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The Internet and Labour Education

I . Objective and Method

Korea is fast establishing itself as an "information society", with the ratio of broadband Internet access surpassing 50% mark and the number of users reaching, as of the year-end in 2002, 2.6 million. Use of computers and internet in the labour movement is also spreading fast and wide; and the younger generation for whom the use of information communication technology has become a way of life is fast developing into the new ranks of workers. The labour education, however, has yet begun to contemplate an active use of information communication technology. This study examines the various cases of labour education undertaken in other countries with the use of Internet, and explore the various ways forward for labour education using the new medium.

II . Information Society and the Labour Movement

It is not only impossible, but also not desirable, for the labour movement, finding itself in the rapid development of the information society, to remain blind to the realities created by the new environment. The labour movement needs to develop a comprehensive strategy, on the one hand, to overcome the negative aspects of the information society, and on the other, to maximise the positive aspects for its own purpose and objective.

One of the key challenges for the labour movement, in confronting the information society, is to bring about a fundamental change in the fabric of informational communication technology, where the design and development are monopolized by the capital, being applied for the consolidation of dominance and control, with a sole aim for maximization of profit. The working people should become the centre of the development of information communication technology, aimed at bringing about an enhancement of the quality of life. People as a whole should be able to contribute and shape its development, evaluation, and its introduction into their lives and work.

Given the reality where information society is being established coupled with the neoliberal wave, the labour movement needs to develop a clear understanding of its various impact on work and lives to construct a meaningful comprehensive strategy. In doing so, the labour movement will need to link up with the civil society and progressive ICT activists to shape an active political and social intervention.

Thirdly, the labour movement needs to be deeply conscious of the impact of information society in breaking down the national borders and laying the foundation for a global playing field for transnational capital. As a response whose reach is confined to the national domain is severely limited, a concerted effort needs to be focused on developing a global response, developing a networked solidarity and modes of action.

III. Information Society and Labour Education

1. A Basic Understanding of "Online Education"

"Online Education" involves, just like "conventional" lecture-centred education, interaction between the educator and learners and amongst learners with the use of online education media that enables the linking up of people separated by distance.

The advantages of "online education" can be specified as in the following:

- * learning can take place anywhere and any time, as it is not confined by time or space

- * while it is costly to build the initial infrastructure compared to "offline education", it is more efficient once the system has been established

- * it is undertaken as "self-study" as the learners themselves can plan their schedule

- * diversification is possible as the learners can select their own education material available online

- * it can be complemented by "community service", use of various audio visual materials, and two-way interactive process, utilizing the various features of the internet

- * active discussion can take place through interactive two-way communication facilities

The strength of "offline education", stemming from face to face process and concrete exercises, needs to be incorporated in a mutually complementary manner.

2. A Critical Assessment of the Existing Labour Education

Most of trade unions in South Korea suffer from limited resources, unable to consider conducting residential education for most of its members. While unions at companies of larger size are relatively better off, members of unions, which are either weak or based in smaller workplaces, especially those workers in small enterprises or in irregular employment, do have any opportunity to take part in education. Women workers, in general, are devoid of any education opportunity.

In case where a union is able to schedule an education programme, its staff has to invest much time and resources to secure an appropriate space, instructors, and various education equipment and materials. On top of that, the union staff frequently has to spend the last minutes before the start of the course to confirm the actual participation by designated workers. The cost a union has to bear in the conduct of an education programme is earmarked most for the transportation subsidy for the participants, the rental cost - both for accommodation and the education space, rather than in actual preparation of the education substance. In general, a union is subject to serious embedded inefficiencies.

In the case of a residential programme, a union usually packs an excessive quantity of information in a course because of the desire to go through a lot of material within the limited opportunity. This also meant that much of trade union education is lecture-type, suffering the limits intrinsic to such a form of education.

3. The Need for Internet-based Labour Education

The greatest advantage for internet-based labour education is its relative freedom from time and space limitation and the relative limitlessness in terms of participants. Workers or union members are able to access the education programme at a time and place of their own choosing.

For the instructors and course managers, the cost for the conduct of the education, once the initial infrastructure investment is completed, is relatively inexpensive. They

can, also, readjust the course material and resources to respond effectively to the changing situations in the society and the labour movement.

Workers or union members can access and take part diverse range of education according to his or her need by shifting through the websites. They would be able to acquire knowledge and skills they need in a flexible manner on the basis of a plan and schedule designed by themselves. For the course coordinators, they would be able to exchange share information and resources with others to pave the way for a more efficient work in the preparation and production of education curriculum.

The utilization of information technology opens the way for the production of a more diverse range and interesting education material compared to text-based production. The use of wide range of multi-media contents can assist in securing the continuing interest of the learners and in preparing more lively resource materials. The ability to utilize the full range of technology towards realising two-way interactive communication can also contribute to the creation of a more participatory education environment that will enable the learners to become more active in the overall shaping of the substance and the course of the education programmes.

The absence of a consolidated and systematic labour education courses mean a wide range of fluctuation in the quality and substance of education, influenced by the geographical location, target groups, and the instructors. The wide spread provision of internet-based education could contribute to the establishment of a systematic education material and uniform standard in course content, avoiding the fluctuation in the level education according to different instructors, paving the way for the delivery of uniformly high quality education. This system would be easily made use of by younger generation of workers who are already "literate" in ICT use from their schooling and other previous experiences.

IV. Philosophy of Internet-based Labour Education

The greatest distinguishing features of computer-based communication compared to mass media, such as television and radio, are its "interactive" or two-way communication capacity and its "anonymousness". These features provide channels to avoid the certain "coerciveness" of the "real" world, setting an environment for the

learners to present their opinions and views freely, and to adjust their views along the course of the interaction.

The "online" discussion enables all individuals to post their views and to communicate with all others with equal right. There is no pre-determined "provider" and "receiver"; instead it opens the communication to an active interaction where each and all participant is able to reach out to all the rest.

The most important interactive activity among the learners involves in online education that arises in the course of online discussion. Online discussion, unlike face-to-face discussion, takes place in the cyberspace in the process of communication amongst the set of learners engaged in joint work-task or discussion on specific topics. Unlike in one-directional communication set-up, learners are able, in such a multi-directional communication, take active part in the discussion, creating their own environment for cooperative learning.

The greatest value of internet-based labour education, therefore, lies not in "efficient delivery of information", but in enabling each and all persons involved an equal opportunity to put their views across to everyone. Distance learning, while it has the advantage, by virtue of its technological features, of being able to deliver large quantity of information simultaneously, its difference from the existing forms of education lies in opening up a space where the views of large number of people are channeled into communication.

V. The Status of Internet-based Labour Education in Korea

1. The Trade Union Situation

The websites created and maintained by trade unions in Korea are mostly devoted to publicity work and data bank for union activity related text resource materials. There is yet any real website that is created for the purpose of educational activity

According to a survey conducted by the KCTU, its website recorded a total of 180 million clicks in 2002. An average of 50,000 people, an annual total of 18 million people visit the KCTU's website. However, the number of clicks on single items listed on "open fora" where visitors are able to upload their own views or read other's writings do not

surpass 100 in general, with exceptions during the periods of intense struggle or conflict. It can be said, therefore, that the websites of the trade union movement national centres, such as, the KCTU or FKTU, are used as depository of (or access points for) information and news, rather than an active participatory space.

2. Cyber Labour University Following the Footsteps of Cheon Tae-il

The curriculum provided by the Cyber Labour University is set in two parts: a regular course and an open course. The regular course is composed of 6 semesters over a period of 6 years. A total of 48 credit points are required to graduate. Four subjects with 2 credit points each are provided in each semester. Each semester lasts six months, with five months devoted to lectures and one month for assessment. Off-line lectures are provided once a month in some 10 regions across the country.

The subjects provided in the first year are mainly general introductory courses in social sciences (political economy and sociology), history (Korean history, history of East Asia, and the Western history), general humanities (science and technology, culture and art, and human studies), and advanced humanities in philosophy and history of labour movement. Second year subjects involved lectures on the features and characteristics of the Korea society and introducing to various proposals for alternative society, providing an in-depth analysis, building on the first year's introductory courses. The third year curriculum is divided into two streams: political movement and trade union movement. Political movement stream focuses on the general theories and history of workers political movement and the various political movement initiatives in Korea. The trade union stream focuses on trade union movement, theories of organisation, and activities of trade union organisations, ranging from the national centre, industry-level organisations, and ground level activities.

Each subject is conducted through one weekly lectures (of around one hour), providing a total of 4 lectures a week. They are complemented by one off-line lecture (conducted on regional basis). Online lecture is conducted using a lecture-programme called GVA. It also makes use of electronic white-board for putting up focal points of the lecture (composed of texts, photos, and graphics). Lectures themselves are voice-based presentations by the lecturers. Video-tapes of off-line lectures are also made available for viewing. Off-line lectures are provided following the completion of 4 online lectures. Lecturers come face-to-face with the students to go through the education material and summary of the online lectures.

3. Teachers' Union's "Cham-Campus"

The Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU, Chunkyojo) developed into a mammoth mass organisation of 100,000 members (as of December 2002) in the short period since its legalisation, having been, for a long time, an outlawed union with fledgling membership of just over 10,000 committed activists. The rapid expansion of the membership in a short period of time has brought about a wide gap in the trade union consciousness between the pre-legalisation activists (and leaders) and the new post-legalisation membership. The union, faced with a challenge to develop a unified level of consciousness, established an online distance learning training centre, "Cham-Campus".

The lectures provided by the "Cham-Campus, are composed of work-related training, self-initiated training, and membership education. Work-related training is a credit-earning course registered with and certified by the Ministry of Education and Manpower. The union provides subsidies for the members who take this course. It is conducted over 4 to 6 weeks for one course totaling 30 hours of tuition another for 45 hour tuition. Self-initiated training is non-compulsory course devoted to self-development of the members. It takes over 2 months period for free of charge. It deals mainly with ICT-based education and hobby-general knowledge courses. Membership education is a free-of-charge online lecture series open to all union members. Various education materials, either developed by the union itself or obtained through outside agencies, are made available on the union's website for members or union's chapters to make use of.

The lectures run by the union itself use "Active Tutor" where the lectures make verbal presentation with the use of teaching aids, such as electronic white-board for summary and focal points (making use of texts, photos, and graphics).

VI. Cases of Internet-based Labour Education in Other Countries

1. SoliNet of the Canadian Union of Public Employees

Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is one of the largest unions in Canada with a total membership of some 500,000 and some 2,200 branches (or locals)

throughout the country. The union, sensing the need to build a national online communication network for active communication amongst its various locals and members, in 1985, developed a computer conferencing system called SoliNet, a first worker-generated system.

The main function of the SoliNet was a database of the various disputes and industrial actions aimed at providing various resources needed for the collective bargaining work of the union. It supports the union's campaigns by providing wide-ranging information needed by various union leaders, especially those responsible for collective bargaining. SoliNet also provided education service for the members through various short-term online education courses. In 1988, some 30 to 100 union members took part in each of the courses. Union educators working in different parts of the country were able to build a systematic education programme through discussions run through the SoliNet. The communication system also provided various news, information, and resources needed for union's and member's activities. It, thus, contributed to the consolidation of linkages and networking of the various locals spread out across the country. This led to the enhancement of the systematisation of the union's organisational work.

The SoliNet established by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, was made available to other unions and labour organisation. They were able to use the meeting rooms of the SoliNet for discussion on strategies for collective bargaining, and make use of the various news, discussion boards, and the short-term education courses, provided by the SoliNet. The network became a space for discussion, not only on trade union activities, but on the issues of politics and social concern, contributing to the consolidation of networking among the trade union activists in different regions, and the linkages between the trade union movement and other community and social movement groupings.

2. Labor Studies Program of the Athabasca University

The Athabasca University is an open online distance learning university established in 1970 with public funds by the Alberta Province government in Canada. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, after one year of preparatory online discussion, decided to establish and coordinate a "Labor Studies Program" as an online

undergraduate course at the Athabasca University. In 1994, the course was certified as a credit-earning program by the university.

There are three courses in the "Labor Studies Program". One is a regular diploma/degree course running over four years. A total 120 credit points obtained over four years leads to a Bachelor of Arts degree. The course is divided into compulsory subjects and selective subjects. The compulsory subjects are "Introduction to Labor Studies Program (3 credit points), "History of Canadian Labor Movement" (6), "Sociology of Labor and Industry" (3), totaling 12 credit points. Each of the subjects is composed of five to nine lectures. There are some 13 selective subjects offered to the students. Students can enlist for a total of 27 credit points. The second stream in the "Labor Studies Program" is a short-term concentrated diploma/degree course. An arts degree can be obtained by acquiring a total of 90 credit points over 3 years. The third stream is a credit recognition course where a student can earn 12 credit points from 3 compulsory subjects and earn 18 credit points from 13 other selective subjects.

One of the key features of the "Labor Studies Program" is credit recognition for studies in education programs provided by trade unions or other distance learning institutions. For example, three credit points are recognised for the completion of the "CAW Paid Education Leave Course" while worker-students who have completed the education coursed provided by the "Canadian Postal Workers Union" earn six credit points. Students who have obtained a total of 30 credit points, 90 credit points, or 120 credit points, partly through the credits recognised for union provided education courses, are given the respective diplomas/degrees.

3. Internet Study Circle (ISC) of the IFWEA

"Internet Study Circle" was developed in 1996 by the IFWEA as an international education program to facilitate an effective response to globalisation. In its 1996 world congress, IFWEA adopted a resolution on globalisation and workers education which stress the importance of international workers education movement in capacity building for workers for an effective response to the global economic changes. IFWEA adopted the task of defending the interest of international working class in time of neoliberal globalisation and changes in economic order as the main theme of its education programmes. Following the congress, IFWEA devoted itself to coordinating education

programmes under the main theme, developing educational materials and disseminating and sharing its resources.

IFWEA adopted "international study circle" as a vehicle for conducting a world wide education programmes on important international issues. The capacity to conduct an international course was boosted by the development in the new information communication technology. It became possible to contemplate linking up workers and unions across the world using the Internet as the medium for discussion and dissemination of information. Although nothing could replace the value of actual face-to-face meetings amongst workers, computer assisted communication provided much more cost-effective means for international linkages than regular international meetings.

Each course in ISC runs for 6 weeks with 2 hours log-in time per week. Each group has a coordinator who entrusted to prepare reports. Prepared reports are posted on the ISC website for use by other groups. The method allows for workers across the world to share information, experiences and thoughts on a common issue, leading to a better understanding of the impact of globalisation on workers in different parts of the world. ISC is a participatory education programme, where participants can determine the shape and the direction of the courses. ISC also aims to provide the ground works for common action and long-term solidarity links amongst the participating workers and unions.

VII. Prospects for Internet-based Labour Education and the Way Forward

1. The Prospects for Internet-based Labour Education

The rapid deepening of information society is arousing a great anxiety and desire throughout the society for "re-education" for fear of falling behind the new technology and value systems. The introduction of the concept of "life-long education" has also given rise to a new drive for self-initiated learning on issues and areas of one's interest outside the regular schooling learning. The labour movement will also need to respond effectively to the development and wide-usage of ICT and the Internet. Labour education will need to develop a capacity to utilize the strength and advantage of the new ICT to broaden its scope and to explore new dimensions that can be brought by the new media.

2. The Way Forward for Internet-based Labour Education

The first task in vitalising the internet-based education lies in establishing the basic infrastructure. This calls for a significant change in the thinking of the trade union leadership and education coordinators concerning the use of computers and the Internet. A fancy website devoted to publicity does not lead to a full utilisation of the potential of the Internet. The basic question that guides the thinking about the use of Internet evolves around the challenge of encouraging member participation in the life and activities of a union, creating a vibrant organisation with full and free flow of communication amongst the leaders, activists, and members of the union. The motivation for exploring the potential of the Internet stems from the very basic challenge the unions have always faced. It is this motivation that would inspire the labour education to explore the interactive potential of the Internet.

The responsibility for taking up the challenge of internet-based labour education lies mostly with national industry level organizations or national centers of the trade union movement, rather than local units. Education coordinators will need to explore in-depth on the education potential of the ICT and distance learning, by organizing study teams, workshops, and various experiments. There is a need, also, to produce the basic trade union materials concerning its activities and methodologies using the various multi-media formats. Resources thus created can be made available to unions and members at the various levels of the movement through the websites of the relevant organization. This would meet the needs of the education materials experienced by education coordinators at different levels of the organization. This would also contribute to creating a uniform level of consciousness among the members. The whole project could start with online discussion among the education coordinators dealing with day to day work, planning, and implementation of education programmes. Through this, it would be possible to secure a unity in the education work of the organisation and a consolidation of the capacity of education coordinators.

The kind of work unit level organisations of the trade union movement can and needs to undertake is enhancing the ability of the members in using computer and ICT. Unit unions would need to bring the issue to the collective bargaining process to secure various needs, such as, education time and cost provision, to create the opportunity for the members. Union organisations would need, also, to explore the ways to enhance

coordination between ICT department and the education and publicity department for an effective development.

Various labour movement organisations can contribute to this process by concentrating on developing education programmes that unions cannot, as yet, produce themselves. In particular, a systematic education programme which could link up with isolated workers, such as those in irregular employment or small scale workplace, who cannot rely of the resources of an organisation to overcome the reality of discrimination.