



KLI Working Paper

September 15, 2022

For Inquiry: KLI Academic Publishing Team

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The Climate Crisis and the World of Work (I) : The Climate Crisis and a Just Transition

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Abstract

Although humans are a part of nature, nature has traditionally been recognized as “the other” of labor. Labor has cut off labor and nature by perceiving job creation and environmental protection as separate goals, and as a result, delayed the emergence of nature as an integral part of the production process and as a collaborator of labor. Due to such historical antagonism between labor and nature, or the wrong dichotomy, nature (environment, ecology) failed to occupy even a single spot in the trade union movement or labor research. Recently, however, as the impact of the climate crisis intensifies, the need to explore the “relationship” between labor and nature by including nature in labor research has been increasing.

Against this background, this study discusses the discourses and perspectives surrounding the climate crisis and the world of work. Also, it attempts to

provide an overview of the impact of industrial policies to respond to the climate crisis on the labor market, focusing on the coal-fired power generation, auto, and clothing industries, and seeks to draw implications for labor policy.

The researchers who participated in this study have diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds such as law, economics, business administration, labor sociology, science technology, environmental sociology, and international development studies. This is because discussions about the climate crisis and the world of work need to take a multidisciplinary approach, and include diverse viewpoints and opinions. In terms of research methods, it has to be comprehensive, ranging from research that poses philosophical questions implied by the thesis of “humanization of labor” to microscopic studies on workers’ perceptions and attitudes toward the climate crisis and industrial transformation process. As a starting point for

discussing the climate crisis in labor research, we attempted to reveal the multilayered aspects of the impact of the climate crisis on the world of work, and to suggest areas and issues that should be noted in future labor research.

1. Causes of the Climate Crisis and Response Strategies: From the Perspective of Climate Justice and a Just Transition

Climate change is a huge crisis caused by the phenomenon of “great acceleration” created by industrial society after transitioning away from the “Holocene Epoch,” covering the last 10,000 years, which facilitated the development of human civilization. Although the explanation that climate change is caused by greenhouse gases emitted by human industrial activities is an essential explanation to combat climate deniers, it is not sufficient. Such “carbon reductionist” logic leads to market-and technology-driven solutions, turning attention away from the need for transformation or transition of the current capitalist growth system, which is the root cause of the climate crisis. The climate crisis is the result of international and social inequality. Countries in the northern hemisphere that started industrial activities early and built enormous economic wealth are responsible for most of the accumulated greenhouse gas emissions to date. In addition, the consumption activities of the world’s rich with the highest incomes account for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions. Nevertheless, the damage caused by climate change is overwhelmingly concentrated on poor countries and poor individuals. The huge climate crisis stems from severe climate injustice.

The international cooperation system to respond

to climate change was established by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992. The provision of scientific analysis and recommendations led by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) resulted in the creation of an “epistemic community,” enabling international cooperation. The Kyoto Protocol, signed in 1997, was a system that required only developed countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions until 2012, but was deemed a failure due to the withdrawal of the U.S. and others, despite meeting its external target. After overcoming the failure of the Copenhagen summit in 2009, the Paris Agreement, signed in 2015, established a new climate regime starting in 2021. Through the Paris Agreement, the Parties agreed to “hold the average global temperature increase to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” (the 2°C goal) and “pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels” (the 1.5°C goal). The Parties also agreed to submit their 2030 reduction targets (NDC) but progress with implementation has been slow.

In 2006, the Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment held in Nairobi, Kenya, resolved to “strengthen the link between poverty reduction, environmental protection and decent work”. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), established in the same year, succeeded this resolution and began intervening in international climate negotiations in 2007. The ITUC’s intervention is based on the analysis that climate change will bring a major shock to labor and that mitigation policies will have a negative impact on current jobs. However, the ITUC is supportive of greenhouse gas reduction policies. It just insists that damage and costs should not be passed on to the workers and that there should be support in the transition process. After its continuous efforts, the

ITUC incorporated the principle of “just transition” into the Paris Agreement and gained widespread support. However, not all unions are taking the same attitude toward the possibility of job loss. Also, there are different understandings of “just transition” itself, ranging from one that focuses on protecting the current jobs to one that seeks structural change that resolves even existing social inequality.

Recently, the international community has abandoned the 2°C goal of the Paris Agreement and is focusing on the 1.5°C goal. This is because the social awareness of the seriousness of the climate crisis and the demand for action are high. Many countries have set a target of “carbon neutrality” for 2050, strengthened the reduction target for 2030, and are specifying policies to realize those targets. The European Union announced the “European Green Deal” at the end of 2019, enacted the climate law in June 2021, and announced the “Fit for 55” containing a set of legislative proposals in July 2021. The U.S. has also strengthened its greenhouse gas reduction target under the recent Biden administration. The large-scale investment plan aimed at rebuilding the U.S. economy and creating jobs takes the “Green New Deal” approach that seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and preserve ecosystems at the same time. The mitigation policies that the international community is strengthening are now leading to the establishment of policies to reduce or stop the use of fossil fuels, and the introduction of new international trade rules such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. Meanwhile, with the rapid transition to a decarbonized energy system, interest and suggestions for policies and systems for a just transition are also increasing.

The climate policy, which was partially attempted during the Lee Myung-bak administration, has been

implemented in full swing during the later period of the Moon Jae-in administration. The Moon Jae-in government declared the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, established the 2050 Carbon Neutrality Commission, and adopted carbon neutrality scenarios to materialize its goal. In addition, the reduction target by 2030 has been strengthened. Korea’s National Assembly also passed the Framework Act on Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth to support such efforts. However, the government has already wasted time by delaying the urgent response, re-adopted the old strategy of “green growth,” and failed to put the principle of climate justice at the forefront. Accordingly, the Korean government’s carbon neutrality scenarios and the reduction target by 2030 are expected to continue to cause controversy over “the appropriateness of the greenhouse gas reduction target,” “the timeliness and appropriateness of the individual reduction measures,” as well as “the direction of just transition policies.”

2. The Climate Crisis and Labor Law

The history of labor law can be summarized as a history that governs the dehumanization of labor caused by the development of technology, as evidenced by the experience of the 1st and 2nd industrial revolutions. Labor law, along with universal social security and public services, contributed to the birth of a social state. However, the social state already had an ecological dilemma by objectifying nature in exchange for humanizing labor. This is because the social state, and labor law as a part of it, had limitations in their very way of humanizing labor. Labor law chose to circumvent the philosophical question implied by the humanization of labor thesis

rather than directly responding to it. It sought to improve the socioeconomic status of workers through the enhancement of productivity. As a result, the alienation of labor inherent in capitalist industrialism itself was forgotten or ignored. In any case, however, the problem of alienation of labor could be put on hold throughout the twentieth century, thanks to the increase in productivity achieved, especially after World War II, which resulted in the release of huge amounts of greenhouse gases.

However, with the deepening of the climate crisis, further productivity growth has become impossible. Even if there is still a possibility, it is no longer a desirable path. At the same time, the path stipulated in the founding charter of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1919, namely, “régime de travail réellement humain” (a truly human work regime), has become a question that could no longer be deferred.

The neoliberal reaction that began in the 1980s further exacerbated the crisis. Totalitarian markets have resulted in extreme transformation of labor and nature into resources. According to Karl Polanyi, labor, money, and land are not commodities, but the capitalist market treats the three elements as commodities. The tension built into the conflict between reality and fiction explodes if not systematically controlled. Such controlling should be done by labor law, financial law, and environmental law. These laws constitute the basis of the market. In contrast, neoliberalism treats these laws as market commodities. Companies compete within the framework of legislation under the normative structure of the nation-state, whereas nation-states participate in competitive bidding for the lowest price against transnational corporations in the neoliberal global normative structure. In such competition, the labor law, financial law, and environmental law

of each country is compared. Businesses invest in countries that offer these legislative products at the lowest price (i.e., in the most favorable way for them). This is what is called “law shopping”. Law shopping not only aggravated inequality at the global level, but also constantly brought about financial and ecological crises.

As such, the climate crisis and labor crisis are closely linked. In that sense, responding to the climate crisis is not a matter of industrial policy or policy change, but a matter of transforming the neoliberal system or, more fundamentally, transforming the capitalist system itself. However, labor law is still caught in the trap of industrialism. Those who are concerned about the climate crisis think only about ecological issues or may consider financial issues, but they do not seem to pay attention to labor and labor law. The so-called “just transition” concept seems to only refer to the reinforcement of unemployment compensation and vocational training in the process of job relocation, and the participation of workers in the process.

On the other hand, no one really raises the following questions in earnest: What is work? Why do we work? What is a truly human work regime? What is a labor system in which humans and nature can coexist peacefully, not one that reduces humans and nature to energy sources? How should labor law change if it were to be ideal as a law about labor? The climate crisis and the labor crisis must be solved at the same time. Otherwise, neither of them can be solved.

Humans, above all else, change the world through their work. The term ‘Anthropocene’ also points out that human labor is intervening in nature beyond its limits. From the point of view of labor law, it can be said that the climate crisis is caused by labor and labor law that are caught in the trap of industrialism, in other

words, the pursuit of limitless wealth or the illusion of indefinite economic growth.

Among the questions that are referred to as the five Ws and one H (who, when, where, what, why, how), the current labor law covers only the first three. Who works? This is a matter pertaining to workers. When do they work? This is about working hours. Where do they work? This is about the scope of application of labor law. The other three questions are excluded. The question of “Why do they work?” is reduced to the question of “For how much money do they work?” and the question of “What do they make and how do they make it?” is effectively left to the employer’s sole discretion. The bargaining power of workers is limited to how much they sell their labor per hour. Workers seek to maximize wages, while employers maximize productivity. In this way, labor is converted into employment.

This principle, which made a certain compromise between labor and capital possible, was extended to the organizing principle of the entire industrialist society after World War I. This is often referred to as Fordism. Fordism gave birth to a society of mass production and mass consumption. Although people now talk about post-Fordism, current labor law is still based on this principle (Of course, this statement needs to be relativized to some extent. With neoliberalism, the traditional Fordist compromise was broken. But such breaking is one-sided. High wages have disappeared, but high productivity has not. The neoliberal system mobilizes precarious labor to enhance productivity. Labor law is still caught in this trap and cannot get out of it).

Behind Fordism there is an illusion of scientific rationality. Taylor emphasized the necessity of scientific management from the point of view of

capital. This is a well-known fact. However, the dilemma of the ILO is not well-known. When the ILO was founded in 1919, it had already declared the principle that labor was not a commodity. However, in the reality of the capitalist wage-labor society, it leaned towards industrialism or productivism without securing a concrete prospect of the principle. In other words, its position was to eradicate poverty and improve the status of workers by enhancing productivity. It could be said that this was perhaps the inevitable path for the ILO because scientific rationality was something that was accepted by both labor and capital as a kind of law. For as long as it is a law, humans can only apply and adapt to it, and they will not be able to turn away from it.

Industrialism, or, in a more general term, economic growth supremacy, has its origins all the way back to Mandeville, not Adam Smith. Mandeville strictly affirmed individual selfishness and desire, arguing that private vice results in public benefits. Adam Smith simply replaced the term “private vice” that has a negative connotation with the term “self-love” which gives a positive nuance. The driving force behind capitalist industrial society is not the ascetic rationalism of Protestantism as Max Weber said, but the selfish and private desires of individuals liberated by Mandeville. The spirit of capitalism based on Mandeville’s ethics accepts economic growth as a law of nature.

For a sustainable community, it is necessary to learn the sense or meaning of limits. The debate over the Green New Deal and degrowth is meaningful in that respect. However, labor is missing from this debate. Labor is simply reduced to the problem of employment fluctuations and movement, and there is no discussion of the sense or meaning of labor. The sense or meaning of limits cannot be separated from the sense or

meaning of labor. This is because man confronts the physical world through labor, and thus learns his limits and controls his imagination.

Work is not merely a means of realizing one's personal desire. Work is the fulfillment of individuals' obligations towards each other. One's life is purely dependent on the work of others, and one's work is the act of paying off debts owed from the work of others. This mutual relationship is called social solidarity, which becomes the basic principle of maintaining a community. Work has three dimensions of survival (labor), self-fulfillment (work), and social solidarity (action) that always coexist.

It is necessary to reconstruct a new labor law based on the restored concept of labor. Labor law should no longer be limited to the question of who, when, and where. Labor should not be immersed in the question of how much labor is sold per hour. Capital should not treat workers as mindless machines in the name of scientific rationality. The development of digital technology fosters a new level of imagination that treats workers as thinking machines, but the representation has only changed from a clockwork mechanism to a computer, and the dehumanization of labor is deepening rather than stopping. The new labor law should cover the three questions of "What will they make?" "How will they work?" and "Why do they work?" By doing so, it can also embody the values proclaimed by the ILO Declaration of Philadelphia, namely, the concept of labor that maximally contributes to the common good.

The workplace must break out of the trap of industrialism. The workplace should be a place that creates something that can contribute to the public good, a place where the pride of *Homo faber's* combining of human thought and action is reflected,

and a place where one's own labor becomes an opportunity to form solidarity with others. Such a workplace will no longer be a grand factory dominated by Taylor-Fordism. It is unlikely that a large factory system and a human workplace will be compatible. *Homo faber's* workplace will inevitably be an atelier in which the concept of human scale operates. Metaphorically speaking, a large factory makes cars, and an atelier makes bicycles.

A *Homo faber* rides a bicycle to work, not a car. Riding a bicycle is an act of slowing down. Capitalism, on the other hand, is essentially a political system of speed. In factories, workers are subordinated to the speed of machines; in cities, citizens are subordinated to the speed of cars. Economic growth is the process of increasing this rate. Urban landscapes represent the hearts of citizens. It can be said that cars overtaking the car in front while crossing lanes and driving through the city at high speed reveal the competitive spirit of the people caught in the endless competition. On the other hand, labor that is truly human requires a relocation of workplace and housing. This is ultimately a matter of redesigning the city.

At this point, however, the following question naturally arises: Does human labor and atelier labor law still presuppose capitalism? We are not interested in the name of a system that makes truly human labor possible. If it is possible even in capitalism, it would be good to maintain capitalism. If it is impossible under capitalism, it would be good to envision a different system. This is because our interest is not to think about a labor system that can sustain capitalism, but on the contrary, to think about a system that makes human labor compatible with ecological values.

3. The Climate Crisis and The Response of Labor

Since the climate crisis is also a labor crisis, the response of the labor circle is important in responding to the climate crisis. Thus, this chapter analyzed the situation in Korea, organizing the responses of the labor circle to the climate crisis by perspective and type.

The various perspectives of responding to the climate crisis and the strategies of trade unions discussed in the existing literature were examined. The existing responses to cope with the climate crisis and income inequality can be summarized into three scenarios: Green Growth, Green New Deal, and Degrowth. All three scenarios include the elements of carbon tax, high energy efficiency and renewable energy but differ slightly in the following characteristics: Green Growth is more focused on 1) high labor productivity, and 2) increase in consumption; Green New Deal is more focused on 2) increase in consumption, 3) job guarantee, and 4) working time reduction; and Degrowth is more focused on 3) job guarantee, 4) working time reduction, 5) decrease in exports, 6) decrease in consumption, and 7) wealth tax (O'Neill, 2020).

Just transition policies can be divided into four types: the “status-quo” approach that promotes the transition to a low-carbon economy led by companies and markets while ensuring jobs for affected workers; the “managerial reform” approach which seeks greater equity and justice within the existing economic system; the “structural reform” approach that promotes structural reform of the current economic system while valuing governance improvement, democratic participation and decision-making, and collective ownership and management; and the “transformative”

approach that seeks to fundamentally transform the growth-oriented economy and political system (Morena et al., 2018). Various approaches to “transition” and “climate justice” are also being discussed. Climate justice can be described in various dimensions such as distributive, procedural, restorative, and recognitional dimension. In particular, attention is deserved to “recognitional climate justice,” which refers to the inclusion of non-human organisms and of cultures of others (minorities, climate refugees) that depend on the ecosystem in devising measures for combating climate change (Han Sang-woon et al., 2019); and “productive climate justice,” which means going beyond compensating workers for implementing decarbonization policies to guarantee their participation in socially useful production and related decision-making processes, and guarantee their right to stop work if it is harmful to nature (Lee Chang-geun, 2021). By analyzing European cases, it is possible to categorize trade unions’ strategies to respond to the climate crisis (Thomas & Dörflinger, 2020) into “opposition” which means rejecting the need to adopt carbon emission reduction policies, “hedging” in which unions advocate incremental approaches and minimized regulation, and “support” that refers to taking an active approach for ecological transformation while supporting mitigation policies.

Based on these diverse perspectives and strategies for responding to the climate crisis, and the concept of climate justice, this study evaluated the Korean trade unions’ strategies to respond to the climate crisis. It can be said that their strategy is close to hedging. They agree on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prepare industry-specific countermeasures to respond to the climate crisis, and are demanding the government, industries, companies to provide

information, guarantee jobs, prepare measures to support labor transition, strengthen the public nature of the energy transition process, and establish a response governance that guarantees stakeholder participation. The survey revealed that workers are highly supportive of an urgent switch to coal-free and renewable energy. However, depending on the effect of the energy transition process on employment, the Korean unions' response strategy may be located between hedging and support, or between hedging and opposition.

It can be evaluated that the Korean trade unions' response strategy—at least in the context of their demand—contains various dimensions of climate justice such as distributive, procedural, productive, and recognitional justice. However, it was difficult to find a strategy for reconstructing the relationship between humans and nature. Efforts to break away from the perception that nature is both an exploitable resource and a means to achieve production (Uzzell & Räthzel, 2019: 26), or to expand the unions' attention to ecosystems and others who depend on them were not explicitly identified. Also, the concerns and strategies for realizing “productive justice” were not shown. The concept of productive justice is concerned with the workers' controllability over the content (what), method (how), and reason (why) of work, i.e. the three questions that have been neglected so far among the five Ws and one H of labor law discussed earlier in this paper. Also, productive justice includes

not just protection from the natural environment that is harmful to humans but also limiting human labor that is harmful to nature. However, it was not possible to find much of such content from trade unions' strategies for responding to the climate crisis so far.

The relationship between environment and jobs explored initially in the chemical industry by Tony Mazzocchi, who created the concept of a just transition, was expanded to encompass the entire economy. Beyond the status quo responses such as job maintenance or economic stability of the local community, the discussions are now developing on the argument for a fundamental transformation of the economic social system (anti-capitalist degrowth) (Hong Duk-Hwa, 2020). However, while the Korean trade unions understood that the climate crisis was caused by the exploitative structure of capital centered on “growth,” their responses failed to explicitly suggest alternatives to the existing economic system. Even so, they point to companies and capital as the actors playing the biggest role in aggravating the climate crisis, emphasizing their responsibilities. This view is similar to the “managerial reform” approach classified by Morena et al. (2018), that is, pursuing fairness and justice within the existing economic system, focusing on labor and workplace-related issues, and emphasizing the importance of social dialogue and tripartite consultation.