

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

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ABSTRACT

5. Theme (Choose one of the Themes in the list on the Call for papers.)

Polanyian Progressive Movements

6. Title

Workers' Counter-movements in Contemporary Neoliberalism: Dynamics of Polanyi-type and Marx-type Labor Unrest in South Korea, 1998-2013

7. Abstract

Scholars have highlighted that Karl Polanyi fails to theorize how counter-movements arise in reaction to commodification and marketization and, in particular, how workers leverage their power to build the resistance in order to protect their livelihoods from being undermined by the self-regulating market. Yet insufficient attention has been paid to exploring the conditions under which workers successfully organize a counter-movement against neoliberalism and the characteristics of this workers' resistance movement.

Drawing upon the conceptual distinction between Polanyi's notion of "counter-movements from below" and Marx's notion of "class struggle", this article attempts to systematically compare two distinct patterns of labor unrest in post-1997 South Korea in terms of workers' grievances, demands, and their sources of power. Through the analysis of an original database on labor unrest events in South Korea, this article argues that already-unionized regular workers tend to organize defensive struggles to protect their rights and livelihoods faced with collective dismissals and casualization of the workforce, while newly-unionized non-regular workers, mushroomed in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring, try to organize offensive protests to demand pay increases, better working conditions, and right to collectively bargain with their substantive employers. It also suggests that the waves of regular workers' protests are conditioned by economic hardship, while the cycles of protests led by non-regular workers are conditioned by bargaining power of workers. In-depth analyses on the micro-dynamics of major episodes of labor unrest reveal that Polanyian counter-movements led by already-unionized regular workers gain traction when employers violate the "moral economy" of regular workers, while the narratives on newly-unionized non-regular workers' struggles revolve around resisting capitalist exploitation and achieving labor rights.