AJSID ASIA JOURNAL OF SOCIAL INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Asia Journal of Social Innovation and Development

https://www.ajsid.org/index.php/pub

Article

Cooperation and Win-Win of Trade Unions in Protecting Labor Rights: A Law and Economics Perspective

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Received: Day Month Year; **Revised**: Day Month Year; **Accepted**: Day Month Year; **Published**: Day Month Year

Abstract: The future of labor rights protection lies in cooperation, harmony, and win-win outcomes. Labor-capital cooperation is closely related to maximization, equilibrium, and efficiency. Labor-capital cooperation, win-win outcomes, and the construction of harmonious labor relations together form an organic whole. Enterprise trade unions play an indispensable role in achieving win-win outcomes for both labor and capital.

Keywords: enterprise trade union; labor rights; harmonious labor relations

Trade unions are the representatives of workers, and protecting labor rights is their duty. The question we must consider is whether trade unions merely—or are limited to—protecting the rights and interests of workers while disregarding the interests of employers. The interests of enterprises and workers are often seen as mutually opposing and conflicting: protecting workers' rights and interests supposedly means harming the interests of enterprises. Therefore, when enterprise trade unions strive to maximize and safeguard workers' interests, they are in effect minimizing the interests of employers. However, on the other hand, the interests of workers and employers are not merely opposed and conflicting; they also converge. When an enterprise develops, workers' wages and benefits increase accordingly. Conversely, when an enterprise performs poorly, workers' wages and benefits become insecure, and they may even face unemployment. If workers make excessive demands on the enterprise—demands that may benefit workers in the short term but exceed the enterprise's capacity, thereby affecting or even crippling its operations—the consequence may be losses or even bankruptcy for the enterprise, and workers will then face layoffs. Thus, workers and employers share a relationship in which "one prospers together and suffers together"; their interests are closely intertwined and mutually influential. In short, the two sides have both competitive and conflicting aspects, as well as cooperative aspects. So, how should trade unions respond to this complex relationship between workers and employers?

The answer lies in cooperation, harmony, and win-win outcomes. Labor-capital cooperation and the construction of harmonious labor relations are the process, while win-win is the result and goal. Labor-capital cooperation and harmonious labor relations refer to a process and state in which workers and employers coexist amicably, jointly seek enterprise development, the employer uses labor reasonably within the legal framework, and workers refrain from resorting to drastic measures such as strikes. Win-win (also called "mutual benefit") refers to a situation in which parties in a social relationship that are in conflict or opposition cooperate, resulting in an outcome beneficial to both sides. The role of trade unions is, on the basis of striving for and protecting workers' legitimate rights and interests, to promote cooperation between labor and capital, to foster harmonious labor relations, and through such harmonious labor relations, to achieve a "win-win" outcome for both sides.

I. Labor-Capital Cooperation and Maximization, Equilibrium, and Efficiency

Before clarifying the concept of labor-capital cooperation, we must first define "cooperation." According to the Cihai, cooperation is "a joint action formed by individuals or groups through coordination to achieve a certain goal. It is a form of social interaction. Participants must share a common goal, similar understandings, coordinated actions, and a certain degree of trust to achieve the desired outcome. Its characteristics include commonality of behavior and consistency of purpose; cooperation itself may even become an end."[1] The most important feature of cooperation is consistency of purpose. Labor-capital cooperation, as a form of cooperation, is likewise embodied in the consistency of purpose between labor and capital. Labor-capital cooperation refers to "a management approach adopted by capital owners and labor owners to achieve mutual benefits. From a cooperative perspective, the game between labor and capital is not a zero-sum game; both sides can achieve benefits for each through cooperation." [2]

Maximization, equilibrium, and efficiency are the three pillars of law and economics. They are "basic concepts for explaining rational behavior, especially in decentralized systems such as markets involving the interaction of many different individuals."[3] Among these, maximization is the goal pursued by rational economic agents; equilibrium is a balanced state resulting from the interaction of self-interested maximization by buyers and sellers in the market; and efficiency is the measure of whether market resource allocation is good or bad. Win-win is related to all three: win-win means that both sides have achieved maximization (whether long-term or short-term), that their interests have reached a balance, and that resource allocation in the market has achieved an efficient state. Labor-capital cooperation and win-win are also closely related to both sides' self-interested maximization, equilibrium in the labor market, and efficiency of resource allocation in the labor market. For trade unions, as representatives of workers' interests, to achieve workers' self-interested maximization, a balance of power between labor and capital, and efficiency in labor market resource allocation, the direction of their efforts should be toward win-win. Therefore, labor-capital cooperation is closely related to maximization, equilibrium, and efficiency.

1.1. Cooperation and Maximization

Maximization is the goal pursued by rational economic agents. Both workers and employers seek to maximize their own interests. Maximization here should be understood as the maximization of net benefits, i.e., the maximization of the surplus remaining after subtracting total costs from total benefits. In the short term, struggle and the pursuit of self-interest may achieve the maximization of one's own interests. However, from a long-term perspective, cooperation is the means by which mutually competing and interdependent parties achieve the maximization of their own interests.

First, consider whether cooperation can maximize the interests of trade unions and workers. Compare the costs and benefits arising from cooperation between workers (trade unions) and enterprises with the costs and benefits arising from struggle between the two sides.

When workers (trade unions) engage in struggle against enterprises, the benefits they obtain depend on the strength of the trade union and the outcome of the struggle. If the trade union is relatively strong and gains an advantage in collective bargaining, then in the short term, the benefits workers obtain through collective bargaining will be greater than those obtained through cooperation (compromise) with the enterprise. However, collective bargaining also incurs costs, including but not limited to information-gathering costs, wage costs for bargaining team members, and so forth. In the case of cooperation, although short-term benefits may be lower than those from successful collective bargaining, the costs are significantly lower. Thus, the net benefits from cooperation are not necessarily lower than those from collective bargaining. When the trade union is relatively weak, it is at a disadvantage in collective bargaining. Even if it tries its best, its weak bargaining power may lead the enterprise to ignore its demands. By contrast, in a cooperative scenario, enterprises, for the sake of convenience, may give due consideration to the trade union's demands. Therefore, in this situation, the benefits of collective bargaining and struggle are smaller than those of cooperation, while the costs of collective bargaining and struggle are greater than those of cooperation. Consequently, the net benefits of collective bargaining and struggle are lower than the net benefits of cooperation. That is to say, cooperation is more rational than collective bargaining (struggle) and more conducive to maximizing workers' interests. It can be seen that whether a trade union chooses to cooperate with an enterprise, from a law and economics perspective, depends on the strength of the trade union itself.

Next, consider whether cooperation can maximize the interests of enterprises. If the trade union is relatively weak and the enterprise gains an advantage in collective bargaining, then the employer's benefits will be greater than if it were at a disadvantage. In such a situation, if the employer seeks to obtain an advantage in collective bargaining, the costs incurred will also increase accordingly, as it may need to find skilled negotiators, study how to reject in whole or in part the demands put forward by the trade union and workers, and so forth. However, relatively speaking, if the employer gains an advantage in collective bargaining, the increased benefits can often cover the resulting increased costs. Therefore, to obtain greater net benefits from collective bargaining, the employer will do its utmost to secure an advantage in collective bargaining—this is the employer's optimal choice between these two scenarios. Once the trade union becomes very strong, the enterprise may find it difficult to reach an agreement with the trade union even after expending substantial human and material resources. Not only will its benefits be smaller than when the trade union was weak, but its bargaining costs will also be higher. Clearly, its net benefits will be lower than when the trade union was weak. In this case, choosing cooperation is more advantageous. If the enterprise cooperates with the trade union, the benefits the employer obtains may not be as high as those obtained through collective bargaining. However, at the same time, the cooperative strategy of both sides will substantially reduce the transaction costs associated with collective bargaining and similar processes. Therefore, from the perspective of net benefits, the net benefits of cooperation between the two sides are not necessarily lower than the net benefits the employer would obtain by doing its utmost to gain an advantage in collective bargaining.

It is not difficult to see that, depending on whether the trade union is strong or weak, the choices of enterprises and trade unions regarding cooperation versus collective bargaining and struggle differ. When the trade union is relatively strong, the enterprise's rational choice is cooperation, while the trade union's rational choice is collective bargaining and struggle. When the trade union is relatively weak, the enterprise's rational choice is collective bargaining and struggle, while the trade union's rational choice is cooperation. So, is there any intersection between the two? The answer is yes. If one side insists on collective bargaining and struggle while the other side advocates cooperation, the outcome of the game between them will be cooperation. However, such cooperation is obviously more favorable to the side that insists on collective bargaining and struggle, because that side is stronger, and the other side will necessarily give up some interests in order to achieve cooperation.

From the perspective of long-term net benefits, if both sides adopt a cooperative approach, they will no longer need to engage in time-consuming and labor-intensive negotiations and struggles each time. Compared with a situation where both sides struggle for their interests every time, transaction costs will be significantly reduced, and both sides can allocate their limited resources to enterprise management and development. Although the short-term benefits of trade union struggle against the enterprise may be higher than the benefits from compromise and cooperation between the two sides, from a game theory perspective, cooperation and compromise between the two sides, while suboptimal in the short term, are beneficial to both sides in the long run. Therefore, labor-capital cooperation is an inevitable choice for both labor and capital to achieve the maximization of their respective self-interests.

1.2. Cooperation and Equilibrium

Why should labor and capital cooperate to achieve a win-win outcome? From the perspective of law and economics, the first reason lies in equilibrium. “The concept of ‘equilibrium’ is one of the most important features of neoclassical economics and also serves as the foundation of neoclassical economic methodology.”[4] So-called equilibrium refers to a state of harmony between the two parties in the market, a “state in which opposing forces are balanced.” [5] Equilibrium implies not merely a static state, but also the interaction and interdependence among various forces in the market. The cooperative relationship between enterprises and trade unions (workers) clearly conforms to the characteristics of equilibrium. When enterprises and trade unions choose cooperation to maximize their respective interests, the ultimate result is the formation of market equilibrium. Equilibrium is both a process and a state. The outcome of equilibrium is not necessarily a win-win situation; it may be that one party gains an advantage while the other compromises. However, the emergence of a win-win outcome necessarily presupposes a state of equilibrium.

Enterprise trade unions, in striving for and protecting workers’ legitimate rights and interests, engage in a continuous struggle against employers. This state of struggle may take two forms: intense confrontation or moderate resistance. Cooperation does not mean that trade unions abandon their struggle against enterprises. Rather, it means adopting moderate and rational methods, instead of resorting to drastic measures such as strikes, sabotage of machinery, or passive work stoppages. When trade unions adopt moderate and rational means to engage with enterprises, an equilibrium state tends to emerge. In other words, when the contest between labor and capital takes place in a moderate environment, it becomes easier to reach an outcome acceptable to both parties, thereby achieving equilibrium and a win-win situation. The equilibrium state in the labor market not only helps workers maintain stable employment and livelihood security, but also helps enterprises sustain stable production and operations—a result that both sides desire. Thus, labor-capital cooperation is a necessary means to achieve equilibrium in the labor market and to maintain stable labor relations.

1.3. Cooperation and Efficiency

The importance of efficiency for resource allocation is self-evident. Because resources are scarce, pursuing efficient resource allocation rather than inefficient resource allocation is essential for making full use of effective and scarce resources. Whether in the labor market or the product market, both workers and enterprises tend to pursue efficient outcomes. So, is the outcome of labor-capital cooperation efficient? The answer is yes. The reason lies in the criterion for judging whether resource allocation is efficient: the maximization of social welfare, which is a normative standard. The efficiency of resource allocation is essentially the maximization of welfare, and within the research paradigm of law and economics, the efficiency of resource allocation means Pareto optimality.

The maximization mentioned above refers to the maximization of net benefits for each individual market (or social) actor. In contrast, the maximization of social welfare refers to the total welfare of society, i.e., the sum of the welfare of all actors. In the labor market, total social welfare is the sum of the employer’s welfare (total surplus) and the workers’ welfare (total surplus). Thus, in addition to maximizing net benefits, we also focus on maximizing social welfare, i.e., maximizing the sum of consumer surplus and producer surplus. When the Pareto optimality efficiency standard is achieved, social welfare is maximized.

The Pareto optimality standard, as a criterion for efficiency, refers to a state in which any change in the allocation of resources in the market cannot make any party better off. When enterprises and trade unions cooperate to achieve a win-win outcome for both labor and capital, the Pareto optimality standard is clearly met. This is because win-win is an outcome beneficial to both sides, and in such a situation, any shift of resources in the labor market in favor of one side would necessarily harm the interests of the other. Therefore, a state of cooperation and win-win is an efficient state. Cooperation and win-win achieve the maximization of social welfare, i.e., the maximization of the total welfare of both labor and capital, and should therefore be encouraged and affirmed.

Therefore, as can be seen from the above analysis, cooperation is closely related to the three pillars of law and economics: efficiency, equilibrium, and maximization. Labor-capital cooperation helps to achieve efficiency in the allocation of labor resources, maximize the interests of both parties, and reach market equilibrium.

2. Labor-Capital Cooperation, Win-Win, and the Construction of Harmonious Labor Relations

2.1. Labor-Capital Cooperation and Win-Win

Labor-capital cooperation is the prerequisite and condition for win-win outcomes. From the concept and characteristics of labor-capital cooperation, it can be seen that such cooperation presupposes the existence of a common goal between the two parties. That common goal is win-win. Since both enterprises and workers (trade unions) are self-interest maximizers, if labor-capital cooperation cannot enable them to obtain maximum benefits, their rational choice would be non-cooperation. Given that they choose labor-capital cooperation, this means their cooperative goal is win-win. Labor-capital cooperation is the process, and win-win is the result. “Labor-capital cooperation fundamentally transcends zero-sum logic, applying the mutually beneficial and win-win logic to the practice of labor-capital relations, thereby constructing a new type of labor relations.”[6]

On the other hand, win-win also provides a guarantee for long-term labor-capital cooperation. Although the goal of labor-capital cooperation is win-win, due to the uncertainty of the outcomes of such cooperation, in some cases labor-capital cooperation may not necessarily achieve win-win; it may instead benefit only one party, while the other party gains nothing or even suffers losses. Under such circumstances, the party that has gained nothing or suffered losses may choose not to engage in “labor-capital cooperation” in the future. Therefore, both labor and capital should pay attention not only to the process of labor-capital cooperation but also to its outcomes. Win-win is the guarantee and necessity for long-term cooperation between labor and capital. Undermining labor-capital cooperation solely for one’s own benefit is detrimental to one’s own long-term interests.

Harmony is a complex concept. In simple terms, so-called harmony refers to “a state in which multiple (including binary) elements of a system are in a cooperative state or in which the various elements of the system are in orderly competition.”[7] The idea of harmony has existed in China since ancient times. Laozi’s proposition that “Man follows the earth, earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Way, and the Way follows nature” represents a natural philosophy of harmonious coexistence in which “heaven and man are united.”[8] Since modern times, the concept of building a socialist harmonious society had already emerged in vague form within the ideological systems of scientific socialism founders such as Marx and Engels. As faithful inheritors and developers of Marxist scientific socialism, successive generations of the Chinese Communist Party leadership—from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping and then Jiang Zemin—have all engaged in varying degrees of reflection and exploration regarding social harmony. It was under the central leadership collective headed by General Secretary Hu Jintao that establishing a socialist harmonious society became a clear and specific goal for advancing modernization, with systematic and scientific frameworks developed for addressing the related practical issues.[9]

Building a harmonious socialist society is an important governing policy of the Communist Party of China. The construction of harmonious labor relations is part of building a harmonious socialist society. Harmonious labor relations, as a social development goal in China, were formally proposed at the Sixth Plenary Session of the

Sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2006. In the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Major Issues Concerning the Construction of a Harmonious Socialist Society, “implementing a proactive employment policy and developing harmonious labor relations” was listed as one of the seven important elements of “adhering to coordinated development and strengthening social undertakings.” The Decision further specifies: “Improve the labor relations coordination mechanism, fully implement the labor contract system and the collective bargaining system, and ensure the timely and full payment of wages. Strictly implement national labor standards, strengthen labor protection, improve the labor security supervision system and the labor dispute mediation and arbitration mechanism, and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of workers, especially migrant workers.”[10]The so-called harmonious labor relations refer to “a state of labor relations in which workers and asset owners with different interest orientations, through non-confrontational means such as consultation, coordination, participation, and contracting under game-theoretic checks and balances, have essentially achieved their respective interest goals, realized the effective integration of workers and productive assets, and completed the production process under modern modes of production.”[11]

2.2. Labor-Capital Cooperation, Win-Win, and the Construction of Harmonious Labor Relations

Labor-capital cooperation, win-win, and the construction of harmonious labor relations are not contradictory; rather, they are essentially identical. Labor-capital cooperation and win-win mean that both enterprises and workers benefit from enterprise production and management. Cooperation between the two sides, rather than intense confrontation, reduces transaction costs and avoids costly measures such as strikes (whether for enterprises or workers), thereby maximizing the interests of both parties. Thus, this state of cooperation not only achieves a win-win outcome for labor and capital but also embodies harmonious labor relations. As some scholars have pointed out, harmonious labor relations, “in simple terms, refer to the achievement of ‘mutually beneficial and win-win’ goals between labor and capital through ‘cooperative game’ means.”[11]

For enterprises, labor-capital cooperation is more conducive to enterprise development than simply suppressing the rights claims and demands of workers and trade unions. Even if conflicts and disputes exist between labor and capital, labor-capital cooperation provides a possible channel for dispute resolution, making the relationship between the two sides more harmonious and making it easier to achieve their common goal: enterprise development and profitability. “Resolving labor-capital conflicts and achieving harmonious labor-capital relations is an inherent requirement for the healthy and sustainable development of private enterprises in China. Harmonious labor-capital relations do not mean the absence of conflicts and disputes, but rather that conflicts and disputes can be effectively governed.”[12]

“Win-win” is also a requirement for constructing harmonious labor relations. “Enterprise trade unions should play a leading role in building harmonious and stable labor relations and should adhere to the concepts of harmonious development and mutual benefit and win-win. … Through various efforts, they should promote mutual understanding, support, and cooperation between the two parties in labor relations, achieve joint mechanism building, shared benefits, and common interests, and ultimately attain a result of mutual benefit and win-win for both sides.”[13]

As one scholar has observed regarding the relationship between harmony and win-win: “Enterprises pursue profit maximization, workers pursue income maximization, and enterprises seek cost savings. The construction and development of trade unions, as well as the establishment of harmonious labor relations, require enterprises to increase investment. Conflicts and disputes inevitably arise between the two sides. However, such conflicts and disputes are not irreconcilable; rather, they can be resolved through economic, legal, moral, public opinion, educational, and coordination means to achieve peaceful coexistence.”[14]

The changes in the relationship between labor and capital in Western countries in the new era offer us insights into “win-win.” In Western countries, “with the development of productive forces and the great abundance of products, the living conditions, working conditions, and educational rights of workers have greatly improved. The antagonistic relationship between workers and capitalists has begun to change. The opposition of interests between the two sides is no longer manifested solely through intense confrontation. Seeking checks and balances and cooperation in struggle has become a trend in the evolution of labor-capital relations in the post-war era.”[15]

3. The Role and Function of Trade Unions in Achieving Labor-Capital Win-Win

Trade unions represent workers in contending with enterprises, but they also bear the responsibility of mediating conflicts between workers and enterprises. The realization of labor-capital cooperation and win-win, as well as the construction of harmonious labor relations, cannot be achieved without trade unions. “In coordinating labor relations and interest distribution, trade unions, as representatives and defenders of workers’ rights and interests and as an important pillar of state power, should play an irreplaceable and significant role. That is, as Wang Zhaoguo pointed out, trade unions at all levels should ‘strive to build a harmonious socialist society and better express and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of workers.’”[16]

So, how can trade unions promote the realization of labor-capital win-win? The author believes that trade unions should fully utilize their position and responsibilities to establish systems such as information sharing and transparency, and dispute negotiation and resolution between workers and enterprises, serving as the channel and bridge for cooperation, negotiation, and dispute resolution between labor and capital. The specific recommended measures are as follows:

3.3. An Information Sharing And Transparency Mechanism

Information asymmetry often leads to adverse selection, moral hazard, and losses in games. Trust and cooperation are prerequisites. To achieve labor-capital cooperation and win-win, it is necessary to establish full trust between enterprises and workers. Trust is built upon the premise of sufficient information sharing and transparency. When workers fully understand the business operations and development of the enterprise (excluding core trade secrets), they will understand certain choices that the enterprise has to make for its own development, such as the inability to offer high salaries or generous benefits. Consequently, they will not make demands that, while reasonable in themselves, exceed the enterprise’s capacity. This avoids many labor-capital conflicts and also provides a foundation of trust for labor-capital cooperation.

3.2. An Early Warning Mechanism For Labor Disputes

Labor disputes often evolve into extreme and violent means such as strikes because they have not been resolved in a timely and reasonable manner. Establishing an early warning mechanism for labor disputes enables trade unions to obtain information on labor disputes at the earliest possible time, turn passivity into initiative, actively participate in the resolution of labor disputes, and avoid or reduce the resort to extreme measures caused by the failure to resolve labor disputes in a timely manner.

The early warning mechanism for labor disputes requires “establishing and improving a unimpeded information network system, taking workers’ demands and voices as the ‘first signal,’ and resolving conflicts at the grassroots level and in their embryonic state.”[17]

3.3. a Labor-Capital Cooperation Coordination Mechanism

Labor-capital cooperation takes various forms, including collective bargaining, democratic participation by workers, and so on. Cooperation between workers and enterprises requires a lubricant—something that can step in promptly to help both sides remove obstacles and resolve conflicts when barriers or disputes arise in their cooperation. Trade unions are the best actors to serve as the “lubricant” for labor-capital cooperation. Since this is the case, trade unions need to establish a labor-capital cooperation coordination mechanism. While representing workers in cooperating and communicating with enterprises, they also need to convey the enterprises’ needs and ideas to workers, thereby promoting joint actions by both sides.[18]

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, K.L. and C.Y.; methodology, K.L.; software, K.L.; validation, K.L and C.Y. ; formal analysis, K.L.; investigation, K.L.; resources, K.L.; data curation, K.L.; writing—original draft preparation, K.L.; writing—review and editing, K.L.; visualization, K.L.; supervision, K.L.; project administration, K.L.; funding acquisition, C.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding
No.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Acknowledgments

No.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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