregular workers who are subjected to wage inequality and insecure employment have a particularly hard time in pressing for their claims and need to seek alternative means of organizing and protesting to neoliberal conditions.

Third, corporations that are empowered by their heightened economic and political leverage have responded to workers' protests with a variety of novel repressive methods. For example, they call in industrial relations consultants consisting of public labor attorneys and private security firms to break down strikes and destroy labor unions. One of the anti-union plans that industrial relations consultants implement is called "aggressive factory closing." This plan proceeds with a purposeful instigation of violence and divisions within independent labor unions, shut down of the factory, setting up a pro-management second union, and the deployment of private security guards to crack down violently on workers' collective action.[31]

Another method employers have used to repress and undermine labor resistance in recent years is damage compensation litigation. Since the early 2000s, corporations and government ministries (most notably the Ministry of Justice), alike have routinely filed lawsuits to collect compensation for damages incurred during a labor strike.[32] These lawsuits impose an enormous financial burden on labor unions and individual workers involved in collective action, particularly

targeting those affiliated with the progressive KCTU (Sonchapko, 2017).[33] When firms sue unions for (real and alleged) damages associated with labor strikes (for which the labor law excludes mass layoffs as a legitimate reason), the court often upholds the corporations' claims and rules labor strikes to be unlawful. On these legal grounds, firms proceed with lawsuits to claim damages. The amount of damage compensation filed against unions rose from KRW 34.5 billion (USD 30 million) targeting thirty-nine unions in 2002 to KRW 186.7 billion (USD 163 million) aimed at twenty-four unions in 2017—more than a five-fold increase in fifteen years.[34] Employers recognize the effectiveness of damage compensation lawsuits as a way to financially drain labor unions and individual unionists and this method of monetary dispossession leaves a detrimental toll on workers as discussed in the following section.

Moreover, state institutions, such as public prosecutors, the police, and the courts, often serve as instruments to protect business interests rather than functioning as conscientious arbiters of conflicting interests in society. When union activists bring criminal charges against private security agents for unlawful and excessive use of violence, the police do not investigate the cases and prosecutors do not indict even the extreme cases that were formally investigated.[35] For instance, unionists and their lawyers accused 1,009 private security agents of violating the Law on Punishment of Violent Acts between 2008 and 2012, but only thirty-three of them (3.3%) were arrested and indicted.[36] In contrast, when the courts adjudicate lawsuits filed by employers against workers, they rule on the side of corporations more often than on the side of workers. According to a study of labor-related legal cases, there were 833 court cases between 1990 and 2015, of which about 80 percent were resolved in favour of the employers.[37]

This tilted ground between capital and labor poses fundamental questions about the institutional channeling of class conflict in a democratic state. It was conspicuous that the heightened power of business interests worked through the collusive relationship between conglomerates and state institutions during the past ten years of conservative governments (2008–2017), as evidenced by two former presidents imprisoned on charges of, among others, bribery and corruption. However, even the center-left governments under Kim Dae-jung (Kim Tae-chung) and Roh Moo-hyun (No Mu-hyŏn) uncritically embraced neoliberal deregulations while the current Moon Jae-in (Mun Chae-in) administration has shown little progress in introducing policies to tackle labor market inequities.[38] Thus, despite the spectacular advancement in the realm of political or procedural democracy in Korea, the questions of labor and class remain far from being adequately addressed under a democratic government, regardless its ideological orientation.

In summary, as workers are stratified from within and unable to have reasonable collective bargaining against employers who are empowered with transnational mobility, new anti-labor strategies, and supportive juridical institutions, they have to seek alternative means to make their claims heard and labor rights violations corrected. This is the general structural and institutional background that brings labor contention to the politically symbolic sites in Seoul as a way of gaining national attention and political redress to workers' dire grievances.

Labor Contention: Protracted Protests and Extreme Repertoires

Under these economic and political circumstances, labor protests in Korea have evolved to show two distinctive features. First, many instances of workers' collective action tend to last for a highly protracted period, often without leading to tangible outcomes. These protests have gained the name of "long-term protest workplaces" (*changgi t'ujaeng saŏpchang*, 장기투쟁 사업장) where the struggle lasts for several years (sometimes as long as a decade) and rotates a variety of protest repertoires.[39] The imbalance of power between mobile capital and immobile workforce, corporations' various restructuring methods, management reliance on private violence and litigation against labor unions, and political institutions' alignment with business interests all mitigate against the possibility of negotiating meaningful gains and, consequently, to prolonging the duration of workers' resistance.

Unresolved labor issues lead to workers' protracted struggle, which often ends up in the nation's capital in a search for national publicity and political redress. Although workers' grievances originate from their specific workplaces where they experience unfair labor practices, severe repression, and loss of employment, the impossibility of resolving these grievances at the local or firm level pushes them to move their protest to politically symbolic sites in Seoul. By doing so, they seek to ignite sympathetic public attention and to draw intervention by political authorities at the national level. This is why workers of long-term labor struggles set up banners inscribed with their demands, camp-in tents, and protest art structures in major locations of political significance in the capital. Labor activists occupy the protest sites (which concurrently become their living space) for months, if not for years, and sometimes rotate from one site to another, practicing multiple protest methods.

Figure 2 features a protest artwork set up in front of the statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, one of the most venerated public figures from the Chosŏn era, in

Figure 2 Protest artwork at Kwanghwamun Square during the candlelight protest in 2016
Source: Photo taken at Kwanghwamun Square in December 2016 (courtesy of Judy Han).

Kwanghwamun Square during the candlelight protests in 2016 and 2017. It shows the collusive relationship between the conservative government (under President Park Geun-hye [Pak Kŭn-hye]) and large conglomerates (e.g., Samsung's CEO Yi Chae-yong and Hyundai Motor's CEO Chŏng Mong-ku). At the same time, it points to the ultimate responsibility of Hyundai Motor Company, the parent company of Yusŏng, for the long-term protest by Yusŏng workers. Yusŏng is

Hyundai's subcontractor firm producing auto parts in Asan, a city south of Seoul, and Hyundai Motor Company was found to have coordinated with and financed Yusŏng management to contract a public labor attorney and private security firm who executed the aggressive factory closing plan in 2011.[40] The labor union at Yusŏng, which is one of the core members of the Korean Metal Workers' Union affiliated with the KCTU, was destroyed, while a second, pro-management union was created in the meantime. Union leaders sued the CEO of Yusŏng and Hyundai Motor Company in 2013 but no indictment was made by the prosecutors. Additional lawsuits were filed against Yusŏng management and Hyundai in 2016 and the court ruled Yusŏng management guilty in May 2020. It took nine years for workers to see this conclusion to their resistance to factory closing and union destruction.

Figure 3 shows a labor protest demanding government intervention to stop the abuse of damage compensation lawsuits filed against labor unions and individual workers. It took place in front of the statue of King Sejong, the most revered political leader by Koreans, located dozens of meters behind the statue of Admiral

Figure 3 Workers' protest against damage compensation lawsuits

Source: Photo taken by the author at Kwanghwamun Square on 27 June 2017.

Figure 4 A Cort-Cortech camp-in tent near the National Assembly in Yŏŭido

Source: Kyunghyang Sinmun: http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_storytelling/2016/republic/place_8.html?p=place

Yi at Kwanghwamun Square. The banner reads "[…] it is time for the government to step up," a political demand frequently raised by protestors. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, labor activists chose the protest site purposefully to maximize the symbolic resonance of their claims to rights and justice by juxtaposing the statue of Admiral Yi or King Sejong, who are known for their political integrity and care for the people, and workers' call for the resolution by the head of the government, the President.

Figure 4 captures a Cort-Cortech Guitar worker standing in front of the camp-in tent set up near the National Assembly Building in Yŏŭido. This protest tent is a typical structure found in many different locations in Seoul. Workers or other aggrieved actors erect such a tented construct decorated with their rights claims on the outside and occupy the space as their protest site as well as actual living place. Cort-Cortech workers lost their jobs overnight in 2007 when management of

this world-known guitar manufacturing company (making, among others, Gibson guitars) closed factories to move production lines to China and Indonesia. Laid-off workers were not given an adequate opportunity for negotiation or compensation and began to engage in one of the most protracted struggles by alternating a variety of protest tactics. Union leaders organized a sky protest, a hunger-strike, and an occupation of the closed factory, but private security guards demolished the site and the police arrested and indicted eighteen unionists.[41] Their prolonged protest was concluded in April 2019 with an agreement with the management who promised a temporary reinstatement of union leaders and an unknown amount of consolation payment. In an educational session held after the signing of the agreement, the three union leaders of Cort-Cortech reflected that "it was a second-best but inevitable choice for us because there was no hope for a better deal even if we continued our struggle. We could not stand any more; we were exhausted [after thirteen years of struggle]; our health was devastated, and we missed the normalcy of life."[42]

Among the above-mentioned cases of protest that mostly take place at the ground level, "sky protest" (also called a chimney protest or *kulttuk nongsŏng*, 굴뚝농성) is a unique type of labor resistance that occurs at the sky level. In a sky protest, a small number of workers isolate themselves on top of a high-altitude, risky structure, such as an industrial crane, transmission tower, and factory chimney, with only the bare minimum living conditions for days and months, sometimes for more than a year.[43] Sky protests represent another noteworthy development in recent labor contentions as workers increasingly tend to engage in extreme forms of resistance. The extremization of protest tactics occurs for two main reasons. First, traditional forms of collective action like disruptions of assembly lines or mass rallies have failed to produce meaningful results. Even when workers are able to organize collective action, employers refuse to negotiate, relegate the statutory responsibility to subcontractors (in case of irregular workers), call in the riot police or private security guards to break the strike, and sue labor unions for damage compensation. Second, workers with acute grievances are those who have lost their jobs due to mass layoffs or those with precarious contracts, and they easily lose access to their workplaces to stage protests.

Thus, workers have to invent and resort to other means of contention and choose extreme repertoires, such as hunger strikes, hair shaving, single-person protests, sit-ins, long marches of *sambo ilbae* (삼보일배, the three-steps-and-one-bow march), and sky protests.[44] In comparison to traditional labor strikes, peaceful marches, or street demonstrations, the new forms of protest are extreme, because they involve a high level of self-imposed risk, danger, pain, and harm.

Protestors are exposed to perilous conditions when they starve their bodies, when they march several kilometers in *sambo ilbae*, or when they self-confine in high-altitude, tight-space structures with minimum necessities for days and months. By engaging in these extreme repertoires of contention, workers strive to gain public attention to often under-publicized labor issues and to seek solidarity from other civic actors, as workers alone cannot exercise sufficient leverage in the tilted political ground where corporations exert disproportional power.

Particularly distinctive in the neoliberal decades is the rise of both the sky protests and protest suicides by workers in their resistance against labor repression.[45] The number of sky protests has increased since the beginning of the 2000s, as protesters in most long-term protest locations have turned to this form of resistance in desperation. Between 1990 and 1999, there were only nine cases of sky protest, but this number soared to over one hundred cases between 2000 and 2015.[46] Workers choose from various high structures to climb on with the intention of drawing attention to their acute grievances after other methods of protest are exhausted. As a new repertoire of contentious politics in Korea, sky protests have spread across industrial towns and into symbolic places in the capital city.

Figure 5 is a map of sky protests that took place between 1990 and 2015 and illustrates the variety of high structures and the diversity of locations across the nation. Figure 6 shows two irregular workers of Kia Motors calling on Chŏng Mong-ku, the firm's CEO, and demanding irregular workers' conversion to regular employment. The protest was staged on the top of an advertisement tower positioned on the rooftop of the building where the National Human Rights Commission has offices. This sky protest lasted for about a year between June 2015 and June 2016. The picture also shows how tight and dangerous the occupied space is and how strenuous the protest would be in hot summers and freezing winters.

Figure 7 is another case of sky protest organised by labor activists from six companies undergoing prolonged labor disputes. They isolated themselves on top of an advertisement tower in the Kwanghwamun area in April 2017.[47] It may seem ironic that workers are protesting on top of a screen tower that advertises Samsung's QLED television, but it is this very contrast that protesting workers intend to capitalize on to highlight the dissonance between Seoul's world-leading technology sector and the corporations' archaic practice of labor repression. The protesters held up a banner with their demands: "Abolish massive layoffs, irregular employment, and vicious labor laws"; "Amend labor laws"; "Respect three labor rights."[48] The slogans printed on their banner effectively summarize the core demands of Korean workers in the 2000s and 2010s.

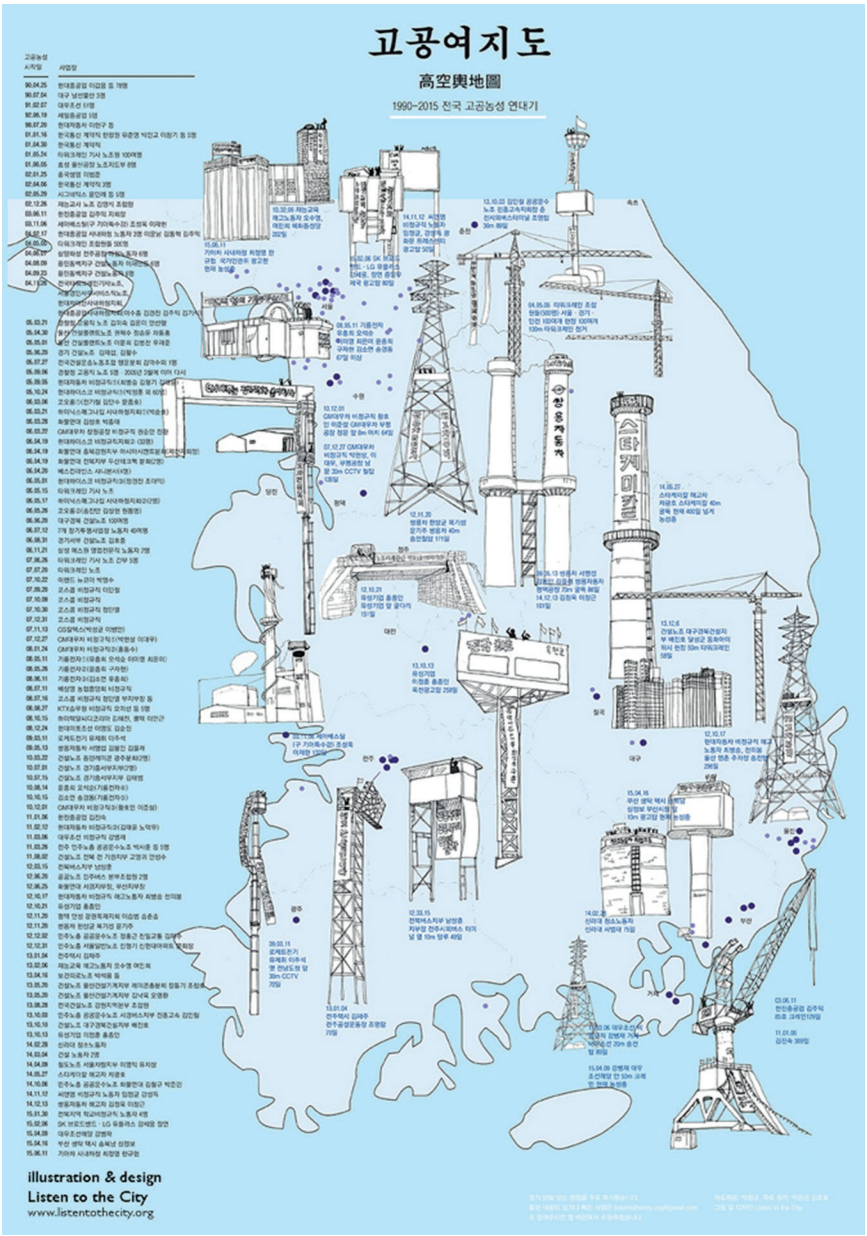

Figure 5 Map of sky protests by Pak Ŭn-sŏn

Source: Listen to the City (A collective by artists and architects): http://www.listentothecity.org/High-altitude-sit-in-demonstration-in-South-Korea

Figure 6 Sky protest by irregular workers at Kia Motors
Source: Yonhap News.

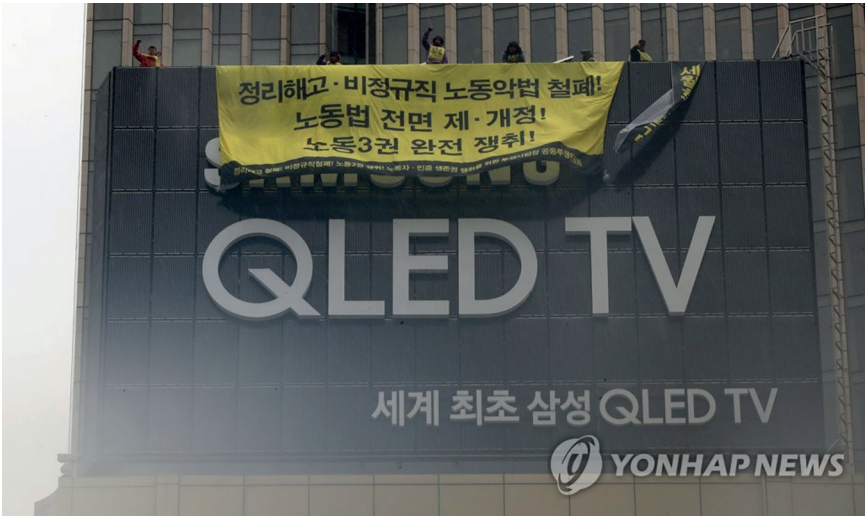

Figure 7 Sky protest by workers from long-term protest workplaces
Source: Yonhap News.

Figure 8 Sky protest by Finetek workers at Mokdong power plant chimney
Source: Hankyoreh Sinmun: http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/labor/827667.html

Figure 8 captures the sky protest by two union leaders of Finetek on top of a power plant chimney (75 meters high) in Mokdong, an affluent residential district in Seoul. Korea Synthetic Fiber was sold to a new investor who renamed the company Star Chemical and later Finetek. The firm closed the factory in Kumi 2013, opened a new one in Asan in 2016, and closed it a year later. Workers were laid off without proper notice or compensation. The sky protest began in November 2017 and lasted for a historic record of 426 days until it ended in January 2019. Figure 9 shows Finetek workers proceeding with the *sambo ilbae* march for four days in May 2018. They marched in this strenuous method for nineteen kilometres from the office of the Korean Employers' Federation to the Blue House. This adds another protest example that demonstrates the public display of self-inflicted pain in the protest procession and the symbolic revelation of the cause (the Korean Employers' Federation) and solution (the Blue House) in the choice of the starting and ending point of the march.

One of the most extreme forms of labor resistance in Korea today is protest suicide, i.e., workers' ending their lives in defiance and frustration with labor

repression. Studies on this subject for the period of 1970 and 2015 find that the total number of such protest suicides rose during the democratization era (1986–1993) to ten cases per year and again during the neoliberal era (2003–2015) to three cases per year (M. Im 2017, S. Kim 2019).[49] It is noteworthy that while the overall number of such deaths has gone down, the share of workers compared to other actors, such as student activists and farmers, increased in the 1990s (12 workers accounting for 57 percent of 21 protest suicides) and again dramatically between 2003–2015 (29 workers accounting for 81 percent of 36 protest suicides) (M. Im 2017, S. Kim 2019).[50]

What lies behind the suicides is not only the frustration of labor activists over the lack of results, but also the extreme pressure coming from a specific anti-labor tactic on which employers and the government have increasingly relied in recent years. Particularly, the unbearable financial burden associated with damage compensation litigation has been identified as the prime cause of several union activists' suicides. Pae Tal-ho at Doosan Heavy Industry in 2003, Ch'oe Kang-sŏ at Hanjin Heavy Industry in 2012, Pae Chae-hyŏng at Hydis Electronics in 2015,

Figure 9 *Sambo ilbae* protest by Finetek workers

Source: Hankyoreh Sinmun: http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/845727.html

Figures 10a and 10b
Ssangyong workers' memorial altar at Taehanmun
Source: Photos by the author.

and Han Kwang-ho at Yusŏng in 2016 all committed suicide, leaving notes that described the severity of the financial pressure they experienced due to damage compensation lawsuits.[51]

The labor protest at Ssangyong Automobile against mass layoffs in 2009 is a prime example of a protracted struggle (for ten years), with a heavy toll on union activists collectively and individually. The strike in 2009 lasted about two months and was quelled by the brutal violence of a special weapons and tactics force and commercial security agents. This was followed by the imprisonment of twenty-two unionists and damage compensation lawsuits amounting to KRW 17 billion or USD 155 million.[52] In the aftermath of the strike, thirty individuals (twenty-seven Ssangyong workers and three spouses), lost their lives due to mental and physical stress associated with post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the extreme violence experienced during the strike, the financial burden of job loss and damage compensation litigation, and frustration over the lost cause in general.[53] Of the thirty deaths, nine were by suicide.

Ssangyong unionists have engaged in all imaginable protest repertoires as Yi Ch'ang-kŭn, one of the union leaders of Ssangyong who participated in the decade-long resistance, recollects that "we did everything we could, including the self-confinement strike, hair shaving, hunger strike, camp-in protest, *sambo ilbae*, and chimney protest three times."[54] The title of his interview book is "We Have Nowhere to Go," in which he repeatedly mentions the physical and mental suffering caused by the extreme violence he and his colleagues experienced in their confrontation with employers and law enforcement authorities.[55] "We Have Nowhere to Go" is a statement about their resistance being the last resort and a testimony about labor's sociopolitical alienation in Korean society.

In June 2018, Kim Chu-chung, a laid-off worker of Ssangyong, committed suicide, adding his name to the list of the victims of this protracted, unresolved struggle. His death re-ignited the public debate on the excessive violence exercised during the crackdown on the strike in 2009 and called for political intervention in the cases of reinstating laid off workers. Ssangyong unionists set a temporary memorial altar next to Taehanmun, the main gate to the historic Tŏksu Palace in downtown Seoul, to grieve the loss of a co-worker and to seek political redress. Figure 10a shows a tent set up as the temporary memorial place. It is guarded by the police because a far-right group had a tent erected next to the Ssangyong one. Figure 10b features a banner hanging next to the Ssangyong memorial altar along the wall of Tŏksu Palace. It reads "Back to work together" and "Keep the promise of reinstatement of all laid-off workers."

Conclusion

This study approached Seoul as a site of labor contention with the goal of engaging with the question of the relationship between urban spaces and social movements. In the neoliberal context of a tilted ground between capital and labor, Korean workers have brought their labor claims to the nation's capital and sought political intervention. Workers' grievances stem from their workplaces where they experience unfair labor practices, employment discrimination, loss of employment, and union repression. However, when workers organize a strike against job cuts or form a labor union to negotiate their precarious employment status, they are laid off, labor unions are destroyed, factories are shut down, and protesting workers lose access to their workplaces to organize collective action. As it becomes unfeasible to address their concerns through negotiations, strikes, or legal channels, workers' resistance is prolonged for years, if not over a decade, and seek alternative means of redress, often expressed in extreme repertoires of contention.

The examples of labor protests presented in this study explicate the particular sites in Seoul workers choose and the specific claims for equality and justice they articulate. With the intention of drawing public attention and the political intervention by the national government, workers select politically symbolic or structurally unsafe sites in the capital city and engage in protest repertoires that display their bodily torment and physical insecurity. They occupy and protest around the statues of Admiral Yi or King Sejong in Kwanghwamun Square, set up camp-in tents in front of the National Assembly, crawl on the ground in a *sambo ilbae* march from the Korean Employers' Federation building to the Blue House, and self-isolate on top of 75-meter-high Samsung advertisement tower or factory chimneys in affluent quarters in the capital. Through these acts, workers do not only amplify their claims to labor rights and economic justice, but also uncover the contradictions hidden in the spaces they choose as protest sites. Their visually dramatic and physically tormenting actions on scorching asphalt streets or tight-space towers are metaphors for the insecurity and perilousness workers experience under the neoliberal economy. Labor protests in Seoul, and Korea by extension, show that the place is not just a global metropolis of material excess, cutting-edge technology, and K-pop attractions, but also a tense political space where workers are exploited, dismissed, and repressed.

This study on the nexus between labor contention and urban locations in Seoul depicts an instance of "spatial claim making"[56] as actors choose emblematic buildings and symbolic structures to dramatize their demands and to validate their claims to rights and power. With the engagement of specific urban structures,

workers experiment with novel protest repertoires that would most effectively convey their desperate statements about insecurity and precarity in a neoliberal capitalism. In the process of spatial appropriation of specific sites, workers' messages are conveyed through and projected on the locations. Therefore, the acts of workers' resistance and occupation of various urban sites redefine and transform the sense and significance of the capital's spaces. These spaces become more than a tourist attraction site, political offices, or commercial structure, but spatial reminders of the contradictions of Korean society, particularly the specific layers of inequality that Korean workers experience in the labor market and the injustices that political and legal institutions impose on them. With these altered meanings of the urban space, the site becomes part of newly invented repertoires of contention and provides primary tactical queues to subsequent protestors.

Notes

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4. Paul Routledge. "Geography and Social Movements," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* edited by Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, 1–15 (London: Oxford University Press), 2015.
5. Michael Douglass. "Local City, Capital City or World City?" *Pacific Affairs* 78.4 (2005): 543–558.
6. Justus Uitermark, Walter Nicholls, and Maarten Loopmans. "Guest Editorial," *Environment and Planning A*, 44 (2012): 2546–2554, 2549.
7. This study uses protest repertoires interchangeably with protest tactics, strategies, forms, and methods.
8. Charles Tilly. *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1843* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1995.
9. Mark Traugott. *The Insurgent Barricade* (Oakland: University of California Press), 2010.
10. Henri Lefebvre. *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Oroduction* (London: Allison and Busby, 1976), 85–86.
11. Charles Tilly. "Spaces of Contention," *Mobilization* 5.2 (2000): 135–159, 146.
12. Tilly, "Spaces," 2000, pp. 135–159, 146.
13. David Harvey. *Social Justice and the City*; Paul Routledge. "Geography and Social Movements."
14. Steve Pile. "Introduction," in *Geographies of Resistance* edited by Steve Pile and Michael Keith, 1–32 (London: Routledge, 1997), 3.
15. Korea Statistics Information Service: https://kosis.kr/eng/ (accessed October 1, 2020).

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18. Ji-bang Kim, "P'aŏp sonbaeso (Damage compensation lawsuits after labor strike)," *Kukmin Ilbo*, October 27, 2016: http://news.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0923634068 (accessed March 2, 2018).
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22. The coverage of regular workers ranges between 84–99 percent while it is between 34–43 percent for irregular workers (Kim, "The Size and Reality of Irregular Workers," 2019, 25).
23. Kim, "The Size and Reality of Irregular Workers," 2019, 6–7.
24. Kim, "The Size and Reality of Irregular Workers," 2019, 30.
25. Yoonkyung Lee. "From 'We Are Not Machines, We Are Humans' to 'We Are Workers, We Want to work': The Changing Notion of Labor Rights in Korea, the 1980s–the 2000s," 206.
26. Author's own observation, June 30, 2018.
27. Yoonkyung Lee. "Neoliberal Methods of Labor Repression: Privatized Violence and Dispossessive Litigation in Korea," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51.1 (2021): 20–37."
28. Jin-ku Kang, "Nodongja ullinŭn nodongbŏp shimp'andŭl (Labor case rulings that make workers sob)," *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, July 5, 2015: http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=201507052231485 (accessed August 1, 2017).
29. Workers are stratified by their employment status (regular versus irregular), by the size of corporations (large firms versus small- and medium-sized subcontractors), by intrafirm relations (primary firms versus subsidiaries or subcontractors), and by union coverage (unionised versus non-unionised, and under the KCTU or the Federation of Korean Trade Unions or FKTU).
30. Interview with author, Seoul, May 25, 2018.
31. Yoonkyung Lee. "Neoliberal Methods of Labor Repression: Privatized Violence and Dispossessive Litigation in Korea," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 51.1 (2021): 20–37, 30. Public labor attorneys (*kongin nomusa*) devise plans for the destruction of independent labor unions and work together with private security firms to execute these plans. The number of both private security firms and public labor attorneys increased in the 2000s.
32. Seong-jun Kang. "Recent Cases of Criminal and Civil Litigation against Labor," unpublished paper (in Korean), 2007.
33. Sonchapko. "The 2017 Report on Damage Compensation Seizure and Labor Repression Cases," unpublished report (in Korean), 2017.
34. Sonchapko, "The 2017 Report," 2017, 8–10.

35. Gyucheol Oh. "Chaegae pal, nosa pungyu hyŏngjang esŏ pulbŏp yongyŏk kyŏngbi ŭi p'ongnyŏk haengwi (Violence by Unlawful Security Service in Urban Redevelopment and Labor Disputes)," *Sahoi gwahak yeongu* 18.3 (2011): 161–179.
36. *Policy Report* (Yongyeok pokryeok geunjeol eul wihan jeongchaek daean bogoseo). Unpublished paper compiled by the Anti-yongyeok Project Team: https://www.kpil.org/board_archive/%EC%9A%A9%EC%97%AD%ED%8F%AD%EB%A0%A5-%EA%B7%BC%EC%A0%88%EC%9D%84-%EC%9C%84%ED%95%9C-%EC%A0%95%EC%B1%85%EB%8C%80%EC%95%88-%EB%B3%B4%EA%B3%A0%EC%84%9C/ (in Korean). 2012. According to the Unfair Labor Practices Report 2015, a class bias is repeatedly found in the prosecutors' indictment rates of employers and in the court's final ruling of criminal cases involving corporations. The prosecutors indicted only 9.5 percent out of 5,738 sued employers (against of an average rate of 46 percent in 2010–2014), while the court gave prison sentences to only 1 employer out of 244 criminal cases committed by employers (against an average rate of 16 percent in 2010–2014).
37. Jin-ku Kang, "Nodongja ullinŭn nodongbŏp shimp'andŭl [Labor case rulings that make workers sob]," *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, July 5, 2015: http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=201507052231485 (accessed August 1, 2017). There is an ongoing investigation on Yang Seung-tae, former Supreme Court Chief Justice (2011–2017) who drafted over 400 documents to influence court rulings. The documents include cases of the dismissal of KTX workers, the legality of a national teachers' union, and the reform of the wage structure. In these cases, the Supreme Court overturned the rulings made by lower courts and upheld the interests of corporations.
38. Yoonkyung Lee. "Articulating Inequality in the Candlelight Protest in 2016–2017."
39. They include unions of KTX women attendants, Dongyang Cement, Sejong Hotel, Asahi Irregular Workers, Cort-Cortech, Hydis, and HitecRCD. See Baek-seon Byeon, "Changgi t'ujaeng saŏpchang (Long-term protest workplaces)," *Labor and the World*, June 22, 2016: http://worknworld.kctu.org (accessed March 2, 2018).
40. Yoonkyung Lee. "Neoliberal Methods of Labor Repression: Privatized Violence and Dispossessive Litigation in Korea," 31.
41. Geon-mo Ahn, "3431il [3431 days]," *Ohmynews*, July 3, 2016: http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002223242 (accessed March 3, 2018).
42. Participant observation by the author, Seoul, June 10, 2019.
43. Yoonkyung Lee. "Sky Protest: New Forms of Labor Resistance in Neoliberal Korea," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45.3 (2015): 443–464.
44. It originates from a Buddhist practice of lowering one's body and mind for meditation and prayer. This form of prostration is called *sambo ilbae* (三步一拜: three steps and one bow) or *och'et'uji* (五體投地: throwing five parts of body to the ground). The person or people involved take three steps forward, then bow to the ground, and repeat the process until they reach the set destination.
45. Yoonkyung Lee. "Neoliberal Methods of Labor Repression: Privatized Violence and Dispossessive Litigation in Korea."
46. Yoonkyung Lee. "Sky Protest: New Forms of Labor Resistance in Neoliberal Korea," 3–4.
47. The six protesters were workers of Dongyang Cement (where subcontracted workers formed a labor union and were instantly laid off in 2014), Sejong Hotel (where management set up a pro-management union in 2011), members of the Asahi Glass-Irregular Workers' Union (formed by subcontracted workers who were instantly laid off in 2015), Cort-Cortech (factory closing and mass lay-off in 2007), workers of HytecRCD (later renamed to Hydis; factory closing and mass lay-off in 2013), and members of the Hyundai Motor-Irregular Workers' Union (demanding conversion to regular employment in 2012).
48. The right to collective association (i.e., labor union), the right to collective action, and the right to collective bargaining.

49. Mi-ri Im. *Yŏlsa: Punno wa sŭlp'ŭm ŭi chŏngch'ihak* (Martyrs: The Politics of Wrath and Sorrow). Seoul: Owŏl ŭi pom, 2017 and Sun-Chul Kim. "The Trajectory of Protest Suicide in South Korea, 1970–2015." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51:1 (2021), 38–63.
50. Im, *Yŏlsa*, 2017 and Kim, "The Trajectory of Protest Suicide," 2021, 38–63.
51. Ji-bang Kim, "P'aŏp sonbaeso (Damage compensation lawsuits after labor strike)," *Kukmin Ilbo*, October 27, 2016: http://news.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0923634068 (accessed March 2, 2018).
52. Sonchapko. "The 2017 Report on Damage Compensation Seizure and Labor Repression Cases," 8–10.
53. Yoonkyung Lee. "Neoliberal Methods of Labor Repression: Privatized Violence and Dispossessive Litigation in Korea," 34.
54. Moon-young Lee. "Urinŭn ijeya kulttukesŏ naeryŏwatta (We have now come down from the chimney)," *Hankyoreh*, February 3, 2017: http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/labor/781268.html (accessed November 1, 2018).
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56. Charles Tilly. "Spaces of Contention," *Mobilization* 5.2 (2000): 135–159.

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