

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Thailand: 'Coups were setbacks for labour movement'

Sunday 13 May 2007, by [PRUKSAKASEM Somyot](#), [ROJANAPHRUK Pravit](#) (Date first published: 7 May 2007).

Labour activist and co-founder of the 1550 Labour Assembly, a new group opposing the junta and the draft constitution, Somyot Pruksakasem talks to *The Nation's* Pravit Rojanaphruk about the state of labour and democracy.

Why are you opposed to the Council for National Security and the draft constitution?

Because the labour movement learned a lesson when the country was under the National Peace Keeping Council [the junta that seized power in 1991]. It severely diminished labour rights by dismantling state enterprise unions and banning outsiders' involvement in labour disputes. Thanong Pothi-an, an important labour leader was also abducted. [He is presumed dead].

When the [September 2006] coup occurred we realised it meant the return of the military state, which doesn't bode well for the labour movement. The labour movement takes the stand that only through the democratic rule of law will justice and a better livelihood be achieved.

The draft charter has been a mistake from the outset. First, the process was never participatory. Its content is regressive because it was drafted by a small group of people who are military cronies.

Many proposals made by labour groups were simply ignored. These include ensuring that Thailand becomes a welfare state with a minimum social safety net in terms of income, the abolishment of under-employment wage, and the right for workers to vote from their workplace rather than having to travel a long distance home to elect their MPs and senators.

Does the assembly represent the labour movement as a whole and how many members does it have?

Most workers' access to news is limited to one-sided information so they are being manipulated. Ours may be a small group, with about 10,000 members from five labour sectors [such as food and beverage, and garment making] while those who joined the pro-junta assembly at Sanam Luang on May Day numbered about 20,000 and the wing that joined the People's Alliance for Democracy [PAD] showed up at another venue with 2,000.

About 1,000 members from our groups separately marched against the junta and the charter on May Day.

We have not received any financial support from the regime while those at Sanam Luang received

Bt3 million and the group that joined the PAD received Bt2 million to promote the draft constitution.

What does the divisive atmosphere within the labour movement signify?

The first group, which gathered at Sanam Luang and wears yellow has a common interest with the junta. Its leader Manas Kosol has been appointed [by the junta] as a member of the National Legislative Assembly.

The second group was a power base for the rally against Thaksin Shinawatra within the PAD. They praise the coup as they hate Thaksin's regime so much. As for us, we oppose both Thaksin and the junta.

What do you think about PAD leader Somsak Kosaisuk?

He came from the labour movement, supports the junta and the junta-sponsored charter, yet still claims to be fighting for democracy.

They still claim they're for democracy because they claim Thaksin's regime was evil and represents parliamentary dictatorship as well as capitalist dictatorship.

This is true. However, the coup and the junta are more visibly dictatorial and worse.

It's hard to say if he's lost, but he hates Thaksin so much it may have blinded him.

Only 3 per cent of the Kingdom's total workforce is unionised and the movement is fractious. Do you see any hope for the movement and can it contribute to the democratisation of Thailand?

There's still hope. If we observe the Sondhi Limthongkul phenomena, many members of the middle class started donning yellow shirts and supporting the coup. This cannot be the future of democracy.

So, only the lower class is left. They are more democratic and should be able to play a role in changing Thai society.

The economic situation after the coup has worsened and it's now affecting job security and [may lead to] political unrest as layoffs in small and medium-size industries are starting. But judging from the labour wing that joined the PAD, they merely want to see a more benign patron to help alleviate their plight. Don't you think they lack class-consciousness?

You must understand that Thaksin's regime created discord in the labour movement through his privatisation programme of state enterprises. So it wasn't difficult to guess that the labour movement would go against him by joining [PAD leader] Sonthi Limthongkul.

But they're now discovering that the situation isn't improving, that the old frame of mind about neo-liberalism and pro-privatisation is also harboured by the junta and the process shall go ahead.

I think they do have class-consciousness and recognise that the capitalist system is their enemy.

But that they joined hands with Sonthi Limthongkul, a capitalist, is a bitter situation and a difficult dilemma.

It is the problem of the movement today.

P.S.

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