

Thailand: The Junta whips up nasty nationalism, cracking down on migrant workers from Cambodia and Burma

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In an attempt to prove itself to be even more repressive and “manly” Prayut’s vile military junta is playing the nationalistic and racist card.

Hundreds of thousands of workers from Cambodia and Burma are being persecuted and driven out of the country. As usual the junta claims they are “cracking down” on “illegal” workers. But the Thai ruling class has long used a hypocritical and repressive policy towards workers from neighbouring countries.

On the one hand, important sections of the Thai economy are reliant on cheap unskilled labour. This demand is met by migrant workers from Cambodia and Burma who do the dirty, dangerous and low paid jobs in sweatshops, agriculture and fisheries. Migrant workers also work in the catering industry and as domestic workers. Thai workers, who have developed more skills and are better educated, are no longer prepared to endure such poor working conditions. They work in higher paid, higher skilled jobs. Some Thai workers also become migrants themselves, working in Taiwan, Korea or the middle-east.

There is no question that the Thai economy and Thai capitalists need migrant workers from Cambodia and Burma and to throw them all out on a permanent basis would create an economic crisis. But the junta are just playing with peoples’ lives to make them nationalist and racist scape-goats. Soon they will return because they are desperate for work and the employers are desperate for labour.

Intermittent crack downs on “illegal” workers, together with cruel and pretend schemes to “register” foreign workers legally, is a long used tactic to keep migrant workers in a constant state of fear and illegality. The registration process is too difficult and costly for most migrants. This helps to keep down wages, prevents the formation of trade unions and also acts as an obstacle to unity between Thai and migrant workers. This is especially important in factories which employ a core permanent workforce of Thai workers alongside casual contract migrant workers.

Police and gangsters also benefit because they can demand bribes and vicious employers can often deny full payment of wages.

While playing this racist card against migrants in a pathetic attempt to win domestic support, the junta is also trying to promote a nationalist film about King Naresuan who led a victorious battle against the Burmese during the Ayuttaya period. Naresuan is portrayed as a “Thai nationalist hero” who defeated the Burmese King while riding an elephant. Free tickets to the cinema have been given out as part of the junta’s “happiness programme”. What next? Perhaps they’ll give the population free tickets to boxing matches or even gladiator fights to the death, Roman style! You can see how

the military despise ordinary people. But this will never be enough to make the army popular.

The Naresuan story is just pure fiction anyway. No such thing as the Thai nation existed in the Ayuttaya period, Naresuan's father collaborated with the Burmese kings as part of an internal power struggle, and most ordinary surfs who were forced to fight in various wars loathed and hated their exploitative masters who lived off their backs and stole their daughters.

It seems to have escaped the junta that Taksin's popularity was based on real policies like the universal health care scheme, job creation and modernisation of infrastructure. Free tickets to the cinema and vicious racist gimmicks don't come anywhere near to matching this.

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