1987 Watershed in South Korean Labor Movement

Politically in 1987

- Chun Doo Hwan announced Rho Tae Woo, a general, as his hand-picked successor
- Massive worker/student demonstrations for the restoration of democracy due to world paying attention due to the upcoming 1988 Olympics:
  - Demands:
    - Direct election of the president by popular vote (instead of by the National Congress for Unification)
    - Switch from multi-seat constituencies to single-seat constituencies in National Assembly elections
    - End of labor repression
June 29th [1987] Declaration

- Early June
  - Chun Doo Hwan abruptly cancelled all discussion for constitutional change until after the Olympics
  - A study had died under police torture, and a woman worker had been raped
  - Shopkeepers, white collar workers, and others began to join the democratization demonstrations

- Roh’s acceptance of demonstrator’s demand for a tactical response to the situation
  - Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam split the opposition vote and Roh Tae Woo won the election with 35.9% of the vote
    - Kim Dae Jung won the Chollas and Seoul, Kim Young Sam Kyongnam, Kim Jong Pil Ch’ungnam, and Roh the rest
Roh pledged not to use state power to suppress the unions

- In the past:
  - National police + company goons (kusadae) broke up strikes
- Now massive outbreak of strikes for three years (1987, 1988, 1989) centered in large HCI chaebol
  - Ulsan, then Pusan, Changwon and Masan, then Seoul and Inch’on
- Koo says these were spontaneous and not centrally organized—examples of hanp’uri
- Issues: wages and authoritarian management
- Demands: humane treatment and more democratic industrial relations
Results of “Great Labor Offensive”

- Ŭyong unions replaced by democratic unions, and many new unions organized
- Real wages rose by 50% a year for three years
  - As a result South Korea moved rather suddenly away from the ranks of a cheap labor economy (that had been the policy of the government 1972–87)
- By the 1990s South Korea was becoming a consumer society
  - Expansion of the domestic market (that was now fairly big) allowed industry to keep going despite a hit in exports
  - Industrial workers began earning wages only a little bit less than the new middle class, and thus could participate in consumer economy
    - First televisions and refrigerators, then phones and automobiles
Unexpected results

- Rise in wages made much female dominated light industry uncompetitive
  - Athletic shoes, garment manufactures, textiles began moving off shore to cheaper countries
  - Women were laid off (though many were able to become “working class housewives” by marrying HCl workers)
- Advent of democracy forced changes in government policy
  - Government had starved investment in housing to put money into industry, but now people demanded decent housing and the building of high-rise apartments began
  - The college entrance qualifying examination had to be abandoned as parents demanded the opportunity for their children to attend college (i.e. the government could not enforce college entrance quotas any more)
Paradoxical reduction in working class solidarity

- Participation in elections and non-government organizations a way of influencing policy
- Middle classes became critical of labor violence
  - “Now that we have elections and democracy violent labor action is no longer necessary. Labor should learn more discipline.”
- Internal differentiation of the working class
  - “labor aristocrats” with technical skills paid as well as white collar workers
  - Workers in large-scale enterprises fairly prosperous
  - Truly poor tended to not work in large-scale unionized industries, but in marginal small-scale enterprises
Koo’s narrative falters in the 1990s

Up through the “Great Labor Offensive” the narrative that industrialization created a “working class in itself” and that this working class gradually developed class consciousness and solidarity to organized for its interests as a “working class for itself” quite persuasive

What comes after that?
  ◦ Koo has a hard time being enthusiastic about the more complicated labor movement of the 1990s
Production Class versus Consumption Class

- Sorensen: with the development of consumer society the nature of class stratification began to change
  - Before 1987 the workers were relatively homogeneous in background, lived around factories, and suffered from conditions that they couldn’t control as individuals
  - With the development of consumer society, stratification begins to resemble a class–status continuum
    - Obvious class boundaries are harder to notice as education becomes widespread, and workers can afford to consume on levels similar to others
    - In this situation people tend to mark status boundaries by styles of consumption (level of education, place and style of residence, “quality” of consumption)
      - Much private consumption determined by age, sex, and in-group boundaries (youth culture, etc.)