

Background and analysis

# The Democratic Labor Party and the Korean progressive movement

Speech at the 5<sup>th</sup> ASEM People's Forum held in Hanoi

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I extend greetings of solidarity from the Democratic Labor Party in Korea,

I would like to start off by thanking the organizing committee for giving me the opportunity to speak among the panelists here. From what I have seen it has been organized superbly, and I commend the organizers for their work. At the same time, I hope that this workshop can be the beginning of a fruitful discussion and relationship amongst all of us gathered here. I am here representing the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) from Korea, but before I start discussing the party itself, I believe an introduction of the historical context and background to the birth of our party is needed.

## **I. A brief history of the progressive party movement in Korea**

The left, as everywhere else during that time period, took the initiative in of resistance to Japanese imperialism during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was at the forefront of the struggle for national liberation. However, after the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the peninsula was divided by foreign forces after the second World War, and the Southern part of it was incorporated into the American sphere of influence, and as a result the left in Korea all but disappeared. Mass movements such as the workers movement and the peasant movement, which had possessed a tradition of active resistance and struggles, also were basically destroyed.

It was after the 60s, during the period of industrialization that the labor movement reappeared in Korean history. The self-immolation of the martyr Jun Tae-il ignited the labor movement with his cry for just labor laws and humane working conditions, and the words *"if I only had a friend in college who could help me,"* drove a generation of college students into factories. This is the reason that Jun Tae-il is still the symbol for the Democratic Labor Party and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). After the Kwangju rebellion in 1980, where thousands died, leftist politics again gained prominence in college campuses. Socialist ideology resurfaced at study circles in universities and soon spread to factories.

I do not know if many of you here know, but the Democratic Labor Party is not the first progressive party to appear in Korea during the past decade. After 1987, when democratic procedures/institutions were partially introduced and the military regime started to recede, various efforts to build a legitimate leftist party were initiated. The People's Party in 1988, and the People Party in 1992 put up candidates in the general elections each year, but these parties were not able to succeed in producing parliamentarians. According to the Korean election laws during that period, this meant that the party had to be disbanded. Nevertheless, if there had been hope that each party would be successful in its aspirations in the future, the party leadership and its members would have found the means to keep the party intact. This did not happen, and there are several reasons for this:

1. Regionalism: After the 1987 presidential elections, political support and preference tended to be decided by region. Workers would vote, not according to ideological orientation or policies, but according to who was from their hometown. This political regionalism continues to affect Korean politics today.
2. The effects of this regionalism were amplified even more by the minor electorate system, where the parliament was filled with only the candidates that had won the most votes in their small regional electorate. In such a political environment, it was close to impossible for new political forces to pass the test of elections.
3. With the division between the North and the South, there was a vague, but nevertheless prevalent, fear among the public of anything leftist or working class based. Actively advertised and encouraged by government agencies, such anti-left ideology produced a mindset among the general public that regarded leftist movements and calls as being dangerous and undesirable.
4. About half of the left in South Korea (broadly referred to as NL for National Liberation) put more importance on putting the nationalist bourgeois in power, rather than building an independent leftist party. This strategy of 'critical support', which was especially strong for former president Kim Dae Jung caused deep divisions within the left and as a result, the efforts for an independent left party was always limited to a portion of the left.
5. Also, a substantial part of the South Korean left had been strongly influenced by the official ideology of the Soviet Union. The collapse in 1991 of the Eastern Bloc led to the state of confusion and disillusion for many of the activists who had been deeply involved in the left movement.
6. A militant trade union movement was born with the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987, but the political consciousness of the working class developed at a slower pace than the trade union movement itself.

## **II. Primary factors for the success of the DLP**

However, several changes have allowed the Democratic Labor party to build an independent and democratic progressive party movement, and to enter the National Assembly.

- The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions was formed in 1995. It clearly set out in its program from the start that one of its objectives is the independent political empowerment of the working class.
- The nation-wide general strike of 1996 and 1997 led to the wide recognition among the working masses that an independent workers' political organization was needed. This was due to the fact that despite paralyzing the country for close to 2 months in a nation-wide general strike against the

retrogressive revision of the labor law, the working class was not able to block a watered-down version of the law from passing the National Assembly.

- Despite such changes, support for remained at solely 1.1% for the workers' candidate in the 1997 presidential elections, where the former President of the KCTU was the candidate.

- However, the illusions that part of the progressive movement in Korea had about the so-called reformist bourgeois government began to crack, as the Kim Dae-Jung government began to pursue neo-liberal restructuring policies according to the dictates of the IMF. Movements and struggles against neo-liberal policies appeared sporadically, and while many times heroic, most ended in defeat.

- As the 2000 general elections approached, the level of agreement among the working class on the need for a worker's party peaked. This was the reason that the DLP was inaugurated in January of 2000. It was born from the active support and backing of the KCTU, and this is the point that separates it from previous progressive parties in Korea. Previous parties had not been firmly grounded in the solid base that the KCTU provided.

- Although it came within a few hundred votes in two electorates, the DLP was unable to produce a parliamentarian in the 2000 general elections. However, unlike the People's Party and People Party of the past, the DLP did not disintegrate. This was because it had proved to itself that it had a core support base and had confidence that this support would expand in the future.

- During the 2002 regional elections, the DLP focused its capacities on the following activities.

1. Joining the workers and peasants in their struggles against neo-liberalism.
2. Organizing movements for a peaceful unification with the North and the withdrawal of U.S. troops in South Korea.
3. Legislative activities to salvage/protect small shop owners, tenants, and insolvent families suffering from neo-liberal financial policies.
4. Campaigns for the institution of a party-representation vote system.

- As the result of a constitutional petition at the Constitutional Court of Korea presented by the DLP, a proportional representative system was made into law starting with the regional elections of 2002. Although limited in scope, the DLP was able to take advantage of the institutional reform. The DLP created a stir by first allotting solely women as the top candidates for proportional representation in each of the regional government elections, and then receiving over 8% of the vote. As a result 9 politicians in regional governments were elected. Most were young women active in the trade union movement. DLP's success in this election had the effect of indirectly pushing other parties in Korea to allot 50% of party-list seats to women in future elections: a trend which continues today.

- Another aspect of the DLP that the Korean public paid close attention to was the process of electing party officials and election candidates. The practice of electing the party leadership and electoral candidates through a direct vote by party members (democracy from below) signified a break from the mainstream political culture in Korea, which had previously accepted a few party leaders selecting the candidates that the party would field in elections (emperor politics). This also led to other parties implementing partial reforms of their election procedures.

- Due to the success of the regional elections, DLP presidential candidate Kwon Young-Ghil was able to participate in all the nationally televised 3 party debates. Candidate Kwon advocated increasing

taxation of the upper classes and increasing social welfare expenditures (free education and medicare for all) with the increased state revenues. He also demanded that President Bush apologize for the death of two middle-school students that had been killed as the result of negligence on the part of two U.S. soldiers driving an armored vehicle. The catch phrase for the presidential campaign was 'equality' and 'independence.' A lot of the votes from reform-minded voters went to current president Roh Moo-Hyun because of the logic that you must vote for the candidate that has the highest chance of being elected. Nevertheless, candidate Kwon received nearly a million votes and left a deep impression on the public.

- At the general elections of 2004, 56 seats of the total 299 were allotted to party list candidates. The DLP was successful in two of the regional electorates (areas of worker concentration), and 8 seats through the party-list system, gaining the support of 13.1% of the voters. The core slogan of the election campaign was *"tax to the wealthy, welfare for the people."*

### **III. The Vision of the Democratic Labor Party**

The party programme of the DLP is more to the left along the ideological spectrum than most social democratic parties in Western Europe.

- However, it is true that differences within the party remain about the overall strategy of the party. There are voices that advocate putting more of an emphasis on parliamentary politics, others that warn against focusing solely on activities within the National Assembly and assert that a new model for a social movement party must be created. There is also a minority within the party that views the DLP as the transitional stage to the formation of a true revolutionary party.

- In 2003, the DLP formed a Special Committee for Party Development in order to discuss strategies after the DLP had entered the National Assembly and also ways to reform the party. After months of debate at all levels of the party, we were able to come to the conclusion that the party must actively seek to combine activities within parliament with mass movements outside of it. It also set out to institute a few experimental policies within the party. It outlawed a member of parliament from taking a position of leadership of the party, and also limits party-list lawmakers to a single term. In addition, parliamentarians only receive the average salary of a worker in Korea.

- The combination of institutional politics and mass movements: With a relatively small presence in all levels of government, the DLP is unable to enact a law by itself. It pursued a regional government law that made it mandatory for local schools to use domestic agricultural products, to provide lunches free of cost, and to directly manage the cafeterias instead of outsourcing it to unaccountable companies. It accomplished enacting this law by carrying out an active campaign to directly gather enough signatures to present for consideration in the regional assembly. In Seoul, the party gathered 200,000 signatures.

- Current DLP strategy: The 'Large minority' line. Only ten of the 299 seats in the National Assembly belong to the DLP, but this does not mean that the positions and policies espoused by the DLP are also in the minority. The 'large minority' line, although it may sound like a contradiction, represents the will of the party to actively politicize the general public in issue where the voices of the people are not adequately represented in parliament. This is done through joint efforts with mass movements, with the aim of expanding public support for a progressive structural reform of society, while at the same time laying the foundation for social change and seizure of political power. The most recent example of putting this party line into practice has been the movement against the dispatch of troops to Iraq. Despite the fact that the majority of the people in Korea oppose sending troops to Iraq, the National Assembly has allowed the dispatch bill to pass through. The DLP has

been at the forefront of organizing the struggle against the dispatch of Korean combat troops outside of the parliamentary arena, while actively proposing resolutions and bills to cancel or oppose the dispatch.

#### **IV. Limits and challenges**

Limits and Challenges to our work remain though. The party for the most part is unable to take the initiative in bringing forward issues that go to the core of contradictions in Korean society, thereby revitalizing mass movements in the process. It is often that the party simply accepts the demands of mass movements resisting neo-liberalism in a passive way. The DLP will try to overcome these limitations in the upcoming inspection of government offices. Also, although the number of party members is at about 58,000, they have tended to become passive as the party has grown. Local and workplace party councils need to be vitalized in order to overcome this shortcoming.

There are many challenges and tasks that the DLP faces, but perhaps the most important is the issue of irregular/contingent workers. The democratic trade union movement in Korea remains mostly company based. After the onslaught of neo-liberalism however, the number of irregular workers has increased because companies have outsourced and subcontracted a significant portion of its jobs. The existing company-based unions have been unable to organize these irregular workers. The transition to industrial trade unions and a program to organize these irregular and non-organized workers is urgently needed. The DLP will have to play a major role in this process.

#### **V. Relationship with Mass Movements**

As mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, the full support of the KCTU has been critical in the party's success. A large proportion (about 40%) of party members and party activists are KCTU members. Added to this, the Korean Peasants League has recently decided to officially support the DLP. The relationship with the environmental movement remains weak however, and it has shown the tendency to pursue an independent green party.

Recently the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) has gone through internal reforms and there are signs that it will join the KCTU in officially supporting the DLP. The DLP is currently striving to strengthen its relationship with not only workers and peasants' movements, but also movements by the environmentalists, women, the disabled, and sexual minorities.

- A national front called the National People's Solidarity exists in the form of an alliance between progressive social movements. The DLP is a part of this. What is important in the relationship with mass movements is not the formal aspects of it, but the substance that constitutes the relationship between the two. It is an urgent task of the DLP to take the lead in revitalizing the mass movements, some of which have shown signs of becoming inert.

#### **VI. A last word.**

Lastly, a word about the significance of conferences such as this one. The DLP recognizes that there are limits in the current global order to what a political movement can do at the national level. This is why our party programme states clearly that the DLP will strive for international solidarity with the progressive forces over the world in order to overcome the destructive effects of neo-liberalism. It is in this context that forums such as this one gain importance, for it gives us the chance to raise

the level of awareness and understanding of each other, recognize and identify common objectives, and to progress toward a joint response to needs of the people worldwide.

I again thank the organizer and the chair, and I wish a successful and fruitful conference to all those present here.

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**P.S.**

Dan Byung-Ho was elected to the National Assembly in April of 2004. He is active in the Labor and Environment committee of the Assembly. He was President of the Korean Trade Union Congress (1990-1994), President of the Korean Metalworkers Federation (1996-1999), and President of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (1999-2004). Prior to being elected as a National Assemblyman, he had been arrested 6 times for his trade union activities.