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Labor Movements and Solidarity

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Recently, trade union movement in Korea has been faced with the weakening of class representation and social isolation. Trade union has experienced the fall of union density, collective agreement coverage, political influence. But there are few new practice to overcome these crisis of labor movements.

Many people have pointed out the total crisis of labor movements. Especially labor movements have not played the active role to reduce the polarization of labor (wage, employment security, social insurance etc.). Now trade union should do the 'solidarity strategy' for the labor justice through the industrial union practice and social network with civil society.

Before 1987, Korean labor movements have developed the protection strategies of the worker's rights against the authoritarian labor control policy of government. After democratization period, trade unions have expanded the organizational basis and improved the economic conditions and workplace citizenship. But current labor movements have experienced the difficulty in the solution of labor polarizations, because of the regular union members-oriented activity, namely 'closed organizational representations'. In other words, labor movements are facing with the 'solidarity crisis'.

According to Zoll, social solidarity consisted of two categories, 'internal solidarity' and 'external solidarity'. The former means the cohesive power of the specific organization members, the latter means the alliance power of the other social groups. Labor movements need to develop the internal and external solidarity for the solution of the social inequalities.

Our labor movements have some weakness in developing the solidarity. As workers achieved the economic outcome since 1990s, they stayed the individual utilitarianism and played the passive role in the union activity. Furthermore union members experienced the serious employment insecurity during IMF economic crisis and union's inability for the employment protection. In result labor movements in Korea have undergone the decrease of internal solidarity that realize the organizational unity and mobilization ability for the 10 years.

Labor movements showed the serious weakness for the external solidarity. Now trade unions didn't protect many workers (irregular, unorganized workers) and didn't overcome the usual practices of the organizational discrimination. Although trade union leadership promoted the external solidarity policy for the unorganized and irregular workers, they only achieved the restrictive outcome. In the solidarity activity with social movements, labor movements often focused in the short-term problem solution.

We would like to propose some practical tasks of the labor movements for the solidarity reconstruction in current instable world.

Firstly, labor movements need to reconstruct the reflexive leadership that can strengthen the collective solidarity. New leadership has to promote various policies and practices for the development of collective relationships and social solidarity.

Secondly, labor movements need to show the political vision of solidarity and overcome the practices of company unionism. Especially we have to construct the organization and activity system of industry union instead of company union practices. Industry union can form the 'organic solidarity' for the harmony of the various workers interests.

Thirdly, labor movements need to strengthen the practice system with 'community' for a basis. Community activity of labor movement makes the emotional solidarity between union members and unorganized workers in the region level. These activities create the practical base for overcome the company union problems. Labor movements can reconstruct the region level solidarity system through the social network between workers and social movement organizations.