

Korean Protests against Importing U.S. Beef

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Thousands of Koreans have been protesting the importation U.S. beef by gathering in vigils almost every night for the last two months. Many Koreans fear since the April trade negotiation between the U.S. and the Lee administration that their government would import beef contaminated with the “mad cow” disease. Whether their fear has a factual foundation is not important anymore because their anger grew and the number of protesters snowballed when the administration dismissed their concerns and brutally repressed a small number of initial protesters.

What makes this ongoing protest different from previous ones in Korean history is that high school students initiated the protest and have been organizing discussions around the issue on internet websites, in their classrooms, and on the streets. They consist of a high portion of “netizens” (a made-up word between “citizens” and “internet”) and they decide strategies and tactics of the ongoing protest based on consensus among them through internet discussions. Moreover, spontaneous street “cultural” events, which anybody can initiate or join, are created after the vigils.

According to a high school student netizen on the discussion bulletin board, <http://antimadcow.org> which is the official website of a group nationally organized by hundreds of civic, labor, professional, and political groups, his classmates listen and watch the news every day at school to see if there are any changes in government’s attitude and come out to vigils after school is over. Some stay on the streets all night, participating in cultural and political events, such as dancing and street sit-in discussions, and return to school next morning. The percentage of high school students who participate is so high that a classmate who has not been in any vigil would be teased by their peers, so states this netizen in a half-joke-and-half-serious mood.

The riot police’s beating up and arresting of initial protesters brought in their families and many other “adult” groups and the vigils became family festivals. All kinds of groups, such as public health related groups, teachers unions, and religious groups, supported the cause. Recently, Catholic priests came forward to support the protesters and criticized the administration’s oppression.

Nevertheless, the mad cow beef issue has not been linked to a larger picture or other social problems. Basic rationales of protesters are based on public and personal health issues and an argument that the administration should listen to its people. Anti-U.S. sentiment is there, but not as a form of global-solidarity against the U.S. imperialism. High school students express that they do not want to die soon by eating mad cow contaminated beef. But are there no other motivations for these thousands of people (a million people came out for the June 10th vigil) to join this kind of collective activities almost every night? Are there some deeper meanings beneath the “surface” level of their own expressions?

Political progressive, liberal, and leftist groups, which have not initiated or influenced the vigils, try to link the mad cow issue with the problems of privatization of utilities or other programs the administration has pursued, but their efforts have not been effective. Some liberal groups seem to pursue anti-conservative administration struggles merely for their own political purposes, and left-wing groups do not seem to have any future plans to develop the youth’s desire for participating in social changes. The Korea Confederation of Trade Unions decided to call for a general strike between July 2nd and 5th, but the strike seems to be a ritualized one in which workers participate in a

several-hour work stoppage and then compensate the loss later by working overtime.

Moreover, many civic groups and individual participants insist that the vigil should be held for only a “pure” mad cow beef issue. When leftist and labor groups joined the struggle, ultra-conservatives, who had denied any problems in the eating of imported U.S. beef and staunchly supported the Lee administration, began to mobilize a counter-ideology that the protest is not “pure” anymore and has transformed into a plot of “subversive” groups and unruly people. They had been organizing counter-protests in places where vigils were supposed to be held, chanting for government repression of the protesters, and denouncing the protesters with vulgar words on internet websites.

David Harvey in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* argues that the more the process of privatization and individualization is intensified —a phenomenon since the 1970s —, the more people tend to yearn for some kind of collectivism and a sense of belonging. This observation includes increasing gang membership, fascist group activities, and authoritarian populism which are negative manifestations of these desires, but nonetheless there also exists a potentiality for diverse efforts of organizing meaningful collectivism and eventually a renewal of socialism.

Do the Korean high school students and people who come out to the streets every evening after their classes and work suggest a desire for a meaningful collectivism beneath the face value of their concerns over eating tainted beef? Could the protest be an expression of their underlying fear of a future in which they might be one of those “irregular” workers who consist of more than 50 percent of the current Korean workforce? Are their gatherings a search for their reminiscent sense of belonging and “oneness?”

If so, there is no reason that their sentiment cannot be linked to the fight against the U.S. led imperial plan of global phenomenon of privatization which deprives the poorest populations of the Third World of their stable jobs, houses, health, and access to utilities. It is possible that the Korean protesters can link their fight with Korean irregular workers who have been struggling to manage their lives under this global economic structure. The vigil is not yet over, and the potentiality of linking these struggles together is still there to be realized.

P.S.

* From SHL’s blog. Reproduced on Against the Current (ATC) website.