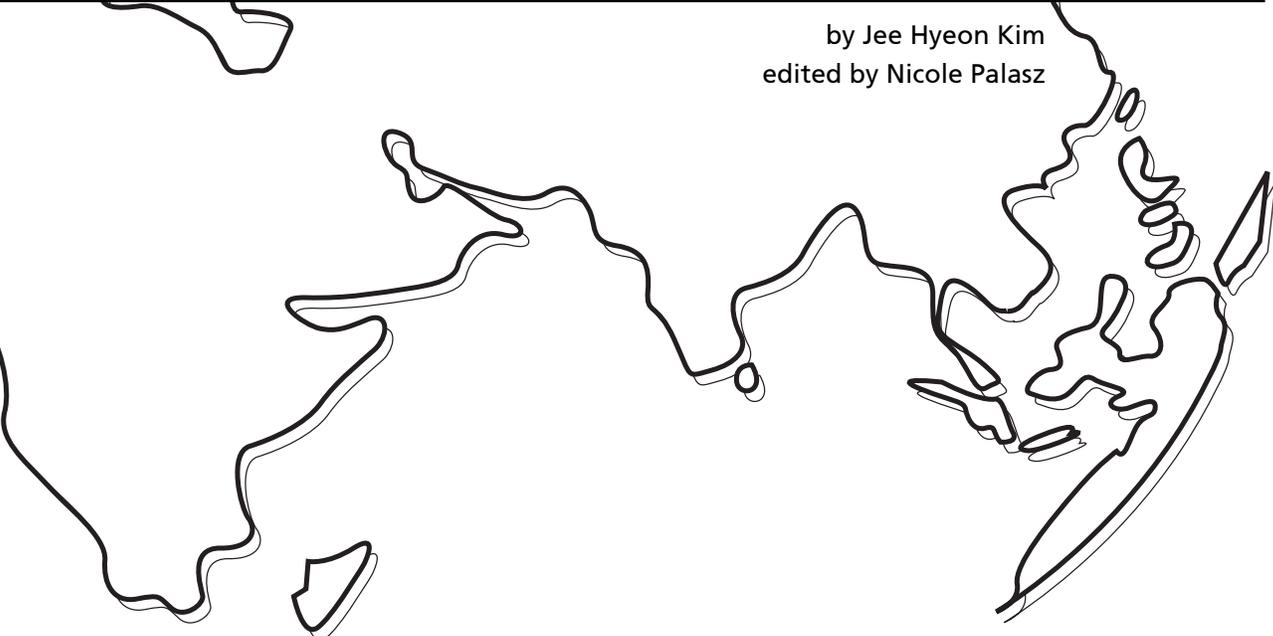


ENGAGING THE MEDIA:
BUILDING SUPPORT FOR MINIMUM WAGE REFORM

by Jee Hyeon Kim
edited by Nicole Palasz



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Ms. Jee Hyeon Kim has worked as a grassroots activist working on women workers issues for over 9 years. She is currently the Director of Publicity & International Solidarity for Korean Women Workers Associations United. She has also worked for Korean Women's Trade Union. In her role as a campaign coordinator she has worked directly with the media and created many successful campaigns over the years. Recently she served as chief director in organizing the international workshop entitled "Women Workers' Initiative to Challenge against Globalization" held in June 2005.

Organizational Information

Leaders of the democratic trade union movement from the 1970s created the Korean Women Workers Association in Seoul in March 1987. Later, regional women workers' associations were formed in export concentrated sectors, industrial complexes and low income areas across the nation. On the 12th of July 1992, the Korean Women Workers' Associations United (KWWAU) was established to more effectively bring together the efforts of these regional groups and to strengthen the central policy making power. The KWWAU has operated "Equaline," a counseling center for working women in nine cities. "Equaline" counselors counsel women on various job-related issues, conducts negotiations with employers, and provides legal services. Since the International Monetary Fund (IMF) financial crisis in Korea, the KWWAU has run the Action Center for Women's Unemployment in order to publicize the serious nature of women's unemployment. In 1999, the KWWAU established the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) with over 400 members in order to organize the increasing number of irregular women workers. Now the KWTU has grown to 6,000 members. Currently, the KWWAU is focusing on organizing poor women workers and has established the "Hope Center to abolish Poverty and Increase the Rights of Women Workers," publicizing the situation of women in poverty, creating policy, and providing childcare support to reassure poor women workers while working. The KWWAU now has nine regional branches and about 5,000 members.

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June 2006

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the New Tactics in Human Rights Tactical Notebook Series! In each notebook a human rights practitioner describes an innovative tactic that was used successfully in advancing human rights. The authors are part of the broad and diverse human rights movement including non-government and government perspectives, educators, law enforcement personnel, truth and reconciliation processes, women's rights and mental health advocates. They have both adapted and pioneered tactics that have contributed to human rights in their home countries. In addition, they have utilized tactics that when adapted can be applied in other countries and other situations to address a variety of issues.

Each notebook contains detailed information on how the author and his or her organization achieved what they did. We want to inspire other human rights practitioners to think tactically – and to broaden the realm of tactics considered to effectively advance human rights.

This notebook will discuss how the Korean Women Workers Associations United effectively engaged the media in their efforts to make changes to the minimum wage system in Korea. The low minimum wage had become an urgent problem, particularly among subcontract workers in South Korea. KWWAU organized a nation-wide campaign in nine cities, resulting in the first challenge to the Korean minimum wage system since its inception in 1988. KWWAU and their partner's efforts resulted in significant changes to the minimum wage law and transformed the annual decision of the Minimum Wage Council into an important social issue in South Korea. The KWWAU and its partners succeeded in raising public awareness and concern regarding the minimum wage system, and creating a social movement that has made it possible for many poor women to benefit from increasing minimum wages and greater protections.

The entire series of Tactical Notebooks is available online at www.newtactics.org. Additional notebooks are already available and others will continue to be added over time. On our web site you will also find other tools, including a searchable database of tactics, a discussion forum for human rights practitioners and information about our workshops and symposium. To subscribe to the New Tactics newsletter, please send an e-mail to: newtactics@cvt.org

The New Tactics in Human Rights Project is an international initiative led by a diverse group of organizations and practitioners from around the world. The project is coordinated by the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and grew out of our experiences as a creator of new tactics and as a treatment center that also advocates for the protection of human rights from a unique position—one of healing and reclaiming civic leadership.

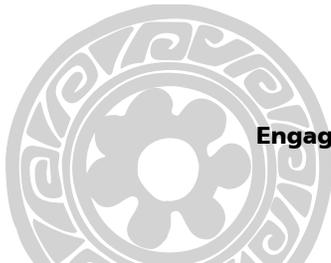
We hope that you will find these notebooks informational and thought provoking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nancy L. Pearson".

Nancy L. Pearson

New Tactics Training Manager



Introduction

On June 25, 2001, about 50 people, including some building cleaners, the Korean Women Workers Association United (KWWAU) and the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU), organized a demonstration at the front gate of the Korean Minimum Wage Council in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. The Wage Council was in the process of deciding what incremental increase would be applied to the minimum wage from September 2001 to August 2002. The demonstration was aimed at pressuring the Council to raise the minimum wage, and participants angrily shouted: "You, council members, try to live only with 420,000 won a month like we do! You must know how much we suffer on these wages!"

The Council officials appeared very embarrassed about the demonstration. They often checked to ensure the front gate was safely locked. We understood why they looked so nervous because ours was the first demonstration against the Council in its history. Nobody had protested its actions before, and suddenly it was exposed on several major television news programs.

Other demonstrations followed, with protests in nine cities during the session of the Minimum Wage Council. As a result of our efforts, including the hard work of drawing media attention to the issue, the minimum wage between September 2001 and August 2002 was raised by 12%. Before that time, the increases averaged less than 4%, so we viewed this increase as a small success. This achievement also encouraged us to continue with our minimum wage campaign.

When we began our campaign, the minimum wage system had been nearly forgotten in South Korea. Rapid Korean economic growth allowed workers to earn wages well above the minimum wage. Since few people cared about what the minimum wage was, the increment was never increased. However, the negative impacts of globalization were felt by increasing numbers of poor workers. They suffered deteriorating real wages while the minimum wage stayed the same. This became particularly clear after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis in 1997 that resulted in a swift increase in the numbers of poor workers in South Korea. In the aftermath of the crisis, the minimum wage re-emerged as a social issue. We observed during this period that the greatest victims of globalization in South Korea were women. Like other countries funded by the IMF, many Korean workers were laid off and transformed into irregular workers.

Prior to the use of this tactic, our organization was involved in organizing subcontract women workers to advocate for their rights. In the process of our



A demonstration at the gate of Korea Minimum Wage Council. On the panel is written "Can you live on 420,000 won for a month?" (Seoul, June 25, 2001)

labor organizing work with this segment of irregular workers in 2000, we discovered the problem of the minimum wage system. The low minimum wage had become an urgent problem, particularly among subcontract workers in South Korea. We determined that we needed to raise the increment of the minimum wage so subcontract women workers would benefit. We began organizing nation-wide campaigns in nine cities, resulting in the first challenge to the Korean minimum wage system since its inception in 1988.

Beginning in 2002, other organizations joined us in advocating for improvements in the minimum wage system. A "minimum wage network" was established. The campaign expanded to other regions, focusing on raising the minimum wage and transforming the minimum wage system itself.

Recently, our efforts resulted in significant changes to the minimum wage law that will improve working conditions for minimum wage earners. Our efforts have also transformed the annual decision of the Minimum Wage Council into an important social issue in South Korea. The KWWAU and its partners succeeded in raising public awareness and concern regarding the minimum wage system, and creating a social movement that has made it possible for many poor women to benefit from increasing minimum wages and greater protections.

In this tactical notebook, I will share our efforts to engage the South Korean media to build public awareness about South Korea's unjust minimum wage system. As you will see, this was one of many coordinated tactics we employed in our campaign to provide living wages to our most vulnerable workers.

In our experience, successful engagement of the media requires many other supporting tactics. I will share with you the approaches that were most helpful in engaging the media: credible documentation of the problem, petitions to demonstrate public interest in the issue, and visually engaging performances and demonstrations that are easily captured by the media. With media interest, our campaign was able to expand, bring in new supporters, and provide us with leverage in our negotiation and lobbying efforts.

Background on the Issue

After the 1997 IMF financial crisis in South Korea, many regular workers were “transformed” into irregular workers, with temporary, part-time, contract, sub-contract or daily employment. These workers often suffer from job insecurity, low wages, and various forms of discrimination in the workplace. In particular, women are deeply affected by these trends, which are direct results of economic globalization. They are significantly more likely to be employed in the informal sector than male workers. At the moment, approximately 70% of working women are irregular workers in South Korea.

Women who become irregular workers find themselves at the brink of poverty, earning less than a living wage. In South Korea, irregular women workers are always at the bottom of the wage ladder. A regular woman worker’s salary is 72% of that of a male regular worker. Irregular woman workers receive only 38% of the wages enjoyed by their male counterparts.

After the IMF financial crisis, the wage differentials in South Korea widened significantly. The income gap between regular and irregular workers started to increase. The irregular workers we spoke to explained that no matter how much and how hard they work, they cannot escape from poverty. Now the ranks of the working poor are continuing to expand, and pose an important social problem in Korea. Subcontract workers make up a large proportion of impoverished irregular workers. According to the Korea National Statistical Office’s Census figures, the number of sub-contract and poor workers reached 413,000 persons in 2004.

Our organization works with one particular subset of sub-contract workers: cleaners. In order to understand the conditions of sub-contract cleaners in South Korea, it is important to understand how cleaning agencies are selected. Most Korean building owners choose cleaning agencies through the solicitation of bids. To reduce costs, most building owners select the cleaning agency that provides the services for the least cost. Once its bid is approved, the cleaning agency

has an incentive to reduce its own costs in order to make a profit. The most common way to reduce their own costs is to reduce the wages of the cleaners they employ. As a result, most cleaning agencies provide the lowest possible wages, or the minimum wage acceptable by law according to South Korea’s minimum wage system.

The minimum wage system has been in effect since 1988, and is governed by a Minimum Wage Council. The Council consists of twenty-five members, of whom seven represent management, seven represent workers, and eight come from public organizations such as government agencies. Decisions in the Council are taken by majority vote.

The primary role of the Council is to prepare and submit proposals to the Labor Minister for adjustments in the minimum wage. The Council enjoys a large degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the Ministry of Labor, as the Ministry only has the legal authority to accept or reject Council proposals. It cannot revise them.

The primary problem with this minimum wage system is that the Council does not provide an objective basis for determining the minimum wage. For example, if the minimum wage was increased substantially in one year, then the Council often adds only a small increase the following year. The members of the Council do not have to defend their decisions based on the cost of living, average wages of Korean workers, or even how their decision might negatively affect the most vulnerable Koreans. The decision was often based only on economic growth or political factors.

The Development of the Tactic

In March 2000, the KWWAU, along with KWTU, established an Action Center for the Restoration of Irregular Women Workers Rights to address discrimination and other forms of exploitation affecting irregular women workers.

At the time, the general public had limited knowledge about the problems facing irregular women workers. Some employers were even convinced that they were not obligated to abide by labor laws if they employed irregular workers. Common violations of labor law included instances where irregular workers were laid off without legitimate reason or notice, or were denied the retirement pay they were legally due for working more than one continuous year. Given this lack of awareness of legal protections, the action center’s activities focused on raising public awareness regarding the rights of women workers and the persistent violations of those rights.





Foundation of Action Center for the Restoration of Irregular Women Workers' Rights (Seoul, March 5, 2000)

The action center also focused on grassroots organizing of irregular women workers through our counseling centers. The KWWAU had eight counseling centers in eight Korean cities. Through our counseling work, we came to learn about the poor working conditions sub-contract cleaners labored under, and the failure of the minimum wage system to provide a living wage.

In October 2000, we compared two similar cases of female cleaners from separate cities. One cleaner was threatened with dismissal because she complained to her employer about her decreasing wages. Another worker was forced to accept an eleven-month contract rather than the typical one-year contract, so the employer would not have to contribute to the worker's retirement. According to Korean Labor Law, employers must offer retirement pay to workers employed for at least a year.

While these two cases were not identical, the stories were similar. Through our counseling sessions with the two women, we came to realize that the minimum wage was not providing them with a sufficient income to meet their expenses.

Steps taken to implement the tactic

We assumed that most subcontract cleaners' experience would be similar to the cleaners we had met at the counseling centers. We also expected that misuse of the minimum wage system to enforce a maximum wage was widespread. Employers were refusing to pay any more than the minimum wage. To help cleaners improve their situation, we needed more precise information and evidence to support our arguments. We also thought it was critical to make details about their working conditions widely known to the public.

As we began planning for our 2001 campaign activities, we prioritized the minimum wage issue. Since the Minimum Wage Council met only for two or three months from May to July, we had little time to prepare our campaign. We decided to focus on an urgent short-term goal and a long-term goal. Our short-term goal was to raise the minimum wage as much as possible in 2001. Our long-term goal was to change the minimum wage law to better protect workers. The following timetable for action shows how we addressed our short term goal:

- October 2000: Discovery of problem at counseling centers
- November-March 2001: Decision to organize subcontract cleaners and development of survey
- April 2001: Administration of survey, showing MANY sub-contract cleaners working in poor conditions
- June 2001: Conference to publicize survey
- June 25-end of July: **Media-friendly street campaigns** to raise awareness about the too low minimum wage, combined with lobbying wage board and Ministry of Labor
- July 2001: Wage Board raises minimum wage

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Although our initial information about working conditions came from cleaners working in a variety of settings, we decided to develop a survey focusing on the conditions of university and college cleaners. Most cleaners on educational campuses are female sub-contract workers between the ages of 40 and 60 years old, and suffer from similar working conditions from those in other buildings.

It was also easier for us to conduct the survey in these settings, since universities require many more cleaners than smaller buildings and institutions. This allowed us to conduct the survey more quickly. Moreover, university campuses are relatively open to contact between outside activists and cleaners. In addition, we were able to involve student activists in the process.

In April 2001, the KWWAU and KWTU conducted the nation-wide survey on the working conditions of sub-contract cleaners. We surveyed 528 cleaners at 107 cleaning agencies in universities in nine cities. Analysis of the survey responses revealed that the majority of workers earned the minimum wage, which was 421,490 South Korean Won (KRW), or 335 USD per month at the time. Over twenty percent of respondents received less than the minimum wage, which indicates cleaning agencies are violating the minimum wage laws.



A cleaner was interviewed with tears on the question, “How much do you earn for a month?” (Inchoen City, April, 2001)

The survey revealed certain common challenges faced by the workers:

- Cleaners were predominantly sub-contract employees earning 37% of the wages regular cleaners enjoyed
- They were typically older women in their 50s and 60s
- Most suffered from job insecurity because they work under one-year contracts, despite the fact that most stay with the same employer for at least five years
- One-year contracts prevented them from gaining seniority, so their wage was never increased over time. They noted that their “monthly wage upon hire was 420,000 KRW (324 USD), which is the wage you were still paid after 10 years.”
- Nearly all respondents considered their wages the greatest stress in their working life (90% of respondents)
- 35% of responses were the primary wage earners for their families

When we conducted the survey, we set as our goals to organize the cleaners while gathering information we could use in our campaign. Membership in the Korean Women’s Trade Union would allow us to better negotiate for improved working conditions in the universities. The first contact between activists and cleaners was the most important to successful organizing. As a result, we needed our interviewers to be experienced organizers. While the organizer visited cleaners and administered the survey, they could also act as counselor to the women. By maintaining close contact with the cleaners, organizers were able to map out working conditions, identify potential leaders among the workers, and evaluate the prospect of organizing them. The organizers would suggest to the cleaners that they join the Korean Women’s Trade Union. We have found that the more experienced the interviewer in

terms of organizing skills, the more likely the cleaners join the movement. Further, the relationship that was built between the organizer and cleaners increased the sustainability of the cleaners’ struggle through the support of emerging leaders. Through this process, 400 cleaners joined the union, this increase arising from a total of just 528 interviews.

HOLDING A CONFERENCE

After the survey data was analyzed, the KWWAU held a conference to publicize the survey results and build media interest in the issue. The title of the conference was “How to Improve the Minimum Wage System from the Perspective of Sub-Contract Workers.” At the conference, we exposed the failure of the minimum wage system to protect workers. We demonstrated that instead of protecting workers, the system served employers’ interest in keeping wages low. During the conference, we demanded that the minimum wage rise to a more realistic level that would ensure a living wage to low income workers.

We made a strategic decision to invite the president of the Korean Minimum Wage Council to serve as a panelist at the conference. Since the council was in the process of deciding the 2001 minimum wage, we thought our conference might lead to a decision to increase the minimum wage. We also invited sub-contract cleaners, who were given the opportunity to describe the working conditions they face, and how difficult it was to survive on their low wages.

The conference was a very significant event. It was the first conference to focus on the issue of the minimum wage system. With our survey results in hand, we were able to use the conference to prove that our demands were reasonable and that South Korea’s low income workers faced real challenges. In addition, we could



Conference, “How to improve the Minimum Wage System from the Perspective of Sub-contract Workers” (Seoul, June 8, 2001)



demonstrate misuse of the minimum wage system. Some government officials attending the conference were shocked to realize that 23% of respondents received less than the minimum wage. They promised to fix the minimum wage act.

LAUNCHING NATION-WIDE CAMPAIGNS

After the conference, we launched a nation-wide street campaign to raise the minimum wage in cooperation with other civil society groups. Activities were organized in nine cities, and continued until the Minimum Wage Council defined the 2001 minimum wage.

The national media was very interested in our survey and subsequent campaign activities, which were featured in most Korean newspapers and broadcast on prime time national television. Media representatives told us they were interested in this minimum wage story because our survey had vividly described the situation of poor workers, and was the first to uncover evidence of exploitation of poor workers through misuse of the legal system. We had also timed our campaign to increase media interest in the issue of the minimum wage. At the time, many Koreans were increasingly concerned about widening income differentials, and the worsening condition of poor workers. Our exposure of this problem through the survey provided the media with an opportunity to connect our story with broader societal concerns.

Our engagement of the media continued to be a key priority throughout the street campaign. There were several steps critical to generating media interest in our street campaigning:

- media catchy slogans,
- petitions that highlighted the public's concern, and
- symbolic demonstrations that provided the media with "picture-ready" material highlighting the issue.

In addition, we always distributed materials about our events to the media, and shared documentation with them to defend our positions.

DEVELOPING A SLOGAN

We thought our campaign could gain wider media publicity with a powerful slogan. We selected the slogan "Can you live on 420,000 won (KRW) a month?" This is the equivalent of approximately 430 USD, and was the amount a full-time worker would earn at the minimum wage. This amounted to only 33.6% of the average wage of Korean workers in 2001, and 35.3% of the average expenses for a family of four living in urban areas. This was of particular concern because

35% of respondents were the main wage earners in their families at the time of the survey.

When average citizens realized the minimum wage amounted to only 420,000 KRW, many wondered "How can workers earning the minimum wage survive on that!?" Our slogan was effective in changing public perception regarding the minimum wage. If we had chosen the slogan "The minimum wage should be raised to a realistic level," the slogan may not have resonated with the public, as the term "minimum wage" was not very well known. One poll suggested that only 40% of South Koreans were aware of the minimum wage. Instead, our slogan, phrased as a question, was thought-provoking for many people.

PETITION FOR CHANGE

With the interest generated by our slogan, we began circulating a petition demanding an increase in the minimum wage. The media was critical in spreading the message about the petition. A magazine and some newspapers reported on our campaign and asked readers to participate in an on-line petition. As a result, many Koreans wrote their name on the on-line petition.

Most of the people we met on the street during our campaign had been unaware of the cleaners' working conditions, and were very sympathetic to our cause. All those who learned about the issue said "I didn't know we had such poor workers! How can they live on such low wages?"

Though most people knew little about the minimum wage system, they agreed to sign the petition to alleviate the suffering of poor workers. In one month, we gathered approximately 15,000 signatures. We also created an on-line board where people could



Gathering signatures for the petition (Seoul, May 28, 2002)
NOTE: See the cartoon format of the posters that easily caught the eye of the public.

add signatures. We were delighted to learn that many overseas Koreans signed the on-line petition after reading about the campaign in on-line newspapers.

APPLYING PRESSURE TO THE WAGE BOARD AND MINISTRY OF LABOR

As media publicity, and public interest and support for our cause grew, union representatives met with members of the Minimum Wage Council to demand an increase in the minimum wage. The KWWAU invited delegates from NGOs and trade unions to a formal meeting it had organized with Council members. We provided Council members with the signed petitions, newspaper articles highlighting our campaign, and public opinion information. At the meeting, Council members appeared very tense and uncomfortable. They had never before been the target of such demands.

While we pressured the Minimum Wage Council, we also brought legal cases against businesses that paid less than the minimum wage, and pressured the Ministry of Labor to launch more investigations of businesses for violating the law, to which the Ministry agreed. After we had received promises to investigate labor law violations from a representative of the Ministry who attended the conference, we sent a formal letter to keep up the pressure. The ministry once again committed to launch an investigation.

Through this mix of tactics, we succeeded in raising the minimum wage 12% in 2001.

CHANGED SITUATION: Shift in Strategic Goal and Tactics

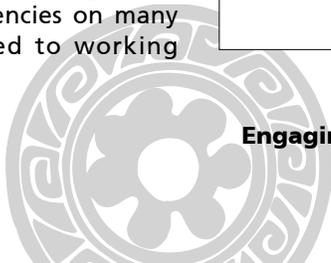
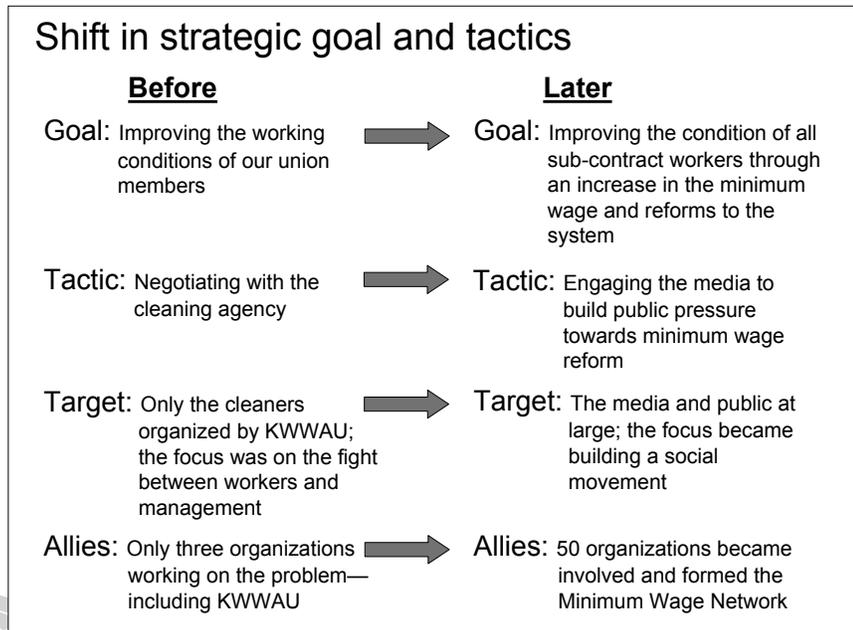
It is important to recognize our initial, most urgent, goal throughout the campaign was to improve the working conditions of the workers we had organized. We fought against their dismissals from jobs, and negotiated with the cleaning agencies for improvements. While negotiating with six cleaning agencies, we learned that the cleaning agencies were unable to increase wages because the bidding process resulted in little room for cost increases. This meant that while we could negotiate with the agencies on many issues related to working

conditions, the only way to raise the cleaners’ wages was to raise the minimum wage. An increased minimum wage would not only benefit the cleaners, but all sub-contract workers. We saw that there was an opportunity to involve other social movements in our struggle.

Over time, our goal broadened from improving the cleaners’ working conditions to changing the situation of all sub-contract workers. Our tactic changed from negotiating with cleaning agencies to engaging the media to bring public pressure to bear on the minimum wage system. We sought out new allies from other social movements to expand the reach of our efforts.

Once the minimum wage became the social issue, many other organizations were interested in participating in the campaign. We welcomed their involvement, as we felt that the campaign needed to be broadened in order to achieve broad reform of the minimum wage system. Other organizations and trade unions also thought the minimum wage campaign was necessary to improve the situation of a growing number of Korean working poor families. So we decided to work together.

As a result, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions established a Minimum Wage Network in 2002. KWWAU was the co-organizer of the network. The creation of the Minimum Wage Network marked a shift in the strategies and tactics we would employ. Throughout the entire process we continued to prioritize media involvement. Some of the significant



changes marking the new campaign included:

MORE ORGANIZATIONS PARTICIPATED IN THE ISSUE AND REPRESENTED THEIR OWN WORKERS

In 2001, only three organizations participated in the minimum wage campaign. After the creation of the network, fifty organizations were involved. Within the network, each organization focused on defending the segment of low wage workers they represented. For example, the KWWAU typically represented the sub-contract cleaners working in universities, whereas another organization, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, represented part-time students. The KCTU advocated for the rights of sub-contract cleaners working in subways. The Migrant Workers' Committee also represented its workers. With the participation of all these different organizations, we were able to publicize more cases of minimum wage earners. Network members conducted surveys of their workers that were then shared with the media, using the same tactics we had used.

MORE EXPANDED AND COORDINATED CAMPAIGN

With the greater reach of the network, we had campaigns in more cities, for a longer period of time. Delegates from network organizations held numerous meetings to gather ideas for the campaign and develop a timetable. Campaign tasks were coordinated and divided between network organizations. For example, when the network decided to have a Minimum Wage Campaign Week, each organization would coordinate events for one day. The women's group participated on Monday, trade unions on Tuesday, civic organizations on Wednesday, and so on. We all shared one pool of money to pay for campaign activities and produce publications. The organizations with local branches like the KWWAU and the KCTU carried out the campaign nation-wide during the week. As a result, many organizations were involved in the campaign across South Korea.

Usually, we planned the campaigns to coincide with the Minimum Wage Council meetings, and developed engaging events to draw the interest of the media and general public. The steps involved in the media-friendly campaigns were as follows:

- Press conference: At the press conference, we explained how much the minimum wage should be raised, and informed the media of campaign details, including which actions we would take
- Street campaigns: Actions were taken in many cities simultaneously. In Seoul, we organized events almost every week. Activists from network organizations rotated their participation

in these events, sharing the burden of these intensive activities and providing on-going events for media to cover.

As we crafted our events, we selected locations where we would have the greatest impact. The events were usually held in downtown areas where there are large crowds. In Seoul, we also held demonstrations at the gate of the minimum wage council. We tried to be creative with our demonstrations, and we thoughtfully considered how to make them:

- Symbolic
- Accessible to the general public
- Engaging to the media, including photojournalists (creating "picture-ready" events)

While each event was different, there were certain actions we included in all events:

- We always gathered signatures for our petitions.
- We always included some kind of performance. Some examples are:
 - Throwing water balloons on a wall where it is written "too low minimum wage."
 - The minimum wage earners' description of their lives of poverty.
 - March against the low minimum wage.
 - Writing postcards to Minimum Wage Council members.

For the purposes of this notebook, I will briefly describe in greater depth three such events: "Lunch with Yong-Hee," "Yung Suk Defends her Wage!" and "Hunger" Demonstrations.

Lunch with Yong-Hee, the Minimum Wage Earner

Yong-Hee Choi, a 57-year old minimum wage earner, working in a college in Incheon City as a cleaner. She has two daughters and a husband, and is the primary wage earner in her family.

At the time, her younger daughter was a college student, her older daughter was unemployed, and her husband an alcoholic. Due to the low wages she earned working at the college, she also took a second part-time job, gathering paper for recycling. The total amount she earned in a given month was 792,000 (820USD). At our performance, we showed her household accounting books.

Due to the lack of disposable income, Yong-Hee commuted on foot. She was unable to purchase clothing, so she received donations from her family and co-workers.



Photos depicting the Lunch with Yong-Hee.

We calculated the costs of one meal, from Yong-Hee's account book. She could afford a meal costing 944 KRW (0.92 USD). A meal sold at an inexpensive restaurant in South Korea costs about 3,500–4,000. The cheapest hamburger runs about 2,500KRW. A Big Mac costs 3,500. Yong-Hee's average meal was less than 1/3 of a McDonald's hamburger.

With this background, we staged a funny performance in front of the Korean Assembly. We prepared Yong-Hee's 944 KRW meal and shared it with the 60 participants at the performance. Participants included reporters from the media. We named this event "Lunch with Yong-Hee."

Our performance was so successful that it was reported in nearly all newspapers and broadcast on two major television news programs during prime time.

Yong-Hee's Accounts Book	
Expenses	KRW (USD)
Hospital Fee for Husband	200,000 (\$207)
Meal	170,000 (\$176)
Insurance	122,000 (\$126)
Allowance for Daughters	115,000 (\$119)
Fuel	50,000 (\$52)
Tax	35,000 (\$36)
Interest on loans for tuition	50,000 (\$52)
Her allowance	50,000 (\$52)
Total	792,000 (\$820)

Jung Suk defends her wage!

On July 27, 2005, we organized a "Jung Suk Defends her Wage!" event. This was the day after the 2005-2006 wage increase was decided. The incremental increase was only 9.2%, and followed a change in legislation that created a five day work week. With the new work week, working hours were reduced from 44 to 40 hours per week, and monthly and yearly leave time was also decreased. Under the previous system, low income workers would have received the increased wage of 700,600 KRW per month. However, with the reduction in working hours, wages decreased for contract workers who are paid on an hourly basis.

After learning of the disappointing decision of the Minimum Wage Council, including the KWWAU, in conjunction with other women's groups, organized an urgent action campaign to demand greater protection for contract workers to the Ministry of Labor. Drawing on the success of the "Lunch with Yong-Hee" event, we chose once again to make a real victim the main character of our media event.

The victim's name was Jung Suk. As a direct result of the Council's decision, her working hours and wages were going to decrease. She wanted to protect her wages. We named the event "Jung Suk Defends her Wage!"

Organizing the performance for this event was more difficult than the previous campaign. The minimum wage for the year had already been decided, and we feared that reporters might be growing tired of the minimum wage issue. We spent three days planning the performance with the media in mind.

We came up with the idea of using "ice" as a symbol for the decreases in wages. It was a hot summer and the temperature soared to 33 degrees Celsius on the day of the perfor-



Photos depicting Jung Suk Defending her wage.



mance. The melting of ice would represent the reductions in wages faced by women like Jung Suk. Her role in the performance would be to prevent the ice from melting. To add to the symbolism, we placed coins in the ice, amounting to Jung Suk's wage. At the end of the campaign, most of the coins dropped around Jung Suk as the ice melted.

The event turned out to be very successful, for everyone except Jung Suk (who was dripping wet by the end!). Many newspapers featured a photo of the event. However, we failed at the time to convince the Ministry of Labor to make any changes, and we continue to negotiate with cleaning agencies to ensure fair wages for the cleaners under the 40 hour work week.

Hunger Demonstrations

In addition to these events that featured one victim of the minimum wage system, we also had some on-going demonstrations. When the Minimum Wage Council was deliberating, we would organize events outside the gates of the Council venue. We would begin the demonstration at 7:00 in the morning because the council meeting began at 8:00a.m. We wanted to ensure we met the members of the council as they arrived. My colleagues named these events "hunger demonstrations" because we went without breakfast. We could only have a meal once we finished the demonstration around 10:00a.m. By that time, we all felt hungry!



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Tactical Impact

There are a number of ways we have been able to evaluate our success in engaging the media to build pressure for change. Since we began our campaigning on the minimum wage system in June 2001, there has been an annual *average increase in the minimum wage of over ten percent.*

During our campaign, we came to know how seriously flawed the minimum wage system was in South Korea. It no longer seemed enough to simply raise the annual wage increases. Since 2002, we have lobbied the Korean Assembly to overhaul the entire system. During the Presidential election in 2002, we also

Minimum Wage Increase Chart

Period of Application	Minimum wage per month	Increase (%)
Sep. 1997 – Aug. 1998	334,610 KRW / 240 USD	6.07
Sep. 1998 – Aug. 1999	344,650 KRW / 286 USD	2.69
Sep. 1999 – Aug. 2000	361,600 KRW / 316 USD	4.90
Sep. 2000 – Aug. 2001	421,490 KRW / 335 USD	16.60
Sep. 2001 – Aug. 2002	474,600 KRW / 358 USD	12.60
Sep. 2002 – Aug. 2003	514,150 KRW / 428 USD	8.40
Sep. 2003 – Aug. 2004	567,260 KRW / 474 USD	10.30
Sep. 2004 – Aug. 2005	641,840 KRW / 615 USD	13.10
Sep. 2005 – Dec. 2006	700,600 KRW / 686 USD	9.20

demanded promises to reform the minimum wage system to protect the rights of low wage workers. We are proud to have influenced the Korean government to adopt some reforms.

The improved minimum wage system includes the following safeguards:

COMPANIES AND THEIR SUB-CONTRACTING AGENCIES HAVE TO ABIDE BY THE MINIMUM WAGE LAWS

Before the reforms were implemented, the company providing contracts had the power to determine the wage of sub-contract workers, but they weren't ultimately responsible for ensuring sub-contract workers received the minimum wage since the sub-contracting agency paid labor costs. Under current law, the contracting company will face fines of up to 20,000,000 KRW (over 21,000 USD) or under 3 years' imprisonment if sub-contract workers are underpaid as a result of low bidding.



Minimum wage campaign organized by cleaners (Incheon City June, 2003)

IMPROVED TIMING OF MINIMUM WAGE INCREASES

Prior to the changes, the minimum wage was set in July, with enforcement beginning in September. This disadvantaged sub-contract workers employed by government agencies, since the government budget cannot be changed until December. They would therefore receive the previous year's minimum wage from September to December. The new regulations provide for changes to the minimum wage to go into effect each January.

BROADER GAINS

We have also watched our movement grow over time, which is an additional impact of our tactic. About fifty organizations are now involved in this issue. More sub-contract workers are also actively participating in the movement to defend their rights. For me, this is the most important impact. Through our efforts, more sub-contract workers are unionized—the more workers that are involved, the more dynamic our campaigning. Workers soon realized that increasing the minimum wage would have clear benefits for them, and they committed their time to the effort. In some colleges, they organized events such as gathering signatures for petition, holding street campaigns, and distributing brochures during their lunch breaks everyday for two months.

Workers also began to view their participation as essential. Suddenly, they were no longer isolated in their lives as sub-contract workers. They were expressing solidarity with other workers. They were an important part of a movement.

Challenges

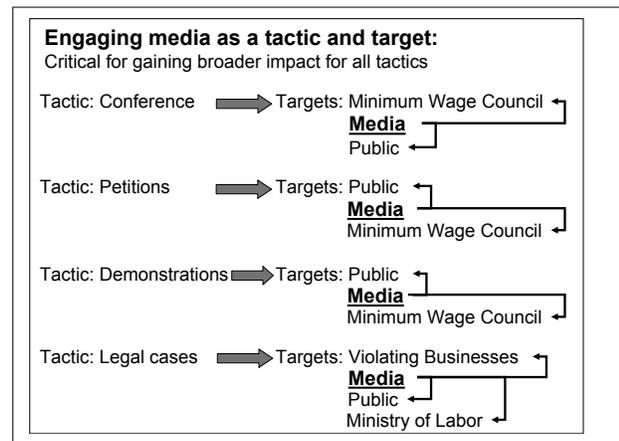
Five years have passed since we initiated the minimum wage campaign. Despite numerous small successes, we have faced many challenges.

The most difficult limitation to our campaign has been our exclusion from the primary decision-making body: the Minimum Wage Council. We have been advocating for the participation of irregular workers in the Council, where they currently are not represented. Instead, it has been a continual struggle to pressure the Council to prioritize the interests of irregular workers, disproportionately affected by the minimum wage. We continue to demand that the council body be reformed to represent the interests of women and irregular workers.

In addition, although the minimum wage has almost doubled since we began our campaign, the minimum wage remains too low. We have been unsuccessful so far in achieving our ultimate goal: to fix the annual minimum wage to half the average wage of all South Korean workers.

Tactic Transferability: Lessons Learned

When I first heard of the New Tactics project, I asked myself which of our tactics had been most critical to the success of our movement. Media was one key target that connected many of our tactics. (See diagram “Engaging media as a tactic and target”)



This tactic can be used even more broadly. While the issue of minimum wages may not be a priority in other countries, the tactic of engaging the media for public awareness is widely transferable to any society and issue where there is a semi-independent media.

In order to influence media coverage of our issue, we found several lessons particularly useful:

BUILD TRUST WITH WORKERS — GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

The organizing work we had carried out with cleaners fostered a relationship of trust between us. This



foundation of trust was necessary to gain their support and involvement in our campaigns, thus making the minimum wage campaign more sustainable.

ALLOWING VICTIMS OF ABUSE TO TELL THEIR STORIES

The media was very excited to share real stories of people affected by the minimum wage system. Victims of abuse are often ashamed of their situation. This is also the case for many low wage workers. They don't necessarily want to be exposed through the media. However, our grassroots organizing work had created trust between us. Workers came to understand how the media's sharing of their stories could lead to changes in their situation and that of other workers.

CREDIBLE DOCUMENTATION OF THE ISSUE

The information we gathered from our counseling centers drew out true and credible stories of women affected by the minimum wage system. The stories coming out of the centers gave us a foundation from which to create a survey to document the extent to which abuses and limitations in the minimum wage system affected many sub-contract workers. Moreover, the reliability of our information was essential to building credibility with the media and ultimately with the public.

TIMING FOR EFFECTIVE MEDIA INVOLVEMENT

In South Korea, the Minimum Wage Council only deliberates for three months. As a result, it was essential to focus the concern of the public on this issue rapidly, and for the duration of the Council. We understood that the media would not always cover our issue, so we called on them only when we felt it was most urgent, and when the public had an opportunity to take action.

In my view, strong minimum wage systems are one of the best ways to protect poor workers and limit income disparities within society. South Korea is not the only country facing widening gaps between the rich and poor. For example, the United States has a similar labor market model to South Korea, and is afflicted by many of the same problems, including decreasing real wages, large populations of workers earning only the minimum wage, and growing numbers of workers in temporary, part-time or otherwise precarious work environments. In reality, a strong minimum wage system is important in any country where one finds:

- An increasingly irregular workforce
- Widening income differentials
- Little political power among the working poor
- Limited social safety nets
- Severe gender disparities in wages

- An exploitative labor market

In our case, we had success because we convinced the public that the prevention of income disparities in our country was a legitimate social justice concern. It is important to offer convincing arguments backed up by reliable information. Through media involvement, the public came to agree with us that raising the minimum wage allows workers and their children to escape poverty.

Over the five years that we have been carrying out our minimum wage campaign, the numbers of working poor in South Korea have continued to increase. The problem is also deepening in other Asian countries, where we are now organizing minimum wage campaigns. Currently, twenty Asian countries are participating in campaigns for a just minimum wage system. It is our on-going challenge to defend the economic rights of our most vulnerable workers.

Conclusion

First, it is very important to have research and evidence to back up your advocacy strategy. The media are interested in stories that they can defend. In our case, we focused on stories from real victims and a survey process.

Second, the timing of your efforts to engage the media can affect the outcome. It is helpful to focus your campaign on an issue that is current, and reflects societal concerns. The media can then connect your story and issue to broader social problems.

Finally, creativity is both fun and effective! By organizing symbolic and engaging events, we consistently sparked the interest of the print and broadcast media in South Korea. It is a chance for media representatives to learn about your issue and bring it to the attention of the general public.

I hope our experience will help give others many more ideas. Media engagement to increase public support for a human rights issue can only be judged successful when you persuade the public to take action.

Irregular workers are those individuals employed part-time, or on a daily or temporary basis. Irregular workers are typically part of the most vulnerable economic class in their societies.

For a full list of publications available in the New Tactics Tactical Notebook Series, go to: <http://www.newtactics.org>