

Singapore: Reviving worker's power with new generation of activists

Tuesday 3 September 2024, by [ANDREWARTHA Jacob](#), [LYNN](#), [SALMON Alex](#), [SOBIERALSKI Nova](#), [TAY Elijah](#) (Date first published: 30 August 2024).

Singapore's once vibrant left and labour movement led the nation's successful anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s and '60s. However, dreams of an independent and socialist Singapore were betrayed by Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP), whose regime arrested hundreds of trade unionists, socialists, journalists, students and ordinary workers.

Leftist politics took a hit, but never disappeared. In the following decades, left-wing thinkers and movements resurfaced in various spaces, having to confront extreme repression each time. Now a new generation is emerging, determined to rebuild people's power.

Nova Sobieralski, Jacob Andrewartha and Alex Salmon spoke to two Singapore left activists from this new generation for [LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#). They are active with Workers Make Possible, an organisation seeking to build worker power in Singapore.

Elijah Tay is a student organiser and leader of Students for Palestine, which campaigns for the government and universities to cut ties with Israel. Lynn is an anti-death penalty and labour rights activist.

Tay and Lynn were in Australia for [Ecosocialism 2024](#), held in Boorloo/Perth at the end of June. Below they discuss the situation facing left activism and the upcoming general elections.

Considering the PAP's determination to suppress any left and democratic opposition, what has enabled the rise of a new left in Singapore today?

Tay: One factor is the growing recognition of capitalism's problems, especially with the rising cost of living — everyone is feeling the pinch. The government has sought to frame the issue as just a negative externality of capitalism, rather than something inherent to the system. But the terrible cost of living is making people more open to talking about issues such as class and poverty, which has allowed us to make headway. There is growing class consciousness among the people.

Lynn: The increasing encroachment on civil liberties has also shown the public how much of a façade our democracy is. It has revealed that we do not have a democracy; rather, we live under an authoritarian state. The more the state clamps down on civil disobedience, the more it exposes itself. This just reinforces how important acts of resistance are, as they expose the system and abuse of powers.

Tay: Another factor is that after the state obliterated the left, we saw the rise of professionalised activism in the late 1980s. This involved people setting up NGOs that are regulated by the state. They tend to be identity-based rather than focused on struggling with the people and resisting the common roots of capitalism, imperialism, and authoritarianism.

I used to fall into the trap of liberal, identity politics, but it always felt like something was missing. For there to be sustainable, long-term change, we need to be grounded in the material, grassroots struggles of the people, and be in solidarity with one another. These are the spaces we managed to create as we realised that navigating the existing professionalised activist spaces simply was not working out.

Lynn: It is important to note that this new left did not just happen — it took a lot of work and organising to make sure it is not just a flash in the pan. People may have ideas, leanings and concerns, but these have to be organised and linked back to the issue of class. This takes conscious effort and grassroots work. That is the kind of activism we have been slowly putting in to rebuild the left in Singapore.

What campaigns are you involved in organising?

Lynn: I am part of the [Transformative Justice Collective](#), an abolitionist group campaigning against the prison industrial complex in Singapore. We are working on the abolition of the death penalty and prisons in Singapore.

On this issue, Singapore's statistics are astounding: we have one of the highest death penalty rate for drug trafficking — since 2022, 20 people have been executed, including one for cannabis trafficking. A majority of these individuals come from impoverished backgrounds.

In addition, we are challenging the government's continued encroachment of civil liberties, which they have carried out through acts such as POMFA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act), MHRA (Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act) and ISA (Internal Security Act).

A lot of the more professionalised organisations and activists have purposefully stayed away from these issues due to fear of backlash from the state. But we have very consciously chosen to stand proudly and strongly against authoritarianism, despite the risks of arrests and persecution.

Tay: My friends and I recently started reviving the student movement rooted in material struggles. We organised a group called [NTU financial aid friends](#), which we started at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) a year ago to campaign for student financial aid. Our main focus was ensuring low-income students could pay their school fees by NTU providing them with bursaries.

Our focus group discussions and research found that even if your per-capita household income is zero, you are not necessarily guaranteed the NTU bursary. This means lots of students have to maintain three or four jobs just to pay their fees and day-to-day expenses. Some end up having to choose between paying fees or rent, and end up homeless.

Recently, we had some small wins. After campaigning, petitioning and speaking to the media, NTU reached out to us to meet. As a result of students coming together to make our demands heard loud and clear, Singaporean students at NTU can now get a bursary.

Fellow students also recently started Students for Palestine to organize actions in response to the genocide happening right now and to demand that our universities cut ties with Israel. Similarly, we set up [Students for Migrant Rights](#), which works closely with Migrant Workers Singapore to advocate for migrant workers' rights and support them on the ground in Singapore.

What are some of the obstacles activists face in Singapore?

Lynn: There are too many!

One of the biggest barriers is that in every aspect of democracy, we face constant intrusions: we do not have freedom of speech, we do not have freedom of association, we do not have freedom to organise, we do not have an independent judicial system, we do not have independent media. All rights have been clamped down on in Singapore. Just associating yourself with an issue, such as the genocide in Palestine, can mean being investigated or persecuted.

Another issue that we find is that as informal groups, we end up struggling to carry out all the functions of a healthy democracy. For example, we have to do reporting ourselves because the mainstream media does not want to associate with us — most media is either state-owned or state-funded. Even then, our freedom of speech is restricted, and they are increasingly censoring online media as well. Moreover, we find that we often have to navigate much of the legal system ourselves. Few lawyers want to associate themselves with cases deemed “politically sensitive”, resulting in some —including death row prisoners —having to argue for themselves in court.

To compound that, funding is another issue: the government places limits on international solidarity by restricting funding from overseas to ensure that they remain the largest funder in Singapore. However, this means they can easily restrict funding for organisations should they not comply with their wishes.

Tay: Employment is also an issue. If you are an activist, you can lose any hope for landing a job in the public sector. Getting a job in the private sector can be tricky too. For example, I have been threatened with losing my contract if I continue speaking out on things such as the genocide in Palestine. So, there is employment precarity too.

Another obstacle is the way the state has successfully cultivated a sense of fear and repulsion towards activists. Police have investigated many students for taking action in solidarity with Palestine. When I talk to these students, often they are most worried about how their parents and family will react. This can matter for various reasons.

For example, students can find home becomes a hostile environment, yet they have no other real option except homelessness. If you are single and under 35, you do not have access to public housing, which means you are looking at paying US\$1-2000 in rent in the private market for just a room. Most students work part-time and can barely afford day-to-day expenses, let alone rent. So, it is not an option for people to live outside the parent’s home.

Lynn: It is important to note how housing has been used to coerce Singaporeans into complying with certain norms. For example, you have to be a married heterosexual couple to purchase subsidised public housing below 35 years of age. Even once you gain access to public housing, you still incur so much debt that you feel you cannot lose your job because your housing is dependent on that. On top of that, many jobs in Singapore are tied to the government.

Tay: All of this means single and queer people do not have equal access to housing. But it also hurts heterosexual couples, because many end up rushing into marriage to secure housing. The first thing any straight Singaporean couple may come to ask themselves is: “Are we going to get a house together?” The question of a proposal and marriage come way later. Unsurprisingly there is a pretty high divorce rate in Singapore.

Former president Halmiah Yacob announced that addressing structural inequality was a government priority. How connected is this claim to the realities Singaporeans face?

Lynn: A lot of what the government does is to render temporary aid with a large amount of conditions tied to it. They will say: “Yes, you will get some aid.” But there are limits on it. For

example, you can only get monetary aid for 3-6 months each time and must go through all sorts of bureaucratic hurdles to prove your need for this assistance. It often also comes with a lot of criterias that you need to meet, which might not be reasonable for a household that is already struggling. Or you can get access to rental housing, but only temporarily. Once your income increases, your housing subsidy decreases, penalising people for earning more.

In Singapore, there is a lot of fear mongering around the idea of social handouts. The government claims welfare leads to people becoming reliant on the state. They refuse to acknowledge that the short-term welfare they dole out does not get people out of poverty — which ultimately means people have to keep coming back. Such statistics do not get released to the public, but we know this because people who work within the system have told us how some of these programs have failed.

Another example: the cost of water and other utilities has been rising for the past few years. The government's response has been to provide a one-time subsidy because the elections are coming up this year. But in the long term, working class families are still penalised through the increased cost of basic amenities and regressive taxes, which always benefit the rich.

The government continues to implement stopgap measures to pacify people and the increasing unhappiness around the cost of living. In this way, they hope to avoid mass disapproval or movements.

Could you outline some of the undemocratic features of Singapore's electoral system?

Lynn: The elections department in Singapore, which determines things such as electoral boundaries, are run under the direction of the Prime Minister's office, with advice from the president. This essentially means the ruling party gets to decide the electoral boundaries each election — and every time the boundaries are different. After each election, they look at the statistics from each electorate and redraw the boundaries in their favour.

The end result is that, despite a decreasing share of the vote [from 69.86% in 2015 to 61.23% in 2020], the PAP held onto the same number of seats [83] at the last elections. PAP continues to have a supermajority, with which it can pass laws without any checks and balances.

There are also important undemocratic limits on financing and the availability of spaces for rallying and organising. Often, only the ruling party is allowed to use certain spaces. Furthermore, no political campaigning is permitted until 9-11 days before the elections. Of course, this does not stop ruling party candidates from putting their faces up on posters or running grassroots events and saying: "Hi, I'm part of the ruling party, this is the event we are running for Gaza". Opposition parties, on the other hand, cannot easily do this.

Tay: Another obstacle opposition parties face is having less funds than the incumbents. Funding affects us in terms of how many posters we can put up, affording a proper social media team, hiring media people for promotion and publicity, etc.

Lynn: The media point is important: when you open a newspaper during election times, the difference is stark: nine pages dedicated to the ruling party, only one dedicated for all opposition parties — and obviously even that small coverage is unfavourable to the opposition. That means we have to create our own media, otherwise how else can we reach the people?

What can you tell us about the [People's Manifesto](#) that has been launched for the elections?

Lynn: We have been working on this for quite a while. What we found was often people only declare

their views during elections. But we feel this should be ongoing. In a healthy democracy, topics that affect basic rights, such as access to services, should be in constant discussion. So, we felt it was important that the people — and not just political parties — comment on these issues.

We made sure to consult different organisations, NGOs and activist groups to bring together a whole slew of concerns: healthcare, cost of living, housing, pensions, civil liberties, democratic rights. It is a long document, over 50 pages long, that we have released and hope to get people to read, think about and sign onto before deciding who they vote for in the coming elections.

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Links

https://links.org.au/reviving-workers-power-singapore-left-activists-speak?fbclid=IwY2xjawFCVtleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHfwLrD0ViftvkhXmQUXG4fzMylzTEh0ogKSdFbEUtWzqlvybFaOogHK_MA_aem_IdSyK5TrRHLaQ5A_3p7E-A&sfnsn=mo