

Cities as ‘Laboratories of Democracy’ to Improve Labor Policies

By Kwon Ki-bum, 12.12.2018 (translated from the Korean)



Mayor Park Won-soon (right) and David Weil, professor at Brandeis University in the US, are having a conversation at the Mayor's Office in Seoul City Hall on the afternoon of the 11th. The two agreed that outsourcing the non-core sectors for management efficiency deteriorates the working environment of the workers.

“Local government is like a ‘laboratory of democracy.’ The central government can try to improve the working environment by trying a burdensome public policy.”

Professor David Weil, a professor of labor policy and former member of the Barack Obama administration in the United States, met with the mayor. Professor Weil, who visited Korea to deliver the keynote speech at the ‘2018 Good Job Cities International Forum’ sponsored by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, met with Mayor Park in the afternoon and discussed ‘Public Roles and Alternatives for Resolving the Fissured Workplace.’ Professor Weil suggested actively trying various policies to improve the working environment, even if the local government has relatively less authority than the central government.

Professor Weil, who is well known for the concept of the ‘fissured workplace,’ worked as an administrator in the wage and working standard division of the US Department of Labor from January 2014 to January last year. The ‘fissured workplace’ is a critical view of the phenomenon where the companies that are leading the innovation and profit maximization move the non-core sector out through subcontracting or special employment. A book of the same title was published in Korea in 2015.

Mayor Park said in a conversation that Professor Weil’s ‘fissured workplace’ applies to Korean society, and asked Seoul for concrete measures to solve it. Professor Weil pointed out the project that was initiated at the request of President Obama in 2015. When federal contractors had a history of violating labor laws, they introduced a policy that makes it harder for other contracts to be signed until they comply with the regulations. Park said, “There is a great deal of suggestion in Seoul without the authority to supervise work. We can learn and review enough.” The two men said on May 11 that the president of Korea Railroad Corporation (KORAIL) resigned due to a derailment of the KTX railway, and continued to talk about excessive management rationalization as the root cause of the accident. Professor Weil nodded, expressing full agreement that ‘risk outsourcing’ would increase the operating costs of the enterprise in the long run and reduce efficiency. “We have seen many cases where subcontracting makes workplace dangerous. I agree that a cracked workplace will prevent sustainable growth.”

Professor Weil rated Park City’s ‘Union City’ initiative highly. ‘Union City’ is Park’s plan to decentralize the labor administration and make the city a pro-labor city. “The idea of ‘Union City’ is very impressive. It shows the attitude of Seoul City to improve the working environment. I would like to introduce other cities,” he said.

At the ‘2018 Good Job Cities International Forum’ that Professor Weil attended, in-depth discussions were held on the role of local governments in creating ‘good jobs.’ It was held through December 12, and attended by officials from 17 cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Vienna, Austria and the International Labor Organization (ILO). On the afternoon of the 12th, there was a ‘Finding Opportunities in a Rapidly Changing Labor Market’ session, in which ILO’s director of employment policy participated. In the second forum this year, the ‘Good Jobs City Council (DWCN),’ centered on Seoul City, was established.

At the opening ceremony on the 11th, prospects for local governments will become more important in order to improve the working environment and create good jobs. During the congratulatory speech, Moon Sung-hyun, chairman of the Committee on Economic and Social Affairs, said, “Unlike in the past, when the government moved under the planned system of the central government, local specialized industries have been established recently.”