

# Union Characteristics and its Impact on Absenteeism in the Context of Metal Industry in South Korea\*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine whether key differences in characteristics of unions have significant implications for absenteeism. To uncover what characteristics of union made workers make decisions to be absent, this study used such key dimensions of unionism as democracy, cooperative strategy of a union, and density rate.

**Research design and methodology** – The research model of this study is that absenteeism has positive relations with union's democracy and density. But it has negative relations with union cooperative strategy. This study was conducted by survey method on 333 local unionized business entities of metal industry in South Korea.

**Results** – The result shows that significant and positive relationship between unions with high density rates, democracy and absenteeism which is in line with the argument of the previous studies. Different from the expectation, the hypotheses 2, it has been shown that there is positive relation between cooperative strategy of union and the decision of workers to be absent.

**Conclusions** – Employers with unions with high density rates could not fully exercise disciplinary power against those workers absent at workplace since a strong union shields them effectively from punishments by employers.

**Keywords:** Characteristics of unionism, Democracy, Union density, Cooperative strategy, Absenteeism, Exit-Voice effect

**JEL Classification Code:** J50, J53.

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## 1. Introduction

Although absenteeism causes disruptions on production plans and requires the increased use of substitute workers to replace absent workers (Allen, 1984), researches on absenteeism are very few (Chaudhury & NG, 1992). One of the distinctive scholarly debates was about the union effect on the absenteeism. However, there has been divorce between theoretical framework and empirical studies in terms of the union impact on absenteeism. The theoretical framework by Freeman and Medoff (1984), voice and exit effect of unionism, explains that a union would reduce the exit behavioral intention of workers such as turnover and absenteeism when it plays a role as an agency delivering the voice of discontents of workers at workplace, mediating between employers and workers and improving working and employment condition. However, different from Freeman and Medoff (1984), a number of studies have examined the impact of unions on absenteeism and have found a positive association (eg, Allen, 1981, 1984; Leigh, 1981, 1985, 1986) since union members tend to be absent from work due to the shielding effect of unionism which prevents employers from imposing penalties for worker's absenteeism. The divorce between voice-exit theoretical framework and the empirical studies roots from its homogeneous view point over unionism. The both have seen a union as a homogenous entity which would result in treating unions having homogeneous behavioral patterns and ignoring the fact that unions would behave differently depending on its characteristics which are defined by strategy, political stand point, level of solidarity and etc.

Under the assumption of that unions are heterogeneous, this study aims to advance the discussion with identifying the different level of absenteeism caused by characteristics defined by strategy, political stand point, level of solidarity unionism. Among various dimensions defining union characteristics, this study would focus on the union characteristics related to collective bargaining power of unions under the assumption of that those likely to exercise its higher collective bargaining power would increase absenteeism. Workers would make a decision to be absent when evaluating their union effective and powerful enough to shield them from sanctions imposed by managers for their absenteeism. The key factors this study explored are militancy, density, and level of democracy. Using survey data in metal industry in South Korea, this study discussed absenteeism is deferred by different characteristics of unionism.

## 2. Previous studies

The common behavioral patterns of the discontent workers at workplace are exit behaviors which are considered as signals to employers on the preferences and the causes of discontents at workplaces. According to Freeman and Medoff (1984), unions as voice agents provide workers with a collective voice through which unions express discontents of workers on behalf of their members and provide a direct channel of communication between workers and management. Employers also are able to pay attention to the issues of discontents of workers on a regular basis and solve the problems which cause the discontents of workers. With the presence of union at workplace, workers instead of responding to their dissatisfaction by exit behaviors, they can present their grievances through a union and seek to have the dissatisfaction resolved. At the end, a union as a collective voice institution can reduce exit behaviors including absenteeism and improve workplace morale (Addison & Belfield, 2004). However, different from the exit-voice theory by Freeman and Medoff (1984), empirical researchers of industrial relations have found out more absenteeism among unionized employees (Allen, 1984; Chaudhury & NG, 1992; Leigh, 1984; Veliziotis 2010; Tompa, Scott-Marshall, & Fang 2011). Using the data of the Current Population Survey (CPS) from 1973-1978, Allen (1984) found that the ratio of time lost from absenteeism to scheduled work time is 1.3 percentage points higher than that of non-union workers. Chaudhury and NG (1992) with the sample of 33 Canadian firms from both public and private sector found that non-union firms experience fewer days lost due to absenteeism. The similar finding was supported by Veliziotis (2010), Tompa, Scott-Marshall, and Fang, (2011) and Mastekaasa (2013).

The major reason for the divorce between the theoretical framework and empirical studies is that firstly, the complexity of the characteristic of the process where workers decide to be absent. The important implication of the exit-voice dichotomy is that the absence is not easily classified as a pure form of either exit or voice. "Exit" refers to the behavioral forms of workers who attempt to withdraw from workplaces due to the undesirable work condition. The voice, on the other hands, is a direct and constructive attempt to change and improve dissatisfying work situation. In this regards, absenteeism can be considered as an exit behavior in that it represents a form of behaviors of workers who would want to avoid an unpleasant work situation. However, it is not really "exit" since workers do not decide to permanently withdraw from the workplace. At the same time, absenteeism could be considered as workers' behaviors resulted from the voice mechanisms since it offers protective measures for the workers under the

collective bargaining system (Luchak & Gellatly, 1996). However, most of the previous studies attempt to classify and explain absenteeism into the framework of either exit or voice. As a result, they were not able to develop an adequate explanation of absenteeism, and the predictive power of the exit-voice framework has been reduced. To understand how a union influences workers to decide to be absent at workplace, the theoretical framework of absenteeism should not be dealt under the framework of exit-voice, since absenteeism has double dimensions of exit and voice.

Secondly, besides the issues of theoretical framework, the previous studies failed to see the variations within unionized firms. They treated a union a homogeneous entity and compared absenteeism among “union” and “nonunion” workplaces. Even if unionization tends to increase absenteeism, question remains: what union brings about absenteeism? Further, in terms of union effect, there are several studies reporting that there is no constant positive result found in terms of unionization effect on working condition. Little empirical evidence supports that unionization leads to better working conditions and promote safer working place (Morantz, 2009) while some studies show no stable constant result found in relation between unionization and the rate of injury or work-related illness (Robinson & Smallman, 2006).

In the efforts to find out different union affect absenteeism differently, Benson (1996) tested the different effect by different types of unionism on absenteeism under the assumption of that not all unions are the same. Analyzing the effect of different types of unionism in unionized workplaces with using survey data from 183 unions in Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe cities in Japan in 1991, he categorized them into four types of unionisms; independent unionism with high functional and structural independency, company unionism with low functional and structure independency, oligarchic unionisms with high structural and low functional independency, and finally enterprise unionism with low structural and high functional independency. The result showed that independent unionism had the highest absent rate among the four types of unionisms. However, the limit of the study is that it did not provide insight into the mechanisms that enable workers to make a decision to be absent.

Trying to find out the mechanism of unionism in relation to absenteeism, a study by Garcia Serrano and Malo (2004) tested and proved that those firms with collective bargaining system had higher absence rate than those without it. The study shows that one of the key factors influencing the absenteeism would be the institutional factor which allows unions exercise its bargaining power. The positive influence of collective agreements at firm level on absenteeism suggests that the collective agreement on absenteeism prevents firms from imposing sanctions against those absent workers. The collective bargaining agreement stipulates explicit disciplinary procedures at a workplace level and clears the uncertainty about the result of absences, which leads workers to make a decision to be absent more frequently. However, they did not clearly identify which part of collective agreement does play a role to influence workers to decide to be absent or not. Recent study by Veliziotis (2010) using data of the UK Labour Force Survey found that regardless of collective bargaining agreement presence, non-union members did not have positive relations with absenteeism is they were covered by collective bargaining agreements.

To put it in a nutshell, the exit and voice theory did not effectively see the complexity of absent decision made by workers, and empirical studies failed to see the variety of unionism. Further, what dimensions of unionism affect workers to decide to be absent needs to be explored. Based on the previous discussion, the study tries to find what union characteristics bring about higher absence rate among union members. This study focuses on the question of what certain characteristics of unions are related to absence rate. By finding out the systemic relationship between characteristics of unionism and absenteeism, it would make it possible for us to make better sense on the mechanisms of workers to decide to be absent. It would help us to clear the doubts on based on what characteristics of union workers would perceive that their union is effective enough to protect them from managerial disciplinary measures for their absent behaviors. In the following discussion, the hypothesis will be developed based on the discussion of the impact of different key characteristics of unionism in relations to collective bargaining system on absenteeism.

### **3. Explanatory Model and Hypotheses**

It has been argued that workers decide to be absent when unions can protect them effectively from the sanctions by employers for their absence (Allen, 1984). Although workers are afraid of the employers responding by threatening dismissal for excessive absence, under the protection by a union, an individual worker would make a decision to be absent. However, when absent, workers do it under careful calculations of power relations at workplace (Allen, 1984). After evaluating their union effective and powerful enough to protect them from potential sanctions imposed by employers, workers decided to be absent (Goerke & Pannenberg, 2011) .

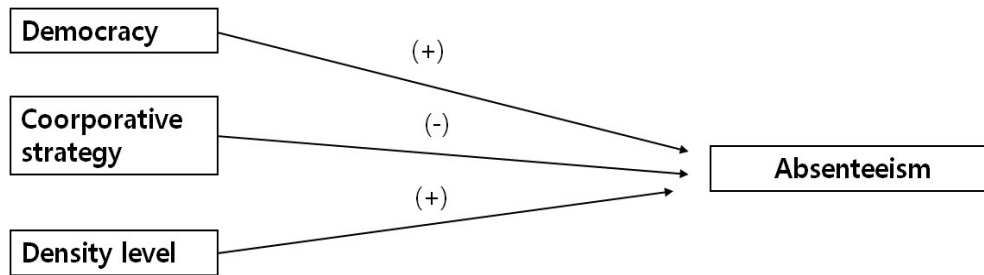


Figure 1: Research Model

One of the key dimensions defining union characteristics is democracy which represents cohesion and unified actions among its members (Craft, 1991). The level of cohesion and effectiveness depends on the willingness of union members to participate in unions activities and democratic structure of a union allows members to participate in unions activities. A union with high level of democratic structure would make union leaders engaged in representing the interests of rank-and-file workers, since union members within democratic structure push union leaderships to bargain for the interests of their members. In terms of absenteeism, democratic union leaders are asked to bargain with managers to reduce the level of disciplinary actions against those with high absenteeism (Barbash, 1969). Based on this discussion, it can be argued that workers tend to be absent when if they perceive their union democratic enough to represent their interests, which leads them to be committed more to push leaders to be responsive to the needs and interests of rank and file workers. The democracy would further enhance cohesion among members. Higher commitment and cohesion among union members would lead a union to take a stronger bargaining position over employers, and push their leaders to bargain lower penalties for their absence or protect them better from disciplinary procedures.

Hypothesis 1: The level of absenteeism would be higher for those with higher degree of democracy.

Besides the relations between member and a union, another factor which defines behavioral patterns of a union is its direction of building relations with its employers. It has been said that a union sharing trust based relations with its employers tends to build harmonious, respectful and open climate in an organization. Further, those unions having cooperative relations with employers have higher member loyalty since workers have seen a company sincerely responsive toward the needs of their representative body (Sanpe & Redman, 2004). While building cooperative relations with employers, a union of cooperative strategy would encourage workers to be committed to a firm sharing productivity cooperation at workplace with employers. Further, they have the interests in the profitability of their own firms facilitating cooperation between labor and managers so that their firm can sustain competitive position in the market (Lee, 1998). In this regards, if a union chooses to take cooperative strategy and build cooperative relations toward employers, it tends to develop a norms and climate promoting workers to follow the work rules and policy of a company and to be committed to a company objectives sustaining competitive position in the market. Therefore, cooperative unions would lead to lower absenteeism among union's members.

Hypothesis 2: The level of absenteeism would be lower for those unions with cooperative strategy.

Another of key characteristics of a union to be evaluated as a body powerful enough to be a successful bargaining organization is density since it is dependent on level of employee's participation in a union. Union size is considered to be linked to bargaining efficiency due to economies of scale (Barbash 1969; Bok & Dunlop 1970). Also, a large size could mean larger bargaining power and therefore more ability to resist employers' demands and push employers to be respectful toward the voice of the union. Therefore, it is expected that those unions with high level of density level would have higher absence rate since they could exercise the power to limit employers imposing punishment to those absent at workplace.

Hypothesis 3: Those unions with high level of density level would have higher absence rate.

#### 4. Data and Measurement

The research target is unions at an organizational level in metal industry in Korea. Traditionally, unions in metal industry in Korea have the longest labor movement history and play the most critical role as the leading groups in Korean labor movements. Also, unions in metal industry record the highest in the number of union members and the largest unions of all. Therefore, unions of metal industry are considered as the most appropriate sample for identifying various types of unionisms.

The survey was conducted with the supports of Korean Metal Workers Unions (hereafter the KMWU) and Federation of Korean Trade Unions of Metal Workers (hereafter the FKMTU). The researcher visited each regional office of the KMWU and outlined the research objectives and questionnaire. Union officials of the KMWU regional office distributed the questionnaire and asked representatives of affiliates to complete and return it to the regional office. The FKMTU faxed official letter to their affiliates. Then, union’s official of the HQ of the FKMTU collected the completed questionnaires and sent them to the researcher. The survey was conducted from April of 2010 until September 2010. At the end of September 2010, usable replies were 133 out of 333 local unions of organizational level, which accounted for around 40% of response rate.

Absence rate as a dependent variable was measured into five scales. The data was collected through multi-survey methods. The representatives of HRM department of each company were asked to mark 1 if the absence rate is less than 1%, 2 if it’s between 1% to 2%, 3 if it’s between 2% to 3%, 4 if it’s between 3% to 4%, and 5 if it’s more than 5%.

**Table 1:** Variable names, Descriptions, and Descriptive statistics

Variables	Descriptions
<b>Dependent Variables</b> Absence Rate	1=less than 1%, 2=more than 1% and less than 2%, 3=more than 2% and less than 3%, 4=more than 3% and less than 4%, 5=more than 5%
<b>Independent Variables</b>	
Democracy	The standardized score of the sum of scores of each items of the followings: 1) The degree of influences by shop floor workers on union policy, bargaining agenda, and change of union leaderships (Five Likert Scale) 2) The degree of possibility for changing negotiation demands and strategy according to the request by union members(Five Likert Scale) 3) The degree of encouraging workers to present their demands to union leaders(Five Likert Scale)
Union Density	Number of union members x 100/ Total employees
Cooperative Strategy	KMWU as Non Cooperative strategy union = 1, FKTU as Cooperative strategy union =0.
<b>Control Variables</b>	
Sales	Standardized score of 2008 total sales
Strike	Occurrence=1, Non-occurrence=0
Pay level	Whether workers consider they are paid considerable higher than those in other workplaces (five likert scale)
Participation	Whether workers feel that they are allowed to participate in various decision making structures (Five likert scale)

Dependent variables are degree of democracy, union density, and union’s strategic choice of building cooperative relation with its employers. Degree of democracy was measured with the questions of three items. The three question items were measured with five Likert scales. The sum of the standardized scores of those three items was put into estimation as the degree of democracy. Unions density was put into estimation after measured with ratio of union members of all employees. Finally, we used proxy for union strategy with whether unions are affiliated to KMWU or FKMTU. Those affiliated to the KMWU are considered as unions of developing workplace norms of anti-

firm behaviors. The FKTU is considered as a union sharing a norm of having cooperative relations with their employers.

The control variables include sales, strike, pay level, and participation. Level of sales was converted into standardized score to control the size of the organization. Strike, a dummy variable, was put into an estimation to control the industrial relations of the workplace. Pay level was asked to union representatives whether their pay level is higher than those in other workplaces (five Likert scale). The pay level is one of the important control variables since workers with high level of wages would tend not to be absent due to the fact that they would not want to be dismissed by disciplinary actions taken by employers for their excessive absenteeism (Milkovich & Newman, 2002)

Participation is considered to be highly related to the absenteeism according to job characteristics model. High level of participation would endow workers with more autonomy and increase workers' responsibility, which will lead the decrease of worker's absenteeism. Participation was asked to workers whether they are allowed to participate in various decision making process with five likert scales. A summary of the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum is presented in <Table 1>.

**Table 2:** Description of variables

Variables	N	min	max	Mean	S.D
Absenteeism	98	1.00	5.00	1.65	1.19
Union democracy	98	1.00	4.67	3.12	0.64
Union density	98	26.62	100.00	67.54	17.99
National center	98	0.00	1.00	0.68	0.47
Sales	98	-0.39	6.86	0.00	1.00
Strike	98	0.00	1.00	0.22	0.42
Pay Level	98	1.00	5.00	2.79	0.84
Participation	98	1.00	5.00	3.19	1.03

## 5. Result

To examine the hypothesized relationships between absenteeism and key unions characteristics, ordered probit regressions were estimated. Absenteeism as a dependent variable was ordinal, thus, ordinal probit regression is the proper analytic methodology for this study. Table 3 provides the results of ordered probit regression analysis on absenteeism.

**Table 3:** Absenteeism: Results of ordered probit model(standard errors in parentheses)

Variables	Coeff.	sig.	Wald
Sales	-0.050	(0.166)	0.090
Strike	0.585	(0.366) *	2.549
Pay Level	-0.264	(0.151) **	3.039
Participation	0.141	(0.143)	0.973
Union democracy	0.317	(0.218) *	2.125
Union density	0.207	(0.138) *	2.248
(KCTU=1, FKTU=0)	-0.560	(0.316) **	3.146
Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke)	0.109		

\* Significant at .10 in one-tailed test.

\*\* Significant at .05 in one-tailed test.

The results show hypothesis 1 and 3 are accepted, but hypothesis 2 is rejected. Those firms with the unions with higher degree of democracy had significantly higher level of absenteeism, compared to those with the unions of lower democracy level (coeff.=.317,  $p<.10$ ). Those firms with higher level of unions density have significantly higher absenteeism (coeff.=.207,  $p<.10$ ).

However, the result testing hypothesis 2 showed opposite from what we expected. Different from the expectation on the relationship between unions with cooperative relations with employers than those without, those unions which reject building a cooperative relations with employers showed significantly lower absenteeism (coeff.= -.560,  $p<.05$ ). This result would not even generally acceptable to industrial relations scholars in Korea.

The reason for the opposite result may be due to the variable included in the analysis to measure the cooperativeness of unionism. When including in the analysis, we used proxy, KMWU and FKMUT, for those cooperative unions to employers and those not. The KMWU affiliated unions were put into estimations as the variable representing the unions without cooperative relations with employers and the FKMTU affiliated unions were put into estimations to represent those unions with cooperative relations with employers.

There is no doubt on the fact that those KMWU has been representing militant unionism and had been antagonistic against employers, the ideology and the labor relationship that an umbrella organization is pursuing would not be generally accepted to local firm level unions. Furthermore, the structure of unions in Korea is based on enterprise level unionism, thus the characteristics of labor relations that unions at firm level have would not in line with their umbrella organization. Rather, situational factors and employer's strategy toward labor unions within the workplace would be most important to explain variance in labor relations of firm level unions. This point is further borne out in the finding of the research by the Ministry of Employment and Labor. The research results maintain that the umbrella organization does not influence on the quality of trustiness between labor unions and employers significantly (Kim, Kim & Kim, 2010).

When looking at the tendency of strike in 2008, I could find out that those firms with unions involving in collective labor disputes showed increase of absenteeism. It can be assumed that right before taking strike, individual workers tend to be absent to express their discontents.

As expected, in line with the argument by Milkovich & Newman (2002) those workers who feel that they are paid higher than others tend not to be absent since they would not want to be dismissed by disciplinary actions taken by employers for their excessive absenteeism.

## 6. Conclusion

Main finding of this study is that absence rates are much higher among those unions of high density rates and high level of democracy. The result of significant relationship between unions with high density rates and absenteeism is in line with the argument of the previous studies (Allen, 1984; Chaudhury & NG, 1992). Employers with unions with high density rates could not fully exercise disciplinary power against those workers absent at workplace since a strong union shields them from punishments by employers.

Democratic unions encourage members to be involved in union activities to make voice of them within a union structure. Unions with higher level of democracy allow members to push their leaders to represent interests of members rather than that of union leaders. Union leaders should effectively protect members of high absenteeism from the disciplinary actions by employers. Employers with unions with high density rates could not fully exercise disciplinary power against those workers absent at workplace since a strong union shields them from punishments by employers. Democratic unions encourage members to be involved in union activities to make voice of them within a union structure and members can build strong cohesiveness within a union and be more closely engaged in each other. Another factor that may be causing higher absence rates is pay level and this result indicates that even if they are dissatisfied with their current working and employment condition, they are hardly absent at workplace. They do not want to be dismissed from the company which pays them relatively higher than any other company.

I must note that firstly, this study has potential reverse causality problems due to the cross sectional data. To mitigate potential reverse causality problems, I lag all explanatory variables by using data from union leaderships holding their position more than one-year period. Secondly, dependent variable, absenteeism, was based on self-reports by firm's HRM managers.

Secondly, this study hardly touched the issues of complexity of the nature of absenteeism. There has been the core of the controversies over the issues of absenteeism. It has been argued that absence behaviors cannot be considered as an exit behavior since workers do not choose to leave the firm but still the workers remain unpleasant at workplace. Even if workers do not have any problem with working and employment condition, still they might

choose to be absent and avoid disciplinary actions by employers under the protection of unions and collective bargaining agreement.

Thirdly, another limit of this study is about the issue of characteristics of absenteeism (Luchak & Gellatly, 1996), 'avoidable' (or 'voluntary') and 'unavoidable' (or 'involuntary') since the data used in this study is not at an individual level but at an organization level. Having said that, it is still crucial to distinguish between those different types of absenteeism whether if it results from the inability to attend work or from the employee's unwillingness to work.

The study finding implies that to reduce absenteeism at workplace, employers should take strategic approaches toward unions. Unions holding various characteristics such as different power by level of density and level of democracy encouraging workers to be engaged in union activities would influence differently on absenteeism.

Future study could explore the relationship between absenteeism and interactional effect of various union characteristics and employer strategy toward unions, which would help building labor relations strategies in accordance with characteristics of unions to reduce absenteeism at workplace.

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