

The Multi-Scalar Practices of the Labour and Economic Geography of TNCs: A Study on the Labour Geography of Nestlé Korea

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노동자들의 다중스케일적 실천과 초국적 기업의 경제지리: 한국네슬레노동조합의 노동지리를 사례로

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Abstract: The current Korean labour movement is at an impasse that is partly sustained by the idea of “strong” transnational corporations (TNCs) versus “weak” labour, and this perception is based on the “global-local dichotomy,” wherein TNCs are depicted as abstract and structured entities operating at the global scale and workers are represented as having a concrete and weak presence within the local sphere. As an alternative perspective to break this “global” capital vs. “local” labour dichotomy, I focus on labour geography, which assumes that labour is not simply a factor of production but a sentient spatial actor that (un-)intentionally produces the landscape of capitalism. Borrowing insights from the multi-scalar perspective, this paper aims to understand the actual methods in which workers utilize spatial strategies through an empirical case study of the Nestlé Korea labour union strike in 2003. Based on this case study, this paper claims that workers are both capable of employing coordinated multi-scalar practices and can be more influential to the economic geographies of TNCs. Additionally, it suggests that workers’ scalar practices are actually more complicated and multi-directional as a result of their complex and dynamic interactions with political, economic and cultural forces and actors at diverse geographical scales.

Key Words : Scale Jumping, Global-Local Dichotomy, Multi-Scalar Approach, Labour Geography, Transnational Corporation, Nestlé Korea Labour Union

요약: 초국적 기업에 대항하는 국내노동운동이 교착상태에 빠진 원인 중 하나는 “강한” 초국적 기업 vs. “약한” 노동자라는 공간적 인식과도 관련된다. 이러한 인식의 기저에는 초국적 기업은 추상적, 구조적인 존재로서 글로벌 스케일에서 자유롭게 움직이고, 노동자는 구체적이고, 연약한 존재로서 로컬 스케일에 속박된 것으로 재현되는 ‘글로벌-로컬의 이분법’이 놓여 있다. 본 논문은 “글로벌” 자본 vs. “로컬” 노동자라는 이분법을 깨기 위한 대안적 시각으로 노동지리학을 주목한다. 노동지리학은 노동자를 단순히 생산요인으로 간주하지 않고, 자본주의의

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경관을 의도적 또는 비의도적으로 생산하는 행위자로 개념화한다. 다중스케일적 접근의 통찰을 빌려온 본 연구는 2003년 발생한 한국네슬레노동조합 파업을 사례로 노동자들이 사용하는 공간전략의 작동방식을 면밀히 분석하고자 한다. 본 사례연구를 통하여 저자는 노동자들이 다중스케일적 실천을 고안할 수 있는 역량이 있으며, 이는 초국적 기업의 자본주의 경관의 형성에 상당한 영향을 미칠 수 있음을 주장한다. 또한 다양한 스케일 상에 존재하는 정치적, 경제적, 문화적 요인들과 행위자들과의 역동적 상호작용의 결과로서 노동자들의 다중스케일적 실천은 매우 복합적, 다면적인 특성을 띠고 있음을 강조한다.

주요어: 스케일 뛰어넘기, 글로벌-로컬 이분법, 다중스케일적 접근, 노동지리학, 초국적 기업, 한국네슬레노동조합

1. Introduction

Because of intensified economic globalisation after the 1990s, there has been increasing interest within academia on the relationship between transnational corporations (TNCs) and labour unions around the world. Regardless of ideological position, the rapid development of transportation and information technology has developed a dominant view of TNCs as free movers while union movements are waning in power (Ohmae, 1995; Castells, 1996; Peck, 1996). After the First World imposed the Age of Imperialism on Asia, history has repeated itself. Today, Asia has inherited a “global factory” (Chang, 2009) of capital accumulation led by western TNCs under the influence of globalisation and neoliberalisation, which is evident in the recent example of the Apple manufacturer Foxconn’s factories in China (Ngai *et al.*, 2014). As many have noted, the reaction of Asian workers against TNCs has remained lukewarm (Glassman *et al.*, 2008; Shin, 2010; Crinis, 2010; Chang, 2017). South Korea is no exception.

Here, I would like to suggest approaching the labour question *socio-spatially*. Similar to my

viewpoint, in exploring the Korean labour movement, Jamie Doucette points out that we need to keep an eye on “contingency” shaping capitalist social relations that are not completely reducible to labour–capital antagonisms (Doucette, 2010, 145–151). The inventory that constitutes socio–spatial contingency may include the state, international or national regulations, labour culture, the local community, etc.

From a socio–spatial perspective, I argue that the current Korean labour movement is at an impasse that is partly sustained by the idea of “strong” TNCs versus “weak” labour, and this perception is based on a “global–local dichotomy” (Sayer, 1991), wherein TNCs are depicted as abstract and structured entities operating at the global scale, and workers are represented as having a concrete and weak presence within the local sphere. For instance, as shown in a recently–published newspaper article entitled, “GM warns it may leave Korea as conflict with union continues” (*The Korea Herald* November 19, 2020), we sense the labour unions’ vulnerability with regards to TNCs, even today. According to Gibson–Graham, struggles based on this dichotomy strengthen the dichotomy itself. As a result, this dichotomy contributes to maintain

TNCs' existing capitalist power amidst globalisation (Gibson–Graham, 1996).

Alternatively, critical social scientists have stated that the labour force is still alive, and its high mobility and advanced position is equal to its capital (Waterman, 1998; Silver, 2003). In this vein, labour geographers such as Andrew Herod (2001) and Jane Wills (1998), who are the founders of labour geography theory, problematized existing predominant perspectives that consider the landscape of capitalism as only being created by capital. From a worker's perspective, labour geographers have reasserted that they can actively form an economic geography of capitalism, which is important in a practical political sense because this perspective produces new possibilities for labour movements in the vortex of neoliberal globalisation, and it expands the horizons of existing labour studies theoretically. In addition, such a perspective must make sense of a "multi-scalar approach" (Park, 2005; Hwang *et al.*, 2017) that is sensitive to diverse actors located at multiple geographic scales, as well as their contingent interactions to break deep-rooted, global-local dichotomies that are inherent in the current labour movement and studies.

As an alternative approach to the traditional top-down perspective of economic globalisation, a multi-scalar approach helps to avoid the global-local dichotomy while suggesting an alternative perspective of globalisation, as the outcome of socio-political contests that involve various actors, rather than as the product of strong TNCs, global capital and international organisations operating beyond national borders

(Park, 2005; Allen and Cochrane, 2007). In this vein, labour forces within the workplace may acquire mobilising powers and resources from different geographical scales (e.g., local, national and global) by using the politics of "scale jumping" (Smith, 1993; Cox, 1998). However, as in this article, we must also be cautious of more or less romanticized views about scale jumping as a panacea or as victory over the struggle. That is, workers must be seen as having "constrained agency" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011) in the process of scale jumping, which determines the diverse nature of workers who are embedded in different geographical contexts.

In summary, my main arguments are bolstered by a multi-scalar approach and can be stated as follows: workers who are capable of employing coordinated multi-scalar practices may have more influence on the economic geographies of TNCs; and a worker's scalar practices are more complicated and multi-directional because of the worker's complex and dynamic interactions with various political, economic and cultural forces and actors (e.g., national or local states, international organisations, discourses, etc.) at diverse geographical scales.

To empirically support this argument, I will examine the case study of the 145-day strike of the Nestlé Korea Labour Union (NKLU) in 2003 in Cheongju City,¹⁾ North Chungcheong Province, South Korea. Nestlé is the world's largest food company and one of most powerful global TNCs;²⁾ it entered Korea in 1979, and Sam Lee was appointed the first Korean Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Nestlé Korea in 2002. Irrespective of the labour union's opinion, he pushed an outsourcing

strategy after his inauguration, and it provoked a backlash of labour and led to an overall strike. Despite the workforce's discontent, he locked workers out of offices and plants and threatened to relocate Nestlé Korea's manufacturing facilities from Korea to China. This case study corresponds with my main arguments in that, despite the TNCs' threats, such as the outsourcing strategy and plant relocation, and obstacles to the workers' scale jumping (e.g., the territorial nature of regulatory regimes), the labour union attempted various multi-scalar practices.

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that the reason I focus on this *old* case that happened almost two decades ago is to provide stimulus to the intellectual apathy that is prevalent in Korean economic geography scholarship. This scholarship has regarded labour as a factor of production, influenced by Weber's theory of industrial location and its successive debates (e.g., regional innovation and global production networks). In this vein, in *Journal of the Economic Geographical Society of Korea*, the flagship journal of economic geography research in Korea, there is not a single study of labour geography, although I introduced this issue to other Korean-language journals a decade ago (Hwang, 2011, 2012). In other words, there is a time difference between Korean economic geography and Western economic geography. This time difference will be discussed in the conclusion.

As previously discussed in the introduction, the dominant view insists that TNCs are stronger than labour, whereas labour geography considers workers as being able to actively produce an economic landscape of capitalism through

multi-scalar practices. The discussion then turns to a critical review of the labour geography literature that emphasizes the significance of the politics of scale jumping and its conceptual weakness. With hindsight, I then summarize the scalar politics in the labour disputes of Nestlé Korea and extract four key research questions from this old case study to support the theoretical concerns in more detail. Some case studies emphasise discursive materials, such as newspaper articles and (un-)official documents, to comprehend the case across diverse scales. But discursive materials alone are limited for capturing internal situations and nuanced interpretations. Because of this limitation, I conducted in-depth interviews with key figures, such as the leaders of labour unions and governmental officials.

2. The Politics of Scale Jumping in Labour Struggles and Its Conceptual Weaknesses

Before the 1970s, positivist human geographers influenced by Weberian industrial locational theory and neoclassical economics considered labour as a production factor. After the 1970s, Marxist geographers such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey recognized the role of labour in class struggles; however, they could not theorize the fact that labour is an active actor that both intentionally and unintentionally creates the capitalist landscape as well as capital, because they mainly focused on capital as the unit of

analysis (Herod, 2001, Ch. 2). In the 1990s, however, Andrew Herod, a founder of labour geography, argued that the production of capitalist geography was not a unique privilege of capital, and he attempted to actively conceptualize labour as a sentient spatial actor through “the eyes of labour” (Herod, 2001, 17–18).

As Herod noted, mainstream social and political scientists regard labour as an object of the capitalist economy, called the “factor of production,” in an age of crises in the labour movement. Even progressive and radical political economy students outside of geography have a similar perception of labour. For example, Dae-oup Chang did not deny the possibility that a new labour movement had been created, even in the face of the informalisation of labour in Asia; however, he has an epistemological view of labour as, “an ideal type of individual source of revenue, a mere factor of production within and outside the existing regulatory framework” (Chang, 2009, 169).

In such situations, labour geography provides labour unions and workers with new possibilities and hope for confronting TNCs, which might theoretically provide critical social scientists, including geographers, sociologists, scholars of labour and industrial relations, with new intellectual stimulation (Castree *et al.*, 2004; Lambert and Gillan, 2007; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; McGrath-Champ *et al.*, 2010).

In the development of labour geography, the concept of scale has been significant. The “politics of scale” means that the construction of a certain scale is the product of contestation and struggle among various actors who can mobilise power at

different scales, from the workplace to local, national and global scales for its own politico-economic interests (Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997; Cox, 1998). Labour internationalism is an example that explains the importance of scale and scale jumping in labour geography (Castree *et al.*, 2004, Ch. 8). Since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2006[1848]) stated, “Working men of all countries, unite!” in *The Communist Manifesto*, labour internationalism, which is oriented towards a global perspective, has practically been the core of the union strategy (Lier, 2007, 825). This type of labour internationalism is exemplified by Wills’ (1998) classic study of the development of European Works Councils (EWCs) in the United Kingdom. During the 1950s and 1960s, each European national union was strongly allied with its respective social democratic-leaning government because rich country unions during the Cold War exploited poor country unions. However, as the Cold War ended, this unholy alliance collapsed, and these unions began searching for new allies and new strategies. Hence, the International Union of Food and Allied Workers Associations (IUF) and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions (ICEM) began to consider a global strategy of labour beyond national borders. In the same manner, when the Maastricht Treaty concluded in 1993, EWCs were established as part of a treaty by the long-term effort of the European Trade Union Confederation. The role of EWCs is technically as a consultation body for pure economic purposes. However, according to Wills, the British unions regard EWCs as an avenue for

labour's interest (such as the right to involve the economic decision-making of TNCs). In this sense, Wills evaluates labour internationalism as it has been realised by EWCs and refutes the mainstream thesis that globalisation necessarily threatens labour organisation.

The success of labour internationalism mainly in the Global North has been studied extensively to date because labour in the Global North has been able to accumulate a material base that relies on the exploitation of poor countries (Castree *et al.*, 2004, Ch. 8; Wills, 1998; Sadler, 2000; Herod, 2001, Ch. 8; Ryland and Sadler, 2008), as Wills (1998) explained above.³ This situation creates an epistemic problem in the explanation and creation of the scalar politics of labour. In other words, labour internationalism with a focus on up-scaling to the national or global is similar to this fact being mistaken for a panacea because going global alone is seen as a virtue; however, it could succumb to the global trap in which local actors and factors (e.g., communities) are overlooked.

Here, the usefulness of scale jumping is acknowledged; however, we must also remember that scale jumping *per se* is not a panacea. As Howitt (2003, 142) noted, scale matters, whereas scale alone as a stand-alone concept is meaningless. It is only meaningful when we see that scale is articulated in a complex and dynamic geographical context. In addition, recent critical geographers and sociologists have strongly argued that the politics of scale must be understood in continuing connection with other spatial concepts, such as place and network (Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Nicholls, 2009).

Recognising the limits to studies of labour in-

ternationalism, some labour geographers and social scientists in other neighbouring disciplines have suggested the concept of community unionism and emphasised the importance of condensation at a local scale (e.g., association with local civil society, or "going social"), which depends primarily on conditions within developed countries (Tufts, 1998; Walsh, 2000; Wills, 2001; Fine, 2005; Black, 2005; Sadler, 2004).⁴ The following example was drawn from Lier and Stokke's (2006) study on the unionism of local social movements in Cape Town and illustrates this approach. In South Africa, the transplantation of neoliberalism after apartheid aggravated conditions of income inequality and job insecurity. In this context, the South African Municipal Workers Union, a public sector union, collaborated with the Cape Town Anti Privatisation Forum, a community organisation, to resist neoliberal attacks, such as those of privatisation. Accordingly, they argued for the importance of intensification between labour unions and civil society at the local scale compared to the prevailing "universal" or "global" model that mainly focused on up-scaling, which is meaningful because community unionism cautions against the existing positive perceptions of labour internationalism that have a local-blind tendency. However, consciously or unconsciously, community unionism literature argues that society must be viewed at a local scale, and it tends to downplay extra-local actors and factors, i.e., the local trap. This problem is similar to the possibility of the global trap that occurs in labour internationalism literature. Apparently, the two debates remained unresolved (for extensive reviews, see Hwang, 2011, 145–152).

Borrowing from Kevin Cox's (1998) theory that conceptualises scale jumping as a causal relationship between "spaces of dependence," in which local-dependent actors are embedded in more-or-less localised social relations, and "spaces of engagement," in which local-dependent actors and non-local dependent actors engage with each other, Jordhus-Lier (2013, 40–42) attempts to specify and categorise the relationship between community unionism as spaces of dependence, and labour internationalism as spaces of engagement. This is not simple eclecticism. Rather, he emphasised new *geographies* of labour (not labour *per se*) that specify how and with what kind of spatial mechanism workers can make for scale jumping in the process of their scalar practices, and how constrained agency affects workers by stifling them with obstacles at various scales, so that they do not see *ex post facto* noticeable tendencies from established perspectives, such as labour internationalism or community unionism.

Presumably, Cox (1998) regards a "space of dependence" as materially confined, such as in the case of a network of gas pipelines or a social network called a "community" that is situated in a defined locality (see also Cox and Mair, 1988), whereas a space of engagement is understood as a non-materially and discursively constructed space. In my view, when we discuss Cox's concept at an abstract level, more or less linear explanations are not problematic. However, when applying his concept to empirical studies, the relationship between spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement must be taken into account more dynamically and dialectically at a less ab-

stract level (see also Hwang *et al.*, 2017, 668–672). The reason why I have made this distinction is because it could be an epistemological trap for a similar kind of global-local dichotomy, i.e., global (as a barely socialised space) versus local (as a totally socialised space). As confirmed below, going social at a *global* scale (which might be viewed as another *local* scale from another angle),⁵⁾ such as by associating a Korean labour union with Swiss civil society, had an important key role in establishing a global space of engagement.

Existing labour geography literature has paid scant attention to Cox's insightful view in their studies on scale jumping, although there has recently been an increase in the number of studies on the subject. This article will contribute theoretically to more active communication between the divorced debates.

We must also be sensitive to the differences between so-called First World countries, Third World countries and more developed East Asian countries. Contrary to the situation in the Global North, it is highly possible that various obstacles to up-scaling, such as place-based interests, the identities of workers, path dependencies in the strategies of labour movement, the territorial nature of regulatory regimes and the insensitivity of mostly northern-based, global unions to the complexity of the situations of Third World unions, may exist throughout the Global South.⁶⁾ Therefore, these obstacles must be understood on different geographical scales. Accordingly, the purpose of introducing the South Korean case study in this article is not simply to suggest one that is similar to Western empirical cases. When Marx and Engels stated "Working men of all

countries, unite!” they should have known that the Global North workers and Global South workers were different from each other because both are embedded in different political economic structures and this fact tends to block unification. In a politically practical sense, excavating and introducing non-Western contexts is important for communication between the Global North and South.

In this section, existing labour geography literature is reviewed to determine the usefulness and weaknesses of the politics of scale jumping. Based on previously discussed labour geography, I will examine the multi-scalar practices of labour unions that have an influence on the global strategies of TNCs.

3. A Research Framework for Conceptualising Labour as Sentient Spatial Actors in the Landscape of Capitalism

Before entering the empirical phase in earnest, I need to suggest a more detailed research framework.

Usually, the politics of local economic development literature mainly concerns local firms, local governments, local politicians, and local media as key local-dependent actors while considering local labour a passive follower of key actors’ initiatives (Cox and Mair, 1988; Wood, 1996; Hwang, 2014; Shin *et al.*, 2015). However, labour also could be leading local-dependent actors because these actors are dependent on

fluctuations in the local economy as well.

Given a situation where the local economy is declining, workers will support a local economic agenda promoted by local capital or local government because of a coincidence of interests in the same space of dependence. Not only local capital but also TNCs could invest in a certain locality in the globalised economy. However, a “scalar mismatch” (Hwang, 2014, 86) between less-local-dependent actors and more-local-dependent actors’ needs, which may produce the seed of territorialisation at the local level, can occur when confronting a local economic crisis. If the continuing operation of a branch plant in a certain region were negatively to impact total profitability on a global scale, TNCs’ headquarters (HQ) could decide to relocate plants to other regions. Contrary to the logic of TNCs, different types of logic could exist on the local scale. In particular, workers who are working in a branch plant may wish to remain in the same location for their livelihood. This inclination is not only confined to the sphere of production but also closely connected with local people’s social reproduction in the same space of dependence. The level of local dependence would be especially high when a branch plant accounted for a substantial portion of the local economy. In this case, workers could use a territorialising strategy (Cox, 1999) that divides “us” (the same *local* people) and “them” (a *foreign* investment company) while constructing a geographical boundary, such as a locality divided between “inside” (a locality where workers and local residents live together) and “outside.” With this strategy, workers can mobilise and draw support

from local residents, the local government, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), etc. in the name of “protecting our local economy!” Additionally, workers can construct a global space of engagement by being engaged with global unions or international organisations. These workers’ multi-scalar practices eventually may influence TNCs by contesting, conflicting and compromising with one another. This influence reveals that the spatiality of global and/or local capitalism is not a pure product of TNCs but a territorially “contested field” (Levy, 2008) among diverse firms and non-firm actors.

To concretise this theoretical debate, the next section will examine the NKLUs’ 145-day strike against Nestlé.

4. Summary of the NKLUs’ Multi-Scalar Practices in the Labour Disputes of Nestlé Korea

Nestlé is the world’s largest food company and one of the most powerful TNCs. Until 1990, the global strategy of Nestlé was to build and sustain branch plants covering the individual domestic market, not to exceed each border (Maucher, 1989). However, starting from the mid-1990s, the rapid growth of the Asian market caused the major Western agro-food TNCs to stress the strategic importance of Asian markets (Pritchard, 2000). In this context, Nestlé has aggressively utilised manufacturing outsourcing strategies all over the world for the smooth operation of its global strategy.

Nestlé entered Korea in 1979 and established a joint venture with Hanseo Foods and the Korean Rural Development Corporation. It was renamed Nestlé Food Company in 1988 and became 100% owned by the Nestlé HQ in Switzerland, which had 660 full-time employees, in 1993. As of 2003, Nestlé also had Seoul offices, a Cheongju plant, seven sales branches nationwide and four warehouses. After Nestlé entered the Korean market in 1979, both its labour and management had good relationships (Interviewee B; KCTF, 2003a). Even during the financial crisis in 1997, Nestlé Korea made a significant profit as a result of profits in the foreign exchange (Do, 2003). However, after the economic crisis, Nestlé Korea workers had increased concerns about job security, and those concerns were reflected in other industries as well (KCTF, 2003a). At the end of 2002, Sam Lee, who was the former CEO of Nestlé USA, was appointed as the representative of Nestlé Korea and began working to promote outsourcing strategies related to components of the coffee mix stick machine, because of decreasing profits, which is shown in Figure 1.

The NKLUs opposed the company’s action because of potential problems with product quality and surplus labour. In principle, when a company must outsource and subcontract, the company should consult with the labour union in accordance with the collective bargaining agreement made by labour and management together (KCTF, 2003b). On 1 July 2003, as part of an outsourcing strategy, a portion of the sales agency within Nestlé Korea was consigned to Nong Shim Ltd., which has its own nationwide marketing and distribution network.

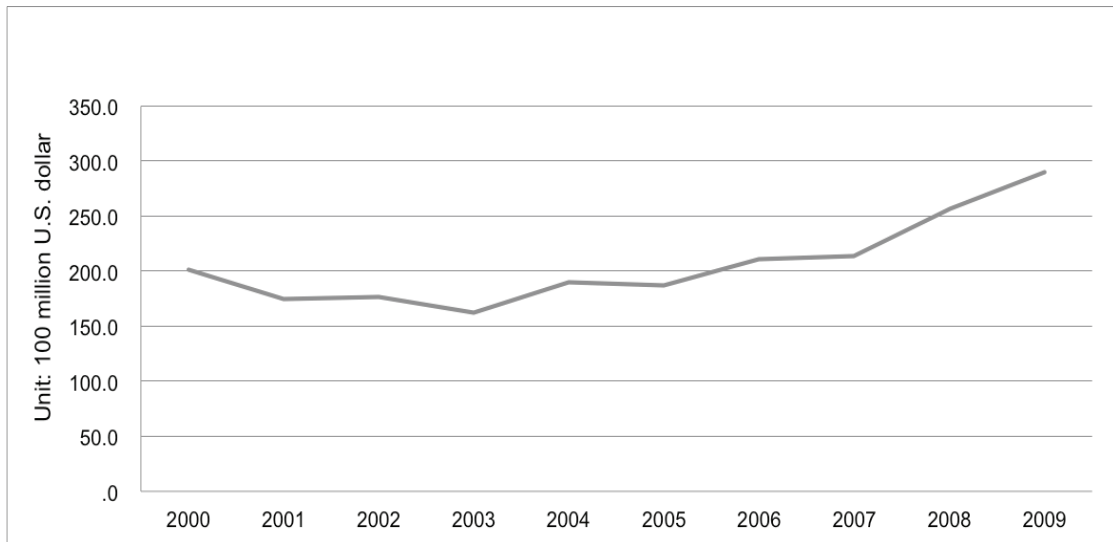


Figure 1. Nestlé Korea Sales, 2000–09. Source: Provision from Nestlé Korea.
(1 U.S. dollar = 1,300 Korean won at 2003 exchange rate).

After eight rounds of collective bargaining collapsed, the NKLK finally began a strike on 7 July. The Cheongju-based LG Chemistry and Dr. Chung's Food, which were affiliated with the Korean Chemical and Textile Worker's Federation (KCTF), joined the strike. The initial target of the union was the representative Sam Lee rather than the Swiss HQ, which had the final authority (Interviewee A). In contrast to the hostile labour-management relations within Korea at the time, the NKLK had relatively harmonious and peaceful relationships even with the foreign CEO of Nestlé Korea prior to Sam Lee. Therefore, the NKLK optimistically predicted that they would be able to solve their problems as a result of the smooth labour-management relationship. However, they eventually failed to reach an agreement with management in ten rounds of bargaining. The management then locked out the Seoul offices and refused to talk with the labour

unions on 25 August. The Swiss HQ ordered a legal examination of the possibility of evacuating the manufacturing facilities in Cheongju on the same day. Therefore, the target of the labour dispute changed from outsourcing to evacuating the factory. In the end, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which is the country's largest umbrella labour group, the KCTF and the NKLK established a task force team to manage relations with the company.

Since September 2003, the union movement expanded to a global scale to disseminate information on the strike to a global audience and gain strength through global solidarity (Interviewee B). The task force team used the Internet to disseminate news of the domestic situation to the Nestlé European Union and International Union of Food and Allied Workers Associations (IUF). On 8 September, the Nestlé European Union presented a letter of protest to

the Nestlé HQ and Nestlé Korea. At the same time, the KCTU, KCTF, and IUF sued the Swiss and Korean government for violating the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines. The guidelines prohibit exercising the threat of production transfers as a method of pressure in host countries (cf. OECD 2008, 9, 18). Therefore, the Swiss government held a first hearing, which encompassed the IUF, Swiss Trade-Union Confederation and Nestlé HQ, and the Swiss government recognised the reasons for the complaint by the NKLK. Sam Lee sent correspondence to the unionist's family on 9 September that stated, "With the strike protracted, it might be necessary to withdraw manufacturing facilities from Korea to prevent unfortunate events." Eventually, the widespread controversy forced the HQ to announce that they did not have a business withdrawal plan to relocate Nestlé Korea's manufacturing facilities from Korea to China. However, management in the Seoul offices stressed, through domestically conservative and pro-capital media rather than from negotiations with labour union, as stated below, that the TNC plant evacuation was possible at any time as a result of wage increases and productivity declines.

"The striking workers demanded an *11.7 percent* wage hike, whereas the company suggested a 5.25 percent hike. ... "It is difficult for the company to accept the *double-digit wage* hike. The recent wage hikes have pushed production costs at the Cheongju plant in Korea beyond that of the German plant," Nestlé Korea President Lee Sam-hwi (a.k.a. Sam Lee) said. "*The competitiveness ranking*

of the Cheongju plant for producing instant coffee in North Chungcheong Province was among the nine Nestlé plants worldwide that went down to fourth. It once stood at the top in the late 1990s," the company said. "The number of foreign companies weighed down by *labour issues are increasing and Korea has become a troubled work environment for foreign executives,*" Lee said, adding that the trouble-free handling of labour conflicts is key to attracting more foreign direct investment. The company said that if the strike were prolonged, it would review implementing a lockout on sales branches nationwide and the Chungju (a.k.a. Cheongju) plant" (*Korea Times* August 25, 2003, italics added).

The CEO's statements were reproduced through the national media; however, the domestic media did not mention the specific figures and facts of Nestlé Korea. According to the management, the union demanded wage increases of 11.7 percent, but they actually demanded increases of 9.2 percent (KCTF, 2003a). Nestlé Korea has produced annual profits of over 19 million U.S. dollars since the 1997 economic crisis, whereas they have spent 9.3 million dollars in start-up fees for technology and royalties for the trademark, which were paid to the Swiss HQ (S. S. Lee, 2003; KCTF, 2003a). Shortly before the strike, Nestlé Korea earned a net income of 18 million dollars in 2002 and delivered 15 million dollars to the Swiss HQ. In other words, the media reports given by the management and domestic conservative media were designed to hide the original context of the labour negotiations. The NKLK had been put on the defensive.

At the same time, the task force team undertook the construction of solidarity from the workplace to the local community. Sixteen local civic groups based in Cheongju formed a joint committee on 24 September. Concurrently, in an effort to promote the interest of citizens, the task force team pushed for a “50,000 Cheongju Citizens’ Signature Campaign”. As a result, the Cheongju Regional Labour Office asked Nestlé Korea management on 12 October for corrective action to silence the unrest within the local economy, and the Cheongju Regional Labour Relations Committee⁷⁾ published a ruling that admitted the company’s violation of the collective bargaining agreement on 18 November.

As the Nestlé strike dragged into November, it was linked to a nationwide general strike on 12 November that focused on the Roh Moo-Hyun administration. With over 2,300 people, the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), the Hyundai Motor Union and the Social Insurance Union gathered at the Cheongju plant to show their solidarity (Interviewee B). At the same time and in the same place, another ceremony was also held for the delegation of the NKLU to Switzerland. On 18 November, the delegation left for Switzerland, and the IUF promised to help the delegation. On 19 November, the Swiss OECD National Contact Point (NCP) for compliance with OECD Guidelines unveiled a plan of industrial arbitration through the press. The Swiss people were increasingly interested in the protest by the NKLU delegation at Vevey, the location of the Nestlé HQ. It was expected that Nestlé’s corporate popularity within their home country would be damaged. Eventually, the NKLU’s strike, which

had lasted for 145 days, was concluded by the arbitration of the Cheongju Regional Labour Relations Committee on 28 November.

5. Key Research Questions

In this section, I posit and examine four research questions from a summary of the labour union’s multi-scalar practices that were previously discussed to demonstrate the theoretical arguments in more detail.

1) What Made the Workers’ Territorialising Practices Successful?

The first question is what made the workers’ territorialising practices from the workplace to the local community successful, and the answer is closely related to the significance of Nestlé Korea’s Cheongju plant to the local economy. The Cheongju plant employed 400 workers at that time and was ranked the 9th largest company in the Cheongju industrial complex.⁸⁾ Additionally, the Cheongju plant had a business relationship with four local subcontractors in charge of packing products. The plant, directly and indirectly, created approximately one thousand jobs in Cheongju (Y. J. Kim, 2003; Interviewee B).

Thus, Nestlé Korea was a flagship in Cheongju City, and the possibility of a long strike caused increasing concern within the local community about a possible shutdown of the plant, which would have caused significant damage to the local economy. Thus, the KCTU’s Chungbuk branch re-

quired the Cheongju City Council to adopt a special resolution for Nestlé's misconduct on 23 September. In fact, in the early stages of the strike, there was no solidarity between the NKL and the local society (Interviewee B). However, faced with local people's growing criticism of the strike under the heavy influence of domestically conservative and pro-capital media⁹⁾, the labour union began to consider solidarity with local society. Therefore, the sixteen Cheongju-based local civic groups formed a Joint Committee for fear that the Cheongju economy would become worse on 24 September (Oh, 2003). The intention of the Joint Committee was to mobilise local residents to support the NKL.

"Many *local* residents are concerned about the strike dragging out for too long due to a disagreement between workers and management. It is too bad to see a halt in the production of Nestlé Korea, which is the 9th largest company in the Cheongju industrial complex, as well as the employment instability of *workers, who are also Cheongju local residents*, which shows that the *local* economy and *local* workers' right to live are *under threat* ... We judge that it should not be overprotection of the management and violation of the domestic workers' fundamental rights of labour for the simple reason that Nestlé is a *foreign* investment company" (Joint Committee statement delivered before Cheongju City Council Hall, 24 September 2003, italics added).

The statement shows territorialising logic that makes local residents and local workers congeal

into "us" (*Cheongju* residents) versus "them" (*foreign* investment company or *damn Yankee*¹⁰⁾). In addition, the locality (*Cheongju*) became a boundary between the "inside," which is "under threat" from the "outside," and the "outside," where the *foreign* investment company operated.

In other words, the task force team, composed of the KCTU Chungbuk branch, the KCTF and the NKL, focused on the "local dependence" of local regulation regimes, local civic groups and local residents (Cox and Mair, 1988). As a result of this territorialised atmosphere, the task force team obtained three products of territorialisation as follows. First, the task force team pushed for the "50,000 Cheongju Citizens' Signatures Campaign" to earn the support of Cheongju citizens from 28 October to 11 November. The campaign was successful, and 55,000 citizens joined the campaign. As a result of this campaign, local residents were more concerned for their local economy and supported the NKL's strike in the name of protecting the local economy (Interviewee B).¹¹⁾ Second, because the task force team has raised numerous issues against the Cheongju Regional Labour Office, the office judged that supporting the union would be better than supporting management to silence the local unrest regarding the economy (Interviewee C). Lastly, based on the local conditions, the Cheongju Regional Labour Relations Committee published the ruling that detailed the company's violation of the collective bargaining agreement on 18 November. These actions are a successful example of the construction of solidarity between the NKL and the local community. Afterwards, the three products of territorialisation (signature list of more than 50,000 citizens,

Cheongju Regional Labour Office's judgment and Cheongju Regional Labour Relations Committee's ruling) played a pivotal role in successfully associating the NKLU with the global union.

2) What Made the Delegation to Switzerland Possible?

The second question is concerned with what made the delegation to Switzerland possible. In fact, jumping scale is not always effective or successful in representing the class interests of workers. There are obstacles to up-scaling in the labour movement. The salient obstacles could be the place-based interests and identities of workers, the path dependencies of the labour movement's strategy and the territorial nature of regulatory regimes (e.g., national government), etc. In the case of the NKLU's struggle, going global was the product of complex interactions among the various actors to decide if the delegation could globally jump to Switzerland or not.

In principle, when the strike occurred, the individual unions should have cooperated with the superior organisation, the KCTF (Interviewee B). However, the KCTF was located in Seoul (the distance from Cheongju to Seoul is 128 km). Regardless of the development of information communication technology, during the strike, face-to-face communication between contacts was vital to manage the rapidly changing situations. Because the strike was not performed as expected, the KCTU Chungbuk branch, the KCTF and the NKLU established the task force team to address the situation. The KCTF sent one attendee who represented its position favouring

a national scale-based movement. However, the KCTU Chungbuk branch and the NKLU's positions were more open-oriented and included global solidarity. The different views between them were coexisting within the task force team (Interviewees A and B). Hence, this division impacted the debate on when to send the delegation to Switzerland.

The NKLU not only considered the Seoul office as the target of struggle but also the Swiss HQ, which had the final authority (Interviewee B). This jump to the global did not smoothly connect with and produce global solidarity; in fact, it produced additional issues within the task force team. For the first time, the Executive Secretary of the KCTU Chungbuk branch (after being appointed as director of the delegation) wanted to send the delegation in early August 2003. However, the KCTF argued that the local struggle was important within the national boundary and expressed scepticism regarding sending the delegation. The KCTF's domestically oriented standpoint was mainly that negotiation and the struggle for national government in regulating domestic economic activities, including labour-management relations at a national scale, have been used as a main tactic of Korean labour unions since the Workers Great Struggle in 1987 (Lim, 2003; J. S. Jung, 2003). At that time, President Roh Moo-Hyun was a former human rights lawyer, and the Korean people considered the fledging Roh administration as having a pro-labour attitude. However, the national government desperately solicited foreign corporations to attract investment from abroad.¹²⁾ For example, the Minister of Labour Kwon Ki-Hong, who was a professor

affiliated with the local labour movement, invited thirteen leaders of several business associations formed by and for foreigners, such as the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea, the Seoul Japan Club, and the European Union Chamber of Commerce in Korea to a restaurant in Seoul on 24 October 2003 to convince them that Korean industrial relations only appeared to be in a bad state (Interviewee D; K. J. Jung, 2003).¹³⁾

Unlike the romanticised view concerning jumping scales as a panacea *per se* in the labour movement, as Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) indicate, we ascertained that labour agency is constrained by various obstacles that exist on diverse scales. Eventually, after determining the uselessness of the national government in mediating the conflict between management and the labour unions, the task force team sent the delegation to Switzerland (Interviewee A).

3) What Made the IUF Decide to Help the NKLU?

Unlike Marx and Engels' golden saying, "Working men of all countries, unite!", labour internationalism was not automatically achieved

by only associating with global unions. Currently, most of the global unions that are based, led and staffed in the Global North are insensitive to the complexity of Third World unions and reproduce the global union's top-down, north-south patron-client relations (Munck and Waterman, 2010, 281-282). Therefore, we must find a definitive answer to the third question to verify the role and limit of the global union.

Three factors are at play as follows. Factor one is of strategic importance to the Nestlé labour union in the IUF. As shown in Table 1 (as of 2007), Nestlé is the world's largest food company. Since its founding in 1866, the company has expanded operations to 85 countries. Its major agricultural products are baby food, instant coffee, dairy products, chocolate, soft drinks, bottled water and pet food, and its products are processed in approximately 508 manufacturing facilities that employ 28 million people (Nestlé Global homepage). In terms of numbers, the Nestlé labour union comprises a near majority in the IUF. According to a survey, the total global workforce of Nestlé, including Danone, Heinz, Kraft, Unilever, Smithfield and Coca-Cola, accounts for 30 to 50 percent of the IUF affiliates (Garver *et*

Table 1. The World's 5 Largest Food and Beverage TNCs, Ranked by Foreign Assets, 2007.
(Millions of dollars and number of employees).

Rank	Corporation	Home economy	Assets		Sales		Employment Total
			Foreign	Total	Foreign	Total	
1	Nestlé SA	Switzerland	65676	101874	94079	95559	27600
2	Inbev SA	Netherlands	34922	42248	16156	21242	88690
3	Kraft Foods Inc.	United States	29697	67993	15698	37241	103000
4	Unilever	United Kingdom, Netherlands	29581	54912	53613	59159	175000
5	Coca-Cola Company	United States	29259	43269	18300	28857	90500

Source: UNCTAD (2009)

al., 2007, 241).

The leverage of the Nestlé workforce in the IUF is not simply a problem of size itself. Rather, the current position of Nestlé is closely associated with the history of its labour internationalism. According to Dan Gallin, who was General Secretary of the IUF between 1968 and 1997, there was a conflict between the labour union and management in 1973 at the Nestlé plant in Chiclayo, Peru. Afterwards, the Nestlé labour union became an icon in the battle with TNCs. That is, the Nestlé labour union acted as a leader against TNCs and had shared a close connection with the IUF in response to the increasing proliferation of TNC power in the 1970s (Rütters and Zimmermann, 2003, 59). Thus, because of Nestlé's enormous economic importance and its early experience of labour internationalism, Nestlé is currently a prestigious company because of the trade unions (Rüb, 2002, 12). However, factor one is still insufficient to fully explain the IUF's final decision regarding the NKLU's strike.

Factor two is a change in the production geography. Until 1990, Nestlé had used a multi-domestic strategy to build branch plants to cover individual domestic markets (Maucher, 1989). However, because from the mid-1990s, the major Western agro-food TNCs, including Nestlé, began to stress the strategic significance of Asian markets as a result of the development of transportation and communication technologies, lowered barriers to trade, rapid increase in per capita income and the westernisation of the Asian diet; this shift was called the "Rush to Asia" (Pritchard, 2000, 249; Pritchard and Fagan, 1999, 13). In this situation, Nestlé actively utilised

manufacturing outsourcing strategies as new geographies of corporate control in harmony with this change in the international coordination of production (Pritchard, 2000, 253; IUF, 2006; Nestlewatch homepage). According to some statistics, prior to the strike in 2003, the growth of Nestlé in Europe remained at 0.7% and in western Europe, there was a 0.2% decline in growth in 2002. However, Nestlé earned a higher operating profit from developing countries in the same year (Rüb, 2004, 19; Garver *et al.*, 2007, 241). At the Jakarta meeting sponsored by the IUF for Nestlé unions in autumn 2002, each member union expressed concern regarding the Nestlé HQ's production transfer, plant closures, staff cutbacks and increases in insecure employment (Rüb, 2004, 16). Therefore, Nestlé HQ's managerial controls placed the Nestlé European Works Council in a difficult position, so the council decided that solidarity with the Asia-Pacific region beyond Europe and America was required.

Based on the conditions of factors 1 and 2, the last factor was the influence of the territorialisation in Cheongju that was previously mentioned. On 18 November, the delegation of the NKLU comprised of seven members from the KCTU, the KCTF and the NKLU left for Switzerland. Contrary to expectations, the IUF announced that they were not going to leave because other Nestlé unions from other countries had already arrived for different reasons and sparked a violent incident and negative public sentiment (Interviewee A). However, the NKLU did not seek a demonstration similar to the other Nestlé unions. Rather, they persuaded the IUF to suggest a plan that placed pressure on the Swiss

government according to the three products of territorialisation (i.e., Cheongju Regional Labour Relations Commission's ruling, Cheongju Regional Labour Office's judgment and the list of the signatures of over 50,000 citizens). In the end, after a prolonged discussion, the IUF promised to support the delegation by virtue of the three products that helped them to understand the situation in Korea, along with the delegation's strategy, which was dissimilar to the preceding violent protests (Interviewee A).

4) What Made the Nestlé HQ Change Its Decision?

The change in Nestlé's decision was key to solving the labour disputes. The delegation of the NKNU considered the local dependence of the Swiss HQ, which is detailed below.

Faced with Sam Lee's withdrawal threat, the NKLU discovered the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises while in the process of determining alternative solutions (Interviewee A). On 26 September, the KCTU, the KCTF, and the IUF sued the Swiss government, the Korean Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy, and Nestlé for violating the OECD Guidelines. The Swiss government held a first hearing in which the Swiss Confederation, the IUF and the Nestlé HQ participated and appeared sympathetic to the NKLU's reasons for the complaint.

On 19 November, the Swiss OECD NCP announced a plan of industrial arbitration. It was expected that the OECD NCP's action would damage Nestlé's corporate popularity. The violation of the OECD Guidelines was not a major con-

troversy in Korea. However, the Swiss government and Swiss unions took it seriously, which showed a different cultural embeddedness surrounding the international regulations between Korea and Switzerland (C. J. Lee, 2003). Despite the OECD Guidelines being non-obligatory, the Nestlé HQ faced a second Swiss government-led hearing, which was scheduled on 1 December; if arbitration had failed, the Swiss OECD NCP would have made a statement to the public on the issue to pressure the Nestlé HQ (Huh and Lee, 2004; Moon, 2003). In addition, because Nestlé should have complied with the OECD Guidelines stated in the Nestlé corporate business principles, a withdrawal from the host country was a greater threat to its corporate popularity. Thus, the Nestlé HQ was sensitive to the action of the OECD NCP, as well as to the IUF's ability to name their offenses publicly (C. J. Lee, 2003; Interviewee A). At the same time, there was growing interest in the protest of the delegation among Swiss civil society, and it was helped by the IUF on the streets of Vevey and Geneva (Interviewees A and B). For example, *Le Courrier*, a local Swiss newspaper written in French, reported on the activities of the delegation in Switzerland on the front page on 23 November. Because of this publicity, many Swiss people got to know about the activities of the delegation and the situation in Korea from the article (The delegation, 2003a).¹⁴ The delegation copied and distributed the news article of *Le Courrier* as a pamphlet for Swiss people before they made a French pamphlet with the support of the IUF (The delegation, 2003b).¹⁵

These strategies considered the political and cultural embeddedness of Switzerland where the

Nestlé HQ was located. At that time, the delegation from the NKLU was conscious of this weakness in Nestlé (Interviewee A). Thus, Nestlé’s HQ was becoming more sensitive to potential damage to its corporate popularity¹⁶⁾ within its home country by the IUF, the OECD, and the NKLU, and this concern ultimately prompted a change of decision from the Nestlé HQ.

6. A New Starting Point for A Pluralist Labour Geography in Korea

In this paper, encouraged by developments in labour geography, I examined the NKLU’s 145-day strike against Nestlé Korea, which had

pushed for unilateral outsourcing and threatened to transfer manufacturing facilities. The case study shows that the predominant view that TNCs are inherently stronger than labour is false and that workers can become sentient spatial actors capable of producing economic geographies through the politics of scale jumping. More specifically, we ascertained that the NKLU’s localised scale jumping from the workplace to local society played a significant role in the subsequent creation of a global “space of engagement” (Research Questions 1 and 3). Additionally, we should not consider scale jumping strategies as panaceas *per se*. The NKLU was presented with obstacles to up-scaling, such as the path dependencies of the Korean labour movement that evaded labour internationalism, the territorial



Figure 2. The front-page story in *Le Courrier*.

Source: *Le Courrier* November 23, 2003

nature of the central government that wanted to attract foreign capital (Research Question 2) and the insensitivity of Global North unions to the complexity of Global South unions (Research Question 3). Lastly, we perceived dynamic and dialectic interactions between spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement beyond the static labour internationalism–community unionism dichotomy by exploring the local dependence of the Nestlé HQ on its home country (which could be viewed as “global” from a Korea perspective), and by associating the delegation of the NKKLU with Swiss civil society (Research Question 4).

Accordingly, we must focus on obstacles that exist on diverse scales because multi–scalar practices driven by workers as the “constrained agency” (Coe and Jordhus–Lier, 2011) are both the cause and effect of workers’ complex and dynamic interactions with various political, economic and cultural forces and actors at diverse geographical scales; therefore, such obstacles are not completely reducible to labour–capital antagonism (Doucette, 2010, 145–151).

This unknown story has profound implications for future labour union movements against TNCs. Labour studies and labour movements in Asia should be more concerned with the usefulness of the politics of scale jumping, and its weaknesses when presented with the complex spatial patterns of TNCs’ global strategies, because of the active communications between the Global North and South, both in a practical political and analytical sense. Several readers might still have a dream similar to Marx and Engels, who stated, “Working men of *all* countries, unite!” This dream, however,

is subject to understanding the diverse nature of workers who are located in *different* countries and spaces.

Finally, I would like to conclude with some words for researchers who are interested in labour geography. For Western economic geographers following the latest debates on labour geography, it may seem that this paper’s theoretical focus (i.e., scale as a key concept) and empirical findings (the spatial fix of labour unions as a typical case) are “old,” because they are now attempting to pluralise the terrain on labour geography through articulating new subjects (e.g., the precariat and platform labour) and perspectives (e.g., ontological thinking) (Peck, 2018; Strauss, 2020). On the other hand, Korean economic geographers must regard this paper as a “new” starting point for escaping from the “capitalocentrism” (Gibson–Graham, 1996) embedded in their perspective. As stated above, the Nestlé Korea labour union strike occurred in 2003. In the period of the approximately two decades from 2003 to the present, there are many different cases that need to be explored by economic geographers through the lens of labour geography. In the near future, I look forward to reading subsequent studies that surpass the limits of this old paper.

Notes

- 1) Cheongju city is an inland city located 128 km southeast of Seoul. Cheongju had a total area of 153.31 km² and a total population of 615,155 in 2009. The provincial office of North Chungcheong Province is located in Cheongju.

- 2) The TNI (transnationality index) can help in roughly understanding the level of transnationality of TNCs. Since the 1990s, the TNI growth rate of food companies was higher than any other industrial sector (Senauer and Venturini, 2004). In 2007, Nestlé's foreign assets were 28th and its TNI was 7th among the world's top 100 non-financial TNCs (UNCTAD, 2009).
- 3) However, research in the field of the Global South and Second World is not entirely satisfactory. Exceptions are Waterman (1998), Hutchinson and Brown (2001) and Gray (2008).
- 4) In addition to case studies of labour internationalism, case studies of community unionism in the Global South are rare. See Lier and Stokke (2006) and Jordhus-Lier (2013) for exceptions.
- 5) In other words, a global space can also be a local place according to the geographical location and perspective (Sayer, 1991; Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2002).
- 6) I do not deny the possibility that there are similar obstacles even in the First World. However, we should recognise that the rest of the First World has their own experience. This particular experience could be explained in relation to the obstacles.
- 7) In Korea, there is no labour court system as in Western countries. Instead, the regional labour relations committee, affiliated with the Ministry of Labour and consisting of public members, management members and labour members, operates to arbitrate labour-management disputes.
- 8) Despite an *ex post facto* evaluation after the end of the strike, Nestlé Korea lost a 10% coffee market share in Korea (Huh and Lee, 2004). This loss indirectly shows the influence of the Cheongju plant beyond the local economy.
- 9) The NKLK filed a complaint with the Press Arbitration Commission against the conservative newspaper because of their distorted reports (S. Y. Jung, 2003).
- 10) Formally, in America, the term Yankee means "an inhabitant of New England or one of the northern states". Informally, Yankee is used as a derogatory term outside America such as in the context of anti-Americanism. In this case, the NKLK used Yankee as a territorial term to indicate that Sam Lee was the former CEO of Nestlé USA (i.e., a foreigner outside Cheongju).
- 11) This number, 55,000 people, represents 10% of the total population in Cheongju.
- 12) During his remaining tenure, Roh Moo-Hyun unabashedly pushed ahead with neoliberal economic policies. The push for the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement is a case in point. He regarded the internationalisation of the Korean state as a solution for its national economic polarisation. Emblematically, he said, "our administration is the *leftist neoliberal* administration," (italics added) during an online chat with Koreans in 2006.
- 13) At this time, KGI Securities, Owens Corning Korea, Lego Korea, KOC electric and Carrefour Korea had lockouts for several reasons, such as declining productivity and the militancy of unions (J. H. Kim, 2003). Since the 1997 economic crisis, attracting foreign corporations and capital to Korea has been an essential part of the resurrection of the national economy. To accomplish this task, the domestic conservative media have strongly denounced labour unions as selfish and hard-line groups.
- 14) Not only newspapers but also influential Swiss media such as radio broadcasting reported the delegation's activity (The delegation, 2003a). Because of a blaze of publicity, the Swiss people encouraged and supported the delegation when it picketed on the street (The delegation, 2003a; 2003b).
- 15) Because Switzerland's official languages are French, German, etc., making the pamphlets in French was better than making them in English (The delegation, 2003b).
- 16) Honorary Chairman of Nestlé Helmut Maucher said, "Corporate image has become important, both as a basis for a company's long-term activities and also as a means of recruiting capable executives and employees and binding them to the firm" (Maucher, 1994, 93). This statement symbolically shows that Nestlé is sensitive to corporate popularity.

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- Interviewee B: Former President of the NKLU, November 2010; August 2014.
- Interviewee C: Former Head of the Cheongju Regional Labor Office, November 2010.
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