

# **Between the TV and the Barricade: Performativity and Militancy of Subway Strikes in New York City and Seoul**

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*This paper compares two significant public transit strikes in New York City in 2005 and Seoul in 1999 through a comparative analysis of the process of emergence of the two strikes. The 2005 New York Transit strike was largely performative, lasted three days, and without the backing of a highly organized rank-and-file, but was able to secure lasting reforms in transit worker contracts. On the other hand, the militant, 11-day strike in Seoul in 1999 was met with heavy-handed state repression. I argue that the symbolic act of leveraging controlling images (Collins 1990) was a significant contributor to this divergence, where racialized legitimization strategies were pivotal in the relative success of the New York City strike. Lacking legal and political stability due to labor-repressive contexts in both cities, both transit unions used charisma and worker solidarity developed through collective emotions, articulated in class terms to symbolically reify, and legitimize the strike. However, the New York strike was proven to be more effective because of a cause-specific articulation of racial dispossession which resonated among a wider range of political interests, compared to a broad-based articulation of class-conflict in Seoul. This finding invites further inquiry into the impact of leadership, race, and class on trade union organizations in labor-repressive contexts, and the impact of legitimization processes in collective movements.*

## **Extended Abstract**

Speaking to the purely economic and organizational-political model of strikes, in the early 1980s, Bruce Kaufman proposed a unifying theory: the bargaining model of strikes. It stipulated that it is the lack of comprehensive information on both sides of a dispute leads to strikes rather than irreconcilable differences between labor and management (Kaufman 1981). Writing two decades later, Martin and Dixon highlight that strikes have evolved to be largely defensive and reactive, while offensive strikes happen opportunistically when workers have leverage at the bargaining table through a type of social movement unionism (A. W. Martin and Dixon 2010). Many agree that strikes are very performative (Rhomberg and Lopez 2021; Chun 2009) and taken

together, recent writing on strikes suggest that public-facing justification is not just a strategy, but a defining characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup>-century modes of collective action.

Assessing the reasons for the 1999 and 2005 strike, several oddities departing from macro-institutional theories stand out for the case of New York. Economic factors are indeterminate since unemployment levels were low during this period in New York, between 4 -5% (compared to 7% in 1980), as were inflation levels of 4% (compared to almost 15% in 1980).<sup>1</sup> The MTA also had a billion-dollar surplus, which was not cited in earlier union reports of the strike.<sup>2</sup> The repressive Taylor law also did not deter the union from going on strike in either 1980 or in 2005. This confirms Martin and Dixon's study of strikes between 1984-2002 that found that economic factors such as unemployment rates and inflation are not significant in predicting strikes (A. W. Martin and Dixon 2010, 115). Similarly, the bargaining model centered on information does not seem to completely explain the whole story. A negotiator who was in the room during the strike, mentioned at the beginning of the section also notes that it was clear that there was an "air of militancy" which preceded negotiations. These testimonies seem to confirm Hyman's 1972 insight that industrial arbitration is more political than judicial, and the assumption of informational rationality depends on power dynamics and performative justifications more than rationality (Hyman 1972, 110–11).

This puzzling dynamic is further confounded in comparison to the 1999 strike in Seoul. The 1999 strike was a direct challenge to the austerity policies that reigned over South Korea in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. While the public sector was not initially targeted

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/NYUR>; <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-inflation>

<sup>2</sup> Kagan, Marc, "Take Back The Power: The Fall and Rise and Fall of New York City's Transport Workers Union Local 100, 1975–2009" (2023). *CUNY Academic Works*. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/5457](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/5457) p.457

in the earlier days, or the negotiations of the IMF, in November of 1998, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) announced that 30% of the workforce, or 3,447 workers were to be laid off in the Seoul Metro, and wages and benefits reduced.<sup>3</sup> Similar terms were announced in several different public sector workplaces around the country.

Unlike the fragmented leadership under Toussaint's TWU Local-100 which led the 2005 MTA strike, the Seoul Transit Labor Union (STLU) demonstrated high levels of solidarity and organizational coherence. They were ready to fight. The leadership tasked with dealing with the layoffs announced in 1998 was a militant slate elected with the intention of carrying out direct action against the layoffs.<sup>4</sup> The rank-and-file were eager to fight and sought out a leader that could take serious action in the upcoming, inevitable struggle against the government. The militants won the union election with 50.75% of the vote on a platform to block structural adjustment, ensure employment stability, and plan a public-sector wide direct action against public sector austerity.<sup>5</sup> This was in direct contrast to the more performative demands and show of community solidarity in New York.

In context of the changing governance of the two cities, workers in both cities legitimized their strikes through framing worker action as a pro-social, discursive challenge. New York workers tied work to citizenship, using the language of dignity and respect. Hard working, upwardly mobile working-class men deserved jobs, a pension, and opportunities for mobility.

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<sup>3</sup> 서울지하철노동조합 30년사 1987-2017 정경원 전누리, 한내. P.384

<sup>4</sup> Seok Chi-soon interview with Youbin Kang, Seoul, March 23, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> 서울지하철노동조합 30년사 1987-2017 정경원 전누리, 한내. P.374

Seoul workers on the other hand, semiotically linked workers to historical agency, using the language of vanguards. They lead the offensive intending to structure the economy through socialist policies during a time of political volatility. In both cases, the resonance of these epistemic frames and morally charged identities were evident from heightened emotions which translated to collective action.

However, the outcomes of the strike were strikingly different. The highly organized, militant, and well-planned offensive in Seoul was met with military repression and a subsequent division of the transportation authority to mitigate the reach of the STLU, while the less organized, performative strike in New York was able to preserve its benefits and pensions, introduce a variety of training programs that enabled upward mobility of workers in the MTA, and concretize a preservation of jobs in the transit authority.

This paper, using a variety of archival sources and oral history interviews, argues that lacking legal and political stability due to labor-repressive contexts in both cities, both transit unions used charisma and worker solidarity developed through collective emotions, articulated in class terms to symbolically reify and legitimize the strike. However, the weaker economic punch of the New York strike was proven to be more effective because of a cause-specific articulation of racial dispossession which resonated among a wider range of political interests, compared to a broad-based articulation of class-conflict in Seoul. This finding invites further inquiry into the impact of leadership and race on trade union organizations in labor-repressive contexts, and the impact of legitimization processes in collective movements.