

Asia's May Day: Tradition and Renewal

Sunday 7 May 2023, by [ARIFIN Syarif](#), [Asian Labour Review](#), [CHOU Catta](#), [HONG Myungkyo](#), [KAIN Damni](#), [KUMARR Suraendher](#), [LIN Kevin](#), [Ma Cheria](#), [Nanako Furuse](#), [Nicha Wachpanich](#), [SY Jose Monfred C.](#) (Date first published: 30 April 2023).

Editor's Note:

May Day has a long and tortured history in Asia dating back to the early 1900s that reflects the fortunes of the working class movements. It was born out of, mobilized against, and interrupted by colonialism, civil wars, anti-colonial and revolutionary movements, counter-revolutions, coup d'états, (state) socialism, developmentalism, and neoliberal capitalism.

All through these periods, May Day has been a site of contestation between labor, capital and the state, between different factions of the labor movements and political formations, and between contrasting visions of future societies. It has in turn been joined by millions, banned outright – or worse, subdued into staged official events.

Today May Day holds complex and changing meanings for millions of workers on this continent. While honoring its history, May Day should also be a day of renewal to make the movement relevant to more workers by incorporating those outside of trade unions and outside of formal sectors, and by reinvigorating labor militancy.

On this May Day, we want to capture fragments of May Day's rich history and the aspirations of today's labor movements.

We thank our authors and contributing writers for sharing their insights.

The Philippines - May Day was first celebrated in the Philippines in 1903 when over 100,000 workers organized by the country's first trade union center, the Union Obrera Democratic de Filipina (Philippine Democratic Labor Union, or UODF), stormed the streets of Manila. Unlike the mutual aid groups that arose among the workers preceding it, the UODF aimed to emancipate Filipino workers through protective legislation and free education. Its prime movers, including activist and folklorist Isabelo de los Reyes, founded the union center on the principles of Marxism.

For many activists in the Philippines, International Workers' Day on May 1 is considered a "red-letter day." On a calendar, a day shaded in red holds much importance. The national government touts it as a day when workers can rest with their family and friends. But the unjust conditions of work in the Philippines demand only unrest. And so on this red-letter day, thousands of workers, unionists, and activists from other sectors will march the streets across the country to demand better salaries, livable working conditions, job security, and other democratic rights. The streets leading to Mendiola, Manila—the gate to the country's seat of power—are painted red by the demonstrators wearing the color of international proletarian solidarity.

Rodrigo Roa Duterte's administration, which lasted from 2016 to 2022, left the Philippine economy and its productive industries in shambles when he transferred power to now President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., the son of one of the most infamous dictators in Southeast Asian history. Prices have skyrocketed since the tail-end of Duterte's term, with the inflation rate hiking to as high as 8.6% earlier this year. Filipino workers are nowhere equipped to meet the rising costs of living.

Contractualization continues to withhold job security from millions.

Attempts from unions and other progressive groups to assert labor rights are unjustly met by state-sanctioned violence. These conditions have long agitated Filipino workers, setting a fertile ground for continued organizing and mobilizing.

For May Day this year, thousands are expected to fill the streets to call for “sahod itaas, presyo ibaba” (“raise the wages, drop the prices”), an end to contractualization, and the protection of activists and unions. The International Workers’ Day rally is not only attended by those in productive industries. Students, Indigenous peoples, urban poor communities, women and members of the LGBTQ+ sector, and teachers like me join workers in calling for economic relief and just working conditions for every Filipino. The red-letter day deserves such a show of solidarity.

Jose Monfred C. Sy, a researcher and a member of teachers’ unions in the Philippines

China - On May 14, 1908 (May 1 in the Russian calendar), thousands of Russian and Chinese workers in the northeastern Chinese city of Harbin - then under the military control of Tsarist Russia - gathered in a public park to celebrate May Day. The seeds of the May Day celebration and worker solidarity had been sowed in the previous year. In early 1907, Russian railway workers at the Chinese Eastern Railway company in Harbin were planning a strike on the occasion of the second anniversary of the Bloody Sunday massacre of workers in St. Petersburg.

Before they could carry out their plan, however, some of the Russian workers were arrested by the Tsarist police. The Chinese railway workers organized with the Russian workers. On January 22, thousands of Chinese and Russian workers went on a joint strike and successfully secured the release of arrested Russian workers. For the next few years, amid revolutionary fervor in Russia and soon also in China, Chinese and Russian workers in northeastern China staged dozens more strikes.

In 1920, across a number of cities in China beyond the northeast, workers demonstrated on the street, calling for an eight-hour working day and respect for workers. In Shanghai, a center of working-class organizing in the early 20th century, workers met in a sports stadium to commemorate “International Labor Day”. They issued the Manifesto of Shanghai Workers, which reads, “From today onwards, the spirit of unity of our awakened Chinese workers will make our oppressors tremble with fear”. Early communist leaders - before the formation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 - like Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao played an instrumental role in mobilizing industrial workers and propagating the ideas of the working class movement through their writing, speeches, and magazine publishing.

In 1949, the People’s Republic government proclaimed May Day a national holiday. Annual festive gatherings were held, and “model workers” were honored. But May Day ceased to be a day about the working class movement. Decades of capitalist development later, May Day is barely recognizable, having been further transformed and de-radicalized. Today, it is primarily known as a long holiday for tourism and ironically a time of online shopping and consumption.

In Hong Kong, where May Day rallies had been organized by independent trade unions to express working class power, no May Day rally will be held this year after the rally organizers’ notification to the police was withdrawn under pressure. This made any rally on May Day illegal. This followed the dissolution of the city’s trade union federation, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), and a number of trade unions over the last two years.

Leading up to May Day this year, hundreds of Chinese delivery riders working for one of the country’s largest food delivery platforms, Meituan, were on strike for a week in late April to protest

their deteriorating conditions. Although they did not stage the strike to coincide with May Day, their actions revived and represented the genuine spirit of May Day.

Kevin Lin, managing editor of ALR

Indonesia - The Indonesian labor movement celebrated the first May Day in 1918 during the anti-colonial movement. After independence, Indonesia under Soekarno celebrated International Labour Day from 1948 until 1965. Until a decade ago, Labor Day was always commemorated with enthusiasm and festivity, as a moment for the consolidation of labor unions' members, the unity of social movement, and the campaigns for the rights of the working class.

May Day was banned during the authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998), and removed from the working class' collective memory. President Soeharto replaced May Day by naming the February 20 as Workers' Day. That is the date when the Federation of Indonesian Labour (FBSI), a state-sponsored labor union, was founded. But progressive activists continued to mark May Day. FBSI later became All Workers Trade Union (SPSI) in 1985, a labor union set up to coerce the labor movement into acquiescing to state policies that favored capital. During the Soeharto era, any labor protest would run the risk of being labeled as communist, leading to arrests.

Following the Reformasi in 1998, the mass actions of May Day between 2000 and 2012 involved large numbers of working people across the country. The intensity and scale of the Labour Day celebration has made it the largest and most popular demonstration. Despite not being a public holiday, many workers were mobilised to strike, especially those in the manufacturing industries.

Strongly demanded by the labor movement, May Day was recognized again. The government made May Day a public holiday in 2013. However, since then workers' participation in May Day demonstrations has declined. Labor union leaders have found it difficult to mobilize members and non-unionized workers. Rather than gaining the momentum to articulating workers' rights and their political aspirations, workers are being diverted by other activities as organized by the companies starting in early April.

So too have the local governments such as the Regional Government of Tangerang City tried to sabotage May Day by holding contests of religious activities. Tangerang City is an industrial city, where low wages, gender-based violence, and harassment, suppression of labor unions are workers' and unions' daily experiences.

This year, 25 years after Freedom of Association was reclaimed, labor unions in Indonesia are preparing a celebration of the historic International Labour Day with demonstrations against the Omnibus Law that favors business over workers. Despite public protest and judicial reviews, the Omnibus Law that was unconstitutionally enacted during the pandemic continues to be implemented against people's wishes.

The International Labour Day celebration will rally against the erosion of civic spaces, where activists have been criminalized and arrested with fabricated cases.

Syarif Arifin, a researcher at the Sedane Labor Resource Center (LIPS) in Indonesia

Japan - The first May Day rally in Japan took place in 1920. Amid social upheavals, the government outlawed May Day rallies in 1936 for the next decade. Since the end of the Second World War, rallies have been held annually by the three major national trade union federations. However, the trade unions have been struggling to attract the young generation to participate in rallies.

As one of Japan's Generation Z and as a non-regular female student worker, I have not always felt

attracted to May Day. This is because the labor movements are typically associated with male workers in high-paying regular employment.

When the pandemic began, non-regular workers, mostly women, students, and migrant workers, were severely affected. It revealed the lasting structural discrimination against non-regular workers and made labor issues relevant for me personally and for many other non-regular workers.

In the past, non-regular workers have often been referred to as “housewife part-timers” in Japan. In the 1970s, Japanese companies began to employ married women part-time to secure cheap labor. “Housewife part-timers” were not supposed to work full-time because they were dependent on their partner’s income and worked just to supplement household finance, which justified the suppression of their wages to the bare minimum.

The situation has changed over the past few decades. Women non-regular workers no longer work to supplement household finance but to support themselves and their families. Due to the expansion of non-regular employment, more and more non-regular workers assume key responsibilities in companies. There is less clear a difference between regular and non-regular workers. Yet non-regular workers are paid less and excluded from the welfare system.

The National Confederation of Trade Unions announced that one of their major goals for this May Day is to achieve workers’ equal treatment and reduction of gendered disparities. Highlighting the issue of non-regular employment is crucial to organizing non-regular workers.

Nanako Furuse, researcher and activist in Japan

South Korea - In 1923, two thousand Korean workers celebrated Labor Day for the first time. Although a planned general strike was suppressed by the Japanese colonial government, the Chosun Federation of Labor held public talks and demonstrations across the country. All through the repressive years of the 1930s, May Day continued to be celebrated by workers and unions who proclaimed, “Let’s celebrate May Day with a political general strike!” After Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonialism, the socialist-led General Council of Korea Trade Unions (GCKTU) celebrated the 60th anniversary of May Day on May 1, 1946.

During the U.S. Military Trusteeship (1945-48), the military cracked down on left-wing unions, warning that “any organization or association engaged in a political movement cannot be recognized as a labor union, regardless of its name.” Instead, it supported the pro-government, right-wing Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). In 1957, President Rhee Seungman declared March 10, the date of the FKTU’s formation, a pro-government “Labor Day” in honor of the “anti-communist workers’ organization”.

Under the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 80s, workers were subject to extreme exploitation. The July-September 1987 workers’ uprising marked an important turning point in South Korean social movements by reclaiming May Day. Tens of thousands of workers fought through tear gas on the Yonsei University campus. The new, progressive Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), founded in 1995, now holds rallies every year on Labor Day in major cities across the country.

For me, May Day is a day of struggle by the working class and a time to show the strength of the labor movement. This year, we want to stop the Korean government’s anti-worker labor law reforms. President Yoon Suk Yeol has attempted to expand the flexible working hour system, but it is being pushed back by popular opposition. The government approval rate has fallen below 30 percent.

I also hope on this May Day, with East Asia being threatened by the recent military build-up,

including the South Korea-U.S.-Japan military alliance, China's military exercises, and North Korea's missile tests, we can building international working-class solidarity for peace in Asia.

Myungkyo Hong, a union organizer and member of PLATFORM.C in South Korea

India - May Day celebrations In India began in 1923 in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in a struggle for the eight-hour workday. The Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan, founded by Malayapuram Singaravelu Chettiar, one of the founding members of the Communist Party of India led the first celebration of May Day. But it was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who after becoming the Labour Member to the Viceroy's Council in 1942 established the eight-hour workday in India in the 7th session of the Indian Labour Conference. He also established the Independent Labour Party for the rights of the working-class people. Along with this, he formulated several laws for women laborers which included the Mines Maternity Benefit, Women Labour Welfare Fund, and Paid Maternity Leave for women working in factories.

Every year, May Day is celebrated with great enthusiasm across India as workers, activists, academics and trade unionists march in solidarity, holding high red flags. Young students also celebrate the day by reading revolutionary literature, poems, and songs in universities, bookstores as well as theatres.

My first celebrations of May Day were in my school where we honored the workers in the school. As a child, I was completely unaware of the revolutionary history behind it. The celebrations made us realize the importance of the dignity of labor. It was only in radical and critical spaces of activism and universities did I get to know about the long-standing historic context behind it.

This May Day, the Indian state should acknowledge the inherently anti-worker structures of its politics and the systemic injustice. Rather than taking a step forward for the workers, the Indian state rolled back the pre-existing initiatives and welfare measures for workers during a time of crisis. It is this sheer apathy that needs to be challenged as we celebrate May Day!

Damni Kain, a labor researcher in India

Myanmar - In Myanmar, the first May Day celebration started in 1938 as workers went on strike against the imperial rule and exploitation of the British-owned Burmah Oil Company (BOC) in Yenanchaung, a city in the central region of Myanmar, before the country's independence. Earlier in the same year, on January 8, 1938, strikes started by oil workers in Chauk led to a massive movement known as the "Revolution of 1300" named after the Myanmar Calendar, amidst the colonial government's violent crackdowns. After independence, this day was marked as a "national holiday".

Before the military coup in 2021, the government celebrated May Day, wherein the labor ministry, business leaders, and representatives from international organizations attended the ceremonies. Workers from different industries rallied at the industrial zones and marched to demand their rights.

Since the coup, however, the streets have fallen quiet on May Day. No more rallies and marches on May Days as union leaders were driven into underground or exile. But workers have continued to organize and resist: garment workers went on strike despite police and military intervention, and delivery riders organized themselves for collective actions.

Unable to organize public events inside Myanmar, unions, activist groups, and the Ministry of Labor under the National Unity Government (NUG) will celebrate May Day online. The celebration will feature the theme, "United Voice of Workers, Fight for Federal Future". Others are finding space

outside of Myanmar. Workers and activists from Myanmar will participate in the May Day rally in Bangkok, Thailand.

Ma Cheria, an activist from Myanmar

Thailand - Thailand had its first May Day celebration in 1946. Organized by the Labourers Association and the Tricycle Association in Bangkok, May Day caught the attention of the public the following year when thousands of workers joined the celebration. However, a few months later the military staged a coup d'état and prohibited the celebration.

Thailand has experienced more coups than any other country in contemporary history. The celebration of May Day was suspended time and again. In 1956, due to the fear of growing communist ideology, the Thai authority negotiated with the labor leaders and allowed the May Day celebration on the condition that the name be changed from Labour Day to Workers Day. In 1974, May Day was announced as a public holiday for those who work in the private sector.

On May Day, the Ministry of Labour and the labor rights groups would hold activities across the country to voice out their demands. In Bangkok, networks of Thai workers and migrant workers will take to the street in the city center and march to the Government House. The newly founded Creative Workers Union in Thailand will have its annual meeting.

If you were in Chonburi, the main port city in Thailand's biggest industrial estate, you could enjoy the speeches, concerts, and grilled chicken and papaya salad hosted by the Eastern Relation of Labour Group. From there, the participants will form a caravan to Bangkok and join the rally.

Unlike 9-5 workers, May Day for a freelance journalist like myself can be a day-off, just like any other work day. This reminds me of the different conditions that workers are in. Despite these diversities, we are all workers.

There are only two weeks left before Thailand's general election. This election will determine the future of the country after eight years of the military government. How will the new government empower labor rights? Apart from the political democracy that people are crying for, what about our economic democracy? For the past decades, military leaders have been taking turns in the government seats and they have weakened the labor movement by limiting mobilization.

Thailand has not ratified the ILO conventions that recognize the freedom of association and right to collective bargaining despite being a founding member of the ILO. The worker's movements are scattered in small fractions: the private sector's workers and civic staff can have unions within only their organizations. Meanwhile, the hope to set up a union is far off for migrant workers. The situation is not better for the gig workers - the growing population who are fighting to be recognized as employees.

Nicha Wachpanich, a journalist and unionist in Thailand

Singapore - In Singapore, May Day is usually celebrated by the state-controlled National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) from the 1960s onward. The prime minister, NTUC president, and secretary general attend these celebrations and make speeches that stress the symbiotic relationship between the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the NTUC, the economic climate for workers, and what the NTUC and the PAP have done for workers.

These rallies are invite-only, and restricted to members of the NTUC and the PAP. In some years, there have been protests held at Speakers' Corner, the only public space in the country where Singaporeans and Permanent Residents are allowed to assemble without getting arrested. These

protests were largely focused on resisting the government's immigration policy. They have been very well attended.

This year, the organization I'm a part of, Workers Make Possible, will be organizing a Labor Day Rally at Speakers' Corner on May 1. Called "Power to the People", this year's rally will feature six speakers from working class backgrounds. They include organizers and workers in healthcare, food delivery, transport, food and beverage services, and a mother who lives in a low-income housing community. Without the culture of independently forming associations let alone unionizing, many of the speakers will be speaking publicly for the first time in their lives.

They will be making references to the "The People's 15 Demands", a list of demands that we compiled from a year's worth of community organizing and town hall meetings. Recently the government amended the laws such that migrants are no longer allowed to be in the park. This means almost 40% of the country's labor force is not allowed to participate in the rally.

Nonetheless, the People's 15 demands include migrant workers' demands. Speakers will be speaking on the need for solidarity, stressing how our struggles are interconnected and that our unity as one working class is integral to changing things for the better. The rally will also feature performances from local rappers, punk, metal, and rock bands.

May Day is my favorite holiday. It is a day to remember the sacrifices workers have historically made to achieve the rights many of us take for granted today, and in some cases, are gradually losing. This includes having the weekend, rest hours, and paid sick leave. I have attended May Day rallies in other countries but never had the chance to do so in my own country. In Singapore, we have not had a significant wave of progressive labor reforms since the roaring 50s when our trade unions were their strongest. This May Day, I hope we can all collectively reignite the soul of labor that is deeply rooted in this country. It has been asleep for far too long.

Suraendher Kumarr, a community organiser and member of Workers Make Possible in Singapore

Taiwan - The May Day rallies in Taiwan can be traced back to the trade union movement in the 1980s and 90s. Many workers started to form their own trade unions and staged strikes and protests in 1987 during a period of the opposition movement against the authoritarian rule of the Nationalist Party (KMT). In 1998, the Labor Party staged a May Day rally to call for the independence of trade unions and for the government to lift restrictions on trade union organization. They demanded a reduction in working hours and the implementation of a two-day labor holiday.

Since then, every May 1, labor unions and labor organizations have organized a May Day rally and raised key labor issues of the year. In recent times, most of the May Day demands are focused on reducing atypical labor, shortening working hours, wage increases, and retirement protection for workers.

The trade union organization in Taiwan mainly takes the form of enterprise unionism. Although there were many so-called "occupational" trade unions, membership in these unions was mainly for the purpose of labor insurance. Most of them did not perform any actual trade union functions. The current unionization rate in Taiwan (if excluding occupational unions) is only about 8%, and the national general unions do not effectively represent the voices of local grassroots unions, making it impossible for many policies to be promoted through unions.

Even so, the May Day rally still has an important symbolic meaning, as workers from different regions and industries take to the streets to voice their common demands. Through this rally, they see the problems faced by workers in different industries, which is still conducive to communication

between unions.

The theme of the 2023 May Day Labor Rally is demanding accountability from the government. After nearly eight years in power, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has not implemented many labor policies. The presidential and legislative elections will be held in Taiwan in January 2024. We will put forward the demands of labor unions and labor groups, such as “workers want a pay raise, national holidays should be restored,” “youth want hope, elderly want dignity,” “atypical workers need protection, health care workers want labor rights,” and “labor unions must have power, the labor’s three rights (freedom association, the right of collective bargaining, and the right to strike) should be intact.” We want to remind the two major political parties in Taiwan that working class voters will take into account the policies proposed by the candidates when casting their votes.

Catta Chou, a union organizer in Taiwan

P.S.

• Asian Labour Review, a journal for labour movements across Asia. April 30, 2023 5:15 am:
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