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## Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States

Jennifer Jihye Chun

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## Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States

### Abstract

[Excerpt] What might the striking convergence in the trajectories of the South Korean and U.S. labor movements mean for the dynamics of change taking place for labor on a global scale? To what extent does the embrace of marginalized groups of workers such as immigrants and women by previously exclusionary labor movements signal the development of more inclusive and democratic forms of labor politics? How can workers subject to overlapping forms of social, economic, and political marginality actually transform the unequal relations of power and domination that underpin downgraded forms of employment?

The answers to these questions constitute the heart of this book. What unfolds is a story about a sea change in the dynamics of labor politics and organization. South Korea and the United States have two different paths of industrial development, histories of class formation, and positions in the larger world economic system, yet both labor movements are experiencing profound shifts in who the "working class" is and how to build collective power under processes of globalization.

### Keywords

labor movement, South Korea, United States, union, organization, globalization

### Comments

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# ORGANIZING AT THE MARGINS

The Symbolic Politics of Labor in  
South Korea and the United States

**Jennifer Jihye Chun**

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# Contents

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|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Preface  | ix         |
| Acknowledgments  | xv         |
| Abbreviations  | xix        |
| <b>1. The Symbolic Leverage of Labor</b>   | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>2. Employer and State Offensives against Unionized Workers</b>                                    | <b>24</b>  |
| <b>3. Reconstructing the Marginalized Workforce</b>  | <b>44</b>  |
| <b>4. Social Movement Legacies and Organizing the Marginalized</b>                                   | <b>68</b>  |
| <b>5. What Is an “Employer”? Organizing Subcontracted University Janitors</b>                        | <b>101</b> |
| <b>6. What Is a “Worker”? Organizing Independently Contracted Home Care Workers and Golf Caddies</b> | <b>142</b> |
| <b>7. Dilemmas of Organizing Workers at the Margins</b>  | <b>171</b> |
| Notes  | 185        |
| Bibliography   | 199        |
| Index  | 215        |

In the summer of 1998, I left Berkeley, California, and arrived in Seoul, Korea. I was immediately swept up in a wave of union protests organized by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)—the militant democratic wing of the labor movement. With raised fists and indignant voices, hundreds of thousands of unionists participated in mass rallies, marches, and strikes to express their opposition to structural adjustment reforms by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).<sup>1</sup> While the Korean government insisted that privatization, labor market deregulation, and flexible labor law revisions were all necessary for the country to overcome the so-called IMF crisis, the nation's highly militant workforce rejected the assault on their wages and livelihoods. From the huge banners that were prominently displayed at public demonstrations to the synchronized chants of protesting unionists, the terms of their opposition were clear: "Eradicate Unilateral Economic Restructuring! Guarantee Job Security! Defend Workers' Right to Live!" There would be no national economic recovery off the backs of workers.

The mass opposition of Korean workers to the "flexible" prescriptions of neoliberal globalization was exactly what led my ethnographic pursuits from one of Silicon Valley's high-tech shop floors to the contentious streets of downtown Seoul. My previous research examining low-paid assembly work, and much of the literature on the fate of trade unions under globalization, indicated that workers had little, if any, power to challenge the flexible imperatives of today's highly competitive global economy. While touted for its "win-win" advantages

for both workers and managers alike, the drive for flexibility was more than a business strategy to boost profits and efficiency; it constituted a powerful disciplinary force upon workers, whose very livelihoods had become subordinated to a dizzying array of performance indicators, quality-control measures, and market forecasts (Chun 2001). The militant struggles of Korean unionists, however, seemed to defy the universalizing laws of the new global marketplace. Rather than accept its inevitability, the Korean labor movement was mounting a full-scale effort to challenge neoliberal restructuring and its flexible prescriptions. While the IMF's structural adjustment loan conditionalities were virulently criticized, the Korean government's attempt to operationalize its universalizing mandates were also harshly censured. The mass-based, politically charged defiance of Korean unionists, I speculated, could signal the beginnings of a potential shift in the international geography of working-class power. Although workers and trade unions in the advanced industrialized core of the Global North had submitted to the logic of flexibility, however unwillingly at first, perhaps the workers and trade unions of the rapidly industrializing peripheries of the Global South could chart an alternative course.<sup>2</sup>

In a few short months, however, I would encounter the first of several violated expectations in the messy world of ethnography. Rather than lead a dynamic worker-based movement against the flexible prescriptions of global neoliberalism, the Korean labor movement seemed to be imploding. In August 1998, the leadership of one of the most militant of KCTU's member unions, the Hyundai Motors Union in Ulsan, consented to the mass layoffs under the rationale of "necessary business restructuring," igniting a chain of events that began undermining the strength and legitimacy of organized labor, especially militant forms of unionism (see chapter 2). Skyrocketing layoffs, unprecedented unemployment, and mass social dislocation followed the state deregulation of the labor market and the privatization of public industries. The criminalization of union militancy recommenced under the guise of shepherding national economic recovery. As the national economic crisis unfolded, the seduction of mass labor militancy gave way to a more sobering look at the internal schisms playing out among workers and their collective organizations, not only in Korea but also around the world. As more and more workers faced downward pressures on their wages and working conditions, clear fault lines began to emerge. Unions representing more privileged sectors of the industrial workforce increasingly prioritized the job security and interests of their members at the expense of more disadvantaged groups of workers, thereby exacerbating capital's divide-and-conquer strategies. Whereas in the United States, dividing lines cut across race, immigration status, and gender, in South Korea, they primarily cut

across gender (see chapter 3). “Women fired first” seemed to be the overarching principle of mass layoffs, especially at the height of Korea’s financial crisis, and some male-dominated unions were accused of using women workers as a buffer to mitigate the damaging effects of workplace restructuring on male members.

I left South Korea after fifteen months of fieldwork in an ethnographic haze. Instead of documenting the vibrancy of industrial unionism, my notes told a story of a militant, yet highly divided and conflict-ridden labor movement. While I had not anticipated writing another account of organized labor’s defeats at the hands of global capital and neoliberal states, the Korean labor movement seemed to be heading on the same downward spiral as labor movements in the Global North, left only to try to slow down the erosion and decay.

To my surprise, the year 2000 threw up another violated expectation. After decades of exclusion, the Executive Committee of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) issued a historic reversal of its anti-immigrant stance. Not only did the AFL-CIO Executive Council publicly declare that it “stands proudly on the side of immigrant workers,” but it also called for sweeping protections of undocumented workers, including the repeal of employer sanctions, unconditional amnesty for undocumented immigrants and laws that provide full workplace rights for immigrant workers.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in South Korea, in response to the exclusionary tendencies of big enterprise unions, the KCTU elected a new president in 2000 who passionately reaffirmed the KCTU’s commitment to act as the “the genuine representative of all working people, including those workers in non-standard employment, the unemployed, and the vast array of workers in small enterprises.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, the independent KCTU and the historically government-linked, more politically moderate Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), once starkly opposed, began uniting under the cause of “abolishing irregular employment” (*pjǒng’gyujik ch’ölpye*).

This unexpected convergence became the new starting point for my project. Previously stigmatized as “unorganizable,” the ranks of unorganized workers in low-paid, insecure jobs represent the new *cause célèbre* of labor movements in two very different countries—South Korea and the United States (see chapter 4). Although the embrace of historically excluded sectors of the workforce in both countries is partial and contested, the relative successes of local organizing cases waged by marginalized workers are redefining the priorities and the vocabularies of crisis-ridden labor movements. In the United States, low-wage service workers in highly insecure, precarious jobs—many of whom are immigrants and women—have won historic victories in their fight



to secure more just living and working conditions. By challenging the institutional policies and cultural values that permit workers and their families to live in a chronic state of poverty, immigrant janitors, hotel workers, home care workers, and others are paving the way for the renewal of the U.S. labor movement. In South Korea as well, low-paid workers in luxury hotels, country clubs, cafeterias, and other service sectors—many of whom are women—have begun challenging the deterioration of their wages and working conditions under more insecure forms of irregular employment. Given the harsh climate of anti-unionism that has followed the Asian debt crisis (1997–1998), the unexpected militancy of irregularly employed women workers is injecting renewed vitality into the Korean labor movement.<sup>5</sup>

The gains made by these groups of workers are still relatively minor with respect to the deepening crises plaguing organized labor movements in today's global economy. However, they are part of a growing effort by unions, community organizations, social justice organizations, immigrant rights advocates, and labor activists, among others, to prioritize the struggles of workers that have been historically relegated to the bottom of national labor market hierarchies (see chapter 4). What might the striking convergence in the trajectories of the South Korean and U.S. labor movements mean for the dynamics of change taking place for labor on a global scale? To what extent does the embrace of marginalized groups of workers such as immigrants and women by previously exclusionary labor movements signal the development of more inclusive and democratic forms of labor politics? How can workers subject to overlapping forms of social, economic, and political marginality actually transform the unequal relations of power and domination that underpin downgraded forms of employment?

The answers to these questions constitute the heart of this book. What unfolds is a story about a sea change in the dynamics of labor politics and organization. South Korea and the United States have two different paths of industrial development, histories of class formation, and positions in the larger world economic system, yet both labor movements are experiencing profound shifts in who the "working class" is and how to build collective power under processes of globalization. Through a comparative historical analysis of the changing dynamics of the Korean and U.S. labor movements, the first part of the book reveals that global economic transformations are reshaping the balance of power among capital, labor, and the state in strikingly similar ways. While each labor movement previously built its base of power on the capacity of some of the most powerful workers in the labor market to extract concessions from capital

and the state, the reconfiguration of national terrains of unionism under processes of globalization has begun shifting organized labor's attention to some of the most vulnerable groups of workers, especially the growing ranks of (im)migrant and women workers employed in low-paid, insecure service jobs. This shift has revived the importance of social movement-inspired forms of unionism that seek to challenge the overlapping conditions of economic and social marginalization.

Through a comparative analysis of ethnographic case studies of labor organizing, the second half of the book illustrates exactly how and under what conditions marginalized groups of workers can challenge the downward pressures on their wages and working conditions. In particular, I focus on two groups of workers in low-paid, service jobs: subcontracted university janitors and independently contracted personal service workers. Rather than rely solely on conventional tactics such as the labor strike, which harness workers' power at the point of production, these workers are cultivating an alternative form of leverage based on symbolic politics; that is, "symbolic leverage." By waging dramatic, morally charged struggles against the injustice of their living and working conditions, janitors, home care workers, and golf caddies are seeking to transform the relations of power and inequality that underpin downgraded forms of low-paid, service work. As I elaborate in chapters 5 and 6, "symbolic leverage" roots the source of worker power in the contested arena of culture and public debates about values. By shifting the focus of their struggles away from narrowly defined labor disputes, symbolic leverage aims to undermine official sources of authority such as the law and demand alternative applications of social justice.

By emphasizing how processes of globalization are reconfiguring national terrains of unionism in unexpected ways, this book attempts to provide a systematic account of the shifting balance of power among labor, capital, and the state and its implications for how workers and their collective organizations are refashioning their politics and practices. My aim is not to write a comparative history of trade union renewal, nor is it to produce a "best practices" guide that weighs the benefits and disadvantages of various organizing strategies. It is, rather, to convey an account of "what might be called a conjuncture, a turning point, a break, a rupture" (Cooper 1987, xii). The story at the heart of this book is about exposing the limitations of old ways of organizing the workforce, based on historical relationships among labor, capital, and the state, and uncovering new ways of strengthening the basis of worker power, especially when approached from the perspective of workers on the bottom of

social and economic hierarchies. In a global economy that feeds on and profits from social inequalities, rooting worker power in the contested politics of justice is central to any effort to produce more emancipatory possibilities for future generations.

Please note that all Korean words have been Romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system; exceptions are published Korean authors and well-known Korean names and events using a different spelling in English.

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teasing, irreverent humor, and unflinching commitment to irregular workers and class liberation. I am particularly grateful to Soonkyoung Cho, Kyungsook Choi, Bonghee Chu, Hyewon Chung, Jooyeon Jeong, Myoung Joon Kim, Yoon-joo Lee, and Aelim Yoon for helping me make sense of the inspiring history and complex politics of the Korean labor movement.

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## Abbreviations

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|         |   |
|---------|---|
| ACORN   | Associations of Community Organizations for Reform NOW                |
| AFL-CIO | American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations |
| BLS     | U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics                                       |
| CIO     | Congress of Industrial Organizations                                  |
| ERAP    | Economic Research and Action Project                                  |
| 88CC    | 88 Country Club   |
| FLSA    | Fair Labor Standards Act (US)   |
| FKTU    | Federation of Korean Trade Unions                                     |
| GDP     | Gross Domestic Product  |
| GM      | General Motors  |
| HCECP   | Harvard Committee of Employment and Contracting Procedures            |
| HERE    | Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees                              |
| HPLM    | Harvard Progressive Labor Movement                                    |
| ICE     | Immigration and Customs Enforcement                                   |
| IHSS    | In-Home Supportive Service System                                     |
| ILO     | International Labor Organization                                      |
| IMF     | International Monetary Fund   |
| INS     | Immigration and Naturalization Services                               |
| IWWA    | Incheon Women Workers Association                                     |
| JforJ   | “Justice for Janitors”  |
| KCTU    | Korean Confederation of Trade Unions                                  |

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| KLI   | Korea Labor Institute                                  |
| KSPW  | Korean Solidarity against Precarious Work              |
| KT    | Korea Telecom  |
| KWWA  | Korean Women Workers Association                       |
| KWWAU | Korean Women Workers Associations United               |
| KWTU  | Korean Women's Trade Union                             |
| LSA   | Labor Standards Act (South Korea)                      |
| NACLA | North American Congress on Latin America               |
| NFWA  | National Farm Workers Association                      |
| NGO   | Nongovernmental organization                           |
| NICs  | Newly Industrializing Countries                        |
| NLRA  | National Labor Relations Act                           |
| NLRB  | National Labor Relations Board                         |
| OECD  | Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development |
| PATCO | Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization      |
| PASC  | Personal Assistance Services Council                   |
| PD    | "Participatory Democracy"                              |
| PICIS | Policy and Information Center of Internal Solidarity   |
| PSSP  | People's Solidarity for Social Progress                |
| PWC   | Power of the Working Class                             |
| ROK   | Republic of Korea                                      |
| SCALE | Student Coalition Against Labor Exploitation           |
| SDS   | Students for a Democratic Society                      |
| SNU   | Seoul National University                              |
| SEIU  | Service Employees International Union                  |
| SWTU  | Seoul Women's Trade Union                              |
| TAN   | Transnational advocacy network                         |
| UAW   | United Auto Workers                                    |
| UFCW  | United Food and Commercial Workers                     |
| UFW   | United Farm Workers                                    |
| UFCW  | United Food and Commercial Workers                     |
| USAS  | United Students Against Sweatshops                     |
| USC   | University of Southern California                      |



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# **ORGANIZING AT THE MARGINS**

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## THE SYMBOLIC LEVERAGE OF LABOR

**SEIU gets their moral center from the janitors.... We are the campaign that people in the public look at and gives SEIU its glamour and identity. People say all the time that janitors are the “urban farmworkers.” They have that kind of moral cause that people are really able to unite around.... We put janitors forward as examples of what’s wrong—economic injustice. But they are not victims of it, because people are standing up and fighting militant actions in the street. The personal stories that we put out there [about the hardships of health care workers, immigrants, and mothers]...in my opinion, that’s really where public support comes from.**

—Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizer

**When I see middle-aged or elderly women [*ajumma*] find a way through labor unions to show off the abilities and skills they have had all these years, it is moving and inspirational. I see how all their energies and capacities were repressed, all because they were women, working at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, earning minimum wages, as lowly janitors and irregular [*pjông’gyujik*] workers. These people meet women’s movements and women’s labor unions and they just blossom and come to life. There are some amazing orators and great leaders, and that’s because their stories are rooted in life experiences. Sixty-something union members saying they can now live with pride.... It’s only when the majority of the public participates that we’ll see meaningful change.**

—Korean Women’s Trade Union (KWTU) organizer

The struggles of janitors as well as other low-paid service workers—many of whom are immigrants, people of color, and women—demonstrate that building power from the margins is not only possible but *pivotal* to the future of workers and their collective organizations in the twenty-first century. The unexpected

makeover of one of the most unglamorous segments of the U.S. workforce speaks to the transformative potential of marginality. By rendering the injustice of poverty wages and social inequality both intimate and public, SEIU has refashioned the identity of janitors from one of the most undervalued and demeaned segments of society into the “moral center” of the most rapidly growing union in the United States. The use of tactics and vocabularies from civil rights–inspired unions such as the United Farm Workers (UFW) in the 1960s and 1970s has also garnered rare public support for unpopular trade unions. As the etymological origin of the word janitors to the two-headed Roman god Janus suggests, the role of janitors as doorkeepers or, more specifically, guards to the gates of heaven, makes the figure of the janitor a powerful catalyst of transitions and new beginnings.<sup>1</sup> Since the SEIU launched its morally charged “Justice for Janitors” (JforJ) campaign in 1985, one hundred thousand new janitors as well as many other low-paid service workers such as home care workers, nursing care workers, and security guards have joined the union’s ranks. While its dynamic growth and aggressive organizing campaigns have created schisms and conflicts, the SEIU has led one of the most decisive shifts in the contemporary U.S. labor movement.

Likewise, in South Korea the growing ranks of *pijöng’gyujik* (hereafter translated as “irregular” or “nonstandard”) workers—many of whom are women employed in low-paid and insecure jobs—are redefining the landscape of unionism. By “irregular” workers, I refer to those workers employed outside the boundaries of full-time work under a single employer, including part-time, temporary, subcontracted, independently contracted, and daily workers among others, and thus, often denied basic rights entitled to fully employed workers such as paid sick and vacation leave, employer-paid health care, unemployment compensation, and seniority. No longer willing to accept the stigma and chronic poverty associated with work on the “lowest rungs of the social hierarchy,” a new generation is rising up against the rampant cost-cutting and discrimination associated with the post-IMF deregulated labor relations climate. While “elderly women” and “lowly janitors” do not represent the “typical” image of a militant and male trade unionist, they too are joining unions and taking to the streets. Women’s movement organizations and newly formed independent women’s unions provide an important vehicle to empower “sixty-something union members” to live with pride and dignity, according to the KWTU organizer quoted above. For those who never imagined wearing a union vest or participating in a “demo” (*taemo*), a colloquial term for mass protests, the experience of speaking out against the unjust terms of irregular employment is both uplifting and transformative not only for individual workers but also for the broader labor movement. In addition to striking workers in the

auto and steel factories, shipbuilding and transportation, telecommunications and other white-collar sectors, images of union struggles now include the primarily female workforce of golf game assistants and home study tutors misclassified as independent contractors; hotel room cleaners, school cafeteria workers, and train attendants employed under outsourced and often negligent third parties; and telephone operators and retail cashiers employed under highly insecure and unregulated short-term contracts.

The upsurge of labor unrest by atypical and vulnerable segments of the workforce in South Korea and the United States as well as around the world is reviving interest in the transformation of trade unions and labor movements, more broadly (Clawson 2003; Cornfield and McCammon 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Milkman 2006; Moody 1997; Munck and Waterman 1999; Voss and Sherman 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001). Despite widespread consensus from both sides of the political spectrum that trade unions have become obsolete in a globalizing world, many are beginning to deliver optimistic forecasts for the future. The development of new organizational strategies and forms that can outsmart anti-union employers (e.g., comprehensive organizing campaigns), outmaneuver transnational corporations (e.g., consumer-student boycotts, transnational labor coalitions, cross-border organizing), and overcome overlapping forms of social, economic, and political disadvantage (e.g., community unionism, labor-community coalitions) represent hopeful signs of change amidst a backdrop of dwindling union density, deepening income polarization, and deteriorating labor standards.<sup>2</sup> While labor scholars and practitioners debate the pros and cons of different strategies and organizing models, most agree that the narrow, self-interested unionism of the post-1945 era has reached its limits. What we find, in particular, is renewed interest in the role of labor as a dynamic social movement, replete with contentious politics and collective mobilization (Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Lopez 2004; Moody 1997; Turner and Hurd 2001).

The proliferation of vibrant forms of collective action that go beyond organized labor's traditional weapon—the strike—and mobilize the broader public alongside unions calls attention to the significance of the *symbolic* as a key site of contestation in contemporary labor struggles. The fight against economic injustice invariably includes another conception of justice that is rooted in the cultural or symbolic. The overlapping nature of such struggles is particularly salient for workers situated at the bottom of the socioeconomic and symbolic order. Challenging economic marginalization often entails overcoming “institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible,” thus intertwining what Nancy

Fraser calls “struggles for recognition” with “struggles for redistribution” (1995, 70–71; 1997).

The entanglement of the material and symbolic also foregrounds the importance of the *public*, or perhaps more fittingly, “counterpublics” as driving forces of change (see Fraser 1996; Warner 2002). While the physical gathering of a broad array of individuals during a public protest is crucial for demonstrating strength in numbers, the morally charged language that is circulated on protest signs and in protest chants as well as in the media evokes a longer history of discursively mediated struggles on behalf of the poor, the excluded, and the marginalized. Using the signs, slogans, and vocabularies of past social movement legacies to revalue the identities and contributions of devalued members of society is crucial to reconfiguring the hierarchies that underpin and reproduce relations of economic domination and subordination. In other words, influencing how people think and act in relation to each other is about more than just the art of communication. The symbolic battleground of contemporary workers’ struggles are reflective of, in Pierre Bourdieu’s words, broader “political struggles...for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world...and the direction in which it is going and should go” (Bourdieu 2000, 185).

To better understand the potential leverage that derives from the symbolic and public dimensions of workers’ struggles, we need to eschew the tendency to treat struggles over meaning and values as separate and unrelated to struggles over the distribution of power and resources.<sup>3</sup> Too often, the colorful and dramatic aspects of public protests are dismissed as attention-grabbing tactics with little staying power over the long term. We see this in the thinking of union organizers and researchers that deem public sentiment as an important but ultimately fleeting and intangible source of support. While it is certainly true that appealing to the public can have limited and even detrimental effects, neglecting to examine the interplay between the cultural and structural basis of worker power leaves some crucial questions unanswered: Why have the struggles of some of the most vulnerable, as opposed to most powerful, workers become such a revitalizing force for crisis-ridden labor movements in today’s global economy? What is the significance of the symbolic and public dimensions of struggles for marginalized groups of workers? How do these struggles help change the unequal balance of power between workers and those entities that use and benefit from their labor? In other words, what exactly are the mechanics of converting social and economic marginality into a concrete form of leverage?

## **Building Power from the Margins: A Comparative Study**

To answer the questions above, I compare the struggles of workers employed at the bottom of labor market hierarchies in two distinct national contexts: South Korea and the United States. In both countries, this stratum of the workforce disproportionately represents historically disadvantaged groups that have faced and continue to face barriers to obtaining higher-paid and higher-skilled employment. Racialized groups of immigrants and women in the United States and socially disadvantaged women in South Korea are a predominant part of the marginalized workforce in each country, though other kinds of workers (e.g., youth, the elderly, the disabled, ex-offenders, former welfare recipients, and those with low education levels) also can be found in the low-paid, service workforce. The growth of flexible employment relationships such as part-time, temporary, independently contracted, subcontracted, and daily work (Cranford and Vosko 2006; Gonos 1998; Gottfried 1992; Houseman and Polivka 2000; Kelleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000) has rendered marginalized workers particularly susceptible to precarious and unfavorable wage bargains. Although there are certainly exceptions, in comparison to workers in full-time, permanent jobs, workers in flexible employment relationships usually receive fewer benefits and statutory entitlements, are subject to a greater risk of employer abuse, and are less likely to be unionized.

To understand how and under what conditions marginalized workers are attempting to overcome downgraded forms of flexible employment, I analyze the dynamics of workers' struggles on multiple scales—from the local and national to the global. While studies of labor movement revitalization in the United States provide the most concrete understanding of how unions are organizing new sectors of the workforce, there have been limited attempts to interrogate their "connections with dynamics at play in other places, and in wider regional, national and transnational arenas" (Hart 2002, 14). We know little about how labor movements in other national contexts are responding to similar conditions of crises associated with global economic restructuring and labor market deregulation. We also know little about the relationship of their struggles with respect to each another. To bring a much needed cross-national lens to the study of labor revitalization, I focus on the dynamics of change in South Korea and the United States.

On the surface, these two countries seem an unlikely pair for comparison; they represent two places with asymmetrical trajectories of economic development