

Is it Possible to have a Progressive Leftist Party in a Divided Korea?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Translated from Korean by **Laam Hae**

Grounded in his own experiences as one of the most prominent figures in the progressive movement in South Korea, Saihwa Hong (Sehwa Hong) examines the challenges and opportunities facing the Korean left in this talk delivered at the York Centre for Asian Research on 19 April 2017. Hong maps out historical events that have led to the current social and political conditions in Korea, which, he argues, have disempowered the working class and the progressive left more broadly. He takes up the role of the division of North and South Korea, Japanese imperialism, democratization and neoliberalism in shaping the structure of the education system, party politics and class consciousness. For Hong, these conditions require the progressive left to come up with new strategies to ensure a successful future for the movement and make “another democracy” possible.

1, 5, 13 and 37

I am sorry to start my talk with the numbers of death. The number 1 refers to the number of people who are murdered everyday on average in Korea. The number 5 represents the average number of people who die from industrial accidents a day. The number 13 is those who die from car accidents and 37 is the number for people who commit suicide a day. We should take special note of numbers 5 and 37, the number of people who die in industrial accidents and by suicide. These numbers are from official statistics, and we speculate that the real numbers must be higher than these.

I represented the New Progressive Party (*Chinboshindang*) from 2011 to 2012, and now I am working as an advisor to the Labor Party, which is the successor of the New Progressive Party. I am also the chief of Jean Valjean Bank.¹ As you can guess from the name of the bank, I am not paid to work for this bank. I actually pay money to the bank. The bank lends money to people who cannot pay fines to the court when they are charged and indicted. We do not receive interest from the people who receive loans from us, and we do not even require any collateral from them. People who cannot pay their fines to the court have to go to jail. In 2015, there were 48,000 people who could not pay their fines, therefore 'choosing' to go to jail.

Korean society has been witnessing more and more polarization. There has been an increase in the number of the so-called 'precariat.' Impoverishment and household debt has been increasing. In this reality, the Labor Party in Korea proposed the following three points as campaign pledges for the General Election in 2016:

- 1) The establishment of a 35-hour-per-week ceiling for working hours: Korea's average working hours are above the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. In 2016, the average working hours a year for Korean workers were 2,069 (OECD 2018). The 35-hour working week would mean 1,820 hours a year. This is still more hours than the average 1,770 hours worked annually in OECD countries;
- 2) The introduction of a minimum wage of 10,000 KRW (11.70 CAD) an hour; and
- 3) The establishment of the monthly 300,000 KRW (350 CAD) basic income for people older than age 18 and 200,000 KRW (233 CAD) for people who are 6 to 17 years old.

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These were the issues that the Labor Party concluded were critical to the livelihood and labour conditions of working-class people, based on an analysis of the labour and living indexes in Korea. However, the 2016 election ended miserably for the Labor Party, which only earned 0.38 per cent of the total votes. Four years earlier, the New Progressive Party (which later became the Labor Party) earned 1.13 per cent, and eight years ago, it earned 2.94 per cent. Because these were all below 3 per cent, the then New Progresssive Party could not hold any seats in the National Assembly. Since then, the Labor Party has gone into futher decline, and party membership numbers have also been dwindling (14,721 in 2012; 13,928 in 2013; 13,798 in 2014; 12,284 in 2015; and 11,450 in 2016).

Is there a future for the Labor Party as a progressive leftist party in Korea? Some leaders left the Party, arguing that the Party's activism, which focuses on irregular labour (workers in casualized employment) rather than in regular labour, cannot succeed in acquiring more votes from the popular base. But we, people who remained in the Party, believe that the Labor Party should focus on this issue and pursue what many people conceive as impossible. But there is another vexing question here. Karl Marx (1971) said that it is "[people's] social existence that determines their consciousness" (20). The working class should have a working-class consciousness in principle. But, the Labor Party that focuses on the labour issue was turned away by the Korean working class. Why? What does the division of Korea have to do with this turning away?

In 1946 before the Korean War, the *Dong-A Daily* published a survey conducted with 8,453 people in South Korea. One of the questions asked on the survey was:

Which system do you prefer? The survey results showed that:

- 1) 14% (1,189 people) preferred capitalism;
- 2) 70% (6,037 people) preferred socialism;
- 3) 7% (574 people) preferred communism; and
- 4) 8% (653 people) did not have a preference.

The results of this survey show that the preference for socialism reached 70 per cent among those surveyed. Of course, it is not clear

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whether those respondents who chose socialism were aware of what exactly socialism meant. But, nevertheless, it is undeniable that many people found socialism to be an ideology for equality and supported it. So, during this period, when imperial Japan had just left Korea (1945) and before Korea fell under the spheres of influence of the United States of America (in the case of South Korea) and USSR (in the case of North Korea), the thesis that one's social existence determines one's consciousness worked, it seems. As I elaborate later, the thesis worked while the ruling class's ideology had not yet penetrated the popular consciousness through the nationalist-totalitarian educational system.

Cho Bongam, who represented the Progressive Party (*Chinbodang*) and earned second place in the Presidential Elections in 1952 and 1956, was executed on 31 July 1959 by the Rhee Seungman regime. He frequently declared that he had parted with communism, with which he used to be affiliated, and he was even appointed the first Minister of Agriculture in 1948 to carry out redistributive land reforms under President Rhee (whose base was the conservative, pro-capitalist Liberal Party, *Chayudang*). President Rhee had to appoint Cho Bongam as the Minister of Agriculture because there was demand from the grassroots and intelligentsia for him to carry out the land reforms. It was a period in Korean history when social existence still determined consciousness among grassroots and intelligentsia. But, despite his service, Cho Bongam was eventually executed. Once a person was branded a 'commie' like he had been, then no matter what they did, they had to be eliminated at that time in South Korea.

What happened between 1946 (when the above survey was completed) and 1959, when Cho Bongam was executed, that led to this political climate? The Korean War (1950) played a decisive role in transforming South Korea into a McCarthyist country and a military authoritarian state. Cho Yongsu, who established the *Nationalist Daily* (*Minjokilbo*), was also executed in 1961 by the military dictator Park Junghee. Cho Yongsu was 31 years old at that time. The reason for his execution was his support for the peaceful unification between North and South Korea. The peaceful unification of the two Koreas was the slogan advanced by North Korea. That was why Cho Yongsu was executed by the regime. The executions of Cho Bongam and Cho Yongsu heralded a dark age in South Korea.

In the Open Space after a Quarter Century

Since then, Korea had 25 years of authoritarian dictatorship. Then, the democratization uprisings in 1987 opened the possibility of democracy in

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the Korean political scene. With the change to more progressive regimes, I was able to terminate my exile life in France in the late 1990s and came back to Korea. On the day that I returned to Korea, I saw a billboard in Seoul that said "*Bujadoeseyo* (Get rich)!" Interestingly, the 10 years of democratization in South Korea until then resembled the era of Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. During the Park regime the government's propaganda mantra was "*Chalsalabose*," that is, that *all of us* should get rich. But in the neoliberal Korea of the late 1980s and 1990s, it was only *me*, only the individual.

Workers who were facing frequent threats of layoffs now had to continuously prove themselves in the eyes of their employers as 'individuals' who were of utility to the capitalist system. Every labourer had to improve herself to be employable in the market. Under persistent assault by capital, labour continued to be fragmented, and workers could not exist as one class any more. In order to better respond to capitalism and the persistent offensive against labour, it was necessary for the progressive bloc to develop a proper analysis of the system and labour's capacity. But there was barely any effort among progressives to learn, analyze and create solidarity due to factional infighting and intellectual arrogance. Instead, different factions within the progressive bloc were competing with each other to procure power and employment within parties. Absurdly, different factions of the progressive bloc militated against their competing progressive factions, instead of fighting neoliberal, neoconservative, right-wing regimes.

Just as capital conquers labour by preventing workers from building solidarity and by stirring internal division amongst workers, uneven playing grounds established by the divisional system of two Koreas shaped and formed the constellation of the progressive leftist landscape. That is, the division of Korea contributed to the split of the progressive bloc into two factions, National Liberation (NL) and People's Democracy (PD). [Translator's note: NL puts national liberation at the forefront of their political agenda. They see United States (US) imperialism as the originator of the problems in Korea and prioritize unification of South and North Korea as its main objective to fight against US imperial power that seeks to consolidate the division in Korea. By contrast, PD has been more concerned with the class question in Korea.]

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We should ask why resistance/insurgent movements that fought against the authoritarian political regimes in the 1980s have now become so powerless and disorganized in face of the power of the neoliberal capitalist regime. The popular uprisings of 1987 were not only about a fight against the authoritarian military regime, they were also a working-

class insurrection, organized labour's struggle against the unequal capitalist system. We tend to remember the June uprising in 1987, which was a broader popular protest against the authoritarian government, but not the workers' struggles that unfolded from July to September of 1987. This selective memory tends to consolidate the separation between the democratization movement and workers' struggles.

The 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis not only transformed the capitalist order of the country, it also transformed its social and political order. In the 2004 General Election, the Democratic Labor Party—the progressive leftist party in Korea—earned 10 seats in the National Assembly. It was an accomplishment of the progressives' long-standing objective of political empowerment of the proletariat in the country's realpolitik. Until then, progressive party politics were almost non-existent in Korea's representative democracy. Even though politics within the National Assembly are fundamentally limited—that is, party politics within the National Assembly tend to be liberal—there was no question that the Democratic Labor Party's 10 seats were a great victory for the progressive leftist block in Korea. It was the democratic (civilian) governments of the preceding 10 years that enabled the entry of progressive politics into the National Assembly.

Among scholars and commentators, there have been a number of analyses of the formation and achievements of progressive parties, such as the Democratic Labor Party. But I have been wondering why there has rarely been a thorough analysis of the fragmentation of the working class that has been caused by attacks made through the state-capital complex since the 1997 financial crisis. We are aware that capital divided the working class through the means of labour flexibilization and the creation of hierarchy among different sections of the working class. We are also aware that despite labour's fight against capital's divide-and-rule strategy, labour (and labour's resistance) was disempowered by government propaganda that insisted that the country should prioritize overcoming the economic crisis (during and after the IMF crisis) over labour rights, and that labour should make concessions to capital by accepting the tiered labour system (between regular and irregular labour). I would argue that this submission of labour and disempowerment of working class politics was partly due to the NL faction's hegemony, which prevailed not only in broader progressive politics, but also within the labour movement.

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Consciousness that Betrays Social Existence

What barriers has the division of the two Koreas created for Korean leftists and progressives? It created a political architecture in which the ruling class indoctrinated the working class with a consciousness that betrays the latter's social existence.

In the official educational system, Korean students have had no opportunity to learn about the history of capitalism, labour movements or the formation of the working class. Korean citizens tend to show their animosity toward workers' strikes, for example, because their perspectives on strikes are one-sidedly formed by ruling-class ideas inculcated through the school system. Where does this anti-labour stance among the working class come from? Unlike the student activists' confidence about working-class consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s, the ruling-class monopolization of the infrastructure of inculcating ideologies through the convenient site of schools has made it hard for workers to establish an understanding of working-class consciousness.

There is no student in Korea who is able to acquire working-class consciousness via the school curriculum unless one is fortunate enough to meet a mentor who can instruct them. Rather, official curriculum from grade 1 to grade 12 inculcates Korean students into voluntary servitude to capitalism, and they do not have opportunities to become familiar with critiques of capitalism.

The Korean education system originated from the modern education system established under Japanese colonialism. This system was one in which students uncritically and competitively memorized and internalized ruling-class ideologies, instead of developing their own opinions about society. An excellent student in this system was one who was loyal to ruling-class ideas. Just like this standardized education, the current form of Korean capitalism also promulgates an uncritical thinking about capitalism and seeks to produce a so-called professional class, contributing to the increase of capitalists' profit. The totalitarian system of education founded through Japanese imperialist dominance has continued and has even intensified. In particular, indoctrination of anti-labour ideologies is more intensely carried out now than during the Japanese colonial period.

The Korean education system, where students do not have a chance to develop their own way of thinking, has been busy inculcating students with ruling-class ideas and perspectives. This system roots out the 'thinking-self,' which is the very foundation of the human and social sciences. The 'self' is absent from the thinking process among students,

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as writing and debating are themselves absent in the educational system; the latter is used to inculcate ruling-class ideas from above that students memorize. Memorization erases the need for 'self'. Would the human and social sciences be possible without the thinking self? The self can be a man, woman, sexual minority, migrant labourer, poor or rich person, peasant or urban person. The diverse self should question humanity and society and develop their thoughts and opinions based on their own class and other identities. But without the 'self' such humanistic and social scientific studies cannot exist. Then, who chooses the ideas that are inculcated in students? *What* ideas are inculcated? I argue that it is the ruling ideology that is very often represented as an objective truth, even though there is no such thing as an 'objective truth' in human social scientific knowledge. The totalitarian educational system that started during the Japanese colonial period has continued and been reinforced. We can establish the schema as follows:

- 1) We do not have a process of 'thinking' within the family or at school. Therefore, we do not have a critical capacity. We tend to be obsessed with inculcated ideas and not be skeptical about them;
- 2) What is injected into our consciousness is actually the ruling class's perspectives and ideas disguised as an objective truth; and
- 3) Therefore, the ruled, especially workers themselves, tend to have a betraying consciousness—such as an anti-labour sentiment—in which their social existence and their consciousness do not correspond. The ruled are even obsessive about keeping this distorted consciousness.

We are just programmed to memorize and not encouraged to 'think'. Therefore, we are not able to 'be skeptical.' We have only a lot of inculcated ideas and stubborn thoughts, imparted by the ruling class.

Progressive Politics and the Division of Korea

I want to ask people who believe that they have a working-class consciousness: how was the consciousness formed within you? It is not through the education system? It is impossible to form a working-class consciousness for self-empowerment if it is not based on the individual, the 'real me,' who understands their class condition. Under the Korean school system, thinking through 'myself' is not possible.

I want to ask people who believe that they have a working-class consciousness: how was the consciousness formed within you?

There are some fortunate people in Korea who are able to develop a working-class consciousness within themselves. These people often have an experience of being unduly laid off, which spurred the recognition of the condition of class inequality in society. Or, they have fortunately met someone in school who can educate them about working-class consciousness. Except for these people, it is hardly possible for people to develop class consciousness. The Labor Party had to confront the following three problems in this societal condition:

. . . they mistakenly believe that they have a special social consciousness unlike others, which led them to have a sense of superiority over others who have not developed this consciousness.

- 1) Korea's divisional system has enabled those who have developed a critical social consciousness based on nationalist identity, rather than class identity, to acquire hegemony within the progressive bloc;
- 2) Most of them had a vanguard sensibility and arrogance. That is, they mistakenly believe that they have a special social consciousness unlike others, which led them to have a sense of superiority over others who have not developed this consciousness. These progressives also started to work in the activist field from an early age (when they were in university), so they have not been able to actively study the changing society themselves. They do not possess a refined and precise consciousness and understanding of the society around them. For example, they ignore the notion of class self-determination, as they are more concerned with the issue of nationalist self-determination. That is why they sympathize with the North Korean system. This distorted sense among these progressives is the result of ignorance. They reproduce this distorted understanding simply to maintain and consolidate their own hegemony within the progressive bloc; and
- 3) In this way, progressive leftist parties have remained a minority within the national political sphere and the prominent progressive politicians have continuously left these parties in order to win in elections and get a seat within the National Assembly.

Conclusion

Earlier I asked, will there be a future for the Labor Party? I was once a member of the NL faction and now have a Labor Party membership. The political tasks that I think the Labor Party should carry out now are as follows:

We should endlessly interrogate what democracy in Korea has been, that is, the essential features of the democracy under both the authoritarian and dictatorial regimes and the so-called 10 years of (liberal) democratic governments. We should also analyze the possibilities and limitations of Korean democracy in relation to the divisional system that Korea has been under.

What is also important is to examine how capitalism is articulated through the political evolution of Korea from the Park Chung-hee dictatorship in the 1960s, to the subsequent two military dictatorships led by Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo for 12 years, to the political liberalization executed by three civilian regimes led by presidents Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jong, and Roh Moo-hyun for 15 years, and the most recent two conservative and neo-liberal regimes led by Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye (the latter was impeached in 2017).

But, more importantly, we should take the contradictions and antagonisms between capital and labour to the political terrain and make them a focal point of political struggles, especially when these contradictions and antagonisms are masked by competitive drives between Korean conservatives and liberals over hegemony in parliament and the cabinet. What is desperately needed for Korean people is not more [liberal] democracy, but alternative democracy in which people control the capitalism that privately eats up 'common goods' (*res publica*) and tends to degenerate humans into 'surplus debris' and 'defenseless beings.' What is needed is a democracy in which the passive citizenry, which has been subjected to police administration as well as capitalism, can transform itself into a protagonist of democracy.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Translator's note: Jean Valjean is also the name of the protagonist of the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (1862). In the novel, Jean Valjean was imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's children.

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An educator, author and journalist, Hong Saihwa received a Baccalaureate in Political Science and International Relations from Seoul National University (1977). His membership in the Preparation Committee for Nam-Chosun People's Liberation Front forced him and his family to seek political asylum in France in 1979. He returned to Seoul after two decades, where he worked as planning fellow at Hankyoreh Sinmun and editor at *Le Monde Diplomatique* Korea in the first decade of the twenty-first century. His autobiographical book *I am a Taxi Driver in Paris* (1995) resonated with a wide readership as a sincere account of the diasporic experience and progressive intellectualism. He was the leader of New Progressive Party in South Korea (2011-2012) before the party was dissolved to form the Labor Party, where he currently serves as advisor. He is also actively involved in wide-ranging projects such as Chair of May, which commemorates the Kwangju democratic movement in 1980, and Jean Valjean Bank, a grassroots safety-net program that provides loans without interest or a guarantor to prisoners who cannot afford bail.

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