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Irregular Employment and Irregular Workers: Industrial relations and trade union movement

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Non-standard employment forms have been gaining in importance in advanced countries since the 1980s, with the growing labour market participation of women and continuing mass unemployment. The increasing of more flexible employment in the form of part-time, temporary and help-agency work is seen as a alternative to the rigid internal labor market system in most neoliberal countries. But it is true, also that the increasing of them has caused the polarization of labor market as well as of society in Korea. And some say that is resulted from the Neoliberal Globalization.

Since early 1980s, the labour market in Korea has given rise to a rapid growth in contingent workforce. After economic crisis in 1997, the contingent workers have expanded over the half of total workforce in Korea. The number of irregular employees has over the years increased steadily, from 7.37 million in 2000 to 8.7 million in 2007. The most important thing is the working conditions of irregular workers are much worse than them of regular workers. For example, taking the wage of regular employees as found in the supplementary Survey of the Economically Active Population Survey as 100, the wage of workers in irregular employment has around 51~53.

The fact that irregular workers make up more than a half of the total working population, all sorts of discrimination is rampant in the place of work, and some 90% of workers remain un-organised and unable to enjoy or exercise the constitutionally guaranteed rights is in itself an indictment that the government has failed in its responsibility to promote workers' human rights, that the trade union movement has failed to live up to its principles of solidarity, and that the business has neglected its social responsibility.

In recent years, trade union movement has sought to organize the irregular workers, called 'organizing strategy'. Although they play an important role in the world of work, it said to be very difficult to organize them. Their rotating work schedules and their high job mobilities has prevented to organize. Besides, under the current system of enterprise unionism, organizing irregular workers may not provide grounds for significant change.

However, labour unions are thought to remain the most effective tools in decreasing the discrimination of irregular employment.

Recently, so many have been studied about the irregular employment relationship. As they find out, irregular employment relationship is influenced by legal institution and management strategies unlike regular employment. But most studies have focused on the features of their strikes, not collective bargaining or institutionalized irregular employment relationship.

So, our analysis focused on the latter to expand the current studies on the irregular employment. Our questions are as follows: First, what are differences between Korean situation and the other about the characteristic of irregular employment relationship? Second, we need to assess the 'organizing strategy on the un-organized irregular workers' which KCTU has got to work since in 2005. Third, most of the organizing movements made the very long labor-management conflicts. While doing so, what is the role of the regular worker trade unions and their confederation?