

Thai institutions: Unions

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Trade unions have long been a part of Thailand's formal system of participatory and representative institutional arrangements. Yet the ideas, practices, and aspirations that define unionism remain unknown to the vast majority of Thai workers and play little or no role in their lives. The fragile nature of trade unionism has become even more evident over the past decade or so. Of the more than one thousand officially registered private sector unions there are only a relative handful that actually operate and those that do are largely enterprise based, poorly resourced and constantly struggle just to defend wages and conditions. The situation is slightly better in the state enterprises where a lengthy tradition of union organising and activism survives. But here too unions are hardly thriving.

In part the institutional brittleness of unions is the product of longer-term processes of structural change. The relatively ethnically homogenous, spatially concentrated, and securely employed public and private sector workforce that sustained union organising in the 1970s and early 1980s, has unravelled and given way to a working class that is now more casualised, mobile, spatially differentiated, ethnically more complex, industrially raw and inexperienced, and virtually untouched by the ideologies of the left that mobilised earlier generations of labour.

These changes have clearly constrained the building of organisational capacities. At the same time they have also given rise to new rounds of labour organising and activism. However, where collective forms of activism have emerged over the past decade, employers have systematically opposed them. In a period bracketed by two major crises and intensified local, regional and global competition, business has responded by revaluing the costs of labour via the retrenching and downsizing of workforces, reducing wages and benefits, using flexible forms of employment, introducing new technologies, employing ever more sophisticated forms of human resource management as well as relocating operations, often to border areas or other greenfield sites, to make use of cheaper migrant labour. Workers struggling to retain jobs, conditions of employment, and secure legal entitlements to compensation, and outstanding wages and benefits have contested these processes of restructuring and revaluing of work. All too often, however, the outcome of these contests has been job losses, partial payment of entitlements, and the destruction of already existing unions and/or the pre-emptive annihilation of nascent organising efforts.

The business offensive against unions has been facilitated by the nature of broader political contests. Whether statist, liberal or populist—to use Michael Connors' terms—all of the social forces currently dominating struggles to shape the forms that politics might take in Thailand have consistently demonstrated their opposition to trade unions. As a result successive governments have done nothing to reform archaic labour laws, poorly performing labour courts and the outmoded machinery of arbitration and conciliation. This has enabled the crooks, shysters and assorted military, bureaucratic, business and other non-labour interests to continue to subvert and embed their grip over the institutional architecture of labour relations. The undermining and marginalisation of unions from these formal avenues of participation and representation has, in turn, compelled

workers to pursue their collective interests via the spaces of civil society. Here some new organisations have emerged and alliances have been forged with other domestic civil society groups and efforts made to build and consolidate relationship with regional, international and transnational labour solidarity groups and campaigns. But, in a period of continuing labour tensions and conflicts and great social and political upheaval, organising through civil society has been singularly unable to force any recasting of trade union marginalisation from industrial or wider social and political institutional representative arrangements.

The next decade is unlikely to see any significant reversal in the fortunes of trade unions. This is not to suggest that the passion, ingenuity, and courage through which workers have strived to remedy workplace and social and political injustices and indignities will not continue. But the pernicious effects of class restructuring, work reorganisation, and continued hostility by employers and elites (whatever coloured banner they may be flying) will all contribute to the further weakening of trade unions as an institution that once promised Thai workers a real opportunity to collectively shape their workplace and broader social and political futures.

P.S.

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