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The Future is Public

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Towards a Social Public Unionism: Reconfiguring Collective Bargaining
- Public Sector | The significance of Zohran Mamdani's victory in the NYC
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Unions Rising for the Common Good: Ten Theses on the 'Social Public Unionism

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This article summarises ten theses derived from a study⁰¹ proposing Social Public Unionism⁰² as the strategic line of struggle for the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU). The goals and values pursued by a trade union, as well as the direction and methods through which it seeks to advance its struggle, are defined by a movement line. These goals and values reflect the union's ideological orientation and identity. It is a

01 Lee, Jae-hoon, Hong, Seok-man, Jang, Jin-beom, Koo, Jun-mo, Kim, In-ja, Yoon, Yeohyeop, Lee, Deok-hee, Jang, Gwi-yeon, Lee, Young-soo, Oh, Seong-hee, Jeong, Chanmu, and Lee, Seung-chul. 2025. A Study on the Strategic Direction of the KPTU. Research Report 2025-05, Public Policy Institute for People.

02 Social Public Unionism is a transformative model of trade unionism that links the struggle for workers' rights with the expansion and democratisation of quality public services. It recognises that fighting inequality and creating decent jobs cannot be achieved only through collective bargaining but also requires reshaping the broader social contract between workers, the state, and society. This approach combines traditional union strategies (e.g., defending wages, working conditions, and employment security) with a social mission: ensuring universal access to quality public goods like healthcare, education, housing, transport, energy, and water. It positions the labour movement as a champion of the public good, not just the interests of its members.

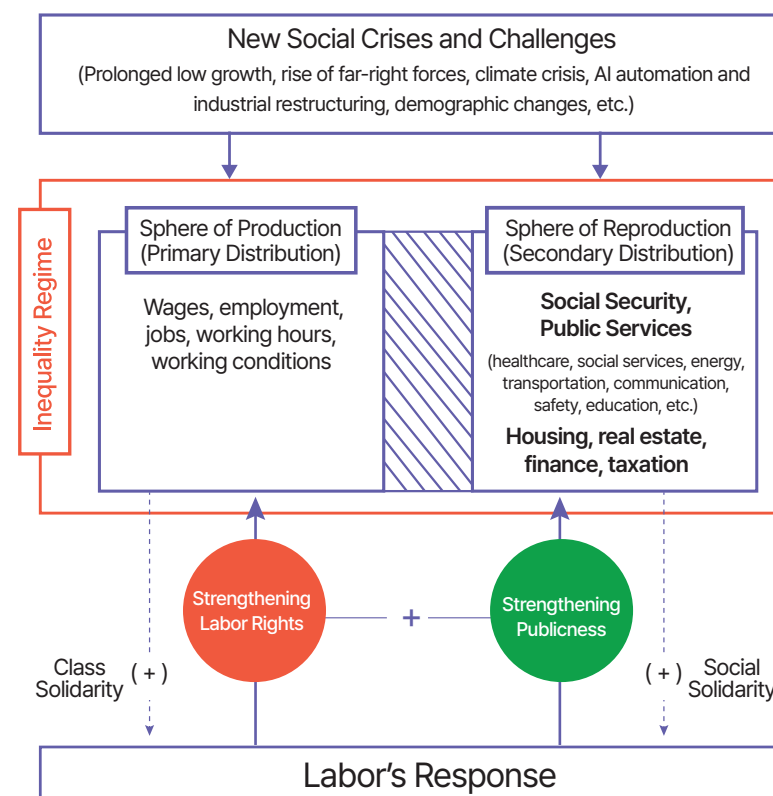
strategic pathway that places the ideological power of ‘common good’ at its core, expands social power based on the foundation of associational power, responds to emerging social crises, and seeks to secure structural and institutional power.

While the democratic trade union movement historically embodied resistance to dictatorship and the struggle for democratisation, the neoliberal era requires a different response. In the face of neoliberalism’s fragmentation of workers’ lives across multiple dimensions, there is an urgent need to develop new counter-hegemonic and alternative values and narratives. For this reason, the Social Public Unionism is proposed as the KPTU’s strategic line of struggle.

Capitalism has entrenched a structure of inequality between the sphere of production(primary distribution) and the sphere of reproduction(secondary distribution). These inequalities are being deepened by emerging social risks, including the climate crisis, automation and industrial restructuring driven by artificial intelligence, prolonged low growth and economic instability, and significant demographic shifts. Neoliberal policy prescriptions, rather than mitigating these challenges, are likely to intensify social insecurity and systemic risk.

The Social-Public Labor Movement is proposed as a strategic response to this inequality regime and to new social risks. It advances a framework that links the strengthening of labor rights with the expansion of publicness. In this view, labor rights and publicness are not isolated or parallel objectives but are deeply embedded within each other, forming a mutually constitutive and interdependent relationship. By integrating these two dimensions, the Social-Public Labor Movement aims to reframe and address questions of rights, power, and distribution across both

[Figure] Social-Public Labor Movement: A Strategy Connecting Publicness and Labor Rights



Source: Adapted from Lee Jae-hun (2022)

the productive and reproductive spheres in a holistic and transformative way.

01 A Counter Discourse Against Neoliberal Privatisation, Marketisation and Austerity

The concept of ‘social public value’ has served as both the banner and the rallying cry of the labour movement in its resistance to neoliberal privatisation, marketisation and austerity. Privatisation and marketisation have proven to be failed neoliberal strategies. The myth of the all-powerful market was promoted through the promise of cost reduction, increased competition, greater efficiency, and improved quality. In reality, however, they have led to rising costs, monopolisation by large private conglomerates, deteriorating working conditions and service quality, and the exclusion from, and reduced accessibility to, essential services. Furthermore, insufficient investment, breaches of contractual obligations, bankruptcies, market withdrawals, corruption, embezzlement, and the general incompetence and irresponsibility of private operators have undermined the socio-economic foundations (Agovino et al. 2021; Kishimoto 2019; Pohlmann and Colell 2020; Lee Jae-hoon 2024).

However, the push for privatisation and marketisation remains strong. Today, privatisation extends beyond traditional mechanisms such as asset sales, ownership transfers, dissolution or handovers. It now takes multiple forms, including corporatisation, outsourcing, competitive bidding, Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs), Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), and the inclusion of private equity participation in the public sector. These strategies are continuously pursued, often indirectly or covertly.⁰³ Sectors such as

⁰³ Privatisation has traditionally been defined as the transfer of government ownership of public enterprises or institutions to private actors, along with associated ancillary activities. Recently, however, the concept has expanded significantly to encompass the much broader idea of ‘utilising the private sector’ (Park Yong-seok et al., 2025). Lee Jae-hoon (2021) includes the utilisation of private actors through measures such as private consignment, private finance initiatives (PFIs) and public-private partnerships (PPPs) within

aviation, telecommunications and petroleum have already been privatised, while healthcare, care services, bus and urban gas industries have been driven by the private sector from the outset. Even in domains that remain under public operation, pressures continue to mount. Private competition is intensifying in railways, power generation and natural gas, while postal services, water supply, airports and social insurance are under significant pressure to downsize and become more market-oriented. Under slogans such as ‘advancement plans’, ‘management efficiency’, and ‘normalisation of the abnormal’, public sector workforce and financial resources are being cut, while the growing demand for public services is increasingly met through non-regular employment, outsourcing, or private contracting.

The Social Public Unionism therefore presents itself as a counter-discourse, resisting the privatisation and marketisation of essential public services and opposing austerity measures that reduce staffing and funding in the public sector.

02 An Alternative Discourse on Expanding Public Services and Reducing Inequality

The Social Public Unionism is about more than just resisting and opposing privatisation and marketisation. It is a movement that seeks to transform the current market-oriented, profit-driven system into one that is labour-centred and public-led system. The neoliberal growth strategies underpinning this market-ori-

the scope of privatisation. Similarly, the Framework Bill on the Prohibition of Public Service Privatisation and the Promotion of Republicisation (proposed in March 2023 by the Office of Lawmaker Jang Hye-young) also defines privatisation broadly to include corporatisation, outsourcing, transfer of business rights, public-private management, and even allowing private capital investment in the public sector.

ented, profit-driven system have exacerbated poverty and widened inequality. The strategies that capital uses to address new social crises only serve to reinforce these dynamics.

Expanding public services and increasing public investment create quality employment opportunities, particularly for women, young people, and older adults, while improving the quality of services. These measures help reduce income inequality and poverty by increasing disposable income and thereby enhancing real income (Verist 2012; Lusig 2012; Wolff 2003; Fearnley 2006; ITUC 2016; Lee Jae-hoon 2017, 2022). Moreover, social transfers and the allocation of public resources serve as a cushion against economic crises. Expanding public sector employment not only involves the supply side and employment policies, but also helps to regulate the market and improve the conditions for those previously excluded from private service provision (Hermann 2016: 16).

In South Korea, employment in the public sector accounts for just 8.8% – less than half the OECD average and the second lowest among member countries, after Japan (4.5%). Between 2019 and 2021, while total employment grew by only 0.4%, whereas public sector employment increased by an annual average of 4.6 %. Nevertheless, this still amounts to roughly one quarter of the levels observed in other advanced OECD economies. Viewed from a different perspective, this suggests that South Korea has significant potential to further expand public sector employment (OECD data, re-cited in Lee Jae-hoon 2024).

Expanding public services entails creating more quality jobs within the public sector, representing a process of (re)municipalisation, whereby public ownership and democratic governance structures are established for essential public services and key national industries. This constitutes a political project integrating

multiple policy dimensions: an employment policy ensuring job security, fair wages and the protection of labour rights; an industrial policy reorganising the current private-sector-centred supply infrastructure into a public-led framework; and a social policy reducing poverty and inequality while guaranteeing the right to a decent life.

Between 2000 and 2023, the re-nationalisation of previously privatised services generated a wide range of positive outcomes. The most common effect was the creation of public (shared) assets within local communities, reported in 356 cases. This was followed by the greater feasibility of public investment in services provided by the public sector (328 cases), contributions to achieving public policy objectives (235 cases), improvements in public health and reductions in harmful factors (235 cases), enhanced working conditions (205 cases), improved accessibility to services (193 cases), reduced financial burdens on users (162 cases), measures supporting responses to the climate crisis (133 cases), and positive impacts on trade unions and civil society (96 cases).

By reversing the failures of neoliberalism and its assertion that ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA), and by addressing its incompetence and blind faith in the market, we demonstrate that we ourselves are the alternative as we create a global trend towards municipalisation.

03 A Transition Discourse on Building the Agents and Foundations of System Transformation

The scope of the publicness is not fixed; it varies depending on the historical period and national context. Decisions regarding

the provision of public services, how they are delivered, and their scope are shaped by economic conditions, social demands, the political landscape of the state, and the balance of class forces. In other words, the publicness and public services constitute both an arena of intense struggles to secure 'social needs' as rights and the historical and institutional outcomes of these struggles. These exist within a fluid field of political tensions and dynamics that are continuously expanding and contracting.

Expanding the social common good can be seen as essential to overcoming the limitations of the traditional welfare state model, which has largely focused on income security within capitalism. Moreover, it opens up the possibility of imagining alternative horizons, in line with the concept of 'socialisation' – once a central tenet of Western leftist strategies for transitioning beyond capitalism. In other words, expanding the social publicness by providing services through non-market forms can ultimately pave the way for systemic transformation towards a non-capitalist economic structure (Lee Jae-hoon 2022).

Most significantly, essential public services, income security, and the protection of labour rights protection constitute a political space in which the logic of 'market demand' is overturned and 'social demands' converge to form class-based actors and foster solidarity. Today, growing social demands have grown to a level that the capital-centred accumulation system can no longer accommodate, thereby increasing the potential for social struggle.

The Social Public Unionism provides a foundation for organising these social demands and expanding them into broader social movements. In doing so, it challenges the capital-dominated accumulation structure and, ultimately cultivates the agents capable of creating a new social order. As McDonald(2022) argues,

public services are vital arena for promoting the transition to a post-capitalist society.

04 A Discourse of Solidarity Against Hate, Discrimination and Competition ⁰⁴

'Fairness' has emerged as a dominant and prioritised value.⁰⁵ Yet this notion has become increasingly narrow, reflecting a limited understanding of equity that is closely associated with meritocracy. Moreover, under the dominance of meritocratic thinking, the concept of fairness has assumed discriminatory dimensions. These exclusionary discourses of fairness often manifest in extreme forms, inciting discrimination, exclusion, and hatred, while undermining the protection and advancement of fundamental rights. This entrenches neoliberal ideologies centred on competition and a winner-takes-all logic.

The assumption that market-based exchange and distribution, governed by the mechanisms of equivalent exchange are inherently fair serves to legitimise discrimination and renders social relations competitive and hierarchical. Therefore, it is crucial to establish the political and practical foundations necessary to reclaim 'the social' and promote redistribution, solidarity, and coexistence in the face of discrimination and exclusion.

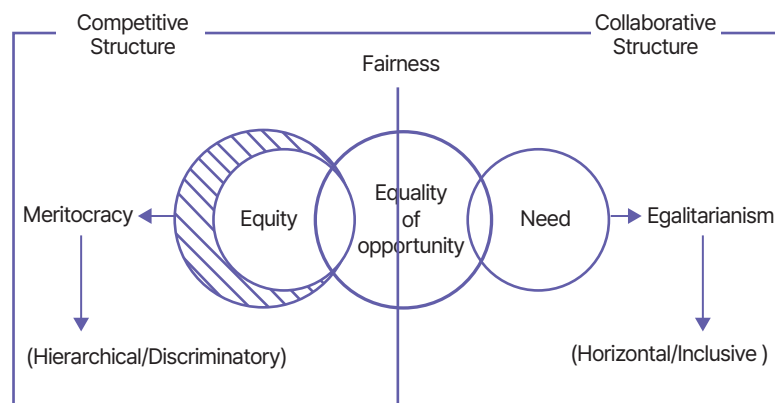
Strengthening public value requires persistently questioning and

04 Excerpted from Lee, Jae-hoon. 2022. 'Chapter 1. The Theoretical and Practical Foundations of Discriminatory Fairness', Song, Ju-myeong et al., A Study on the Discourse of Discriminatory Fairness: Its Nature, Formation, and Social Trends.

05 A 2021 New Year survey conducted by the Kyunghyang Shinmun found that 40.7% of respondents viewed fairness as the value South Korean society should aspire to, a markedly higher figure than those for equality (14.0%), freedom (13.3%), cooperation (13.1%), growth (10.9%), and peace (8.0%).

contesting dominant social values by asking, ‘What is truly fair?’, thereby expanding social awareness and shifting frameworks. The principle of equal opportunity should evolve into the principle of equality, with equality itself progressing beyond superficial expressions towards substantive equality. Moreover, the principle of necessity should be broadened to encompass rights based on need, while the notion of procedural equal opportunity must be expanded to guarantee substantive participation and democracy. When the principle of need-based rights is extended, fairness aligns with public value. Expanding these alternative principles of fairness is not just a matter of theory; it generates opportunities for practical solidarity and collective action.

[Figure] Alternative Expansion of the Discourse on Fairness: From Fairness to Public Value



The narrow discourse of fairness exacerbates inequality and precarity, driving individuals into survivalist competition and conflict, and causing them to seek self-compensation through the hatred and exclusion of relatively weaker groups. Therefore,

the need for an alternative discourse of fairness, grounded in the publicness, is ever more significant. This constitutes a struggle to assert collective demands for coexistence. Moreover, public services and universal social security provide the material foundation for fostering social solidarity by creating breathing space through de-commodification, thereby relieving the pressures of markets and competition within the sphere of production. By doing so, they enable society to transcend the dominant discourse of hierarchical ranking and the illusion of limited escape routes, creating conditions that allow collective solidarity to flourish.

05 A Discourse on Re-establishing the Value of Labour and Broadening Social Recognition

Neoliberal management approaches, as exemplified by New Public Management (NPM), have consistently characterised public sector labour as ‘inefficient’, ‘excessively costly’, and ‘unproductive’. These discourses have informed policies such as budget cuts, workforce reductions and outsourcing, which have reorganised the public sector around market logics that prioritise competition, efficiency, performance and cost reduction. As a result, the autonomy and professionalism of public service roles have been undermined, as have the ethical values and social value of labour. Even the relationship between public sector workers and citizens has been transformed into a commercialised exchange, portraying citizens as consumers or clients. A 2022 survey conducted by the Korea Institute of Public Finance (KIPF) found that 63.8% of respondents viewed mismanagement in public institutions as a serious problem and 71.8% believed that strong reforms were necessary. Among the reform priorities, the largest share (52.1%) called for reviewing and adjusting ‘excessive staffing levels and

employee welfare benefits.⁰⁶

Unlike approaches that replicate private sector managerial methods, ‘democratic professionalism’ is a practice that transcends both bureaucracy and professionalism by organising and delivering public services democratically. This enables workers to collaborate with citizens and service users in shaping and providing those services (Jane Lethbridge 2019). Labour involved in producing and delivering public services constitutes a process integrating democratic accountability and citizen participation, not merely a matter of technical execution or administrative delivery. In this sense, it represents a transition towards a democratic collaborative ‘co-production’ model, in which workers combine professional expertise with democratic practices, including citizen involvement, to collectively deliberate on and decide on the direction, content and implementation of services.

However, if we fail to dismantle the manager-consumer alliance and establish non-consumerist alliances between workers and service users, we will be unable to effectively resist the neoliberal bureaucratic regime. It is therefore essential to establish the foundations of democratic professionalism in workplaces, where workers collaborate with service users and uphold collective values to resist the commodification of services. Workers who deliver public services play an indispensable role in sustaining social reproduction and underpinning the continuity of society itself. Thus, re-establishing the value of public service labour requires us to reaffirm and expand social recognition of the roles

⁰⁶ According to survey responses from experts, an even higher proportion, 77.3%, indicated that intensive reform was necessary. Among the highest-priority reform measures, 57.1% identified the restructuring of public institutions’ functions to concentrate on core operations.

and meanings of public services, as well as the inherent value of labour.

06 An Integrated Strategy for Strengthening Labour Rights and the Provision of Quality Public Services

In South Korea, both labour rights and the provision of public services are significantly underdeveloped. According to Oxfam’s Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index (2020), South Korea ranked 33rd among the 35 OECD member countries in terms of both the provision of public services and labour rights, placing it higher than only Mexico and Turkey. This places South Korea well below the OECD average.

The strategy of linking labour rights with the strengthening of the provision of the common good should not be understood as pursuing two separate or parallel objectives. Rather, they are deeply embedded within one another, forming a relationship of mutual interdependence. Within the framework of the Social Public Unionism, integrating labour rights and the provision of quality public services is a strategic approach to rebuilding rights and redistribution in both the production and social reproduction.

The provision of public services cannot be confined to issues of secondary distribution alone. Enhancing and realising the provision of public services is intrinsically linked to the strengthening of labour rights. This is particularly significant given that market-oriented managerial principles (NPM) emphasising competition and efficiency are increasingly being adopted in public sector areas that remained unprivatised. Strengthening the labour rights of public sector workers is a necessary precondition for advancing the provision of the common good, while the provision of the

common good itself forms a foundation for strengthening labour rights. This interconnection lies at the core of distributive justice, encompassing both primary distribution within the sphere of production and secondary distribution within the sphere of social reproduction.

[Figure] International Comparison of the Provision of the Common Good and Labour Rights



Source: Adapted from Lee Jae-hun (2022)

Within the strategy of linking labour rights and the public service provision, the primary actors are the workers performing public functions. Those engaged in the public sector, or in tasks related to the provision of the common good, bear a social responsibility to realise and safeguard its provision. If this role is not recognised by society, or if workers neglect or abandon their social responsibilities, the public service provision is weakened and the social power of trade unions becomes vulnerable. As a result, labour rights become increasingly exposed to external threats.

A study analysing how public sector trade unions in the United States secured member support found that selective benefits offered exclusively to members (Olson 1965) can help to overcome the free-rider problem. However, non-material motivations are equally significant. In particular, members' sense of satisfaction derived from solidarity and motivations linked to the union's goals and values is important (Clark & Wilson 1961; Moe 1988). Social identity is formed when an individual's self-conception is tied to their sense of group membership and social role (Ahlquist & Levi 2013). In this context, professional identity and pride in occupations responsible for everyday aspects of life, such as public health, safety, ageing, care, mobility, and culture, can foster stronger commitment to one's trade union. Sharing these identities and values thus forms a foundation for linking labour rights with the practical provision of the common good.

07 A Bargaining Strategy for Expanding Collective Bargaining to the Supra-Enterprise Level

One of the defining features of the Social Public Unionism is its bargaining strategy, which takes collective bargaining beyond the workplace to a multi-layered, supra-enterprise level involving central and local government, as well as sectoral and regional frameworks. The collective agreement serves as both a highly visible arena in which the attention of union members is focused, and as a political space where the organisational capacity of the trade union is mobilised. However, an increasing number of challenges cannot be effectively addressed within the confines of individual workplaces. These include legal and institutional constraints, limitations in manpower and budgets, shifts in industrial policies and institutional frameworks, and the payment capacities of individual employers. In conditions of prolonged low

growth and the rapid restructuring of the socio-economic and industrial landscape, traditional distributive negotiations focused solely on dividing economic gains are becoming increasingly inadequate. Collective bargaining must therefore extend to encompass broader issues of production and supply within the relevant industrial and policy frameworks.

The transition from an enterprise-based union structure to an industrial union system is not merely a formal change. It is a strategic choice designed to secure the organisational capacity and bargaining power necessary for supra-enterprise bargaining at the industrial and regional levels. This involves establishing a collective bargaining framework capable of structurally addressing issues that are difficult to resolve within individual workplaces. The KPTU's transition to an industrial union involves forming an organisational structure that channels the capacities of workplace into industry-, ministry-, or region-based units. This secures a multi-layered bargaining structure at the supra-enterprise level, taking into account the specific characteristics of each workplace.

In supra-enterprise bargaining, the most crucial element is the integration with agendas concerning the social common good. Until now, struggles over the social common good have often been perceived as confined to traditional public sectors, such as healthcare, childcare and eldercare, energy provision (including power generation and gas), social insurance (including pensions, medical care, employment insurance and industrial accident insurance), railways, urban rail, buses and public transport, as well as cultural and artistic services. Alternatively, they have been limited to disputes specific to a given workplace. However, the scope of publicness is not fixed; it is a dynamic concept that ex-

pands in response to societal and historical demands. Accordingly, the bargaining agenda concerning the social common good should not be restricted to specific sectors or institutions. It is vital to develop agendas that redefine the social meaning and value of labour, attributing greater significance to it and linking it to the protection of labour rights. In contexts where robust supra-enterprise bargaining structures and systems are lacking, the agenda itself becomes a strategic instrument. It is of central importance to identify common tasks, formulate proactive agendas that respond to changing political and social circumstances, and develop these into broader social issues. In other words, the agenda can drive the creation of bargaining structures.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, sectors such as care services, cleaning, parcel and freight delivery, transportation, and welfare services were designated as 'essential work'. This reaffirmed the importance of state-level protection and support. Similarly, the demands of truckers for a safe rates system extend naturally to a broader public demand for the safety of all road users. Regional initiatives that aim to safeguard workers' health rights, including labour safety programmes, rehabilitation or occupational disease prevention centres, cooperative childcare facilities and enhanced cultural infrastructure, may also evolve into important supra-enterprise bargaining agendas. Furthermore, public institutions that do not directly provide services to the general public should consider establishing institutional mechanisms for democratic governance mechanism, as this is equally significant agenda for the publicness of public services.

08 A Strategy to Strengthen Industrial Unions by Enhancing Workplace-level Dynamism and Industrial Union Centralisation

The Social Public Unionism strategy to strengthen industrial unions aims to overcome internal fragmentation and dispersion, while also reinforcing industrial union centralisation and the practical capacity of members in the workplace level. This strategic approach combines organisational integration at the industrial level with autonomous agency at the workplace level, enhancing the organisation's overall dynamism.

According to scholars such as Offe and Hyman, 'democratic centralism' and the 'workplace-level empowerment' are the two prerequisites for successfully restructuring trade unions (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980; Hyman, 2001). This underscores the importance of a centralised structure to ensure strategic coherence and mobilisation, while emphasising that the sustainability of the movement is jeopardised if effective communication and member consensus are lacking.

The KPTU has resolved to complete its transition to a fully integrated industrial union by 2026. Moving towards an industrial union model involves establishing the institutional foundation necessary to realise the goals and values of such unions. However, this structural shift does not automatically guarantee sectoral cohesion or effective strategic capacity. The central challenge lies in creating mechanisms that can harness the vitality and dynamism of individual workplaces and channel them into the broader framework of the industrial union.

Strengthening the industrial union centralisation is essential for enhancing bargaining power and ensuring the consistent and

sustained implementation of strategic decisions. However, there is a risk that such centralisation could become a top-down mobilisation model. Without securing genuine participation and engagement from union members, the disconnect between central strategies and workplace realities will only worsen. Therefore, reinforcing workplace-level dynamism is an essential pillar that must be advanced alongside enhanced industrial union centralisation. In this context, strategies that link labour rights with the social common good can be implemented more effectively.

Given its multi-industry and multi-sector composition, the KPTU requires a model of 'decentralised centralisation' for its industrial operations. This involves reallocating workplace capacities by industry and region, thereby strengthening the union's capacity to influence both industrial and regional policy. To achieve this, a structural redesign of organisational systems and operational mechanisms is necessary to enable the industrial union to assume a more strategic role. The central body of the union must drive and facilitate supra-enterprise bargaining strategies, allocating the necessary personnel and financial resources. Moreover, the industrial union centralisation should be reinforced by systematising specialised functions, such as education, policy development and bargaining support, while promoting organic coordination and integration with industry- and region-based organisations.

09 A Strategy to Build Power through Solidarity with Social Movements and the Advancement of Progressive Politics

The Social Public Unionism is a discursive strategy that aims to reshape public opinion, as well as a power-building strategy that seeks to establish social support and networks, actively engage

in solidarity with social movements, and expand its social voice and influence. In essence, it is a process of maximising discursive and cooperative resources to build a social base of support, foster solidarity with social movements and broaden the practical foundations of progressive politics.

Studies on trade union revitalisation also the importance of restructuring social solidarity for overcoming crises and fostering innovation within the labour movement (Tohnston, 2002; Frege et al., 2003, 2004). Forming social consensus and securing legitimacy requires a discursive struggle against biased public opinion, as well as the reorganisation of social networks.

This strategy goes beyond merely shaping a positive public image of trade unions. The agenda of the publicness of public services serves as a crucial link between trade unions, social movements and progressive parties, facilitating collective action in collaboration with civil society. By transforming social demands for essential services into political issues, this agenda plays a central role in involving both the government and employers in supra-enterprise bargaining. Solidarity between the labour movement and social movements is not merely a defensive response to counter isolation but also a proactive arena for collective action. Notably, recent global cases of republicisation demonstrate the significant achievements that can result from collaboration among trade unions, community-based movements, civil society, and progressive parties, built upon shared understanding and joint action. Similarly, labour's political empowerment should not be limited to representation by progressive parties; rather, it can be strengthened through cooperative and practical activities undertaken jointly. However, it is crucial to recognise that the interests of workers and citizens do not always align, and may sometimes

conflict. For this reason, fostering everyday communication and building trust are essential components of this strategy.

10 A Fiscal Strategy to Strengthen State Responsibility and Promote Tax Justice

The Social Public Unionism pursues a fiscal strategy that moves beyond the logic of retrenchment and austerity – often framed as ‘fiscal stability’ and ‘fiscal soundness’ – seeking instead to strengthen the state’s fiscal responsibility and establish a secure financial basis for the social common good through a progressive, fair taxation. This involves more than just expanding budgets; it also means transforming existing fiscal and taxation structures that exacerbate inequality, realising fiscal democracy and tax justice, and promoting an alternative fiscal discourse.

The tension between expanding and contracting public services has always been closely linked to ‘finance’. Expanding personnel, budgets and institutional coverage requires overcoming obstacles created by limited resources and fiscal constraints. Heavyweight terms such as fiscal soundness, expenditure efficiency, national debt, and budget deficits have long been used to restrict public services and prevent their expansion. For decades, neoliberal policies have driven the reduction and privatisation of public services. In the process, the state has abdicated its fiscal responsibility by ceding essential services to market mechanisms. However, these policies have deepened social inequality and undermined fundamental rights. The state must now reclaim its role as a guarantor of public life by investing directly in essential public services such as healthcare, social care, education, housing, transport, retirement security, and communications.

Reforming the tax system is essential to achieving this. Tax justice is not just about securing greater tax revenue, but also about how the tax burden is distributed and how public resources are allocated. The tax system must shift towards strengthening progressive taxation of high-income earners, large corporations, and transnational capital. Abolishing tax avoidance practices and preferential tax exemptions, while realising tax justice, would enable the stable funding of public services.

Economist Thomas Piketty advocates the use of progressive taxation and a wealth tax to reduce inequality, viewing taxation as a means of achieving democracy and equality, not just a fiscal tool. Similarly, welfare state theorists emphasise the state's duty to provide universal welfare and public services, viewing taxation as a key means of fulfilling these commitments. In practice, several international examples illustrate the viability of this approach. For instance, the Nordic countries provide extensive public services despite high tax burdens, enabled by strong public support and trust. This is the result of tax transparency and broad social consensus.

This fiscal strategy must also be established as a core agenda in supra-enterprise bargaining, extending beyond the traditional scope of collective bargaining. Through negotiations with both national and local governments, unions must demand structural reforms to budgetary frameworks, tax policy and public service funding. Participating directly in budgetary decision-making, implementation and evaluation processes would enable unions to play an active role in expanding fiscal democracy. Ultimately, this fiscal strategy embodies the Social Public Unionism's political struggle and practical commitment to realising the quality public services and advancing social rights. It is a vital step towards

building a more egalitarian society.

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Towards a Social Public Unionism: Reconfiguring Collective Bargaining

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Problems of the Current Collective Bargaining Regime

Let us begin with a hypothetical case proposed by the American labour activist Sarita Gupta (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 178). Imagine a large chemical plant that provides a significant proportion of local employment. Following an investigation by a government agency, it was found that waste discharged from this plant had contaminated the region's drinking water sources. This resulted in a high incidence of digestive illnesses among local children, including the children of the plant's workers and their neighbours. In these circumstances the plant's trade union begins negotiations with management for renewal of a collective agreement. It would be reasonable to expect the union to prioritise compelling the employer to adopt safer waste management practices, reflecting the most pressing needs of its members.

However, current collective bargaining practices, or the 'collective bargaining regime', conflict with this apparently obvious ex-

pectation (McCartin, 2014: 2).⁰⁷ Under this regime, the scope of bargaining is confined to wages and working conditions and, at most, to matters strictly limited to the workplace. For example, the United States National Labour Relations Board (NLRB) classifies subjects of bargaining as mandatory, permissive or illegal (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 15–16). This categorisation, which is widely adopted in South Korea, implies that the agenda in the example above does not pertain to wages or working conditions and, as it seeks to address 'externalities' beyond the workplace, it would not be considered a mandatory subject of bargaining, meaning the employer would not be legally obligated to negotiate and could not be penalised for an unfair labour practice for refusing to do so. Indeed, such matters are more likely to be treated as permissive subjects of bargaining, or even as illegal ones. Decisions regarding the adoption of production facilities and technologies, as well as the underlying cost-benefit assessments, are generally regarded as part of management's exclusive prerogatives. Consequently, under the current collective bargaining regime, issues of substantial public concern, such as those in the hypothetical case that directly affect both workers and local residents, are either excluded from bargaining agendas altogether or left entirely to the employer's discretion.

The collective bargaining regime, with its narrow scope, particularly disadvantages public sector unions compared with their private sector counterparts. This became especially evident in the United States following the 2008 financial crisis. At that time, governments at all levels sought to address the crisis by scape-

⁰⁷ Here, collective bargaining should be understood as forming an organic part of the right to organise and, in particular, the right to collective action. Without the right to collective action, collective bargaining would be little more than 'collective begging' (Ewing et al., 2016: 2).

goating public sector unions (McCartin, 2013: 54–62) when faced with an unprecedented recession and mounting fiscal deficits. Previously disadvantaged compared with private sector workers, namely taxpayers, in terms of wages, union density and coverage by collective agreements, public sector workers were now portrayed as a 'new privileged class' enjoying superiority on all fronts. A populist narrative gained traction, claiming that their high wages and collective agreements were responsible for causing fiscal deficits. The existing collective bargaining regime constrained public sector unions in their ability to resist such attacks. On the one hand, issues that might foster alliances between unions, local communities and service users were excluded and suppressed as illegal subjects of bargaining. On the other hand, although bargaining over wages and working conditions was legally permissible, it proved difficult to secure meaningful gains amid fiscal crises. Even when gains were achieved, they often reinforced the dominant ideology portraying public sector unions as 'self-serving privileged groups fattening themselves on taxpayers' hard-earned money', thereby turning victories in individual battles into defeats in the broader struggle.

Amid this predicament for public sector unions, a group of Republican politicians with an aggressively anti-union stance were elected to governorships and other key offices. They pursued harsh austerity measures while systematically undermining public sector unions. At the forefront was the Governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, who stripped most public sector workers of their collective bargaining rights. Even in the sole remaining area—wages—he introduced legislation prohibiting unions from demanding increases above the rate of inflation. Ultimately, just four months after taking office, in March 2011, he orchestrated the bill's rapid passage through the state Senate (McCartin, 2018: 173).

Although not always as extreme as Wisconsin's example, similar measures restricting the labour rights of public sector workers were also introduced in Democratic-controlled local governments.

In short, the current collective bargaining regime, by imposing strict limits on bargaining agendas, forces unions, particularly public-sector unions, into a dilemma by imposing strict limits on bargaining agendas: either become stigmatised and isolated as forces of 'collective self-interest' or be suppressed as actors engaged in 'illegal political strikes'. To make matters worse, the decline in union membership has coincided with the growth of precarious forms of employment that unions find difficult to organise. This has fuelled the perception that unions are not only ineffective but also exacerbate inequalities between the relatively small group of organised workers and the much larger population of unorganised workers. Against this backdrop, there have been growing calls to explore alternative forms of worker representation beyond traditional collective bargaining and trade unions (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 15).

Historical Challenges to the Current Collective Bargaining Regime

However, there are also strong voices arguing that the weapon of collective bargaining should not be relinquished too readily. According to this view, collective bargaining remains the most effective means through which ordinary workers can confront the power of elites and corporations in their workplaces and shape the economic and social futures of their families (McAlevey, 2020: 1; Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 19). Historically, the expansion of collective bargaining has contributed significantly to improving workers' overall liv-

ing standards, redistributing wealth and reducing inequality. In particular, in countries with underdeveloped state-level social security systems, collective bargaining has served as an essential complement to social protection (Smiley, 2018: 235; Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 18–19).

Proponents further contend that, in the present context, the importance of collective bargaining has actually increased. Alternative forms of worker representing workers' interest include litigation, legislative and enforcement-based legal strategies, and advocacy campaigns. Yet the effectiveness of these approaches has been significantly weakened by factors such as the consolidation of conservative political power together with the rise of judicial conservatism, as well as the lack or inadequacy of the resources and tactics required to secure meaningful gains (McAlevey, 2020: 2–3).

Practical considerations also play a role. Since union members' participation in union activities tends to be at its highest during periods of collective bargaining, the heightened attention and engagement that accompany negotiations can serve as an opportunity for union revitalisation (Sneiderman & McCartin, 2018: 223). Moreover, collective bargaining constitutes a core function of unions. Given the current shortages of union resources and capacity, it is difficult to undertake meaningful activities independent of bargaining. Conversely, if unions leverage this core function as a strategic fulcrum, they may be able to secure the resources and capacities necessary for revitalisation without resorting to the highly centralised and resource-intensive organising models frequently used in other contexts (Ashby & Bruno, 2016: 104; Sneiderman & McCartin, 2018: 229).

Of course, as discussed above, there is no denying that the current practice of collective bargaining has significant problems. Yet these should be understood not as inherent flaws in collec-

tive bargaining itself, but rather as issues arising from a particular bargaining regime. Moreover, this regime was not inevitable. As the two historical challenges briefly examined below demonstrate, alternative collective bargaining arrangements have indeed been possible.

The first challenge began on 21 November 1945, when more than 320,000 workers went on strike at General Motors (GM), in a walk-out lasting 113 days (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 178–179; Minchin, 2024). Shaking American society to its core, this historic strike was led by the United Auto Workers (UAW) at GM, which proclaimed that they sought to 'make progress with the community and not at the expense of the community' and declared that the strike was undertaken 'on behalf of all Americans'. At the heart of this spirit lay the union's central demand: a 30% wage increase without a rise in car prices (Minchin, 2024: 370). The logic underpinning this demand was clear. Post-war reconstruction required the restoration of broad-based purchasing power, and to achieve this, workers needed a guaranteed 'living wage'. However, to prevent wage increases from driving higher car prices, causing inflation, and ultimately eroding consumers' purchasing power, the cost of wage rises had to be borne entirely by management. If the company claimed that its financial position made it impossible to meet these demands, the union insisted that it should 'open the books' and publicly substantiate its case.

Workers across industries, along with a broad swathe of the public, actively supported the union's demands and reasoning. However, management staunchly rejected the proposals, arguing that bringing sales prices and profits into the scope of collective bargaining, and making such information public, constituted a fundamental infringement of managerial prerogatives (Minchin, 2024: 385).

Thus, the real issue at stake lay less in the wage increase itself, or the precise amount involved, and more in the very structure of the collective bargaining regime, which protected management's control as an inviolable domain while limiting bargaining agendas to a narrow definition of wages and working conditions. In the end, management's steadfast refusal, combined with federal government intervention prompted by the prolonged strike, halted the ambitious effort to establish a bargaining regime in which managerial prerogatives were constrained and union demands integrated with the wider public interest. The strike concluded with an agreement granting a wage increase of 18.5 cents per hour. Nevertheless, this episode demonstrated that an alternative collective bargaining regime was indeed possible and that the current regime is the product of a historically contingent balance of power shaped by the suppression of such challenges.

This point is reaffirmed in the second challenge, which centred on public sector unions. Before the establishment of a formal collective bargaining regime in the United States' public sector, public sector workers engaged in collective bargaining and industrial action not only over wages and working conditions but also on matters of profound philosophical significance. For instance, teachers' unions sought to influence matters such as class sizes, disciplinary policies and educational programmes. In 1965, during a strike in New York City, social service workers formed an alliance with welfare recipients and incorporated their demands into their bargaining agenda. One notable demand was the automatic provision of a clothing allowance to welfare recipients. Although city officials vehemently rejected this demand, claiming that it infringed upon city authorities' managerial prerogatives and thus could not constitute a legitimate subject of collective bargaining, the union ultimately succeeded in securing this concession

through sustained struggle (Burns, 2019: 79–80). Thus, before the collective bargaining regime was formalised in the public sector, bargaining agendas often reflected public sector workers' distinctive sense of social responsibility and were closely aligned with the public good (Burns, 2019: 83). By contrast, the collective bargaining regime subsequently established in the public sector, modelled on that of the private sector, was designed specifically to suppress and exclude such practices.

Thus, the challenges that emerged during the establishment of the current collective bargaining regime in both the private and public sectors have, in the face of the regime's present crisis, inspired contemporary initiatives aimed not at retreating from collective bargaining but at its expansive reconfiguration. These efforts seek to build reciprocal alliances between workers and service users, as well as between unions and local communities. One of the most prominent examples of this trend is 'Bargaining for the Common Good' (hereafter BCG)⁰⁸.

BCG does not set workplace activism in opposition to community engagement, nor does it seek to replace the former with the latter. At its core is the collective bargaining or the reconfiguration of it, and it thus inherits the tradition of militant, workplace-based trade unionism. Moreover, BCG favours broad-based, class-oriented, issue-driven organising and stands in sharp contrast to attempts to dismantle the trade union movement or broader labour movement (Burns, 2014: 86–87). Borrowing the terminology of the American labour organiser late Jane McAlevey, BCG aligns more closely with a model of 'deep organising' rather than one of 'shallow mobilising' (McAlevey, 2016: 54).

⁰⁸ For a more detailed introduction to BCG, see Lee Jae-hoon et al., 2025: 193–204.

Moreover, BCG does not shy away from collective action as an organic component of collective bargaining, particularly militant forms of action. Indeed, public sector unions that have embraced BCG have successfully revived strike tactics long marginalised for both subjective and objective reasons, achieving significant gains, even in regions where public sector strikes are outright illegal. In other words, rather than abandoning militancy, BCG retains it while redefining the objectives pursued through such means. BCG has demonstrated that what determines public support is not the tactic itself but the objective sought through it, and that when militant tactics are employed in pursuit of such goals, they can be not only effective but also broadly popular (McCartin, 2018: 176).

Expanding the Scope of Bargaining and Towards a New Collective Bargaining Regime

The essence of BCG lies in challenging the current collective bargaining regime by broadening the scope of bargaining and, in doing so, pioneering alternative bargaining practices. This expansion takes various forms. Firstly, bargaining agendas are broadened. As noted earlier, the existing regime confines bargaining subjects to wages and working conditions, thereby effectively dividing unions from potential allies within local communities (Sneiderman & McCartin, 2018: 222). In contrast, BCG widens the bargaining agenda to incorporate the demands of community organisations—what BCG describes as 'common good' demands—and thus positions collective bargaining as a vehicle for forging alliances between unions and local communities (Smiley, 2018: 239). This approach extends beyond the pursuit of pragmatic bargains aimed merely at alliance-building. It rests instead on an objective recognition that the very forces undermining union bargaining power and deepening labour precarity are the same actors dismantling

public institutions such as schools and public transport, profiting from rising household debt, and promoting policies that drive climate change and environmental injustice, thereby destroying local communities themselves. In other words, BCG is premised on a shared understanding that unions and communities face a common adversary (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 61–62).

Secondly, BCG seeks to expand the range of workers' needs represented in bargaining. When BCG calls for bargaining agendas to be broadened, it does not treat workers and community members as separate groups whose respective needs are represented independently. Rather, it recognises that workers themselves are 'intersectional' beings. In other words, workers are not only 'employees' but also, for instance, tenants, debtors and consumers, or, alternatively, homeowners, savers and family members of self-employed individuals, holding multiple identities and with diverse needs (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 61–62). The current collective bargaining regime confines workers' needs to wages, working conditions and the workplace. This approach fails to address the full spectrum of workers' needs as intersectional beings. By contrast, BCG seeks to leverage workers' collective bargaining rights, grounded in their status as employees, as a platform for representing their broader needs. In this way, collective bargaining becomes part of a longer-term strategy and movement that seeks to address the various needs of workers (McCartin, 2016: 133).

Thirdly, the BCG advocates expanding the range of bargaining counterparts. The current collective bargaining regime not only limits the scope of bargaining subjects and the needs addressed, and confines the obligated bargaining counterpart strictly to the employer identified in the formal employment contract. However, it is widely recognised that corporate structures have shifted

from the 'single-employer model', in which the 'employer' and 'user' of labour, the employment contractual relationship and the subordinate labour relationship were integrated within a single firm, to the 'joint-employer model', where employers and users, the employment contractual relationship and the subordinate labour relationship are both differentiated and interlinked. In many cases, the formal employer named in the contract functions merely as a 'figurehead' (Yun Ae-lim, 2022: 109–115). For this reason, broadening the scope of bargaining counterparts to include entities wielding 'substantive control' has long been a central demand of the global trade union movement, and its realisation now appears imminent in South Korea. While BCG aligns itself with this trend, it seeks to go even further. It aims to designate as bargaining counterparts not only employers but also any actors exercising substantive control over workers' lives as a whole, for example, landlords, financial institutions, commercial retailers, and government officials, and to impose upon them a duty to bargain (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 74). By expanding both the holders of collective bargaining rights and those subject to bargaining obligations, BCG seeks to reconceptualise collective bargaining as a key instrument of economic democratisation, enabling workers, understood not merely as employees, to exercise control over the capital and power structures, beyond their direct employers that exert substantive influence over their lives (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 74). In this respect, BCG forms part of a broader movement aimed at establishing new institutions and legal frameworks capable of imposing genuine accountability on those who hold power and authority (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 74).

Such changes would, of course, transform the very essence of collective bargaining as we have known it (Smiley & Gupta, 2022: 61). Nevertheless, one principle remains clear and constant: the auton-

omy of trade unions. The current collective bargaining regime imposes bargaining agendas, scopes, and counterparts on workers that are structured to serve the interests of capital, while suppressing their autonomous judgement and efforts to improve their working conditions and lives beyond these limits. Despite continual resistance from workers, the capital-driven bargaining regime has endured, resulting in crises for the trade union movement on multiple fronts (Burns, 2019: 86). Overcoming these crises and revitalising unions must begin with reclaiming workers' autonomous decision-making power: the ability to choose effective strategies, allies, bargaining agendas, scopes and counterparts capable of transforming their lives. Above all, this constitutes the central significance of BCG.

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Because Healthcare Has Become Nothing but a Commodity

Park Kyung-deuk Chair of the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division

Members of the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division wear vests bearing the slogan: 'Healthcare is not a commodity'. In South Korea, however, this slogan does not reflect reality. Healthcare services cannot be obtained without payment; workers are exploited in the process of delivering them; and profits are generated when these services are sold. In every sense, healthcare functions as a commodity.

As of 2024, 40 million people – nearly 80% of the population – were enrolled in private medical expense insurance due to the financial burden of healthcare costs (Financial Services Commission press release, 1 April 2025). Conditions for hospital workers, particularly nurses, remain dire. Chronic staff shortages force nurses to work excessive hours and become ill, leaving many distressed by their inability to provide adequate care for patients. As of 2025, South Korea had just 5.2 practising clinical nurses per 1,000 people, compared with an OECD average of 8.4 (Ministry of Health and Welfare; OECD Health Statistics 2025). During the COVID-19 pandemic, and again amid medical cri-

ses triggered by junior doctor strikes, private hospitals reported profits and biohealth company revenues grew at double-digit rates last year. These lucrative profit opportunities continue to fuel attempts to establish for-profit hospitals. Indeed, Samsung Life Insurance's healthcare privatisation plan, devised two decades ago, remains very much intact. Its implementation has only been delayed by persistent struggles led by trade unions and civil society, which have so far successfully blocked its advance.

In a marketplace where healthcare services are produced, sold, and purchased as commodities, can hospital workers meaningfully defend the public function of healthcare through collective bargaining, a mechanism traditionally limited to negotiations over wages and working conditions? Reflecting on my experience as a member of the trade union at Seoul National University Hospital(SNUH), I believe they can. Indeed, it is not just a matter of affirming that they can: it was precisely through fighting for the



public interest that union members were able to take control of both their workplaces and their struggles. This article explains how these workers have fought, with a particular focus on the KPTU SNUH branch's trade union's agreements concerning the public value of healthcare.

When the Strike Began, the Petition Surpassed One Million Signatures

It was 2014, a time when internet usage in South Korea was still heavily centred on web portals. The fastest way to track emerging issues back then was to monitor the portals' real-time trending search keywords. On 22 July, 'healthcare privatisation' appeared among the top searches. That day marked the end of the notice period for the proposed amendment to the Enforcement Rule of the Medical Service Act, widely known as the 'Healthcare Privatisation Bill'. Posts began circulating on social media urging public attention and warning that, without broader awareness, this bill might pass largely unnoticed. On that same day, the number of signatures opposing healthcare privatisation surpassed 550,000. The following day, this figure exceeded one million by, and the day after that, it has reached 1.5 million.

Remarkably, the petition had actually been launched back in January of that year, yet it had struggled to gain traction for six months. Suddenly, within just three days, more than one million people signed. What, then, happened on 22 July? While the closing of the notice period created urgency and the tireless efforts of civil society both played a part, there was another decisive factor: the strike. On 21 July, the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division began striking in protest against healthcare privatisation. (<https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/119022?no=119022>)

200만 앞둔 의료 민영화 반대 서명, 그 배경엔...

[이 주의 조합원] 변혜진 보건의료단체연합 기획실장

전용기해기자 | 기사입력 2014.07.27. 16:43:09 최종수정 2014.08.01. 15:11:22

의료 민영화 반대 서명이 170만 명(26일 현재)이 넘었다. 서명 동참 인원이 늘어나는 속도를 볼 때 곧 200만 명이 넘어설 것으로 보인다.

Signatures Opposing Healthcare Privatisation Near Two Million - The Story Behind the Movement

[Member of the Week] Byeon Hye-jin, Director of Planning, Korean Federation of Medical Activist Groups for Health Rights

Blocking Healthcare Privatisation and Stopping For-Profit Hospitals

On 27 June, during its first strike, the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division informed the public about the government's push for the Healthcare Privatisation Bill. Targeting the final day of the public notice period, it launched a second strike on 21 July. On 27 August, the SNUH branch carried the struggle forward with a third strike, fighting to block healthcare privatisation. As a result, a series of related legislative proposals—including the full legalisation of telemedicine, the significant expansion of for-profit subsidiaries and ancillary business activities, the Framework Bill on the Development of Service Industries, and the establishment of for-profit hospitals, were either blocked in the National Assembly or faced substantial delays in implementation.

At the time, it seemed almost unimaginable that hospital workers from different institutions would gather in central Seoul to

strike in defence of the public nature of healthcare rather than to pursue workplace-specific demands. Nevertheless, union members at SNUH and Kyungpook National University Hospital voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action and successfully three strikes within a single year. It was a gruelling struggle in the sweltering summer heat, yet the pride in having defended

뉴스1스 + 구독

의료민영화 저지 위한 파업 상경투쟁단 기자회견

입력 2014.06.27. 오후 3:54 · 수정 2014.06.27. 오후 3:55 · 기사원문

2 3

가



[서울=뉴스1스]강진형 기자 = 27일 오후 서울 종로구 세종문화회관 앞에서 열린 '의료민영화 저지 위한 파업

Press Conference by Striking Workers in Seoul Opposing Healthcare Privatisation

Seoul—News1s (Reporter Kang Jin-hyeong): A strike opposing healthcare privatisation was held on the afternoon of the 27th in front of the Sejong Centre for the Performing Arts in Jongno-gu, Seoul.

the public interest in healthcare through strike action, bolstered by the support of ordinary citizens, became deeply rooted in the hearts of union members. Moreover, solidarity extending beyond individual workplaces and regions was further strengthened.

The following year, in 2015, the struggle to block the establishment of for-profit hospitals in Jeju began. Determined that not a single for-profit hospital should be permitted in this country, the Jeju Branch of the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division, together with Jeju residents and civil society, united in an unyielding fight. As a result, in 2019, the licence to open the Greenland International Hospital was revoked, and by 2023, following the conclusion of a prolonged legal battle, the eight-year struggle reached a decisive victory.

Such struggles have long held an important place in the history of hospital trade unions. The collective agreements concluded each year between the SNUH trade union and management have included not only provisions relating to working conditions, but also clauses intended to benefit patients and strengthen the public role of healthcare. While these provisions are now grouped under the heading 'Matters Concerning the Public Functions of Healthcare', during the 1990s and 2000s they were referred to as 'Matters Concerning the Democratisation of Healthcare'. Between 1998 and 2024, the number of such agreed clauses has increased to approximately 100.

1990s - 2000s

In the 1990s, agreements were reached on measures such as reducing designated doctor fees (optional consultation fees) for unemployed patients and allowing credit card payments for medical

services. This addressed situations where patients had previously been unable to access treatment due to an inability to pay in cash immediately.

In the 2000s, further agreements were concluded, including the downward adjustment of optional consultation fees, the expansion of public healthcare programmes, and the securing of more than 50% of total hospital beds as multi-bed wards⁽²⁰⁰³⁾. Additional measures included granting patients free access to hospital room televisions and microwave facilities, removing Samsung Life Insurance consultation desks within hospitals, prohibiting the establishment of for-profit medical corporations, and banning open medical examinations. Agreements were also made to prohibit the use of genetically modified agricultural products in patient meals and to prioritise domestic agricultural and livestock products. Other provisions included closing fast-food outlets (e.g. Burger King) within hospitals, developing standard clinical guidelines to prevent both overtreatment and undertreatment, promoting medical security for low-income groups. The public healthcare system was also enhanced through Seoul Metropolitan Boramae Hospital. Further improvements involved reducing charges for four-bed wards (with a 50% discount for medical aid recipients), improving intensive care unit guardians' waiting rooms, lowering parking fees, and establishing a network of national and public hospitals. Agreements also secured budgets for public healthcare projects, supported a research project on the role of national university hospitals in public healthcare, and ensured that multi-bed wards were maintained at 70% occupancy at Boramae Hospital⁽²⁰⁰⁹⁾.

2010s

In the 2010s, a range of measures were agreed upon during this decade, including a 50% reduction in optional consultation fees for medical aid patients⁽²⁰¹⁰⁾, a 30% reduction in meal charges for guardians of paediatric inpatients, and an end to preferential treatment for sponsors. In 2013, optional consultation fees for medical aid patients were fully waived. Further measures included optimising the number of outpatients per session to address the problem of ‘one-minute consultations’, mandating the public disclosure of non-reimbursable items, and prohibiting both the transfer of patients’ medical records to for-profit subsidiaries and ancillary businesses run by such subsidiaries within hospitals. Additional agreements focused on reducing overcrowding in emergency rooms, establishing an advanced outpatient centre incorporating considerations for the allocation of medical facilities, infection control, environmental assessments, and the reduction of ancillary businesses. Staff cafeterias were to be installed that would be accessible to patients and their guardians while ensuring the maintenance of meal quality and pricing. There were also plans to cooperate with and support the operation of the Seoul Regional Trauma Centre, although this was ultimately not implemented. Furthermore, agreements included promoting patient referrals to strengthen the healthcare delivery system, expanding integrated nursing and caregiving services, and establishing treatment systems for severe and rare diseases.

2020s

During this decade, agreements were reached on establishing comprehensive countermeasures for infectious diseases. These included expanding the number of isolation treatment beds for

critically ill patients, providing infection control supplies and sharing relevant information, submitting recommendations to the government to increase staffing quotas, delivering infection prevention education, and ensuring compliance with staffing standards for nursing personnel in infectious disease wards. Further agreements included developing treatment systems focused on severe, rare, and intractable diseases, implementing climate crisis response measures such as promoting energy conservation, reducing waste, installing renewable energy facilities, and providing education on climate crisis adaptation, and withdrawing from investments in cosmetic companies by disposing of shares held by for-profit subsidiaries.

The Sole Agreement on Optional Consultation Fees

For many years, there were persistent struggles were waged over the abolition of those fees, which were additional charges applied when patients were treated by a professor. At the time, these charges constituted the largest portion of non-reimbursable medical expenses. Yet the term ‘optional consultation fees’ appeared in a collective agreement only once. The hospital administration had consistently maintained that matters relating to physicians’ fees, particularly those of professors, fell outside the scope of negotiation with the labour union.

In 2013, however, following a strike and a marathon twelve hours of negotiations, during which the union occupied the hospital director’s office, an agreement was finally reached to ‘develop improvement measures regarding the optional consultation’. This was the first agreement of its kind in the country to acknowledge that optional consultation fees were both a financial burden on patients and a source of systemic problems—an unprecedented

step at the time and one that has not been repeated since.

Subsequently, legislative bills aimed at abolishing optional consultation fees were introduced in the National Assembly each year. Eventually, in 2017, an amendment to the Medical Service Act abolishing these fees was passed. On 1 January 2018, after fifty years of being a major non-reimbursable item sustaining high physician incomes, optional consultations fees were finally consigned to history.

Labour Rights Safeguarding Public Healthcare

The demand to bring the management of patient meals at the Children's Hospital under direct hospital operation continued for nearly two decades. While meals for adult patients were directly managed by the hospital, those for paediatric patients were outsourced under the pretext of financial constraints at the Children's Hospital. This resulted in serious concerns about meal quality. During negotiations, union representatives once entered the room carrying meal trays and posed the pointed question: 'If your own grandchild were ill, could you feed them this?' The hospital director could not respond, yet still refused to agree to the transition to direct management. In collaboration with a lawmaker's office, the union conducted an unannounced inspection of the Children's Hospital's outsourced meal preparation facilities—areas that had previously never been made public. The inspection revealed unhygienic conditions and shocking food preparation practices, which were subsequently exposed to the public. Despite persistent struggles, the hospital repeatedly resisted change. Between 2013 and 2016, annual agreements were signed merely to 'review' the transition to direct management of the Children's Hospital meal services, yet the path to actual im-



plementation remained distant despite all efforts.

A broader movement then brought about a turning point: the conversion of indirectly employed, non-regular workers into permanent employees. In 2018, regular employees of the SNUH joined forces with subcontracted non-regular workers, launching a strike in the hospital courtyard to demand permanent employment. In 2019, subcontracted workers' unions across national university hospitals under the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division organised a joint strike for the same cause. Through sustained organising, including the formation of local branches, uniting subcontracted workers in cleaning, security, facilities and other roles, and engaging in collective action alongside them, a breakthrough was achieved. A decade after the establishment of the Mindeulle Branch (the subcontracted workers' union), all members were successfully converted to permanent employment. Importantly, the outsourced meal service workers at the Children's Hospital were also included. This marked a significant milestone: a longstanding demand for strengthening public function of healthcare, which had proven unattainable through direct struggle alone, was finally realised through the expansion of labour rights.

Five Agreements, Yet Free Medical Care for Children Remains Elusive

The demand for free medical care for paediatric patients has been an ongoing issue, with several agreements being reached over the years. Collective agreements were signed in 2016, 2018, 2020, 2023, and 2024. These addressed, various measures such as submitting recommendations to the government to reduce the financial burden of medical expenses for children, filing legislative petitions to establish caps on paediatric medical costs, and conducting research on relevant systems and policies. Despite these repeated efforts and agreements, meaningful improvements have yet to be achieved. This demand is not merely that of the SNUH union but forms part of the broader set of joint demands made by the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division to the government.

Union Members' Resolve Preserves the Children's Hospital Beds

In 2023, the SNUH union launched a strike demanding the strengthening of public healthcare functions and increased staffing levels. On the sixth day of the strike, the hospital management presented a proposal for resolution. As the proposal was shared with striking union members, who were then asked to consider ending the strike, many expressed their belief that a provisional agreement was not possible. The primary reason was the absence of a clause prohibiting the reduction of bed numbers at the Children's Hospital. At the time, the SNU Children's Hospital was preparing for a major remodelling project, and the union had discovered plans to reduce the number of beds during the process. In response, the union included a specific clause prohibiting bed

reductions at the Children's Hospital in its collective bargaining demands.

The hospital management argued that it would be difficult to formalise such a clause in writing but offered instead to have the hospital director make a verbal commitment during the signing ceremony, with the statement recorded on video. The union members, however, remained resolute. They insisted that the strike could not be ended without a formal written agreement. An emergency delegates' meeting was convened. While the standard procedure was to hold a vote on whether to adopt a provisional agreement, the union leadership proposed continuing the strike without holding a vote. The delegates unanimously supported this decision without objection.

At that moment, the union faced a delicate dilemma: it was difficult both to continue the strike, which had already lasted more than six days, solely to uphold the demand to protect the public functions of healthcare, and to reach an agreement in the face of internal disagreements. Yet the members stood firm, refusing to abandon their demand to safeguard the public functions of healthcare. Instead of proceeding with a vote, they resolved to trust their members, strengthen their determination, and mobilise an even larger number of strikers the following day to exert maximum pressure on management. This proved to be a wise and strategic decision, protecting both organisational integrity and collective principles. Finally, the hospital management submitted an additional proposal, agreeing in writing not to reduce the number of beds at the Children's Hospital during the remodelling project.

서울대병원 파업 종료, 어린이병원 병상수 보장 등 합의

전아름 기자 | 승인 2023.11.09 13:42 | 댓글 0

7일 서울대병원 노사 정식조인식 "파업으로 인한 불편 참아주신 환자, 국민께 감사하다"

SNUH Strike Concludes with Agreement Guaranteeing Number of Beds at Children's Hospital

Formal signing ceremony between labour and management on the 7th: 'We thank patients and the public for enduring the inconvenience caused by the strike.'

The Task Ahead: Building Broader Solidarity Among Labour Unions

The journey has been arduous. Every year, the hospital management rejected the union's demands, stating: 'This falls under neither the collective agreement nor issues relating to working conditions. It lies beyond the authority of the hospital director and falls within the hospital's exclusive right to determine medical services.' Nevertheless, the union consistently raised demands relating to public healthcare in every round of collective bargaining, fought persistently, and achieved tangible gains. Throughout this process, it was the union members who grew the most, often teaching and guiding their representatives. Patients and citizens, too, expressed their support, stating that they were willing to endure temporary inconvenience if it meant the union would ultimately prevail.

The one hundred clauses on 'medical democratisation and public



Patients sign petitions and receive union leaflets in front of the hospital lobby during the strike.

functions of healthcare' recorded in the collective agreements represent the living history of hospital workers' struggles. The next challenge is to broaden the impact of SNUH's collective bargaining experience: to ensure that more labour unions prioritise demands serving the public good as central goals in their negotiations, and to enable hospital workers across different institutions to fight collectively. If asked whether struggles for the public functions of healthcare can coexist with the union's economic struggles, and whether union members can fight solely on the basis of just demands, I would respond that, while it is undoubtedly difficult, it is by no means impossible. Union members grow stronger when they raise their voices for what is just. I would begin by showing the one hundred agreements achieved thus far and say: 'Let us start from here.'

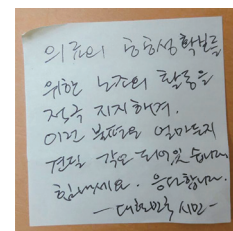
Because healthcare has become overly commodified, hospital workers, those who best understand the harm caused by treating healthcare as a market commodity, must be the ones to speak



A merchant shows solidarity with the 2016 strike against the introduction of performance-based pay by distributing plastic bags printed with slogans supporting the strike.



Strike participants were demanding that the death certificate of farmer Baek Nam-gi, who died in 2016 as a result of state violence, and were calling for the resignation of the hospital director implicated in the political corruption scandal.



A note left by a citizen, accompanied by bottles of energy drinks, at the strike sit-in site
 'I fully support the union's efforts to secure the public functions of healthcare, and I am prepared to endure any inconveniences. Stay strong. I am cheering you on.'
 — A citizen of the Republic of Korea

out and insist that healthcare should not be commercialised. This realisation, and the actions taken in response, have been gradual but are steadily reshaping medical practice. The KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division is currently preparing for a joint struggle in September alongside the KPTU, advocating for stronger state responsibility for regional and public healthcare, workforce expansion, the rejection of healthcare marketisation, and enhanced coverage under the National Health Insurance system. For the health and well-being of both patients and workers, we seek to raise our voices alongside striking union members and declare loudly: 'Healthcare is not a commodity.'

About the Author

Park Kyung-deuk

Park Kyung-deuk joined Seoul National University Hospital in 2005 and, during her tenure as a full-time union officer, participated in eight strikes. She was actively involved in struggles against the hospital director implicated in the political corruption scandal as then-President Park Geun-hye's personal physician, as well as in the campaign to amend the death certificate of farmer Baek Nam-gi. She currently serves as the chair of the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division.



Advancing the Publicness of Schools and of Education:

Schools as Spaces for Personal and Social Growth
Beyond Educational Institutions

Park Seong-sik Director of Policy Planning,
KPTU-EdSol

Korean Education: Can Education Alone Be the Solution?

South Korea is renowned for its fervent commitment to education, yet it seldom pauses to question what education actually means or the purpose of schools. The absence of a comprehensive vision for education and the lack of genuine reform or a paradigm shift are therefore not limitations unique to the Lee administration. It is widely acknowledged that resolving the entrenched system of examination-driven, competitive education will remain extremely difficult unless there is a fundamental transformation of the structures and modes of livelihood within Korean society. Consequently, any government attempting to intervene in educational matters, particularly those concerning university entrance examinations, is perceived as risking severe political costs. The Moon Jae-in administration was criticised by civil society for its education policies, and the first Minister of Education in the Yoon Suk-yeol administration was dismissed after proposing to lower the school entry age to five, which caused controversy.

The National Education Commission was established with the stated intention of addressing the intractable problems of the Korean education system. It was designed to deliberate on medium to long-term visions and policies for education, yet it has lapsed into dormancy, leaving little clarity as to its actual functions. Does this mean that maintaining the status quo is the only realistic option for education? Will Korea's public education system, once a source of national pride based on the principle that 'education is the foundation of the nation', continue to decline into dysfunction? Are students destined to remain trapped within the rigid confines of examination-driven competition and social stratification, condemned to frustration and diminishing aspirations? Furthermore, is the current approach of the educational movement, which primarily frames Korea's education crisis in terms of university entrance examinations, sufficient and effective? While these exams are undoubtedly central to the problem, shouldn't we consider more practical and impactful agendas for educational reform?

In any social sphere, meaningful challenges and transformations must begin with measures that can be achieved immediately at the intersection of societal demands and capacities. Only from this foundation can a movement gain momentum and eventually extend into deeper, systemic realms. From this perspective, the Education Workers Solidarity Division of the Korean Public & Social Services and Transport Workers' Union(KPTU-EdSo) proposes adopting 'educational welfare'⁰⁹ and the 'publicness of schools' as starting paradigms for educational reform. Yet even this approach

⁰⁹ Educational welfare is defined as: 'A comprehensive system of public educational support provided to all individuals in order to achieve the public purpose of education' (2022, KPTU-EdSol).

is far from straightforward. Public awareness of and familiarity with educational welfare are limited, and the concept of the publicness of schools is largely uncharted and underdeveloped.

In any social sphere, meaningful challenges and transformations must begin with immediately achievable measures at the points where societal demands and capacities intersect. Only from that foundation can a movement gain momentum and eventually extend into deeper, systemic realms. From this perspective, the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union Education Workers Solidarity Division(KPTU-EdSol) proposes adopting 'educational welfare' and the 'publicness of schools' as starting paradigms for educational reform. Yet even this approach is far from straightforward. Public awareness of and familiarity with educational welfare remain limited, and the very concept of the publicness of schools remains largely uncharted and underdeveloped.

The Demands of the Era: Publicness of Education and Schools

The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas defines 'publicness' as 'the sphere in which citizens participate freely and equally in deliberations on public agendas, shaping collective interests and realising the common good', identifying it as a core element of democracy. The Korean sociologist Kim Ho-gi, on the other hand, approaches 'publicness' as 'an institutional framework and value orientation that transcends private interests, aims to enhance the quality of life for all citizens, and constitutes a value to be jointly upheld by both the state and civil society'. Drawing on these perspectives, the publicness of schools can be defined as the set of values, instruments, and operational principles that schools should pursue in collaboration with society and under state responsibility to serve the collective good of all citizens. However,



within the field of education, 'publicness' has so far been understood and applied mainly in relation to the publicness of education. The notion of the publicness of schools has not yet emerged as a distinct concept.

The publicness of education has long been a central value within the education movement, functioning as an organising paradigm. It encompasses the philosophy, values and approaches to teaching and learning as defined by the state, as well as the scope of the curriculum, assessment methods and operational structures. Centred on the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTEU), the movement proclaims that 'education is not a commodity' and works to expand free education and reduce private tutoring, aiming to create a curriculum that fulfils the public purposes of education. Put simply, this concerns the question of 'who teaches what and how'. Recently, issues such as state-authored textbooks, the high school credit system, democratic citizenship educa-

tion, teacher rights and protection, and AI-based textbooks have come to the fore. However, none of these agendas addresses the fundamental question of what a school actually is. They remain confined to the assumption that a school is merely a place where education takes place. In contrast, the publicness of schools asks how they should be organised in a changing era.

The reason for explicitly advocating for the publicness of schools, as distinct from the publicness of education, is as follows. Firstly, the two are, of course, different. Secondly, there are social challenges that cannot be adequately addressed within the framework of the publicness of education alone. Teachers, for example, have long argued that care work is not part of education and therefore should not fall within the remit of schools. Thirdly, some key stakeholders in public education have historically been excluded from educational policymaking. Furthermore, the recent rise of meritocratic and technocratic norms within the teaching profession¹⁰ has weakened the influence of public education. Consequently, parents, once considered pivotal figures in public education, have been reduced to the role of complainants. Similarly, approximately 180,000 education support workers are viewed merely as peripheral assistants, with no direct link to education. In some cases, they are even considered obstacles, and do not receive the sympathy typically given to non-regular employees. Consequently, solidarity movements within education have largely disappeared.

¹⁰ A frequently cited maxim among teachers that symbolises this perspective states: 'The quality of education cannot exceed the quality of its teachers'.

Category	Publicness of Education	Publicness of Schools
Principle	Education must be provided equally to all as a social public good under the responsibility of the state.	Schools should evolve into public and democratic spaces that foster learning, provide care, nurture community relationships, uphold human rights, and support all aspects of personal growth and life.
Scope	The entire educational system and policy, ideological and content-oriented directions of education	The overall structures and approaches of organisation, functions, operations, relationships, and culture for realising the communal nature of schools
Legal Basis	Framework Act on Education, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, etc.	None
Policy Domains	Free education, national curriculum, public education competitiveness, teachers' rights, and education finance.	Free education, educational welfare, school management, education finance, and labour rights protection.
Constituent Actors	State (Ministry of Education, Offices of Education, National Assembly), teachers, students, parents, and civil society.	State (Ministry of Education, Offices of Education, National Assembly, schools), students, parents, teachers and staff including education support workers, and civil society.
Key Actors	Teachers are the central actors, educational professionalism.	Education support workers, students and parents are stakeholders who share responsibility.
Relation to Educational Welfare	Limited to issues of free education.	The need to establish a multidimensional public support system in schools to address social inequalities and educational marginalisation

Applied Contexts	Focuses on curriculum, legislation and budget (Top-level)	Focuses on classrooms, cafeterias, after-school care rooms, counselling rooms, libraries, etc. (Concrete and everyday structures)
Conflict Lines	Competition, marketisation and private education (Neoliberalism)	Fragmented educational welfare, precarious employment, and democratic participation
Social Implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reforming teaching and learning with a focus on teacher authority. • Overcoming the entrance-exam-oriented competitive education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redefining the status and roles of schools and educational support workers, and expanding the scope of educational stakeholders • Improving childcare environments in a low birthrate society • Positioning schools as 'spaces of progressive life' where welfare, human rights, and equality are experienced and from which they spread

Although KPTU-EdSol was among the first to conceptualise the publicness of schools and propose it as a guiding principle for policy and activism, the term itself is not entirely without precedent. The term 'publicness' appears in the Framework Act on Education¹¹. However, given the context in which it is mentioned – relating to academic research, culture and community-linked lifelong education – it is reasonable to infer that the term in the Act primarily concerns norms relating to universities and higher

¹¹ Framework Act on Education, Article 9 (School Education) '(1) Schools shall be established to provide early childhood, elementary, secondary, and higher education. (2) Schools shall be in public in nature and shall endeavour not only to provide education to students but also to preserve and advance academic and cultural traditions and to promote lifelong learning for residents.'

education. This appears to be intended as a safeguard in response to the distinctive context of South Korea's higher education system, where private institutions dominate and the publicness of education is comparatively weak. Even assuming that the term encompasses kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, the Framework Act's understanding of the publicness of schools remains narrow. Furthermore, aside from this brief reference, there is little evidence of any broader societal attempt to define the concept, establish its institutional parameters or address its role comprehensively.

The Roles and Aspirations of the Publicness of Schools

The concept of the publicness of schools envisages it as being more than just places of education. Society already expects schools to fulfil roles that extend beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Apart from the family, schools – including kindergartens – are among the first social organisations in which children encounter structured social relations. Educational theory refers to childhood as a 'sensitive period', a highly formative stage with profound and lasting impacts on one's entire life. As schools occupy a substantial part of children's daily lives during this critical stage, they must support their development and growth comprehensively and holistically rather than merely transmitting knowledge. Just as educational welfare was first systematised through the introduction of free school meals, schools should be places where children have equal access to nourishment and welfare services, such as care, provided collectively by the state and community. Schools must now be redefined as spaces of educational welfare where living and learning coexist. This would enable children to heal emotional wounds, develop social relationships and enjoy equitable opportunities for growth. However,

these responsibilities lie beyond the traditional scope of teachers' roles. Consequently, a new category of education support worker has emerged in schools to meet these evolving needs.

Despite these evolving realities, there is still strong resistance in the education sector to acknowledging the transformed role of schools. This resistance is embodied in the following cyclical way of thinking: Schools are educational institutions → Education refers to activities that deliver the national curriculum through teaching and learning → Care services are not education → Non-educational programmes only burden schools → The state must enable schools to focus solely on education → Teachers are the ultimate educational experts (as expressed in the maxim 'the quality of education cannot exceed the quality of its teachers') → Parents are not educational experts → Education support workers are unqualified to educate (they are merely auxiliary personnel) → Education policies and school operations should be centred on teachers → Schools are educational institutions. Caught within this rigid framework, schools have failed to establish their evolving social roles through legal and institutional reforms. Consequently, schools have often become arenas of competition and conflict among teachers and staff, rather than spaces of community and collaboration.

Figure 1 illustrates the current state of schools, where their evolving functions have yet to be consolidated into a coherent and comprehensive framework. The aim of promoting the publicness of schools is to transform this fragmented reality into an integrated system, as envisaged in Figure 2. This requires a process of socially redefining and institutionalising the expanded roles of schools within an organised structure. While schools naturally retain their core identity as educational institutions, they must be

Figure 1. A school where the educational curriculum and educational welfare are fragmented and disorganised

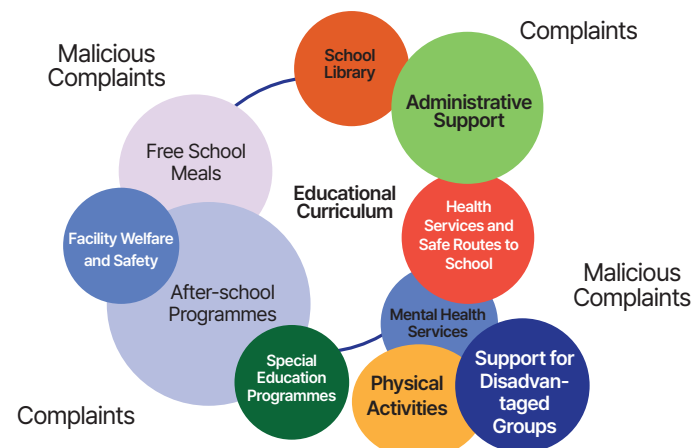
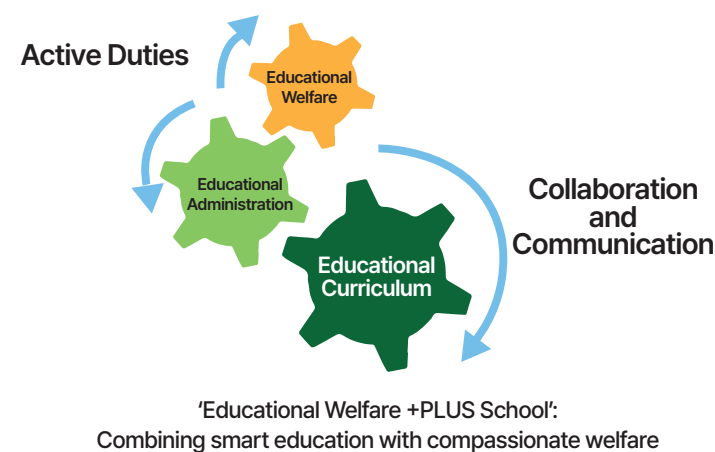


Figure 2. A school where educational welfare is systematised through the lens of the publicness of schools





reconstituted around the paradigm and value of publicness, with two foundational pillars: the educational curriculum and educational welfare. Legally, this means establishing a dual framework for public education based on the Framework Act on Education and a proposed Framework Act on Educational Welfare. Through such restructuring, schools could evolve beyond their traditional role to become sites for holistic development and strongholds of revitalised local communities. They must be reborn as communities of care and learning, as partners to families and local societies, and as equal, democratic spaces where the rights of all children are safeguarded.

This vision sees schools as the starting point for the social lives of future generations, and as everyday spaces where young people can develop an understanding of communal relationships. It also

aims to encourage students to carry the sense of community and commitment to rights acquired in school into the wider social sphere, thereby promoting progress. While this vision is beginning to take shape, it remains unfamiliar and tentative within trade unions and society at large.

About the Author

Park Seong-sik

Park Seong-sik previously served as spokesperson for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and has worked since 2018 as Director of Policy Planning at KPTU-EdSo. KPTU-EdSo is a labour union representing nearly 40,000 non-regular workers employed in public education institutions, including schools. At KPTU-EdSo, Park advocates a movement to establish the publicness of schools by systematically integrating fragmented educational welfare policies. Through this effort he seeks to strengthen the identity of education support workers and to broaden the horizons of the non-regular workers' movement.



The Climate - Safe Rates System:

Envisioning a Just Transition for the Cargo Transport Industry

Koo Junmo Secretary for Planning,
Korean labor and social network on energy

The Reality of the Cargo Industry and Workers

Cargo workers transport export containers, steel and cement, and handle parcel deliveries that we rely on in our everyday lives. However, the road freight industry, which is largely dependent on diesel-powered trucks, is identified as a sector with high greenhouse gas emissions. In an era of climate crisis, all industries must reduce their reliance on fossil fuels and cut emissions, and the road freight industry is no exception. So how can we ensure a just transition for the cargo industry that protects the livelihoods of cargo workers while safeguarding the planet?

In 2022, South Korea's road freight transport sector generated an estimated KRW 51 trillion in annual revenue and employed around 600,000 people. Around 470,000 commercial cargo trucks were in operation. Since the deregulation of the cargo transport market in the late 1990s, the number of commercial freight vehicles has surged. Consequently, the bargaining power

of shippers — companies that contract transport services — has grown significantly, leading to the increased exploitation of cargo workers. Following a strike by cargo workers in 2003, a partial supply control system was introduced to limit the number of cargo trucks. However, the number of commercial trucks excluded from this regulation has continued to rise, creating an urgent problem of oversupply.

As of 2022, cargo transport companies were operating an average of 36.2 vehicles each; however, only 5.1% of these were directly owned and managed by the companies themselves. This reflects the widespread entrustment system, whereby cargo workers register their vehicles in the name of a transport operator and work for them. This system is particularly prevalent in the general cargo sector, where around 87% of operating vehicles are managed through entrustment. Consequently, a large proportion of cargo workers are classified as self-employed under this arrangement.

In conditions of oversupply and entrustment, the cargo industry has effectively evolved into a predatory market, forcing cargo workers to accept low wages, work long hours and endure high levels of intensity. Shippers have considerable power and set freight rates through a lowest bid system. Cargo workers are positioned at the bottom of the transport market hierarchy, below both shippers and transportation operators. This drives them into a destructive cycle of underbidding. The outcome is predictably low pay and excessive working hours. The average hourly income of cargo workers is approximately KRW 11,300 — barely half the average for the broader transport sector (KRW 21,900) and all wage earners (KRW 22,700). Furthermore, their average monthly working hours stand at 319.9 — more than double the sectoral average of 164.4 hours and the average for all wage earners of 154.9 hours.



Attempting to reduce greenhouse gases and transition the industry while leaving its structural contradictions unresolved risks exacerbating existing problems. So how can we achieve a just transition for the cargo industry? To answer this question, we must first examine the shortcomings of current government policies.

Government Policies That Fail to Deliver

In 2022, South Korea emitted around 724 million tonnes of greenhouse gases. The transport sector accounted for approximately 99 million tonnes of these emissions, equivalent to 13.6% of the national total. Of these, road transport produced around 94 million tonnes, equivalent to 96.5% of transport-related emissions. This figure includes both passenger and freight vehicles, with cargo trucks accounting for around 30.7% of these emissions. Cargo trucks are broadly divided into private and commercial vehicles. Emissions attributable to commercial cargo vehicles are

estimated at around 12 million tonnes. While this figure may seem small in relative terms, commercial cargo trucks operate far more frequently and over longer distances than other vehicles, resulting in significantly higher emissions per vehicle.

In October 2021, the government announced its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) for 2030, setting sectoral targets. The aim for the transport sector was to reduce emissions to 61 million tonnes by 2030, which is a 37.8% reduction from 2018 levels. However, transport emissions have not followed the intended downward trajectory. Based on linear annual reductions, transport emissions would have needed to fall to 86 million tonnes by 2022 to remain on track for the 2030 target. Instead, they reached 96 million tonnes in 2022.

The government is seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the cargo industry by promoting the transition to electric and hydrogen-powered vehicles. In March 2023, the government announced the National Framework Plan for Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth, setting a target to deploy 4.5 million electric and hydrogen vehicles by 2030: 4.2 million electric vehicles and 300,000 hydrogen vehicles. To accelerate this transition, the government has pledged to expand purchase subsidies and tax incentives, prioritising the conversion of commercial vehicles, such as buses, taxis and cargo trucks, as well as the development of the necessary infrastructure. Within this framework, the government has set a target to deploy 122,000 electric and 9,000 hydrogen commercial cargo trucks by 2030. However, current adoption rates fall far short of these targets.

In an era of climate crisis, transitioning from diesel-powered cargo trucks to electric or hydrogen models is unavoidable. A critical issue, however, is the risk that cargo workers may be forced to

shoulder the entire cost of this transition. It is essential to ensure that cargo workers are not burdened with the high purchase and operational costs of electric or hydrogen-powered cargo trucks. This would require either a significant increase in public subsidies for the acquisition and operation of eco-friendly cargo vehicles, or these costs to be included in the freight rate structure, ensuring that shippers bear a fair share of the expense. Based on this, cargo workers should advocate for the transition to green cargo vehicles, positioning themselves at the centre of responses to the climate crisis and driving change.

Enhancing Labour Rights for Cargo Workers While Reducing Emissions

Cargo Workers: Not Perpetrators but Key Actors in Driving Climate Solutions

Cargo workers play a vital role in logistics, which are essential to industry and everyday life. While they do operate diesel-powered vehicles that emit greenhouse gases, they should not be held responsible for these emissions. The broader challenges lie in industrial production patterns and the need to transform logistics systems. Therefore, it is imperative that trade unions actively participate in these processes to protect workers' rights while pursuing a just transition. Transforming the cargo industry is essential to achieving substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. However, shifting responsibility onto cargo workers and undermining their professional dignity hinders the necessary changes. As the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) argues, recognising transport workers as co-designers of climate solutions and improving public perception of their work are indispensable steps towards ensuring a just transition in the trans-

port sector.

For this transition to succeed, the government and shippers (i.e. corporate clients) must take responsibility for the costs of change and establish a support framework. The main obstacles to adopting eco-friendly commercial cargo vehicles stem largely from limited technological maturity, unsuitable business models, structural constraints in the cargo transport sector and a lack of effective government policy and infrastructure. Changes in cargo workers' attitudes towards this transition depend on improvements in other areas and can be addressed alongside them. Furthermore, protecting labour rights and restructuring the industry require the active participation of workers and trade unions throughout the transition. Moreover, greenhouse gas emissions stem from structural issues in broader economic and social systems, including industrial structures and lifestyle patterns. Therefore, these



systems must also be transformed.

Trade Unions' Proactive Response to Industrial Transition

When it comes to responding to the climate crisis and managing industrial transition, trade unions must adopt a proactive and strategic approach. They must forge alliances for a just transition, recognise that 'defending what can no longer be defended' is counterproductive, and clearly distinguish between adversaries and allies. If opposing the transition itself is no longer feasible, unions should acknowledge this and collaborate with climate justice movements and civil society to pursue transitions that benefit both workers and wider society. Cargo Truckers' Solidarity (TruckSol), which is part of the Korean Public and Social Services and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU), has significant influence thanks to its high level of organisation among large cargo truck drivers. Its collective actions carry substantial social weight, and it has the capacity to secure negotiations with the government through industrial action. By proactively developing alternative climate policies, pressuring the government and shippers, and building broad social alliances, TruckSol could become a key player in shaping a just transition.

International examples, such as the Teamsters in the United States and Germany's transport workers' union, offer valuable lessons. The Teamsters have expanded their organisational identity beyond the cargo sector to encompass the entire supply chain, linking this organising effort with the development of multimodal transport systems designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Germany's transport workers' union has integrated demands for wage increases and improved working conditions with strategies for addressing the climate crisis, advocating the strengthening of

public transport as a central solution. In close alliance with the climate movement, the union has mobilised public opinion and organised a general strike.¹²

Two Key Challenges in the Transition to Eco-Friendly Vehicles: Preventing Supply Increase and Cost Burdens

The transition to eco-friendly vehicles is already underway. However, to date, progress has largely been limited to small cargo trucks. Substantial changes involving medium and large vehicles are not expected until after 2030. Trade unions must therefore prepare proactively for this transition.

There are several reasons why cargo workers often have negative perceptions of the shift to eco-friendly vehicles. Firstly, there are technological limitations. So far, only small cargo vehicles have been commercialised, and eco-friendly trucks lack the technical maturity and reliability required in terms of power output and driving range. Secondly, there are concerns about potential economic losses. Compared with conventional vehicles, eco-friendly cargo trucks incur higher purchase costs and have reduced cargo space due to the size of the batteries, which increases the risk of income reductions. Thirdly, there are fears of structural deterioration within the industry. If the transition to eco-friendly vehicles coincides with an increase in the number of cargo trucks available, this could threaten the livelihoods of cargo workers. Addressing these challenges is essential to achieving a just transition to eco-friendly vehicles in which cargo workers participate.

¹² Franziska Heinisch, Julia Kaiser (2023), The First Signs of an Ecological Class Struggle in Germany, The Future is Public, Vol.2 (September 2023).

Therefore, the transition to eco-friendly cargo vehicles must proceed without increasing the overall supply. If preferential treatment is granted during the transition process under the pretext of encouraging adoption, there is a serious risk that this could undermine existing supply control mechanisms. It is therefore important to ensure that the shift towards eco-friendly vehicles does not undermine supply regulation or the structure of the cargo transport industry, or harm the livelihoods of cargo workers.

Equally important is ensuring that the cost of acquiring new vehicles is not passed on to workers. If cargo workers are forced to bear the high purchase and financing costs associated with electric and hydrogen-powered cargo trucks, they will be exposed to excessive debt. This will probably compel them to work longer hours to recover these expenses. Instead, the costs of the transition to eco-friendly cargo vehicles should be borne by the government and shippers. If the transition is socially necessary, the government must take responsibility and implement effective measures to make it feasible. One possible approach, which is discussed below, is to incorporate the costs of adopting eco-friendly vehicles into the Climate-Safe Rates System.

[Securing Climate Justice and Labour Rights through the Climate-Safe Rates System](#)

Strengthening and expanding the existing Safe Rates System could see it reconstituted as a Climate-Safe Rates System, which is designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the cargo transport sector. The Safe Rates System could play a vital role in promoting eco-driving practices. According to the OECD, eco-driving practices – such as avoiding speeding and overload-

ing while maintaining an appropriate driving speed – can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 10% and improve fuel efficiency by 8%. In South Korea, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport runs an annual Eco-Driving Campaign in partnership with the Korea Transportation Safety Authority, the Truck Welfare Foundation and the Korea Logistics Industry Promotion Foundation.

However, existing approaches to eco-driving either appeal to drivers' sense of morality or focus on educational programmes aimed at reducing fuel consumption. These methods overlook the socio-economic structural pressures that compel cargo workers to speed or overload their vehicles, instead shifting responsibility onto individual drivers. This perpetuates the problem of placing the full burden of safe driving on workers.

We must seek institutional and structural solutions rather than individualising the problem. The Safe Rates System, if introduced comprehensively to cover all cargo workers and combined with technological measures to prevent overloading, speeding, and excessive working hours, could be supported by trade unions seeking to transform driving practices and culture. This would enable eco-driving that protects the climate without shifting responsibility onto workers or worsening their labour conditions. Strengthening and complementing the Safe Rates System could transform it into a Climate-Safe Rates System that contributes to climate protection. A well-designed Climate-Safe Rates System would facilitate the transition to eco-friendly vehicles, which involves recurring costs such as regular maintenance and loan repayments.

Equally significant is the Climate-Safe Rates System's potential to foster social solidarity by connecting cargo workers with citizens

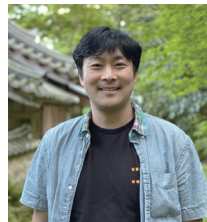
concerned about the climate crisis. In Europe and elsewhere, alliances have grown between transport workers' movements and climate justice movements, forged around demands for improved public transport and better labour conditions.

In South Korea, the Climate-Safe Rates System could serve a similar bridging function. Such a system could advance cargo workers' labour rights and facilitate a just transition.

About the Author

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Koo serves as the Planning Secretary at the Korean Labor and Social Network on Energy, advocating for the energy policies that promote the public interest, a just transition and climate justice.



Leveraging the K-Pass:¹²

Union Strategies to Promote Public Transport Expansion

Lee Young-su Senior Research Fellow,
Public Policy Institute for People

Delays in the Modal Shift towards Public Transport: An Analysis of Railway Budgets

The recent increase in rail budgets, including those for urban rail systems, has given the impression that the government is investing more in rail transport. According to the 2023 final accounts, however, the allocation for railways was KRW 8.1021 trillion, which surpassed the road budget of KRW 7.9779 trillion for the first time. However, closer analysis reveals a different picture. Within the Special Accounts for Transportation Facilities¹⁴, which fund transport and logistics projects, the proportion allocated to rail has remained largely unchanged.

¹³ This article is excerpted and adapted from the report entitled 'Research on the Fare Systems Transition and the Expansion of Public Transport through the K-Pass', published by the Public Policy Institute for People.

¹⁴ The budget categories include roads, railways, aviation and airports, shipping and ports, and logistics.



According to data from the Korea Fiscal Information Service, the railway budget's share averaged 34.1% between 2006 and 2015, rising only to 36.1% between 2016 and 2025 — an increase of just 2%. A genuine modal shift from other transport modes to rail would require a substantially larger increase in rail spending than has occurred. This lack of reallocation reflects the fact that, although road budgets have fallen slightly on average, allocations to other sectors, notably aviation, airports and logistics, have risen correspondingly.

While the overall railway budget has increased, closer examination of its breakdown reveals that the sharpest rises are in allocations for the safety, maintenance and repair of existing facilities, rather than new construction. The budget item 'Railway Safety and Operations', which is funded through the general account to maintain, upgrade and ensure the safety of railway facilities, accounted for 22.3% of the total railway budget in 2013, but this is

projected to reach 53.1% in 2025 — more than doubling over this period. This sharp increase reflects the natural increase in spending due to the expansion of operating railway lines and growing demand for safety investment as infrastructure ages.

In other words, while the railway budget has grown, funding for new infrastructure has not increased accordingly. This highlights the persistence of a road-centric transport system and the continued reliance on private investment in infrastructure projects. Consequently, the expansion of public transport infrastructure, which is crucial for addressing the climate crisis and improving citizens' mobility rights, remains insufficient.

Building Public Pressure and Social Movements for a Transport Transition

As mentioned previously, although railway budgets have slightly exceeded road budgets in nominal terms, an analysis of budget allocations and spending patterns shows that railway construction has been significantly delayed. In order to achieve a genuine shift towards public transport, the total length of operating railway lines would need to at least double from current levels. According to data from the Alternative Research Team for the 4th Basic Plan for Railway Industry Development⁽²⁰²¹⁾, this expansion would require a total construction budget of KRW 128 trillion over the next 30 years, averaging KRW 4.2762 trillion per year. As railway construction requires long lead times, steady annual investment is essential, so construction budgets must increase substantially from now on.

While the need to expand investment in railways is widely acknowledged in principle, this has not emerged as a major social

issue. The key reason for this is the deeply entrenched road-centred transport system. In this regard, Germany's Autobahn, which inspired South Korea's Gyeongbu Expressway, is a useful case study. Following the construction of the Autobahn, Germany established state subsidies and policy priorities centred on the automobile industry. After the Second World War, the German government actively developed transport infrastructure based on automobiles as a core driver of national reconstruction and economic growth. In the process, extensive subsidy regimes developed around automobile manufacturing, the fuel industry, logistics, and transport. Over time, this became an entrenched structure interwoven with a broad-based industrial production system, extending far beyond any single sector.

South Korea followed a similar trajectory. Beginning with the construction of the Gyeongbu Expressway, the government implemented extensive policy support for automobile transport infrastructure and related industries, and this trend has largely persisted through inertia. For example, in 2021, subsidies for fuel used by buses, taxis, and freight vehicles totalled KRW 2.3527 trillion, while subsidies for electric vehicle purchases amounted to KRW 1.5866 trillion. By contrast, rail-related subsidies in the same period were far lower: KRW 379.6 billion for PSO support, KRW 107.6 billion for rolling stock, KRW 36.9 billion for improving ageing urban rail facilities and KRW 113.2 billion for replacing old vehicles — a combined total of just KRW 637.3 billion (Han, 2023).

Furthermore, fuel tax reductions, which disproportionately benefit higher-income groups who drive more frequently, have now been extended for the fifteenth time since 2021. Infrastructure construction involves more than just creating physical structures; it also plays a key role in socio-economic restructuring and gov-

ernment policy.

Entrenched vested interests and institutional inertia therefore make it extremely difficult to shift towards rail-centred infrastructure policies and the corresponding support frameworks. Therefore, public transport unions, including those representing railway and subway workers, must build broad-based public pressure and mobilise social movements under the banner of climate politics to overcome these challenges. In this context, the strategies adopted by the German Railway and Transport Union (EVG) in response to the €9 ticket initiative and the Deutschlandticket are instructive.

The EVG expressed support for the initiative and became actively involved in the initial discussions about introducing the €9 ticket and the subsequent Deutschlandticket, both of which were promoted by the German government. However, when the €9 ticket was introduced in 2022, the sharp rise in passenger numbers caused infrastructure overload and worsened working conditions. Nevertheless, EVG endorsed the policy's intent and issued a statement calling for long-term, affordable, sustainable fares.

The union subsequently collaborated with civil society organisations to help introduce the Deutschlandticket, which followed the temporary €9 ticket scheme. During a 2023 hearing of the federal parliament's Transport Committee, EVG supported the introduction of the €49 ticket, but demanded stable implementation underpinned by expanded investment in rolling stock, staffing, and infrastructure, as well as stronger federal financial support. At a related hearing in 2024, EVG reaffirmed its support for the long-term operation of the scheme, opposed fare increases, advocated continued subsidies and called for increased investment in infrastructure in small towns and rural areas. EVG also pressed for the

inclusion of long-distance trains.

While the impacts of the €9 ticket and Deutschlandticket were significant in large metropolitan areas, their impact was limited in regions and smaller towns with poor infrastructure. In response, EVG and civil society groups highlighted that road construction budgets were twice the size of railway budgets, demanding greater investment in public transport to facilitate a genuine modal shift. Following these developments, the 'traffic light' coalition government (comprising the Free Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party and the Greens) announced a policy to allocate 50–60% of total transport investment to rail between 2025 and 2028. The new federal government, which took office in February 2025, confirmed that it would maintain this policy direction. The German case provides important lessons: by intervening in debates about fares, trade unions successfully raised issues about infrastructure investment and regional inequality, thereby contributing to a partial but meaningful transition towards public transport.

K-Pass Project as a Lever for an Infrastructure Transition Movement

Infrastructure construction is linked not only to the physical substructure of projects but also to the socio-economic policies that are organised around them. In this respect, public policy sets the basic direction of infrastructure management, as the design, construction and operation of infrastructure all depend on a state's public policy objectives. Policies in areas such as energy, transport, agriculture and public health policies, overlap with infrastructure management. This is precisely why public policy is a crucial area for an infrastructure transition movement to inter-

vene(Jang Hoon-gyo, 2025).

In South Korea, transport policy has long been locked into a developmentalist, car-centred, developmentalist paradigm, and the recent emphasis on new airport projects has marginalised public transport policy. Popular pressure and organised movements must create opportunities for policy reorientation; strategic intervention in fare regimes can serve as an effective lever. The response of EVG to the Deutschlandticket in Germany, which helped mobilise increased investment in rail, demonstrates how such a strategy can succeed.

In this regard, it is essential that public transport unions to become actively involved in the government's ongoing K-Pass scheme¹⁵ – a nationwide fare reimbursement programme. While K-Pass does not operate as a flat-rate subscription system like Germany's Deutschlandticket, it offers tangible economic benefits to public transport users, providing along with an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with passengers as part of a broader strategy. However, an analysis of K-Pass usage reveals a significant disparity between large metropolitan areas and other regions, largely due to differences in infrastructure.¹⁶ This disparity could provide an opportunity for unions to advocate for increased regional transport subsidies, similar to the Deutschlandticket model.

K-Pass provides unions with a long-term platform to highlight

¹⁵ The K-Pass scheme, introduced by the Yoon Suk-yeol administration in July 2024, builds on the Metropolitan Discount Card implemented under the previous Moon Jae in administration. Under this scheme, public transport users receive a fare reimbursement ranging from 20 to 53.3%, depending on monthly usage of between 15 and 60 trips, provided that they use public transport at least twice a day.

¹⁶ Approximately 80% of K-Pass users are concentrated in the Seoul metropolitan area.

regional inequalities, put pressure on the central government to increase financial support, and ultimately expand investment in regional transport systems. This would help reduce car dependency over time and facilitate a transition towards an eco-friendly mobility system centered on public transport, which is directly linked to long-term carbon reduction strategies. This could be a strategic approach in the era of the climate crisis, enabling the transition to a just and inclusive society.

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Public Sector



The significance of Zohran Mamdani's victory in the NYC Democratic mayoral primary_ Oh SungHee

The significance of Zohran Mamdani's victory in the NYC Democratic mayoral primary

Oh SungHee Director of International Affairs,
KPTU

On 24 June, Zohran Mamdani defeated nine candidates, including former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, to win the Democratic primary for the 2025 New York City mayoral election. This result stunned not only the United States, but also the rest of the world. The final results were announced on 1 July: Mamdani secured 43.5% of the vote, effectively winning the Democratic nomination for Mayor of New York City, while Andrew Cuomo, who finished second with 36.4%, conceded defeat.

This article examines the implications of Mamdani's campaign promises and the election process for South Korea's labour movement and progressive left-wing forces.

Who is Zohran Mamdani¹⁷

He was born on 18 October 1991 in Kampala, the capital of Ugan-

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly2rgzye9no>



da. His parents are the Indian scholar Mamud Mamdani and the film director Mira Nair. He moved to South Africa at the age of five and then to the United States at the age of seven, settling in New York City.

He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in African Studies from Bard College, where he co-founded a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter during his time as an undergraduate.

Prior to entering local politics, he worked as a housing counselor and hip-hop musician. In the 2020 New York State Assembly election, he defeated the incumbent, who had served four terms, in the Democratic primary and was subsequently elected. He was unopposed in both the 2022 and 2024 elections and currently serves as a member of the New York State Assembly, representing the 36th district in Queens.

His congressional district includes parts of Astoria, an area with a sizeable Muslim and Arab electorate, and he is a member of the Muslim Democratic Club of New York.

According to a recent Siena poll of registered voters, Mamdani's approval rating stands at 44%, despite claims that conservative forces support various far-left ideas. This puts him far ahead of former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who has declared his candidacy for the New York mayoral election as an independent (25%), the Republican candidate (12%), and current New York Mayor Eric Adams (7%).¹⁸

If elected, he would be the first millennial, progressive, Muslim and South Asian mayor of New York City. His diverse cultural background would emphasise the city's roots.

A CITY WE CAN AFFORD

"I will fight for a city that works for you, that is affordable for you, that is safe for you,"¹⁹ he said in his victory speech after winning the Democratic primary. In his speech, he proposed policies aimed at addressing the high cost of living in New York City, the most expensive city in the country.

His key policies are as follow²⁰:

- **Affordability**
- Reducing living costs by establishing city-owned supermar-

¹⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/nyc-mayoral-race-from-zohran-mamdani-to-eric-adams-what-the-latest-poll-reveals/articleshow/123267266.cms>

¹⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/25/politics/zohran-mamdani-new-york-mayor-takeaways>

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/25/nyregion/mamdani-policies-stances.html>

kets: These would operate on city-owned land or buildings, exempting them from property taxes, and would purchase food wholesale to lower product prices.

※ Similar models have been operated by municipalities in Kansas and Wisconsin from 2020 to 2024, and Chicago and Atlanta are developing their own models.

- Imposing a 2% flat tax on the top 1% of wealthy New Yorkers and raising the corporate tax rate to 11.5% to secure an additional \$5 billion in tax revenue and alleviate housing costs.

• Public Transportation

- Free bus service throughout the city

※ While serving as a state legislator, Mamdani collaborated with Governor Hockler to implement a pilot programme of offering free bus fares on five routes for a limited period.

- Traffic congestion pricing
- Funding for transportation infrastructure, particularly improvements to weekend and night-time subway services

• Housing

- Apartment rent increases are determined by a Rent Guidelines Board, with rent freezes for private rental housing residents
- Triple the number of affordable housing units and build 200,000 new homes over the next 10 years (with private sector participation)
- Doubling the city budget for public housing preservation.

• Immigration

- Prohibiting Immigration and Customs Enforcement(ICE) agents from entering city facilities
- Expand legal support and personal data protection for immigrants targeted for enforcement actions

• Childcare and education

- Free childcare for children aged 6 weeks to 5 years
- Providing a 'baby basket' containing essential items such as educational materials, nappies, baby wipes, and baby blankets for new parents
- Designating certain roads around schools as no-vehicle zones
- Free tuition at the City University of New York(CUNY)

• Public Safety

- Establishing a separate, independent Department of Community Safety and expanding programmes to respond to citizens experiencing mental health crises and to prevent violence
- Reducing the substantial overtime budget of the police department

"History did not end, but history was made!" ²¹

Zohran Mamdani's victory in the Democratic primary is considered by many to be historic, defying the expectations of many

²¹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2025/07/17/zohran-mamdani-has-found-a-way-to-combine-the-politics-of-the-street-with-the-politics-of-the-ballot-box/>

people, as New York public radio host Brian Rea said. His victory stems from concerns about the cost of living, particularly housing costs, but it is also the result of years of grassroots campaigning by the Democratic Socialists of America(DSA) in local communities.

High housing costs are a nationwide problem, but they are particularly acute in New York, where construction never stops due to Donald Trump's distortion of the housing market and gentrification.

The DSA and Mamdani built a campaign focused on housing costs, appealing to the two-thirds of New Yorkers who live in private rental housing. New York housing activists worked to maintain the eviction protections secured early in the pandemic.

In the process, DSA activists fought alongside Housing Justice for All and organised the largest protest in August 2021.

Over half of private rental housing residents in New York City are considered 'rent-burdened', paying over 30% of their income to private landlords, who saw their incomes rise by 12% in 2023.

As expected, the promise to freeze rents for private rental housing residents living in one million rent stabilisation units²² in New York City played a decisive role in Mamdani's victory.

Alongside this, Mamdani promised to build 200,000 new 'affordable' homes and expand the definition of 'affordable' to encompass

²² This system prevents landlords from raising the rent on apartments in buildings constructed before 1974 above a certain limit set by the city government. It applies to around 1 million apartments, accounting for approximately 50% of all apartments in New York City. As of 2020, the monthly rent cap for apartments covered by the scheme is \$2,700. <https://www.opinionnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=37739>

public transport, childcare, education and living expenses.

Furthermore, he stated that he would secure the necessary public finances to make New York City affordable by raising corporate taxes and imposing a flat tax on the wealthy. This message stood in stark contrast to the vague messages of the Democratic Party during the 2024 presidential campaign, instilling hope and expectations among Democratic voters for a 'new' politics 'towards equality'.

Attacks from rivals and Mamdani's five boroughs against Trump tour

Meanwhile, rivals within the Democratic Party are intensifying their attacks on Mamdani, including former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's declaration of an independent candidacy after losing the Democratic primary.

Cuomo has been particularly critical of Mamdani's housing policy, which played a decisive role in his victory. He has criticised Mamdani for earning \$142,000 as a New York State Assembly member while living in rent-stabilised housing with a monthly rent of \$2,300. He has also proposed a bill to review rent-stabilised housing eligibility based on income.

Cuomo has also criticised Mamdani's promises to expand public transport subsidies for low-income residents and food assistance for the poor, shouting, "Why should we give subsidies to the rich?" This echoes the controversy surrounding free school meals in South Korea several years ago when Oh Se-hoon was mayor of Seoul. Cuomo is launching a fierce attack on Mamdani, who is

steadily leading in the polls.²³

However, ahead of the November general election, Mamdani is positioning himself as the strongest candidate against Trump by opposing Trump's policies that harm New York City through a 'Five Boroughs Against Trump Tour'²⁴.

In the run-up to the November primary, Mamdani has been in touch with a wide range of groups, including his staunch supporters, such as the North American Service Employees Union (SEIU) Local 1199; influential figures within the Democratic Party; and business leaders from the Association of the Bowery^(ABNY) and the New York Real Estate Association. These groups have expressed concerns about his policies.

In a recent radio interview, he criticised President Trump for excluding more than one million New Yorkers from Medicaid and drastically cutting budgets for food subsidies and housing programmes. He also said that Andrew Cuomo, Republican candidates and others are all connected to Trump because they communicate with him or help him resolve legal issues, and therefore none of them are qualified to run for office.

In the run-up to the November primary, Mamdani has been in touch with a wide range of groups, including his staunch supporters such as the North American Service Employees Union (SEIU) Local 1199, influential figures within the Democratic Party and business leaders from the Association of the Bowery^(ABNY) and the New York Real Estate Association. These groups have expressed concerns about his policies.

²³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/12/nyregion/cuomo-mamdani-rent-stabilized.html>

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/11/nyregion/mamdani-trump-cuomo-mayor-nyc.html>

A victory for broad left-wing alliances and grassroots movements²⁵

In an interview with Jacobin, Gustavo Gordillo, co-chair of the New York City Democratic Socialists of America^(NYC DSA) and a union member, described Mamdani's stunning comeback victory as 'one of the greatest accomplishments of the Left and of the socialist movement in the United States in the last century'. He added: 'Chief among those has been building a working-class coalition that expanded the electorate, that brought in people who had never voted, that increased political participation in a way that no one thought was possible anymore.'

This was a different approach to that of the mainstream Democratic Party, which focused on moderate voters while ignoring demands to address practical issues affecting the working class, such as the cost of living.

The campaign was conducted by two independent organisations: NYC DSA and the Zohran Mamdani Campaign. While DSA core members formed the backbone of the campaign, over 50,000 volunteers participated.

They particularly focused on organising people who had never registered to vote before, as well as South Asian and Muslim voters, who were not part of the traditional voter base.

They established non-English clubs to reach beyond the white working-class community, successfully organising East Asian, South Asian and Latinx communities to form a multiracial voter coalition. Mamdani won the election with overwhelming support

²⁵ <https://jacobin.com/2025/08/nyc-dsa-zohran-mamdani-mayoral>

from immigrants.

These communities had previously been identified as having shifted to the right in the 2024 presidential election by supporting Trump. However, Mamdani's economic policies, which focused on addressing living costs through public funding for free transportation, affordable housing, and public supermarkets, changed their minds.

Meanwhile, most major unions initially supported former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo in the primary. They supported Cuomo because they believed he was unstoppable and that, in the public sector, it was necessary to negotiate with him to secure benefits and favourable collective bargaining agreements. However, this support was not passionate or emotional, and as the primary election progressed, these unions quickly shifted their support to Mamdani, aligning with the UAW 9a, 32BJ SEIU and AFSCME DC37. This shift was driven by DSA union members organising leadership within the unions and mobilising young workers.

Another key factor in Mamdani's victory was the support he received from Brad Lander, a progressive Democratic Party politician who has been active in the New York City Council since 2009. While the Democratic Party mainstream strongly rallied behind Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election, Brad's support was significant given Elizabeth Warren's experience. Warren was classified as part of the Democratic Party's left wing, yet did not support Bernie Sanders.

Given the fierce opposition Mamdani is likely to face from a broad anti-Mamdani alliance comprising the Democratic and Republican parties, Trump and his supporters, and real estate and

financial capitalists, it is impossible to guarantee his victory in November's general election. Additionally, certain compromises are expected during the campaign leading up to the election. The large-scale budget cuts for the police department, which were originally part of his manifesto, are no longer being proposed.

Nevertheless, his policies and campaign, in which he confidently states that he is running for mayor to reduce the cost of living for New York's working class, demonstrate the importance of presenting a concrete alternative to the current economic and political landscape, and of organising like-minded individuals.

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She's worked for the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU), the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) GM Korea Branch and the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council), and now she's the international director of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU). As well as issues related to well-funded quality public services and labour rights, she is deeply concerned about women's human rights, historical issues, and human rights violations committed by the state.



Key Issues

Telecommunications,
Energy·Climate Justice,
Care

3

Telecommunications

Government Policy Tasks for Strengthening Publicness and Labour Rights in the Telecommunications Service Industry_Park Jae-beom

Energy · Climate Justice

The Illusion of the Lee Jae-myung Administration's 'Sunshine and Wind Pension'_Han Jae-kak

#Energy · Climate Justicet

A Stable Climate as a Human Right: State Obligations in the Judgments of the IACHR and ICJ_Oh SungHee

Care

Integrated care without care: State Responsibility is the Answer_
Han Hyeok

Government Policy Tasks for Strengthening Publicness and Labour Rights in the Telecommunications Service Industry

Park Jae-beom Research Fellow,
Public Policy Institute for People

The telecommunications service industry in South Korea has traditionally been regarded as both a fundamental infrastructure that facilitates, the distribution of information across society, as well as a key strategic sector that supports the competitiveness of other industries. Therefore, in its early stages, telecommunications services were provided through direct state investment and management. However, amid the neoliberal wave of privatisation and market liberalisation during the 1980s, the telecommunications industry was transformed into a privatised system, leading to a significant reduction in the role of the state and a marked weakening of telecommunications' public service character.

Nevertheless, telecommunications remain a national backbone network and an essential service, relied upon by the vast majority of citizens. This underscores the ongoing need for state intervention to strengthen the publicness of telecommunications services and the protect of labour rights within the sector. This article summarises the findings of a study commissioned by the KPTU

Broadcasting and Telecommunications Council in April, prior to the launch of a new administration following the Constitutional Court's decision to remove President Yoon Suk-yeol from office. The study examined policy priorities for the incoming government, to strengthening the publicness of the telecommunications industry and enhance labour rights.

Restructuring Governance in the Telecommunications Industry for Improved Public Service Provision

In South Korea, telecommunications services are currently provided by three major private operators. However, because telecommunications are regulated by the government, the telecommunications policy is predominantly under state control. This is due to the publicness public nature of telecommunications, which constitute both a national backbone network and an essential good for citizens. However, successive administrations' telecommunications policies have largely overlooked public good and labour-related concerns, instead focusing on promoting privatisation, facilitating policy negotiations dominated by private operators, and establishing market competition frameworks through measures such as technological development support, frequency allocation, and the regulation of telecommunications charges. To strengthen the public nature of telecommunications services and to secure labour rights within the sector, it is essential to restructure the governance framework of the telecommunications industry. The following policy measures are proposed to achieve this goal.

First, a (tentatively named) Telecommunications Industry Policy Committee should be established to facilitate broad-based consultation on telecommunications policy. Until now, such policies

have either been determined unilaterally by the government or formulated primarily through consultations with telecommunications business associations, industry groups, or academic experts. The participation of workers, as key internal stakeholders, has been excluded, and the voices of customers and civil society organisations have been scarcely represented. This approach has inevitably produced imbalances of interest, granting excessive privileges to telecommunications corporations while restricting or overlooking the rights of workers and consumers. To address this imbalance, it is essential to establish a Telecommunications Industry Policy Committee should be established within the Ministry of Science and ICT to ensure, the participation of labour unions, employers' associations, and civil society organisations, facilitating regular dialogue and inclusive policy development.

Secondly, a 'labour director system' should be introduced in telecommunications corporations. While private companies are not legally required to appoint workers to their boards, the three dominant telecommunications companies in South Korea hold a quasi-monopolistic position and therefore have significant public responsibilities. Allowing worker representatives to participate on corporate boards could help prevent business decisions from serving unilateral profit motives and instead promote transparent corporate governance that supports the expansion of public services.

Thirdly, KT's governance structure should be reconstructed to reduce market concentration and strengthen the public character of the telecommunications industry. One possible approach to ease the oligopolistic dominance of the three major operators, one possible approach would be for the National Pension Service(NPS), as a major shareholder, to align KT's policy orientation

with public interest objectives. The government should support this initiative, thereby encouraging the other two telecommunications companies to adopt similar policies.

Over the past 25 years, the three dominant telecommunications companies in South Korea have generated net profits exceeding KRW 70 trillion through their oligopolistic control of the market (Jeong Heung-jun, Park Jae-beom, Kam Dong-chan and Jang Yeo-gyeong, 2025). However, it remains questionable whether these corporations have fulfilled their social responsibilities commensurate with such profits. Accordingly, it is recommended that workers performing essential functions, such as the ongoing maintenance and repair of telecommunications facilities under exclusive arrangements with the primary contractor, should be employed directly and permanently.

Restructuring the Pay-TV Industry to Strengthen Publicness and Regional Representation

Since the passage of the IPTV Act in 2008, South Korea's pay-TV market has undergone rapid structural transformation, driven by the aggressive entry of the three major telecommunications companies—KT, SKT, and LG U+—into the sector. The decline of traditional cable TV operators (System Operators, or SOs) and their replacement by IPTV services has accelerated the trend of IPTV providers acquiring or merging with major Multi System Operators (MSOs). This has resulted in a significant reconfiguration of the market structure. However, the Korean media and pay-TV industries now face a complex set of challenges. These include the rise of digital platforms such as OTT and FAST services, intensifying global competition, and declining revenues caused by market saturation. The downturn across the broader media industry has

resulted in corporate restructuring, deteriorating working conditions, and a weakening of the publicness of the services, thereby heightening concerns about the long-term sustainability of the pay-TV ecosystem. To address these challenges and ensure the long-term sustainability of the pay-TV ecosystem, the following policy transformations are urgently required.

Firstly, enhancing the public value of broadcasting and strengthening regional representation must become central policy priorities. Broadcasting is a vital means of realising key public values such as democracy, social integration, and balanced regional development. Nevertheless, past policies have tended to prioritise industrial growth and short-term outcomes, neglecting broadcasting's intrinsic public role. The next administration should therefore prioritise realising broadcasting's public role and regional representation as top objectives, while redefining resource allocation and funding priorities accordingly.

Secondly, reasonable regulatory adjustments must be introduced while reforming the integrated media legislative framework to encompass IPTV and OTT services. The current fragmented legal system reveals structural limitations, including regulatory gaps concerning emerging media forms and the erosion of broadcasting's public responsibility. To address these issues, a comprehensive legal framework covering all media platforms, including OTT services, must be established. Such a framework should balance fair competition and social responsibility, while clarifying and strengthening core regulations necessary to safeguard the public character of the media.

Thirdly, it is essential to establish an independent and integrated media governance system must be established. Currently, media policymaking suffers from fragmentation across government



A forum related to this article was held at the National Assembly on 29 August 2025, co-hosted by the KPTU Broadcasting and Telecommunications Council and the PPIP.

ministries, resulting in reduced policy coherence and accountability. A centralised control tower should therefore be created to oversee integrated policy decision-making and coordination, thereby preventing policy inconsistencies and avoiding the shifting of responsibilities. Moreover, a transparent and democratic governance structure should be implemented to ensure the participation of civil society and media experts in the policy process.

Fourthly, institutional innovation is required to realise the public interest and strengthen the regional role of local broadcasting. This includes strengthening the legal status of regional broadcasters, securing financial stability, introducing assessment mechanisms to evaluate regionality, and guaranteeing the participation of local stakeholders in policy processes. These reforms would enable regional broadcasters to respond more proactively to local issues while contributing to balanced regional development and cultural diversity.

Fifthly, policy efforts should prioritise the strengthening of us-

er-focused broadcasting services alongside media labour policies. This includes guaranteeing user rights, providing personalised broadcasting services, and improving accessibility to information, while also addressing labour inequalities by eliminating discrimination against non-regular workers and ensuring stable employment conditions.

Expanding Universal Service and Lowering Household Telecommunications Costs

In order to ensure that all citizens have universal access to telecommunications services, affordable service charges, and the equitable provision of services without discrimination, the government needs to appropriately exercise its regulatory authority to establish a policy that guarantees and protects basic rights. Accordingly, the following policy tasks are proposed to strengthen and expand the public character of telecommunications services and to reduce household telecommunications costs.

Firstly, a 50% discounted LTE tariff and a universal 5G pricing plan should be introduced. As telecommunications operators have already recovered their LTE investment costs and are generating substantial excess profits, introducing of a half-price LTE plan is both feasible and justified. For 5G services, a universal tariff scheme should be adopted to ensure that all citizens can access affordable, universal telecommunications services. Specifically, the leading operator should be required to provide 50% - 100% of the average monthly data allowance (approximately 15-30GB for 5G) at a monthly cost of KRW 20,000 to 30,000.

Secondly, the competitiveness and support mechanisms for Mobile Virtual Network Operators(MVNOs) should be strengthened. To

enhance sustainability and competitiveness among small- and medium-sized MVNOs, and thus stimulate competition with major operators in the low-cost mobile plan segment, it is necessary to reduce the market share of MVNO subsidiaries owned by the three dominant telecommunications firms and to alleviate cost burdens on independent MVNO providers by lowering wholesale network access fees.

Thirdly, a telecommunications service contract review system should be introduced to strengthen transparency in telecommunications cost structures. As terms of service agreements are currently drafted from the superior bargaining position of telecommunications operators, a contract review^(or renewal) mechanism should be introduced to ensure such agreements fair and transparent for users. Under this system, approved or reported terms of service agreements would be reassessed every three to five years, taking into account factors such as subscriber numbers, revenues and supply costs. Where downward pricing factors are identified, service charges would be recalculated, or the relevant services improved accordingly. The contract review system would serve as a key institutional reform intended to reduce household telecommunications costs, promote competition within the telecommunications market, and protect consumer rights.

Fourthly, policies must be implemented to alleviate the financial burden of mobile device costs. To stabilise mobile device prices, the following policy measures are required: **(i)** Enhancing transparency in mobile device distribution by adopting a separate subsidy disclosure system and encouraging reductions in device release prices. **(ii)** Expanding instalment purchase programmes for SIM-free devices. **(iii)** Promoting the launch of mid- and low-priced devices and strengthening guarantees of the right

to repair. **(iv)** Facilitating the adoption of SIM-free devices while expanding support for retailers and distributors that cease operations.

Fifthly, the enactment of a Consumer Class Action Act is essential. The draft legislation announced by the Ministry of Justice in September 2020, during the Moon Jae-in administration, should be introduced without further delay. If immediate enactment of a comprehensive law proves challenging, an alternative approach would be to amend the current Securities-Related Class Action Act to expand its scope. The extended coverage could include product liability, unlawful collusion and resale price maintenance, false or misleading advertising, personal data breaches, food safety, and financial consumer protection. Furthermore, corporations should bear the burden of proof in consumer damage cases, and it is equally crucial to establish an evidence disclosure system, such as pre-litigation investigation processes and orders for preserving evidence. In addition, the existing punitive damages system, which is currently fragmented across various individual statutes, including the Fair Trade Act, the Subcontracting Act, the Agency Act, the Franchise Business Act, the Large Retail Business Act, and Product Liability Act—should be integrated and expanded.

Sixthly, policies should be introduced increase to expand the publicness character of telecommunications. As the telecommunications industry advances, issues such as redundant base station investments and duplicative equipment expenditures generate unnecessary social costs. Therefore, a long-term development strategy that promotes direct public investment should be established for next-generation telecommunications infrastructure, including 6G networks. This would reduce redundant

investments, minimise associated social costs, and improve enhance the publicness character, stability, and universality of telecommunications services.

Policy Measures to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the Telecommunications Industry

Despite the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change(UNFCCC) in 1992, global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to rise, exacerbating the climate crisis, and the information and communications technology(ICT) industry is no exception. Within the ICT sector, emissions have steadily increased, and it is projected that by 2040, the sector will account for 14%(Lee Jeong-pil and Han Jae-gak, 2024). This increase is closely linked to the rapid development of AI technologies and data centres, both of which have significantly increased energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Accordingly, the following policy tasks are proposed for the next government to effectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the ICT sectors.

Firstly, it is necessary to establish reliable emissions statistics for the telecommunications industry must be established, and reduction target plans must be formulated. Following the example of France, South Korea should compile emissions statistics for the information and communications industry and set reduction targets aligned with the recommendations of international bodies, such as the International Telecommunication Union(ITU). As telecommunications companies have already announced their own plans, such as net-zero targets by 2050 and specific reduction milestones for 2030, the government can use these corporate commitments as a foundation for establishing industry-wide reduction goals for the ICT sector as a whole.

Secondly, policies are required to reduce energy(electricity) consumption within the telecommunications industry. With the proliferation of AI applications driving rapid increases in data centre construction, companies should be required to adopt energy-efficient building designs, for example, structures utilising outside air cooling systems, to enhance energy efficiency in new facilities. In addition, regulatory measures should be introduced to reduce electricity consumption in the operation of wired and wireless networks. In particular, telecommunications companies should be mandated to adopt technologies that reduce power consumption of existing 5G wireless networks. Furthermore, in preparing for the deployment of 6G and other next-generation telecommunications technologies, the government should clearly define technological pathways to ensure that future energy consumption does not exceed current levels.

Thirdly, policies should aim to expand the use of renewable energy, set clear targets, and encourage the Korea Electric Power Corporation(KEPCO) to increase its procurement of renewable electricity. Globally, ICT companies are accelerating the adoption of renewable energy as part of their strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In South Korea, telecommunications companies are likewise working to expand their use of renewable energy usage through measures such as installing solar panels for on-site consumption, acquiring Renewable Energy Certificates(RECs), and entering into Power Purchase Agreements(PPAs) with renewable energy producers. Accordingly, the government should mandate renewable energy usage targets for telecommunications companies, monitor progress toward achieving these goals, and encourage KEPCO to increase its procurement of renewable energy.

Fourthly, policies should be introduced to extend the lifespan of telecommunications devices, such as smartphones. Within the ICT industry, the largest proportion of greenhouse gas emissions originates from manufacturing and using ICT devices, including smartphones. While it is important to enhance the energy efficiency of device usage, it is equally crucial to implement policies that reduce device replacement cycles and encourage longer-term use of telecommunications equipment.

Improving the Subcontracting Employment Structure in the Telecommunications and Pay-TV Industries

Recently, telecommunications companies have rapidly shifted their investment priorities rapidly towards AI and other emerging businesses. This has led to a significant reduction in funding for traditional broadcasting and telecommunications infrastructure and technical services. If this trend continues, the marginalisation of core telecommunications functions, such as network operation and maintenance, is likely to accelerate, potentially worsening employment stability and worker safety. To strengthen the publicness of telecommunications and enhance service stability, it is necessary to institutionalise the protection of labour rights alongside sustained investment in telecommunications infrastructure. The following policy measures are proposed to address these challenges.

Firstly, collective bargaining at an industry level between principal contractors and subcontractors in the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors should be encouraged and guaranteed by institutions. As the broadcasting and telecommunications industries are fundamentally network-based sectors, the processes of infrastructure construction, operation, service provision and



Non-regular LG Hello Vision workers called for negotiations with the main contractor and for complete insourcing at a press conference in August 2025

maintenance are highly interdependent. In particular, home services, such as telecommunications service provision, network maintenance, and the supply of broadcasting and internet services, constitute core operational areas. Therefore, it is essential to establish industry-wide labour rights standards through sectoral bargaining to narrow disparities in employment types and working conditions that exist within the same business structures.

Secondly, it is necessary to broaden the criteria for determining what constitutes subcontracting and dispatch work should be broadened, and workers engaged in regular, non-construction, tasks should be converted to direct employment. The maintenance and repair of broadcasting and telecommunications networks are essential operations directly linked to service provision and, by nature, must be undertaken by telecommunications companies themselves. These tasks therefore cannot be performed without the supervision and direction of the principal company. Accordingly, the current criteria for determining what consti-

tutes subcontracting and dispatch work should be broadened so that, where the principal company's supervision can reasonably be presumed, the arrangement is classified as de facto dispatch work. Furthermore, where similar or identical tasks within the industry are already performed by directly employed regular workers or regular employees of subsidiaries, these roles should likewise be recognised as de facto dispatch positions and converted to equivalent direct employment contracts.

Thirdly, the scope of outsourcing prohibitions and approval requirements under the current Occupational Safety and Health Act should be expanded. At present, the Act restricts contracting for tasks within workplaces involving the injection or production of hazardous substances. These restrictions should be extended to include outdoor high-risk operations, such as working at heights, confined-space tasks in manholes, and electrical work conducted outside the workplace. Furthermore, the subcontracting of outdoor high-risk tasks should be prohibited or strictly regulated to ensure that principal contractors cannot externalise responsibility for worker safety. In addition, the responsibility of principal contractors for tasks requiring two-person teams should be clearly defined, and outsourcing driven solely by cost-cutting objectives should be penalised.

Conclusion

In its early stages, South Korea's telecommunications industry was characterised by a strong state responsibility for constructing telecommunications infrastructure, modernising and universalising of telecommunications services, expanding public services, and the creating of quality jobs. Even after privatisation, the government maintained several policies from a public inter-

est perspective, including the development of high-speed national backbone networks, the institutionalisation of measures to prevent unnecessary duplication and over-investment, and the obligation to provide universal service. This reflects the enduring public nature of telecommunications as both a national backbone network and an essential good for citizens. However, since privatisation, the three dominant telecommunications operators have established a quasi-monopolistic structure and generated immense profits, yet they have increasingly abandoned their core responsibilities. While pursuing a so-called 'beyond telecommunications' strategy, these firms have neglected to reduce service charges and expand universal services. Instead, they have scaled back telecommunications investment and outsourced indiscriminately, resulting in an increasingly unstable telecommunications network system. This has led to several major incidents, including the 2009 KT Ahyeon office fire, the 2023 LG U+ data breach, and the recent SK Telecom hacking incident. To address these issues, the government must redefine its telecommunications policy orientation by placing a stronger emphasis on the publicness and labour rights. The first step towards this is to actively review and adopt the policy recommendations proposed in this study, which focus on enhancing the public character of telecommunications services and protecting workers' rights.

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The Illusion of the Lee Jae-myung Administration's 'Sunshine and Wind Pension'

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On 13 August 2025, the State Affairs Planning Committee of the Lee Jae-myung administration unveiled a draft of its five-year national governance strategy. The plan sets out a national vision, three governance principles and five policy goals, as well as 123 policy tasks. Those related to the climate crisis and the energy transition fall under the policy goal titled 'An Innovative Economy Leading the World'. According to the draft, the government intends to 'achieve industrial-sector RE100 through the rapid construction of an energy superhighway, realise carbon neutrality across all economic and social sectors, and strengthen national capacity to respond to the climate crisis'. As with previous administrations, the Lee government has reaffirmed the 'green growth' strategy, viewing the climate crisis as an opportunity for economic growth rather than addressing climate inequality. The new administration has made it clear that it intends to distance itself from the climate justice movement, which calls for a 'just transition'.

While the specific implementation tasks have yet to be disclosed, the tasks under the 12 key strategic initiatives, which are said to encapsulate the new government's governing philosophy, have already been presented. One notable item among these is the proposal to 'expand the Sunshine and Wind Pension', introduced under the fourth strategic initiative, 'Achieving Economic Growth and Carbon Neutrality through the Energy Superhighway'. This was one of President Lee Jae-myung's campaign pledges and he frequently referenced it as a means of expanding renewable energy use and preventing regional decline. During a televised debate, when candidate Kwon Yeong-guk asked about his position on expanding public renewable energy, Lee referred specifically to the 'Sunshine and Wind Pension', effectively using it to represent his stance. To readers unfamiliar with the details, the 'Sunshine and Wind Pension' may appear to be a policy designed to share the benefits of renewable energy with local residents while simultaneously expanding renewables and revitalising local communities. However, despite its positive public image, the policy raises several issues that warrant critical examination.

The Sunshine and Wind Pension pledge is based on an 'experiment' conducted in Shinan County, South Jeolla Province. During his presidential campaign, the Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung posted an explanation of the pension on his Facebook page:

I will expand the Sunshine and Wind Pension to revitalise the economies of regions at risk of extinction. In Shinan County, for example, residents have received a total of KRW 22 billion in dividends from solar power plants over the past several years. By 2032, annual dividends of up to KRW 6 million per person will be possible. Thanks to these achievements, Shinan County is the only

depopulating region where the population is actually increasing. I will roll out the Sunshine and Wind Pension nationwide to boost residents' incomes and encourage people to return to these areas

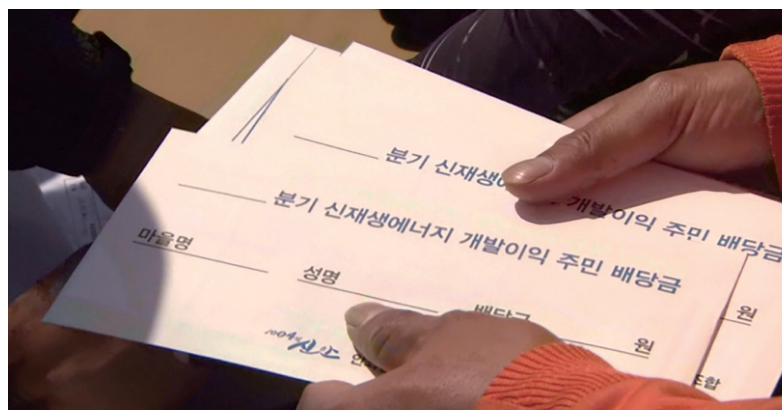
(Lee Jae-myung, Facebook post).

Where does the 'Sunshine Pension', which distributed KRW 22 billion to residents of Sinan County over five years and helped reverse the population decline, come from? As mentioned previously, Sinan County has attracted private solar power projects with a total capacity of 1 GW. The Sunshine Pension is linked to these projects. However, contrary to common misconception, the Sunshine Pension is not financed by distributing profits from these projects to local residents. Rather, its funding derives from Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) electricity tariff revenues, which are ultimately borne by citizens. The government operates a scheme designed to increase public acceptance of



renewable energy projects by ensuring that residents living near such projects can obtain financial benefits. Under this scheme, if local residents invest at least 4% of a project's total cost, the government grants the project's renewable energy supplier an additional 20% of Renewable Energy Certificates(RECs), which are allocated in proportion to the electricity supplied to KEPCO from the solar facilities. The power producers are then required to distribute the revenues from the sale of these additional RECs to residents. Crucially, these REC revenues are derived from the 'climate and environmental fee' surcharge on citizens' electricity bills.

Even though it is clear that the Sunshine Pension in Shinan County is funded by electricity tariffs paid by citizens rather than by a share of profits from power producers, some may still argue that it is reasonable to compensate local residents affected by the location of renewable energy facilities through such charges. However, such compensation is already provided under a separate legal framework, namely the Act on Assistance to Areas



Sunshine Pension: Dividend for Local Residents

Neighbouring Electric Power Plants (although the adequacy of this compensation remains open to question). It is important not to forget that the Sunshine Pension is based on a government scheme designed to 'share the profits of renewable energy'. This raises several crucial questions. Firstly, why is 'benefit sharing' discussed so prominently in relation to renewable energy, unlike other forms of power generation? Secondly, how precisely is this benefit intended to be shared?

During his presidential campaign, President Lee declared in a speech advocating the expansion of renewable energy that 'the sunlight and the wind belong to all of us'. This statement implies that sunlight and wind are free gifts from nature, forming the commons to which all citizens have rights and which therefore cannot be privately owned. This concept is enshrined in Article 120(1) of the Constitution, which stipulates that the utilisation of 'natural resources available for economic use', such as sunlight and wind, requires state authorisation in accordance with the law. From this perspective, the public renewable energy movement argues that renewable energy should be publicly developed, operated and managed publicly, with its benefits shared by all. If private companies are granted permission to develop renewable energy resources, which are a commons by nature, and to generate profits, those profits must not be monopolised, but rather a portion should be returned to society. However, when President Lee said that 'the sunlight and the wind belong to all of us' during his candidacy, it remains unclear whether he intended to convey this idea. It is, however, more likely that he meant the phrase differently.

The government's 'renewable energy benefit sharing' scheme, which underpins the Sunshine Pension in Shinan County, is based

on an investor model. In other words, it embodies the dominant logic of financial capitalism: 'if you want to share the benefits, you must invest'. Within this framework, the scheme was designed so that an additional 0.2 times REC would only be granted if local residents invested more than 4% of the total project cost. However, this 'investor model' only grants the right to enjoy the benefits of renewable energy to those who have the financial means to invest.²⁵ Consequently, it excludes the 'commons model', which holds that renewable energy itself constitutes a commons and that everyone has the right to share in its benefits, regardless of investment.

Currently, the vast majority of renewable energy projects are dominated by private corporations and private capital, with most of the resulting profits accruing to investors and financial institutions. For instance, a corporation investing KRW 6 trillion in the construction and operation of 1 GW of offshore wind power could expect to generate around KRW 780 billion annually from sales to KEPCO, totalling approximately KRW 15.8 trillion over twenty years. A significant proportion of these substantial profits goes to greedy investors and financial institutions, in the form of shareholder dividends and financial servicing costs. Unlike other types of power plant, these private actors exploit natural resources such as sunlight and wind without paying for them, and then monopolise the surplus profits by virtue of having provided capital and extended credit. At its core, the investor model of benefit sharing in renewable energy represents the appropriation of the commons by capital. In this context, the Sunshine Pension

²⁵ Given that total project costs range from KRW several hundred billion to several trillion, a 4 % share therefore amounts to several billion or to several tens of billions, making it difficult for local residents to secure the necessary investment. As a result, in some cases project developers advance these funds to residents through complex financial arrangements.

in Shinan County functions as a mechanism that appeases local residents using funds drawn from citizens' electricity bills, thereby masking this appropriation.

In contrast, the 'Sunshine Dure' project in Guyang-ri, Yeosu City, Gyeonggi Province, which President Lee Jae-myung visited during his candidacy, offers a more positive model. While in Shinan County, private companies own and operate all solar power facilities, capturing the vast majority of profits for investors and financial institutions, in Guyang-ri, the village community jointly owns and manages the solar power plant, sharing all profits for the benefit of local residents. We should pay close attention to the conditions that made this possible. Firstly, the project was led by a cooperative formed by local residents, ensuring that the profits remained within the community. Additionally, the project was able to utilise communal village land and to secure long-term, low-interest government policy loans, minimising the rents that would otherwise have been paid out of the community in the form of land leases or interest payments. While this example is promising, it remains uncertain how widely such a model can be replicated in other rural villages.

In opposition to the 'investor model' that underpins the 'Sunshine and Wind Pension' policy supported by the Lee administration, the public renewable energy movement advocates for a 'commons model'. A recently successful national petition, which gathered 50,000 signatures in support of the proposed Public Renewable Energy Bill, which includes a provision for imposing a resource utilisation levy on renewable energy. Under this proposal, 20% of profits gained from exploiting renewable energy resources, regarded as the 'commons', would be collected as a levy. This approach builds on a precedent set on Jeju Island, where a local or-

dinance established the 'Wind Power Resource Sharing Fund' by requiring a contribution of 17.5% contribution to net profits from wind power generation. If a 'Sunshine and Wind Pension' were to be introduced nationally, it should not be financed by household electricity payments. Instead, it should be financed by charging operators for the right to exploit common resources, thereby ensuring its legitimacy.

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A Stable Climate as a Human Right:

State Obligations in the Judgments of the IACHR and ICJ

Oh SungHee Director of International Affairs
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In May and July 2025, two historic rulings in the form of advisory opinions²⁶ were issued by international courts recognising state responsibility for climate change.

The first, delivered on 29 May 2025 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights(IACHR), affirmed that a stable climate constitutes a human right. The second, issued on 23 July 2025 by the International Court of Justice(ICJ), established states' international legal responsibility to respond to climate change.

Since 2005, when Inuit leaders filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights(IACHR) alleging that

²⁶ An advisory opinion is a legal opinion issued by a court in response to a request for legal advice from an international organization. Although not legally binding, it carries significant authority in the interpretation and application of international law, contributes to the establishment of legal standards within the international community, and assists in the resolution of related disputes. In this respect, it is regarded as an authoritative statement of international law, possessing a level of authority comparable to a judgment.

the US government's failure to act on climate change violated Inuit human rights, nearly 500 lawsuits have been brought worldwide. These sustained efforts to hold governments accountable for human rights violations arising from climate change have culminated in these two landmark rulings.

Advisory Opinion of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR)

The advisory opinion on the climate emergency and human rights, rendered in response to a joint submission by Chile and Colombia in 2023, recognised a stable climate as a human right and affirmed that states are responsible for protecting citizens' human rights from the threats posed by climate change. It confirmed the following obligations of states.

- (i) Legally protect both present and future generations from the impacts of climate change.
- (ii) Act in accordance with a standard of enhanced due diligence to protect the most vulnerable from climate impacts.
- (iii) Establish and enforce stricter regulations on corporations and industries that cause significant pollution.
- (iv) Reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, pursue adaptation measures, and cooperate internationally on a scientific basis.
- (v) Take measures to counter the spread of climate-related disinformation.

This ruling builds on two earlier decisions: the 2024 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which held that

'insufficient climate action violates the right to respect for private and family life', and the decision of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), which affirmed the obligation to prevent, reduce, and control marine pollutants from GHG emissions.

The IACHR is the highest human rights tribunal for the 35 member states of the Organization of American States, covering North America, Latin America and the Caribbean. Its opinion is significant because it sets standards of governmental responsibility for climate change for judicial bodies across the Americas. While the United States, as a non-party to the relevant treaty, is not directly bound, the decision nonetheless serves as a clear warning to US-based multinational fossil fuel corporations.

The ruling embodies key principles: intergenerational equity, the polluter-pays principle, and the precautionary principle. Importantly, it clarifies that international law not only requires states to refrain from conducts that are harmful to the environment, but also imposes positive obligations to ensure the 'protection, restoration and regeneration' of ecosystems.

The IACHR further recognised an independent right to a healthy climate, derived from the broader right to a healthy environment, and mandated that states take bold and essential measures to protect the global climate system and to prevent human rights violations arising from climate change. This recognition of the intergenerational nature of climate injustice echoes the August 2024 ruling of the Constitutional Court of Korea (Case 2020Hunma389), which required legislation to establish GHG reduction pathways to avoid shifting an excessive burden onto future generations.

Furthermore, the IACHR held that the right to a healthy climate gives rise to robust state obligations to regulate corporate

conduct and to impose duties on private actors. By doing so, it expanded states' responsibilities for regulation and oversight, requiring them to enact legislation that mandates emissions disclosure across entire corporate value chains and that requires human rights and climate impact assessments, and to curb greenwashing and to restrain undue corporate influence on political and regulatory processes.

To read the full Advisory Opinion of the IACHR, please follow this link: https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea_32_en.pdf

Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ)

On 23 July 2025, the International Court of Justice^(ICJ) issued an advisory opinion on climate change and human rights, holding that responding to the climate crisis is 'an obligation of all states' and that failure to fulfill this obligation constitutes 'a violation of international law'.

This opinion was requested and issued in response to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 77/276²⁷, entitled 'Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the obligations of States in respect of climate change', which was adopted in April 2023 at the request of the government of Vanuatu, a South Pacific island nation. The resolution requested the ICJ to provide an advisory opinion on the following questions:

- (a) The obligations of states in respect of climate change (specifically, the obligations incumbent upon states under international law to protect the climate system and the environment from GHG emissions);

²⁷ <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/77/276>

- (b) The legal consequences arising from states' acts and omissions that cause significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment (particularly with regard to states' legal responsibilities to humanity, including small island states vulnerable to climate change, and to future generations).

This was the first time the ICJ had issued an advisory opinion on the climate crisis. According to the advisory opinion, its findings apply to all states under the UN system, that is, to every country subject to international law, and may serve as a basis for interstate litigation. Accordingly, it is expected to influence the more than 3,000 climate lawsuits currently underway worldwide, many of which have been brought by future generations and climate-affected states.

This judgment was adopted by all 15 judges, making it only the fifth unanimous ruling in the ICJ's 80-year history. It is of considerable significance: it clearly defines states' responsibilities under international law to respond to climate change and is expected to shape international law, national policymaking, and litigation strategies for years to come.

More specifically, the ICJ's advisory opinion reached the following key conclusions:

- (c) Recognizing states' specific obligations under international law to protect the climate, the Court affirmed that states owe three duties: to prevent significant environmental harm, to cooperate, and to exercise due diligence in fulfilling their obligations, using the best available scientific evidence.

- (d) Acknowledging that the accelerating impacts of climate change pose direct threats to a wide range of fundamental rights, the Court placed people – rather than emissions alone – at the centre of climate law. It held that protecting the climate is inseparable from protecting human dignity, fairness, and justice, thereby affirming that climate change is fundamentally a human-rights issue.
- (e) Highlighting the role of attribution science²⁸ in identifying causes of harm and assessing causal links, the Court emphasized that states must act on the basis of robust scientific evidence and underscored that such evidence can inform determinations of legal responsibility.
- (f) The Court reaffirmed that states must adopt concrete and effective measures to supervise and restrict the activities of private companies that contribute to climate harm. It made unequivocally clear that states are obliged to regulate activities within their jurisdiction, particularly those of fossil fuel producers, to protect the climate system.
- (g) The Court confirmed that vulnerable states and populations, including small island states and developing countries, disproportionately burdened by climate change, have the right to seek protection and compensation, thereby providing a firm legal foundation for safeguarding their rights.

In conclusion, the ICJ held that the climate system constitutes a global public good shared by all nations. The duty to protect it is therefore an *erga omnes* obligation owed by every state to hu-

²⁸ A scientific field that analyzes the causes of specific extreme weather events in order to quantitatively assess the extent to which climate change has influenced them.

manity as a whole. Any breach of that duty constitutes an 'internationally wrongful act'. Consequently, affected states may seek legal remedies, including compensation, guarantees of non-repetition, and cessation of wrongful conduct, from the states responsible.

Although remedies for breaches of state obligations remain limited, the Court provided important normative guidance by establishing clear standards for regulating corporations operating in the international arena. By clarifying benchmarks for state conduct, it opened the way to strengthen existing mechanisms for addressing loss and damage and to improve accountability frameworks.

The question of enforcement remains unresolved. Nevertheless, by emphasizing that climate action constitutes both a legal and a moral obligation at the core of the international legal system, the ruling represents a crucial step in the normative evolution of climate responsibility.²⁹

To read the full Advisory Opinion of the ICJ, please follow this link: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/187/187-20250723-adv-01-00-en.pdf>

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#text

Integrated care without care: State Responsibility is the Answer

Limitations and challenges
of the Integrated Care Support Ac

Han Hyeok Director of Policy, KPTU

The Korean term 'gaeksa' refers to dying in an unfamiliar place, far from one's home. Traditionally, it was believed that those who died far from their homes and families would become restless spirits, unable to cross into the afterlife due to their grief and wandering the mortal realm as a result. However, changes in family structure and advances in medical technology mean that it is now common for people to die in hospitals. Dying away from home has become the norm rather than the exception. People leave their homes not only near the moment of death. In South Korea, for example, when the elderly grow frail and require assistance, they often move into care homes. While families sometimes make this decision on their behalf, many elderly people choose to enter such facilities voluntarily, unwilling to become a burden on their loved ones. In today's Korea, where the historical practice of abandoning the elderly (Goryeojang) has given way to modern-day forms of neglect (Gaeksa), this is the sombre reality of 2025.



In August 2025, the KPTU Social Services Council announced and delivered its demands to the new government to strengthen public integrated care services

South Korea became a super-aged society in December 2024, with one in every five citizens now aged 65 or over. Longevity may be a blessing, but life in old age is far from easy. The ageing body carries a host of ailments: 86.1 % of elderly people suffer from chronic illnesses, and by 2025, it is expected that nearly half of the nation's total medical expenditure will be incurred by those aged 65 and above. South Korea also has the highest elderly poverty rate among OECD countries, which compounds the financial burden of medical expenses for older adults and their families. The need to work to provide for one's family leaves no time for care. This paradox drives many elderly people, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to seek out nursing homes.

According to a 2024 survey by the Care for All Foundation, one in three people born in the 1960s is concerned about dying alone. Among those with a monthly income of less than 2 million KRW,

nearly half expressed concern about dying alone. However, older people have a clear preference regarding how they wish to spend their later years. The majority hope to grow old in their own homes (52%), and many wish to die there as well (46%). In contrast, only 22% expressed a desire to spend their final years in a care facility, and fewer than 5% wished to die in a long-term care hospital.

What was once a rare occurrence - dying away from home - has now become commonplace, whereas dying in the place where one has long lived is now a privilege enjoyed by only a small minority. In response to this reality, the Act on the Integrated Support for Local Care including Healthcare and Care Services - commonly referred to as the Integrated Care Support Act - was enacted in March 2024. This law aims to enable people facing difficulties with daily living due to frailty, disability, illness or accident to continue living healthily in their own homes and communities with state and local government support. In essence, it can be dubbed a 'national Gaeksa prevention act'.

However, the legislative process was far from smooth: the Act only just passed in the final session of the 21st National Assembly. Of the seven bills initially proposed, many faced opposition from private capital interests and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Consequently, the scope of beneficiaries was narrowed, and many key provisions were relegated to subordinate statutes or regulations. The Act was eventually passed in a severely diluted form. While the original intention was to provide coverage for all citizens, the final version is limited mainly to 'the elderly and persons with disabilities', prompting criticism that it is little more than a 'version 1.1' of the existing Long-Term Care Insurance Act.

The most serious and fundamental problem with the enacted

law is its extensive entrustment provisions. It allows much of the responsibility that properly rests with the state and local governments to be transferred to specialist agencies and affiliated institutions. Furthermore, it provides that heads of local government may decide whether to establish departments dedicated to overseeing integrated support services. In practice, this enables local authorities to outsource integrated care projects to private providers without setting up dedicated departments, simply by allocating the budget. In South Korea, where the adverse consequences of the marketisation of care are already severe, there is a significant risk that integrated care will be reduced to a vehicle for private profit. At professional forums, people openly say, “Once integrated care is rolled out, the market will grow, so let’s not compete, but divide the benefits among ourselves.”

Another important issue is the objectification of beneficiaries. The law fails to guarantee mechanisms by which recipients of integrated care can actively participate and assert their rights. They are only permitted to respond to surveys, be notified of outcomes, and receive the offered services. At no stage are they granted the most basic right to lodge objections. Furthermore, the law offers no protection or recognition of rights for care workers who deliver services at the forefront of the integrated care system. Instead, they are regarded as ‘specialist personnel required for integrated support’ and as targets for training and professional development. This is in stark contrast to the Long-Term Care Insurance Act, which obliges state and local governments to ‘actively improve the treatment, welfare and status of long-term care workers’, incorporates their working conditions into the basic plan and includes provisions for their human rights education and protection. It also ensures the participation of workers’ organisations in the Long-Term Care Committee. Un-

der the Integrated Care Support Act, both citizens, the intended beneficiaries, and care workers, the backbone of the system, are effectively deprived of basic rights.

The problems extend beyond the limitations of the law itself to encompass serious institutional and practical challenges. At its core, the Integrated Care Support Act seeks to integrate and coordinate medical and long-term care services. However, South Korea’s primary healthcare system has already effectively collapsed. Frontline public officials openly lament, ‘How can we provide “integrated” care when there is no healthcare system to integrate?’, and have expressed the urgent need for the Ministry of Health and Welfare to devise countermeasures. The problem is not confined to healthcare. In many regions, the infrastructure required to deliver essential services such as daily living support is inadequate, and there are no meaningful solutions to address these disparities.

Above all, there is serious doubt as to whether the state and local governments truly understand the purpose of implementing this system. The stated goal of the Act is to ensure that citizens who require assistance in their daily lives receive the necessary care and can continue to live with dignity in their own homes. In reality, however, budget reduction appears to have become the overriding objective. At a forum hosted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare to discuss the implementation of the Act, an official responsible for a region held up as a ‘best practice’ example stated with pride that the main achievement of their pilot project had been to ‘defend against high-cost beneficiaries’. In other words, success lay in reducing admissions to nursing facilities and cutting expenditure. Furthermore, a recent report submitted by the State Affairs Planning Committee to the Office of the President



On Caregiver's Day in June 2025, the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division held a press conference to demand improved working conditions and increased staffing levels.

indicated that metrics such as ‘long-term care hospital admission rates’ and ‘insurance cost-saving effects’ are to be used as key performance indicators in the section on financial support for integrated care services. Are government policymakers placing the protection of the government’s budget above the dignity of citizens’ lives?

Currently, the law and preparations for its implementation are an inadequate patchwork and an empty shell. How, then, should they be repaired and completed?

Firstly, it must be made clear that integrated care is the responsibility of state and local governments, with securing public interest in care as the foremost principle. Indiscriminate entrustment must be prohibited. Public institutions capable of guaranteeing both public interest and professional expertise, such as the National Health Insurance Service, must be empowered to fulfil

their proper role. To secure the public infrastructure necessary for integrated care services, social service agencies must be expanded and strengthened because a private market driven by profit motives cannot address regional disparities or care blind spots. Social Service Agencies should establish integrated home care centres in every major area and directly employ care workers to ensure high-quality care is available to all citizens, regardless of region. In order to achieve the core objective of integrating medical and long-term care, public healthcare institutions must be secured, and the current fee-for-service payment model must be abolished or reformed in order to lay the groundwork for home visits and community-based healthcare. Above all, citizens must not be confined to the role of service recipients. They must be recognised as active participants in the integrated care system with guaranteed rights to take part in every stage of the process. They must have the right to raise objections and express their views at each stage of assessment, determination and service provision. Similarly, improving working conditions and protecting the rights of care workers must be recognised as the responsibility of the state and local governments. Institutional guarantees must be established to this end, ensuring that worker representatives and trade unions play a formal role in the Integrated Support Council. In the era of integrated care, South Korea requires the firm establishment of the genuine care democracy outlined above.

Since 2024, the Korean Public & Social Services and Transport Workers' Union(KPTU) has set up an Integrated Care Task Force in partnership with its affiliates, such as the KPTU Social Services Council, the KPTU Healthcare Workers Solidarity Division, the KPTU LRG Public Employees Division, and the KPTU National Health Insurance Service Union. The task force has reviewed rel-

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evant legislation, evaluated pilot projects and prepared proposals to amend the Integrated Care Support Act. The KPTU has also sought to identify shared demands across wider civil society, beyond trade unions, through consultations and public forums, and is pursuing joint actions on this basis. In the second half of this year, the KPTU intends to draft a standard municipal ordinance that reflects the demands of trade unions, and organise its implementation across different regions. In an ageing society, care is no longer solely an issue for individuals or their families. The era in which care could be the sole responsibility of individuals or families has passed. If care is not assumed by the state and society, the continuity and survival of the social community will be jeopardised. Care is not an act of benevolence by the state; it is a fundamental obligation that the state must fulfil. This is why the KPTU must play a more prominent role in providing integrated care under state responsibility and strengthening its public nature.

About the Author

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Han Hyeok has freshly joined the social service team in the Office of Policy Planning at the Korean Public, Social Services and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU). Prior to joining the Office of Policy Planning, Han had worked as an organizer of atypical and irregular-status workers at the Seoul headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and also as an organizer at the Seogyong headquarters of the KPTU. Han also worked with an animal rights organization for five years starting in 2016.



Colonies in the Sky: On Publishing the Space
Economic War_ Hong Seok-man

Envisioning a Public-Centred Transition in the Era
of Climate Crisis_ Koo Junmo



Colonies in the Sky: On Publishing the Space Economic War

Hong Seok-man Author of the Space Economic War,
Director at the Chamsesang Research Institute

When I started writing while writing the Space Economic War, I was struck by the deep chasm between humanity's romantic dreams of space and the stark reality confronting us. Those of us who once gazed at the night sky in wonder, must now accept that space is no longer a realm of exploration. Much like the colonial conquests of the Age of Discovery, today's outer space has become a vast 'battlefield' where capital and nations compete fiercely to plant their flags first. Through this book, I aim to address this unsettling reality and ask the fundamental questions that have been overlooked.

Capital's Colonisation of Space: Shadows over Earth's Orbit

When people imagine space colonies, they often picture the Moon or Mars. Yet what draws my attention is Earth's orbit, directly above our heads. The true conquest of humanity's first space colonies is already unfolding before our very eyes. In the twenty-first century, the driving force behind space development

has shifted from government agencies to private space companies such as SpaceX and Blue Origin. By developing reusable rockets and commercial space flights a reality, these companies have transformed space into a domain where we can travel more for less. However, beneath this vision lies a stark motive driven purely by capital and profit. The realm once imagined as 'space for all' is increasingly becoming a vast marketplace for private gain.

I refer to this phenomenon as 'space colonialism', and I critically examine how today's spacefaring nations and private enterprises are saturating Earth's orbit with military and commercial satellites, all the while racing to secure mining rights on the Moon and asteroids. This is reminiscent of how, European empires once plundered the New World and monopolised its resources. Starlink alone plans to launch 42,000 satellites, and once the International Space Station (ISS) is retired, private space stations will take its place. This signals the advent of 'enclosed cities' in space, that prioritise capitalist values above all else, and encompassing luxury space hotels and advanced research facilities, among other developments. A tiny proportion of the wealthy elite will pay vast sums to experience space and enjoy its environment, while an entire class of 'space labourers' may emerge to maintain and service these facilities. This points to a stark future in which Earth's existing inequalities and labour exploitation extend seamlessly into space. The extreme scenario of polarisation could become reality: a privileged class of 'space elites' thriving among the stars, while the great majority of humanity is condemned to a polluted Earth.

Once the ISS retires and private stations take its place, a closed economic sphere will emerge, where habitation (hotels), tourism,

scientific experimentation and logistics become intertwined. I have not presented this trajectory as a narrative of technological optimism. Instead, I have sought to bear witness to how the public interest is being dismantled through the specific provisions of standards, contracts, insurance policies, exemptions and data licences, and how, almost imperceptibly, these mechanisms are becoming entangled with military and security concerns to construct 'fortresses in the sky'. The colonisation of space by capital is already manifesting in several forms. While the finite commons of orbital slots and radio frequencies are being occupied by vast satellite constellations owned by private space companies, the skies essential for astronomical observation and the balance of nocturnal ecosystems are being irreversibly fragmented. The costs and risks associated with debris generation and collision avoidance are dispersed across society as a whole, yet the immense profits and data value generated in orbit flow exclusively into the ledgers of specific corporations and nations. This asymmetry – the privatisation of profits alongside the socialization of costs – constitutes the core mechanism of what I describe as today's 'space colonialism'.

Moreover, the evolving norms surrounding the utilisation of resources on the Moon and asteroids follow a similar trajectory. The principle that 'space is the common heritage of humankind' formally remains intact, yet the 'safe zones' and their operational protocols, established under the Artemis Accords led by the United States, together with corresponding domestic legislation, have in effect refined a logic of territorialisation under the guise of 'non-interference'. This differs little from the way imperial powers looted gold and silver from their colonies during the colonial era.

What I find most concerning is the speed at which this is hap-

pening. Launch frequency, satellite numbers, the pace of data commercialisation and the frenzy of financial investment in space enterprises and projects are all outstripping the evolution of regulatory and ethical frameworks. When this occurs, regulatory vacuums fragment both markets and science alike. This is why the reality of space colonialism confronts us with such urgency. What we must now reconsider is not moral sentiment, but the precise legal and technical language that governs space: the detailed terms of permits, the exact wording of standards, the clauses on liability and compensation, and the provisions on disclosure and preservation. In this book, I have aimed to present these texts as clearly and practically as possible.

The Colonisation of Mars, Investment Narratives and the Truth Behind Them

Elon Musk's plan to send humans to Mars dominated the global headlines and captured the world's imagination. Declaring boldly that one million people could be relocated to Mars by 2050, he promised to mass-produce hundreds of Starships each year to realise this large-scale migration. Yet, in this book, I argue that the essence of such promises lies less in their scientific feasibility than in their function as investment-driven narratives. Radiation shielding, life-support systems, habitation infrastructure and food self-sufficiency all remain unresolved challenges. Nevertheless, the vision that 'one day we will reach Mars' has proved remarkably effective at attracting vast flows of capital. What must not be overlooked is that Mars migration has already functioned as a monumental business model, more precisely, as an investment narrative.

While the commercial migration to Mars is often framed within

a narrative of pioneering, yet in reality it bears the hallmarks of debt-based migration and exploitative labour migration. Migrants would be required to liquidate assets or secure loans on Earth to finance their passage, and upon arrival they would remain dependent on corporations and states for access to life-support facilities and infrastructure. Essentially, they would repay their rights to reside and survive through rents and usage fees, while many could find themselves reduced to a class of 'space labourers' responsible for maintenance, management and construction on Mars. This structure closely resembles the debt-bonded indentured labour and forms of forced migrations that characterised Europe's colonial expansions, effectively bordering on slavery. So long as Mars migration is designed as a form of subordinate relocation serving the interests of capital and state power, it cannot represent a collective leap for humanity but an extension of a new colonial regime.

For this reason, I emphasise not on the mere act of 'arriving on Mars' but on the nature of migration itself. For migration to Mars to hold genuine meaning, it must not be conceived as a commercial or military project engineered by a handful of corporations and nations, but as a public endeavour belonging to humanity as a whole. Only when designed as a system of shared resources rather than monopolised resources, of fair cost distribution rather than cost shifting, and of guaranteed rights and safety rather than labour subjugation, can migration to Mars open a truly new horizon for human civilisation. Mars is not simply another place to live; it is a stage upon which we must decide what kind of civilisation we choose to build. Migration without a public purpose is merely another form of colonialism, whereas migration grounded in the public interest is the only way in which we can genuinely expand the future of humanity.

Cosmos Communism: Reclaiming the Commons of Space

Does this mean that humanity's exploration of space, or the prospect of colonising Mars, must be stopped completely? Certainly not. The potential for humanity to venture into space, advance scientific knowledge and utilise new resources to address Earth's problems remains as compelling as ever. The real issue lies in the question: who will enter and develop space, and according to which values? If, as now, capital and national power struggles dominate the agenda, space risks becoming little more than another site of plunder. Conversely, if principles of mutual equality and ecological preservation guide this endeavour, a different kind of civilisation could emerge.

While exposing the darker realities of space development, the book also puts forward a radical yet fundamental alternative: expanding the space commons. I call this concept. 'Cosmos Communism'. It argues that space should not be treated as a mere physical territory, but as a 'cosmos'—a realm possessing its own harmonious order and ecosystems. Rather than a domain for exploitation, space should become a stage upon which the ethics of mutual care, equality and solidarity are realised.

Earth's orbit, the Moon and Mars are not 'objects to be conquered and owned', but 'new environments in which we must learn to coexist'. Cosmos Communism insists that even on Mars, the principles of resource sharing, ecological preservation and energy conservation must be upheld even on Mars. When migration to Mars is conceived as a public endeavour, these principles acquire an even more concrete meaning. If native life forms exist, they must be respected. Technologies and habitats must be designed in ways that avoid disrupting planetary ecological systems. When humanity comes to live on other planets, we must not behave as

reckless 'space pioneers' but as responsible 'space tenants', using energy and resources only in renewable and sustainable ways. Above all, the resources and profits derived from Mars and outer space must be distributed fairly, shared among Earth and all humanity. Cosmos Communism asserts that the achievements of outer space development must never become the private property of specific states or corporations, but instead be treated as a shared resource for all life on Earth.

To prevent the vast environment of outer space from being degraded by privatisation or militarisation, humanity must collectively establish and enforce new norms. Cosmos Communism is therefore both a powerful declaration—to halt the colonial plunder, ecological destruction and capitalist exploitation long practised on Earth and to refuse their repetition in space—and a vision that imagines new pathways for humanity's future.

Humanity's Fateful Choice: Are We to Become the 'Bad Aliens'?

'How can humanity avoid becoming the bad aliens in space?' When we imagine extraterrestrial intelligent life, we tend to hope that such beings are peaceful and highly advanced. Yet if we ourselves expand into other planets, it is likely that, to any life we encounter there, we would appear as invaders or exploiters. We must confront the paradox that, while humanity regards itself as the 'highest civilisation' on Earth, beyond our planet we may be perceived as nothing more than a minority of outsiders. This realisation marks the first civilisational question humanity faces as it takes its initial steps beyond Earth.

The Space Economic War goes beyond the technological achieve-

ments of space development to ask a deeper question: what kind of civilisation do we intend to build? Its warning is far from fanciful. As the glittering space age dawns, resources may increasingly flow to the benefit of a privileged few, while the vast majority of humanity is left excluded. If we continue to develop recklessly, we may find ourselves constructing fortresses in the sky and igniting a cosmic gold rush, positioning ourselves as aggressors. For this reason, space must no longer be treated as the spoils of capital and power but as a shared realm for the coexistence of humanity and Earth's ecosystems.

The book underscores that we must decide whether space can truly belong to 'everyone' and what kind of beings we will become within it. It closes by asking: 'Can we halt the headlong rush of colonialism and, together, build Cosmos Communism?' This question holds the key to the destiny of the space age. My hope is that readers will reflect, through this book, on the idea that space exploration is not merely a matter of advancing science and technology, but of redefining the trajectory of human civilisation itself. In order to ensure that our journey into space from culminate in a scramble for the spoils of capital and power, we must act now to extend our solidarity to life and ecology.

About the Author

Hong Seok-man

Hong Seok-man has been actively involved in various social movement organisations, working on issues related to politics, the economy, labour, and society. He is currently the publisher of Chamsesang, an independent media outlet serving the public, and also serves as the Director at the Chamsesang Research Institute.



Envisioning a Public-Centred Transition in the Era of Climate Crisis

Koo Junmo Secretary for Planning,
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On 5 July 2025, the Climate Justice Alliance hosted the Climate Justice Forum, themed 'Finding Pathways to System Change through Climate Justice and a Public Pathway Approach'. The five-hour forum was attended by more than 80 activists and citizens, creating a vibrant space for robust debate. From August onwards, the Climate Justice Alliance will hold monthly forums on climate justice and the public pathway approach. On 27 September, the Alliance plans to organise a 'Delegation for a Public Pathway Approach for Equality' to join the Climate Justice March. This article summarises some of the discussions held at the forum and explains why social public value has become so important in the era of the climate crisis. It also suggests ways to grow the social movement for a public pathway approach.

Delayed Transition, Unjust Transition

Six years have passed since the climate justice movement began gaining widespread traction in South Korea in 2019. Thanks to

the efforts of numerous activists, citizens and workers, as well as the personal accounts of those affected by climate disasters, public awareness of the severity of the climate crisis has grown. Today, no one openly denies the reality of the climate crisis. Yet the urgent transition has not yet taken place. The climate justice movement is facing significant barriers. In order to achieve the transition we seek, we must reflect on what these barriers are and discuss how we can overcome them. To this end, I will analyse several key issues and examine the current situation.

The first issue I will address is South Korea's greenhouse gas reduction targets, which are a central climate issue under debate this year. In 2020, the Moon Jae-in administration submitted a Nationally Determined Contribution(NDC) to the UN and the international community, setting a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2030 relative to 2018 levels. However, this target has been criticised as inadequate, falling short of both climate justice and South Korea's international responsibilities. Furthermore, as the baseline and target-year emissions were calculated using different accounting methods, the actual reduction represented by the target is closer to 30%. But are emissions actually decreasing? By 2022, emissions had fallen by only 7.6% compared to 2018 levels³⁰. At this rate, even achieving the 40% reduction goal seems unlikely. This year, South Korea must submit its 2035 NDC to the UN. Industry groups argue that even meeting the 2030 target will be difficult and are pushing for lower reduction quotas for the industrial sector in the 2035 NDC. Meanwhile, several climate organisations have called for a reduction target of 67%, based on the principles of climate justice. The key questions

³⁰ Ministry of Environment. 2025. Press Release: 2022 Greenhouse Gas Emissions Total 724.29 Million Tonnes, Down 2.3% from the Previous Year

we must ask are: why have the necessary reductions not happened yet, and how can we ensure they do happen in the years ahead?

Secondly, there is the issue of the rise of far-right politics and how to achieve a just transition. If an unjust transition further empowers large corporations and financial capital while shifting responsibility and cost onto ordinary citizens and the most vulnerable in society, it will be harmful and provoke rejection. If 'injustice' is understood only in the narrow, passive sense of a failure to achieve justice, then transitions that intensify exploitation and inequality are better described as 'predatory transitions'. Recently, both greenlash and the surge of far-right politics have spread beyond isolated phenomena and are growing rapidly. The 2018–19 Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) movement in France, the farmers' protests across Europe in early 2024, and the rapid growth of far-right forces worldwide all reveal mounting resentment towards green transition policies that exacerbate inequality and shift



costs onto ordinary people. If we fail to break free from the deadlock between neoliberal transition strategies and the greenlash, climate justice will remain out of reach. What is urgently needed is the realisation of a genuinely just transition, not the rhetorical 'just transition' deployed by governments and corporate capital to mask the realities of unjust change. Today's political situation hinges on a fundamental choice: predatory transition or just transition; the perpetuation of unjust structures or systemic transformation.

Envisioning a Transition through Public Pathway Approach and QPS

Since the 2000s, social movements in South Korea have invoked the concept of 'publicness' or 'public value' as an alternative to neoliberalism. This concept has not only been used in opposition to privatisation, but also to articulate the values that an alternative society should aspire to, often being framed as 'publicness' in a given domain. Across various fields of activism, 'publicness' has been widely employed as a guiding principle for institutional reform, policy agendas and alternative social visions. The term also surfaced frequently during the impeachment protests as debates about sweeping social reforms unfolded. But why has social public value become even more significant in the era of the climate crisis? Its importance can be explored through three capacities required in this era: (i) providing support for those living in precarious conditions, (ii) facilitating a just transition, and (iii) enabling alternative forms of prosperity.

A Pillar of Support for Precarious Lives

In order to adapt to climate change, we must reclaim public ser-

vices that have been distorted and commercialised under neoliberalism, and rebuild public goods. Disasters, crop failures, health crises, shrinking incomes and rising prices, all of which are triggered by the climate crisis, exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities. As the saying goes, 'Inequality is a disaster': pre-existing disparities create a vicious cycle in which those with the means to respond to the climate crisis fare better while those without suffer disproportionately, further deepening inequality. As conflicts intensify over basic resources such as housing, food, energy, and water, and insecurity grows, scepticism flourishes. This does not necessarily mean that people deny the climate crisis itself; rather, they come to believe that positive change is impossible. Anxiety and inequality fuel the rise of far-right populism. This is not an inevitable future; it describes the current situation. We must interrupt the destructive interplay between the climate crisis and far-right politics, building countervailing forces to create an equitable future. To achieve this, we must address the everyday hardships and insecurities that people experience and develop practical, feasible alternatives.

Publicness is essential to reducing inequality and preventing the burdens of climate-induced insecurity from being shifted onto individuals. In South Korea, for example, most citizens oppose privatisation and are familiar with the phrase 'water, electricity and gas are not commodities' — they view essential public services as social rights that must be guaranteed to all. Publicness is the pillar that supports precarious lives, and today it must be stronger and broader than ever.

[Pathways towards a Just Transition](#)

To transition from a climate-crisis-facing society to one ground-

ed in climate justice that prioritises ecology and equality, environmentally friendly infrastructure must be established and its benefits shared by all. Pursuing public value serves as both a pathway and a means to achieve a just transition. Let us consider one example. Greenhouse gas emissions from heating and cooling buildings account for around 20% of total emissions, a figure which is notably higher in urban areas. In Seoul, for instance, 68% of greenhouse gas emissions originate from buildings. Therefore, enhancing thermal efficiency in construction and implementing green remodelling are essential. However, two challenges arise. Firstly, energy-efficient construction and green remodelling are costly. Developers seeking to minimise costs and maximise sale prices are reluctant to adopt such measures. In a society that views wealth accumulation through real estate as virtuous, green remodelling is unlikely to proceed unless it leads to a corresponding increase in property value. However, subsidising green remodelling with public funds is problematic if it primarily increases property values for homeowners.

Secondly, in housing environments dominated by private rentals, where tenants' rights are vulnerable, green remodelling tends to result in rent increases. What if such initiatives drive working-class residents out of cities? In that case, eco-friendly housing policies would exacerbate housing insecurity, intensifying class divisions and conflicts over property ownership. To prevent efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from buildings from worsening social inequality, the focus must shift towards strengthening tenants' rights, regulating rents and expanding public rental housing that is eco-friendly. Guaranteeing the right to housing and reinforcing the public value of housing are at the heart of the transition required in the climate crisis era.

The Possibility of Alternative Prosperity

What becomes possible when reinforcing the public value of housing provides a pillar of support for people's lives and opens pathways towards a just transition? If the transition does not threaten jobs or exacerbate livelihood insecurity and is not driven by the preferences and interests of a small economic and cultural elite, a just transition becomes a feasible future and genuine change for climate justice is possible. In such circumstances, public participation and enthusiasm can gain momentum.

The climate justice movement must evolve from conveying fear, anxiety and despair about an unstable future brought on by the climate crisis, to offering a hopeful vision for building a new society. While fear and shock may initially capture people's attention, but without positive alternatives, they quickly lead to avoidance and disengagement. Revolutionary and mass movements



throughout history have been rooted in the hope that a better future is possible. The climate justice movement should also emphasise that the transition can make both material and spiritual prosperity attainable. Prosperity is not guaranteed by pursuing endless economic growth and material consumption. Rather, it arises from securing stability in the world we inhabit, in our communities, and in our own lives, while also fostering a sense of expectation for a better future and a willingness to participate in shaping it. In the process of creating public value, new forms of relationships and solidarity can be established among working and popular classes, across generations, between regions, and between society and nature.

Movement Strategies: Resist, Reclaim, Restructure

The Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED) network has proposed the strategy of 'Resist, Reclaim, Restructure' strategy to pursue energy democracy.³¹ This approach can be expanded into a broader strategy that connects climate justice with the social public value.

First, we must resist neoliberal policies and privatisation. These policies are currently being pursued by the ruling powers and mainstream policy agendas. Neoliberalism is a powerful ideology that portrays market mechanisms, competition, investment and entrepreneurship as universal remedies. Consequently, even social policies therefore emphasise deregulation, marketisation and the stimulation of private-sector supply and investment. Fortu-

³¹ Sean Sweeney. 2013. Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy. Privatisation Retreats, Public Ownership Returns, Energy Labour and Society Network

nately, persistent social movements have had led to privatisation in South Korea being widely recognised as a misguided policy. There is significant socio-cultural strength behind the stance of 'anti-privatisation'.³² It is important to note that privatisation does not merely refer to selling off public institutions. Rather, it encompasses 'any attempt to reduce dependence on the state/public sector in meeting society's basic needs, or to increase dependence on the market/private sector'. Attempts at privatisation will undoubtedly continue, and this constitutes the primary front line. The power cultivated through resisting neoliberal policies and privatisation can be expanded into a broader movement for the public value and climate justice.

Secondly, we must reclaim privatised and marketised institutions and rights as our own. Privatisation has already advanced in many sectors. In the power generation industry, for example, 40% has effectively come under the control of large conglomerates and private investors through indirect privatisation. Although the Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) and public power generation companies are formally public institutions, they now operate like private firms, prioritising profitability. These companies extensively outsource work and neglect the safety of non-regular workers. KEPCO and the Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS) are also listed on the stock exchange. Enterprises with this quasi-public, quasi-private character should be fully brought back into full public ownership, and public institutions' objectives must be realigned to meet social needs. Reclaiming the publicness also involves increasing the proportion of public rental housing, which

currently constitutes only 8% of the total, and reforming the role of the Korea Land and Housing Corporation to prioritise the right to housing. Similarly, increasing the proportion of public health-care facilities – currently accounting for just 9% of hospital beds – and establishing new public hospitals are key components of this endeavour. This process involves recovering what has been taken away and advancing remunicipalisation. It also involves correcting distorted public institutions and systems while reinforcing the public values.

Thirdly, entire systems across different sectors must be restructured to secure universal rights. Localised or partial reclamation efforts are easily isolated and soon reach their limits. Even when public power generation companies undertake renewable projects, the mobilisation of private finance rather than public investment prioritises profit maximisation and profits are diverted to investors. Similarly, merely strengthening the public character of power generation companies alone will not suffice if KEPCO remains listed on the stock exchange, transmission grids are privatised, and electricity retailing is liberalised in a manner similar to that seen in the telecommunications sector. Even in areas where abundant local resources and generous government support enable the establishment of successful energy cooperatives that benefit residents, the remaining 99% of the overall electricity sector will still be dominated by private actors if it remains privatised. Therefore, beyond partial reclamation, the struggle must continue to achieve systemic transformation and secure universal rights.

Although 'resist', 'reclaim' and 'restructure' are conceptually distinct, social movements often pursue these strategies simultaneously in practice. Together, they represent a comprehensive

32 Jeong Seong-sik. 2025. Discussion on 'Systemic Transformation and the Restructuring of Public Value. [Small Forum] Reclaiming and Restructuring Public Value for Systemic Transformation, Systemic Transformation Movement Organising Committee.

strategy and a set of concurrent objectives aimed at advancing the public value and climate justice. To this end, we must formulate an integrated framework and vision to secure the public value across sectors that are essential in the era of the climate crisis, including energy, housing, transport, healthcare, care work, and education. Considerable concrete work has already been developed in each area. However, public interest in care cannot be realised solely through the public provision of care services; it must be developed alongside other public services, such as schools, hospitals, housing and transport systems. Public value must evolve beyond policy proposals to become part of an alternative vision and discourse.

To this end, I propose framing the publicness in each sector within three interlinked narratives: as a pillar of support for precarious lives; as a pathway towards a just transition; and as a means of achieving alternative prosperity. Furthermore, I suggest that we reorganise our strategies around three key principles: resist, reclaim, and restructure.

Practices Linking Climate Justice and Public Pathway Approach

From August onwards, the Climate Justice Alliance will hold monthly forums on climate justice and publicness. Led by member organisations, these forums will explore topics such as workers' right to health, housing rights, health and care work, and transport. They will also serve as a space to discuss ways to expand the climate justice movement. Meanwhile, ahead of the Climate Justice March on 27 September in Gwanghwamun, Seoul, the Systemic Transformation Movement Organising Committee and the Climate Justice Alliance will form a 'Delegation for a Pub-

lic Pathway Approach for Equality'. This will demonstrate the vision and practices required for the transition that Korean society needs today.

The climate crisis has revealed the inadequacy of market-driven and technocratic solutions, which are often considered pragmatic but fit to transform socio-economic structures and frequently exacerbate problems. Responses to a global, cross-sectoral crisis must therefore be more fundamental and necessarily more radical. Comprehensive, radical alternatives are more realistic than partial, pragmatic measures. A cross-sectoral vision of the publicness, grounded in radical realism, can serve as an appropriate means of pursuing a just transition.

In the era of the climate crisis, reducing greenhouse gas reductions while safeguarding citizens' livelihoods requires substantially expanding public services and social infrastructure. Furthermore, the concept of publicness must extend beyond the traditional public sector. Pursuing publicness can lead to the public regulation of finance and can drive transformative changes in the manufacturing and private service sectors. Neoliberalism has restructured the operational principles of all areas of society along corporate lines, subordinating them to the logic of profitability. We must liberate these spheres and reorganise society and the economy so that they meet social needs within the limits of the Earth's ecological systems. Our goal should be to establish a public owned society that is subject to democratic control and operates within ecological limits.

In order to maintain its radicalism while becoming a mass movement, the climate justice movement must present a vision of transition that addresses the immediate crisis and promise everyday prosperity for citizens. The concept of publicness represents

the idea and practical alternative that can make this possible. It can serve as a practical tool to overcome the movement's internal and external barriers and debates. We should develop a comprehensive vision grounded in publicness, establish concrete spheres of practice and build broad bases of support. By doing so, we can forge a path towards systemic transformation.

Book Review

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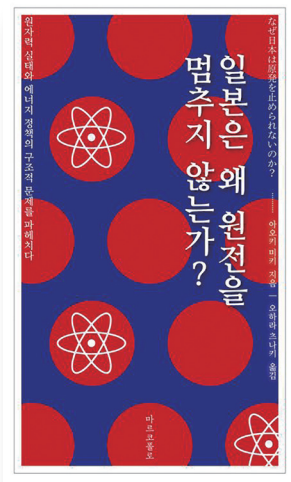
Why Japan Does Not Halt Its Nuclear Power Plants_ Kim Jik-su

About the Author

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Why Japan Does Not Halt Its Nuclear Power Plants:

Probing the Reality of Nuclear Energy and the Structural Problems of Energy Policy, by Miki Aoki

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In *Why Japan Does Not Halt Its Nuclear Power Plants*, Miki Aoki addresses virtually all developments concerning nuclear power plants in the twelve years since the Great East Japan Earthquake on 11 March 2011 and the ensuing Fukushima nuclear accident. While preparing the book for publication — drawing on more than thirty years of reporting on nuclear issues — the author was dismissed from her post, and the book encountered setbacks in the publishing process. Ultimately, this led her to decide not to reveal her employer's name. The circumstances of its production, no less than its content, reflect the highly emotional responses of Japanese society to the nuclear issue.

While the Korean edition of this book is titled *Why Japan Does Not Halt Its Nuclear Power Plants*, a literal translation of the original Japanese title would be *Why Japan Cannot Halt Its Nuclear Power Plants*. This tension is revealing. I suspected that the phrase 'cannot stop' might easily be misconstrued as an excuse, suggesting inevitability or difficulty. Moreover, as the Korean subtitle indicates, I believe the author wished to emphasise the

'structural' dimensions of the problem, which are deeply intertwined. The translator's choice of 'Why Japan Does Not' places stronger emphasis on will and choice, which I surmise is closely connected to the translator's own role as an activist. In my view, this reflects the urgency to encourage Korean readers, in a society comparable to Japan's 'nuclear village' in its nuclear-cartel structure, often described as the 'nuclear mafia', is comparable to Japan's 'nuclear village', to move beyond mere 'understanding' towards concrete 'action'. When I attended a book talk in South Korea, I asked both the author and the translator about the Korean title, and their explanations broadly coincided with my interpretation. However, the author explained that her purpose in selecting the original title was not to emphasise the complexity of the issue, but rather to highlight the opposite point: that 'nuclear power can indeed be stopped'.

Throughout several chapters, the author emphasises how actors in the media, politics, the bureaucracy, academia, and industry - especially 'organisations' rather than individuals - have colluded to sustain and expand nuclear power. She argues that the central mechanism is the suppression of discussion about the damage caused by nuclear accidents, which allows such harm to be forgotten and ultimately creates the illusion that no accident ever occurred. One might even say that a kind of 'cartel of silence' has emerged. According to the author, the number of people supporting the restart of nuclear power plants is gradually increasing in this context. As I will emphasise again in the conclusion, dismantling this cartel of organisations through grassroots activism alone, without support from larger structures, is undoubtedly a daunting challenge.

By contrast, the most directly affected victims of the nuclear ac-



cident are gradually being forgotten: those who lost their homes to the tsunami and the release of radioactive materials. The government has now cut off support for them, insisting that they return home since decontamination is complete. Yet radiation levels there remain too high for safe habitation, and the social infrastructure has not been restored. I had not previously considered that the refugees' greatest reluctance to return stemmed from the absence of medical facilities. Mainstream reporting has also failed to mention that many young people, who were traumatised during their most vulnerable years of childhood, have taken their own lives. It is also shocking that only a handful of cases have been officially recognized as industrial accidents among the hundreds of workers who died or fell ill after being

sent to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

In Japan, the operation of nuclear power plants has long been inextricably linked to persistent radiation risks has, leading to differentiated employment conditions and the outsourcing of workers. Moreover, outside of the core reactor operation sectors, most tasks, such as maintenance, inspections, facility management, and decontamination, comprise largely unskilled labour. Japan's multi-tiered subcontracting system for nuclear power plants, often cited as the origin of the 'nuclear mafia', is notorious for exploitation. As a result, since commercial nuclear operations began in 1966, subcontracted workers who travelled from plant to plant to carry out maintenance have been known as 'nuclear gypsies'. Likewise, the workers sent to Fukushima for the post-disaster clean-up were likewise largely subcontractors at the very bottom of this multi-tiered system. In South Korea, the first-tier subcontractor for plant maintenance, KEPCO KPS, is state-owned and a subsidiary of KEPCO; therefore, the problems associated with multi-tiered subcontracting are less severe than in Japan. Nevertheless, many issues produced by such structures are strikingly similar. Within such a system, thorough inspections, proper maintenance, and rigorous safety management are rarely possible.

Furthermore, the author notes that even the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute, the foundation of the country's nuclear technology, neglected safety research and refused to allocate funding for it. This reveals Japan's reputation as a nation that values safety to be largely illusory. A notable example is the 1999 Tokaimura criticality accident at a fast experimental reactor. Notably, the Fukushima disaster was not the first nuclear acci-

dent in Japan to be classified as a level 4 or above accident on the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale (INES); the Tokaimura accident itself was rated level 4. Yet the Japanese government and power companies completely ignored the lessons it offered. Notably, although the Tokaimura accident prompted the development of remote-controlled robots for responding to severe accidents, senior officials in government agencies and power companies insisted that nuclear power stations were safe and the project was ultimately abandoned. The author argues that, had this development continued, the response to Fukushima would have been considerably easier.

The damage caused by nuclear plant accidents has thus been overlooked. Another important point to note is that the health effects of radiation exposure increase sharply after a latency period of 10-20 years. While not mentioned in the book, health problems among those exposed to radiation from the atomic bombings of Japan at the end of the Second World War also increased after a latency period of over 15 years. Outstanding works such as Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997) in literature and Adriana Petryna's *Life Exposed* (2005) in the social sciences likewise demonstrate that the consequences of radiation exposure are enduring, not transient. In Japan, the full extent of the damage caused by the Fukushima disaster is only now beginning to emerge, yet it is being treated as though it had never happened. Regrettably, the book does not sufficiently address these long-term patterns of harm, a shortcoming that appears to stem from the inadequate diagnosis and investigation of the damage itself.

While recording, analysing and exposing problems is important, equally crucial is the 'politics of representation' - the ways in which the various aspects of an issue are portrayed - is equally

crucial. Curiously, in Japan, a country that suffered the atomic bombings, the television series *Astro Boy* gained immense popularity, followed by decades of animated shows featuring robots powered by 'atomic energy'. The author also discusses *Astro Boy* (Tetsuwan Atomu), noting that, despite its creator Osamu Tezuka's explicit opposition to nuclear power plants, electric utilities continued to use the character in nuclear PR campaigns until recently. In a similar vein, the facility built to process contaminated water from the nuclear disaster is known by the acronym ALPS, evoking images of clear mountain streams. Even after it became known that 'treated water' from this system still contained residual radioactive substances, government pamphlets depicted tritium as a cute character, and the media did not treat this as a serious scandal, merely handling it as gossip.

The author, meanwhile, identifies the Prime Minister of Japan as the head of the nuclear cartel. She argues that the central driving force behind the maintenance and expansion of nuclear power has not been the electric utilities, but successive Prime Ministers who 'have channelled tax revenues into nuclear power, promoted it as state policy, and created a structure that preserves the nuclear ecosystem'.

National politicians maintain their power by receiving political funds from electric utilities, while local politicians, particularly those in communities hosting nuclear power plants and involved in decisions on plant restarts, sustain their positions through nuclear-related grants. Consequently, they are bound to support the maintenance and expansion of nuclear power plants. At electric utilities in which the government holds significant shareholdings, retired bureaucrats are parachuted into executive positions. These politicians, bureaucrats and power companies,

in turn, cultivate compliant academics who are mobilised to protect corporate interests through measures such as deregulation. In return, these academics are rewarded with research funding and institutional prestige. While the scale of this network is striking, these practices have long been observed. Judging by what is already known, South Korea is not greatly different. However, the book's distinctive merit lies in its vivid demonstration, drawn from the author's experience, of how the media's pro-nuclear stance is reproduced through internal processes. Supported by generous advertising revenue from electric utilities and subject to government pressure, the media serve as organs of nuclear propaganda. There are, of course, exceptions: some outlets have consistently opposed nuclear power plants, while others shifted to an anti-nuclear position following the Fukushima disaster.

The author also identifies military considerations as a key reason why Japan's nuclear industry and its nuclear cartel are particularly closed. This relates to Japan's reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel at the Rokkasho facility and its substantial plutonium stockpile. Japan also possesses world-class rocket technology. In this context, Shigeru Ishiba, a former Minister of Defence, stated in an interview just a few months after the Fukushima disaster that 'Japan's nuclear plants serve as a nuclear deterrent'. However, when the author met Ishiba again in 2020 and asked for his opinion, he had surprisingly changed his position and declared his support for a nuclear-free Japan. He added that 'nuclear power plants can become military targets and are therefore dangerous'. However, in 2024, a year after the Japanese edition of this book was published, he became Prime Minister and adopted a pro-nuclear stance again. Is this simply personal betrayal, or does it suggest that whoever occupies the premiership, the Japanese government truly cannot stop nuclear power?

What of South Korea? In the snap presidential election held in 2025, conservative candidates argued that nuclear power must be maintained and expanded, linking energy policy to strategies for economic growth. They claimed that, to remain competitive in the field of AI, South Korea would need to expand its data centres, and that renewable energy's low output and instability could not support this. In contrast, reformist candidate Lee Jae-myung recognised the limitations of nuclear power, including the problems of spent fuel and high-level radioactive waste. However, he neither took a clear anti-nuclear stance nor effectively rebutted the conservative argument, stating instead that investment in AI was essential for economic growth. Having won the presidency, he continues to pursue the promotion of the AI industry as a core growth strategy.

As the world enters an age of conflict and madness, where every industry is being reorganised around rivalry and competition rather than cooperation and coexistence, the outlook is bleak. However, we must ask whether it is truly necessary for individual corporations and many states alike to build and operate their own data centres for AI, given that they consume enormous amounts of electricity. We need to apply the concept of public value to data centres as well. Public establishment and operation would reduce waste caused by redundant investment and make it easier to exercise public control over data, thereby supporting the protection of personal information. Although scarcely conceivable in East Asia, the joint operation of data centres by regional communities, as in Europe, could also aid the development of multilingual AI training models. Above all, this would help to reduce the number of nuclear power stations and increase the use of renewable energy sources. In order to phase out nuclear power, we must also reconsider the direction in which new industries are

developing.

Returning to the book, the author concludes by outlining the process by which Germany and Italy – European countries that declared an early commitment to phasing out nuclear power – came to make and implement that decision. Ironically, these nations, which were once fascist allies of militarist Japan during the Second World War, pursued denuclearisation, whereas Japan did not, despite experiencing the Fukushima disaster. Unfortunately, however, even Italy and Germany have begun to move back towards restarting nuclear power plants this year.

Over the twelve years of reporting following the nuclear accident, the author interviewed more than a hundred individuals involved and wove their stories into this book. The clearest and most straightforward answer to the question posed in the title, 'Why Japan cannot halt its nuclear power plants', came from Taro Kono. He was the only Liberal Democratic Party(LDP) member to vote against the 2000 Bill on Special Measures concerning the development of areas around nuclear power plants, which proposed greater subsidies for host communities. In a July 2011 interview, he stated: "For half a century, the LDP has maintained close ties with the power companies, receiving substantial donations from them. The Democratic Party, too, wins votes from power company trade unions during elections. That is why they can't oppose nuclear power plants".

It is worth noting that even the Democratic Party has been a pro-nuclear in Japan, due to pressure from labour unions. Following the Fukushima disaster, when all nuclear power plants in Japan were halted, the Democratic Party's Noda Cabinet sought to resume operations at the plants. This move was initially opposed by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation(RENGO), the

country's main labour federation. This position was heavily influenced by two major public-sector unions within RENGO: the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers' Union (JICHIRO) and the Japan Teachers Union (JTU). Both unions advocated denuclearisation and strongly resisted the restarts. JICHIRO, in particular, not only opposed nuclear power plants restarts and new construction but also actively engaged in local government administration relating to response to nuclear accidents. However, other core unions also expressed resistance. The NTT Workers Union in the telecommunications sector demanded restarts, as did the Federation of Electric Power Related Industry Workers' Unions of Japan (Denryoku Soren), which is dominated by the power company workers. The Japanese Electrical Electronic & Information Union (Denki Rengo), which includes workers of nuclear equipment manufacturers, also supported restarts. These developments quickly led RENGO to alter its policy, a shift rooted in internal political processes dating back to the mid-1990s when the Democratic Party was founded and debates over unifying political direction within RENGO were underway.

In 1996, the Socialist Party became the Social Democratic Party, but most of its members left to form the Democratic Party. In the subsequent general election, the SDP declined to become a minor force. In 1998, the New Frontier Party, which had been the main opposition until then, was dissolved and its membership merged into the Democratic Party. RENGO accordingly sought to unify its political stance. At the centre of this effort was the newly established 'RENGO Political Centre', which was dominated by the federation's more conservative forces, such as the Confederation of Japan Automobile Workers' Unions and Denryoku Soren. In response, unions that had belonged to the former General Council of Trade Unions of Japan, together with various social

movements, formed the 'Peace Forum'. This organisation, centred on the Japan Congress Against A- and H-Bombs, the JICHIRO and the JTU, had a membership of around two million and prioritised anti-war, anti-nuclear, environmental and human rights policies. However, its financial base weakened as unions in sectors such as telecommunications and postal services withdrew. Ultimately, when Denryoku Soren and Denki Rengo, both formerly aligned with the RENGO's mainstream Political Centre, and the NTT Workers' Union, which had departed from the Peace Forum, began to support nuclear restarts, RENGO's central leadership reviewed its position. They adopted the stance that 'nuclear plants should be restarted, but reliance on nuclear energy must be reduced in the medium to long term'.

Behind such complex party political calculations lies the significant role of labour politics. In this context, one might wonder whether Taro Kono, frequently mentioned as a strong candidate for Prime Minister, could ever attain that office while advocating zero nuclear power. The author stresses that, if the head of the nuclear cartel were the Prime Minister, and they were to take a decisive action, it could fracture the cartel. Yet she is also well aware of the complications posed by the Liberal Democratic Party's factional system and other structural features of Japanese politics. Japanese society more broadly operates through negotiations and compromises among various 'intermediate organisations'. As noted earlier, it is far from easy for individuals to adopt an anti-nuclear stance within their organisations. Nevertheless, as the author argues, when a majority of citizens and workers support denuclearisation and can adequately express this adequately through voting and other channels such as the media, nuclear power plants can indeed be stopped. This holds true in both Japan and in Korea.

About the Author

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Kim Jik-su is a research fellow at the Public Policy Institute for the People, specialising in labour markets and labour policy. His research interests include precarious employment and occupational health and safety. More recently, he has been exploring how labour, space, and the environment can be meaningfully interconnected.

