

A New Agenda for Asian Labour Movements in the Age of Decaying Neoliberalism

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To understand the shift toward authoritarianism and “shrinking civic space” across Asia, it is imperative to place this phenomenon in the context of the crisis of global neoliberalism that has brought back authoritarian statism. This understanding on the changing nature of global capitalist system is crucial for crystallising a new agenda for labour movement-building from below.

We are living in a decaying age of neoliberalism. The global economy suffered from *minus 3.3% growth* during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. It took only 11 years for the global economy to break the shameful record set by the 2007-2008 recession that had brought the global economy to by then the lowest point after World War II.

The pandemic may have made the crisis of neoliberalism more dramatic. However, it is difficult to attribute everything to the pandemic and the so-called supply chain disruption caused by it, given the shape of the neoliberal world order. With the declining influence of the US both politically and economically, rival powers have been challenging the leadership of the US over the global political economy, first through trade wars (China) and now through a real war (Russia).

Indeed, neoliberalism as a capitalist development doctrine has been incredibly impotent in dealing with planetary problems represented by climate change that is likely to erase any possibility of having a world, not to mention a better world.

However, it does not mean neoliberalism is fading away. What we are witnessing is the demise of ‘global neoliberalism’ that has been constructed under the US hegemony with a false promise for a world without (economic and political) barriers through the rhetoric of freedom, liberty, good governance and democracy.

This demise is far from the end of neoliberalism as a class project initiated in the 1970s in Atlantic economies to restore the power of elites and build a worldwide economy that would guarantee such elites unlimited sources of financial and business revenue. Neoliberalism as a class project has gradually become, or at least tried to present itself as, global neoliberalism only because it had to so as to address many challenges to the project, such as broken promises to bring development to the Third World, repeated economic crises and the emerging global alliance of the anti-globalisation movement.

Those challenges were the specific historical conditions that have created an awkward and ultimately temporary planetary alliance between different economies and political forces with a common goal of squeezing surplus labour for the sake of increasing income share for the elites. This alliance is now being shattered as a consequence of the very neoliberal development of the global economy. Confronted with the crisis of global neoliberalism, neoliberalism is taking back its genuine face as its survival does not allow luxuries like democracy and good governance.

The consequence is the outright authoritarianisation of neoliberal development within emerging neoliberal blocks competing for global hegemony. The shrinking civic space that threatens Asia's labour movements across the continent results not from despotic Asian rulers or Asia's unchanging propensity for authoritarianism but from this changing face of neoliberalism as a global trend. Neoliberalism rising from the ashes of glorious global liberalism is many-headed, more genuinely authoritarian, and therefore perhaps a bigger obstacle to Asian workers.

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The Life Cycle of Neoliberalism

All doctrines of capitalist development have gone through their birth, heyday and demise. But not all of them experience death. They may no longer rule the world. Yet, they survive by mutating and adjusting to new environments and, if that is not working, being integrated into something else, like the life of viruses.

We have plenty of such examples throughout the history of global capitalism. Keynesianism, for instance, became the most ridiculed economic development doctrine by the 1970s, when the virtuous cycle of deficit spending and full employment could no longer sustain the post-World War II boom. Many democratically elected governments in Europe and North America ended their affair with Keynesianism or any economic doctrine calling for state intervention and began accommodating newly emerging neoliberalism from the late 1970s.

However, Keynesian policies and other statist approaches to economic development and capital accumulation have survived. Not a single national economy altogether scrapped welfare spending and state sectors, although they became relatively smaller than during the heyday of Keynesianism. State intervention resurfaced as a major saviour every time the free-market doctrine did not work for the interest of elites.

What about liberalism in the 19th century? The end of 19th century liberalism was even more dramatic. Apart from creating the Polanyian satanic mills in leading capitalist economies by accelerating labour commodification and destroying non-monetary social relations, the dominant doctrine of capitalist development had two world wars, depressions and colonialism, to name a few catastrophic consequences.

Even then, it has survived an epochal challenge from statist developmentalism and Keynesianism largely thanks to some hard-core free-market ideologues who waited for a suitable moment to resurface and took advantage of the end of the post-war boom in the 1970s for its revival. They come back gloriously with a new name, neoliberalism, as a guardian of global elites who were frustrated about their declining share of global wealth vis-a-vis the ordinary working population throughout the post-World War II boom.

Neoliberalism, under the auspice of America's geopolitical domination over the post-Cold War world and its model of liberal democracy as a beacon of the political modernisation of the former Second and Third World, began to rule the global economy from the 1980s, leading a moderate recovery from the economic downturn of the 1970s.

When Francis Fukuyama (1992) prematurely, and perhaps regretfully, declared the end of history with the victory of free markets and liberal democracy over other economic, social and political systems, neoliberalism seemed to have established itself as an unquestionable authority. [\[1\]](#)

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The Birth of Global Neoliberalism

However, the heyday of this prominent doctrine of capitalist development in the late 20th century did not go without trouble.

Firstly, the moderate recovery of advanced capitalist economies was made only at the expense of the working population in both rich and poor economies. The neoliberal shock therapy of austerity and high interest rates in advanced capitalist economies led to the decreasing share of labour income for their workers and an increasing debt burden for developing economies.

Disastrous debt crises in Sub-Saharan Africa and South America forced economies in the regions to accept structural adjustment programmes ‘offered’ by international financial institutions. Consequently, more than 70 economies worldwide had to go through 566 structural adjustment programmes of various kinds between 1978 and 1992. [2]

In this sense, ‘the end of history’ was a smokescreen for the suffering of millions who went through the Third World debt crisis and the lost decade of development those regions experienced during the 1980s.

Furthermore, less than five years after the end of history, the doctrine started signalling its premature death. This signal came from the ‘East’, where, according to the World Bank report published in 1993, market-friendly public policy was creating an economic miracle and proving the effect of neoliberal remedies.

The competitive pursuit of export-oriented industrialisation by an increasing number of East Asian economies, whose products targeted the same EU and US export markets, resulted in over-capacity and more heated competition among individual capitals across neoliberalising East Asia. [3] Meanwhile, firms had to rely on credit expansion primarily through short-term foreign loans made available through quickly liberalising financial markets.

The Asian economic crisis of 1998 and the structural adjustment programmes attached to the IMF bailout of the troubled economies were the final turning point toward a more genuine neoliberal development of Asian economies.

Despite a large-scale liquidation of capital in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and South Korea, the crisis of liberalising East Asian economies was not taken as an alarm for the coming waves of neoliberal crises. Instead, it was seen as a crisis caused by surviving East Asian developmental statism (or crony capitalism) and authoritarian states, which deserved more (neo)liberal discipline through structural adjustment.

Therefore, what followed the crisis was the neoliberal consolidation of the global economy that facilitated the emergence of global neoliberalism and the globalisation saga of the 2000s. By incorporating East Asia’s tiger economies known for state-led industrialisation and authoritarian politics, neoliberalism became a leading economic doctrine in a truly global sense. Moreover, neoliberalism came to those economies together with liberal democratic transition, creating the myth of global neoliberalism committed to freedom, liberty and democracy.

Indeed, not everyone bought this illusory image of neoliberalism. What awaited was the emergence

of the global justice movement that understood the emerging neoliberalism as an extension of US imperialism or as an assault on the working class and the poor across the world.

The Battle in Seattle in 1999 showed an emerging convergence of working-class discontents against neoliberalism in the North with the growing anti-globalisation movements in the South such as Zapatista in Mexico, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil and La Via Campesina. In Asia, various anti-globalisation and anti-neoliberal organisations came together to derail the 6th WTO ministerial in Hong Kong in 2005. Meanwhile, those movements began to organise the World Social Forum in 2001 as an assembly of forces opposing neoliberalism and imperialism.

The poor economic performance of early neoliberalism and emerging anti-neoliberal alliances across the world forced neoliberalism to become more inclusive by incorporating more concerns about poverty, governance, equity and employment. Poverty alleviation, democracy, the rule of law and environmental sustainability were all integrated into neoliberalism's so-called good governance agenda by the 2000s, giving birth to what we call global neoliberalism.

On the other hand, it was a new and strange participant of this emerging global neoliberalism that had led East Asia's recovery from the crisis of 1997-1998 and, by doing so, decisively saved neoliberalism from premature death.

China's aggressive promotion of export-oriented industrialisation and supply of millions of migrant workers attracted capital flows from rapidly neoliberalising East Asian economies and, to a lesser extent, from the rest of the world. While Asia's other developing countries struggled with austerity and unemployment, the Chinese economy grew 10% annually between 1998 and 2007, leading to the region's economic recovery. Transnational corporations (TNCs), mostly from more advanced East Asian economies, played a significant role in China's export drive. They produced, for example, 48% of China's export products, 23% of total industrial value added, and 18% of tax revenue in 2001. [4]

China's accession to the WTO in 2001 was symbolic in that China began to play an active role in mediating global capital with unregulated and disposable labour - an essential membership requirement for emerging global neoliberalism that all other Asian economies had to meet. With Chinese workers being exploited to produce cheap consumer goods for the American working class, whose consumption power was decreasing due to the decreasing labour share of national income, global neoliberalism seemed to be complete. In other words, it was the China-driven export boom and economic growth in Asia that completed the making of global neoliberalism.

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Asian Workers under Global Neoliberalism

During neoliberal development, many Asian economies experienced a labour paradox. This paradox refers to the fact that Asia's economic ascent with an explosive quantitative increase of the labour force producing goods for global capitalism did not result in a coherent working class that resembled the industrial working class that had emerged from the core of global capitalism during the 'golden days' of the 20th century. Instead, the ascent of Asia relied on the toiling of segmented working classes involved in the diverse forms of informal labour in neoliberal sweatshops, fields and streets. [5]

Contradictory tendencies to the equalisation and differentiation of labour within the region produced this paradox. The Asian population relying fully or partially on selling their labour power for survival has increased dramatically during neoliberal globalisation. Primitive accumulation under neoliberal globalisation created a vast reserve army of labour by dispossessing people of their land, the commons, communally shared skills, knowledge and technology, and the ecosystem that had once sustained people's livelihood in developing Asia.

In more advanced economies, tertiary labour continually expands, representing the growth of the service sector, particularly with increasing women's participation. Formerly non-profit-making services shared among the population in communal and public spaces, such as caring, educating, entertaining and healing, became profit-oriented businesses relying on wage labour.

Consequently, in East Asia alone, the total labour force increased from about 764 million to 1.2 billion over the last 40 years. [6] China alone added more than 412 million non-agricultural workers to the global capitalist system between 1982 and 2017 (141,360,000 to 561,316,000). [7] Asia, as the home to about 60% of the total global workforce, stands on capitalist labour as the common substance for the survival of its population.

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The newly created Asian workforce was, however, subjected to increasingly asymmetric power relations between labour, capital and the state, which had been inherited from the post-War development and exacerbated by neoliberalism. Asian states quickly transformed into neoliberal states whose prime goal was to secure the best market conditions for capital accumulation. [8]

The neoliberal retreat of the state from the economy has been highly selective and uneven. They became less interventionist in areas such as the selective promotion of industries and regulation over financial and commodity flow across the border. Contrary, these states maintain or even strengthen their authoritarianism by constantly disciplining the ordinary working population in favour of local and global capital.

Organised labour, which had re-emerged out of struggles against developmental dictatorships in the late 1980s and early 1990s, had little time to prepare its counter strategy against the onset of neoliberal development. These asymmetric power relations allow Asian economies to exploit the newly created capitalist workforce without offering them secured employment and welfare, producing the labour paradox of the rise of East Asia.

On the other hand, a territorial transformation of capitalist development that produces transnational labour regimes (TLRs) - a hierarchical series of labour regimes that transcend national borders - also facilitates the labour paradox. TLRs result from repeated attempts by TNCs to incorporate different communities across Asia into regional production networks and, in doing so, maintain a series of labour regimes for their transnational capital accumulation.

East Asia has been spearheading this process. During the three decades of neoliberal globalisation up to 2018, inward foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to East Asia increased almost 28 times, from US\$15.1 billion to US\$ 426 billion. [9] FDI inflow to China increased about 40 times from US\$ 3.4 billion in 1989 to US\$ 138 in 2018.

This massive transnational flow of capital has changed the territoriality of capital relations by increasing the importance of the transnational combination between capital and labour. With the growing importance of such capital relations in export industries, transnational actors, institutions and motivations play increasingly decisive roles in building and managing labour regimes.

Consequently, labour regimes no longer exist predominantly as nationally bound institutions despite their physical locations within national boundaries. [10]

Furthermore, emerging TLRs in individual economies are being integrated into transnational hierarchies of production sites built by TNCs that coordinate their activities in different localities to enhance their competitive position globally. TLRs equalise labour in the sense that millions of workers in each Asian developing economy are now employed by expanding TNCs and their subcontractors.

TLRs also differentiate labour as these local labour regimes, while integrated into TLRs transcending across borders, are not homogenised with similar labour standards and rights. Local labour regimes that are an integral part of TLRs show different arrangements for regular hours, pay and overtime, holiday and other leave, workplace welfare, pensions, trade union membership and collective bargaining rights. The consequence of building TLRs is increasing downward pressure on wages, labour standards and welfare, particularly in Asia's smaller and weaker developing economies.

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The Rift in Global Neoliberalism and Global Overaccumulation

Given that Asia's labour paradox brought economic growth without better labour conditions or increasing labour's share of wealth, it seems that neoliberalism succeeded in achieving its original goal through global neoliberalism. Global capitalism has reached every corner of the world, where more profitable markets and disposable labour are available for global elites.

However, the advance of neoliberalism also caused a deep rift within its vehicle, global neoliberalism. A critical moment came with the global financial crisis of 2007-2009. Apart from bringing a severe downturn to the US and other advanced capitalist economies, the crisis also revealed that the centre of global neoliberalism had been maintained through debt-dependent household consumption and opportunistic financial capital harvesting the gains of such a development pattern.

On the other hand, it revealed that China's growth drive relying on export to advanced economies stood on shaky ground. The recession in major advanced capitalist economies made many export-driven economies in Asia experience an economic downturn with a minus or near zero growth by 2009. China's export hit bottom in 2009 with minus 16% growth.

In the face of decreasing income from the export and roughly 30 million job losses, including 20 million job losses in the export sector that accounted for about a third of China's GDP in 2008, China launched the mega-scale stimulation package in 2008. This included RMB 4 trillion government spending and RMB 9 trillion low rate loans from state-owned banks, most of which went into the

construction industry and market across the country to build physical infrastructure. It seemed that this stimulus package worked out for China not only because it successfully compensated job losses in export industries but also because China's importance in the global capitalist economy became even greater than before.

China became the world's second-largest economy by 2010. In terms of purchasing power parity, China's GDP contributed about 16.49% of global GDP and took over the US, whose contribution to global GDP was only 15.80% in 2014. China also overtook the European Union in 2015 by producing about 17.07 % of global GDP (purchasing power parity terms). [11]

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It is crucial to notice that China, in the meantime, has also become a more important source of the global overaccumulation of capital – competitive accumulation of productive capacity through the endless race to dominate markets until it cannot be profitably utilised. China's recovery has been achieved at the expense of exacerbated overaccumulation within and beyond China, which created overcapacity across industrial sectors and resulted in the so-called 'new normal' in China by the 2010s.

China's production no longer yields as large profits as it did before. Overaccumulation and its resulting falling rate of profit in China are no longer secret because many symptoms of overcapacity have surfaced since the global recession and the introduction of the massive stimulus package to ameliorate problems of decreasing export. [12]

Although China's output-capital ratio began to fall from 2008, [13] this overcapacity is not a problem emerging from post-recession measures, but a result of the overaccumulation of capital within China during its hyper-economic growth since the 1990s.

China's integration into the global neoliberal economy meant that it began to participate in the making of overaccumulation of capital, which is not an abnormal event induced by external conditions but an inherent tendency in the capitalist social form of production.

Capitalist production subordinates the production for social needs to the expansion of capital to the greatest possible extent through “the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power by the capitalist.” [14] This subordination creates a constant tendency toward overproduction and thereby increasing competitive pressure on individual capitals.

Sustaining capital accumulation despite these barriers depends on “the ability of capital to suspend the contradiction inherent in the social form of capitalist production.” [15] Individual capitals attempt to overcome it not by meeting the amount of social need but by introducing new methods of production, intensifying labour and extending the working days, so putting more commodities onto the market with the perspective of occupying a superior position in the competition. [16]

Credit expansion is also a method to bypass such general tendencies. Through the expansion of credit, individual capitals can revolutionise the means of production and technology, create new needs, and expand the world market without regard to the limits imposed by the competitive pressure and the urgency to realise the produced surplus value. However, although credit expansion

may save individual capitals from being victimised temporarily and suspends the immediate manifestation of the contradiction of the social form of capitalist production, it only exacerbates capital overaccumulation. The fundamental contradiction inherent in the capitalist social form of production would emerge in a more devastating crisis.

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China maintained an above 10% annual growth rate between the two economic crises (1998-2007) by pursuing export-oriented and investment-driven growth based on high fixed capital formation and increasing inflow of FDI, mainly from East Asia’s advanced economies. Gaulard (2015) shows that China’s total factor productivity (TFP) has stagnated due to declining capital productivity and increasing idle productive capacity since the 1990s. [17]

According to Pauls (2022), the rate of surplus value also reached its peak in 2005, and China’s extensive accumulation process that had relied on squeezing workers either by extending working hours or increasing labour intensity began to show signs of exhaustion as early as 2006. [18]

Since the global recession slowed China’s export drive, China has tried to increase local demands to maintain growth. Local demands were sustained partially by rising wages, mostly in coastal areas, but more importantly through credit expansion resulting in increasing debt of local government and households. Household debt increased from 10% of GDP in 2006 to above 40% by 2016. [19]

It is in this sense that, although the immediate cause of China’s downturn appears to be the crisis in the US, the so-called new normal needs to be understood as a manifestation of global overaccumulation to which China had been an important contributor since the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s.

Indeed, China’s export boom was a smoke screen for global overaccumulation as the boom was sustained by “the contingent capability of the US to mobilise vast purchasing power from the future through excessive borrowing to fill the growing gap between global production and consumption.” [20]

Without debt-relying consumption in advanced capitalist economies, China’s export industries would have experienced a downturn with a decreasing rate of profit even earlier. Besides, China’s export sector was the outlet for over-accumulated capital elsewhere in East Asia, which tried to overcome overaccumulation through the “spatial fix” – the geographical expansion of capital to resolve problems of overaccumulation. [21]

China, Overaccumulation and Imperialist Exploitation

While China was becoming an integral part of global overaccumulation, it also became a part of the imperialist system of exploitation with maturing imperialist conditions within China, such as the state’s wholehearted support for capital accumulation, the sheer concentration of wealth in large (private or state-owned) corporations, the deprived working class and a large amount of capital overaccumulation that requires foreign outlets.

China did not demonstrate any counter tendency against the development of imperialist conditions observed in other advanced capitalist economies and has become an increasingly ambitious imperialist power during the 2000s. China’s quest for profitable foreign outlets for overaccumulated capital began as early as 1999 when the CCP initiated a going-out strategy. Since then, China

quickly became a major foreign investor in its neighbouring Asian economies while signing increasing trade, investment and aid agreements with them.

This strategy accompanied not only the expansion of Chinese capital across the world but also a subtle challenge to the existing norms of international finance and aid flows, the BRICS initiative to counterbalance the power of the US, and military expansion in the South China Sea. Naturally, it was taken as a threat to the hegemony of the US over the Asia-Pacific, provoking the Obama administration to announce America's pivot to Asia policy in the early 2010s. China's response to America's return to Asia was not only more aggressive foreign investment that turned China into a net capital exporter by 2014.

More importantly, China launched its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2012 as a multi-vector spatial fix aimed at addressing chronic overaccumulation (Carmony, Taylor and Zajontz 2022). [22] It is no coincidence that the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in May 2017 was followed by the imposition of tariffs on Chinese products by the Trump administration in 2018, which started the on-going US-China trade war.

In the end, global neoliberalism brought three most important epochal challenges to the world.

First of all, it brought China back to the centre stage of the global economy, fed capitalist growth and overaccumulation in China, and created *imperialist cracks* between the US and emerging powers. If intensifying the China-US trade war is a soft manifestation of the emerging rift within global neoliberalism, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the irreversible development of antagonism in the Taiwan Strait are hard ones.

Secondly, global neoliberalism's quest for permanent primitive accumulation in developing parts of the world brought irreversible destruction of the Earth's metabolism and accelerated the unfolding of the climate crisis.

Thirdly, the same development involves the expansion of agri-business building animal farms and cash-crop plantations and capital-led deforestation in the hinterland of developing regions, destroying environmental complexity that once kept zoonotic pathogens away from human communities, allowing animal pathogens to jump on human hosts in the frontiers of outbreak zones, and thereby creating zoonoses such as COVID-19. [23] Neat global production networks built by global neoliberalism during its heydays connect those hinterlands to global production and financial hubs through extensive transportation networks and deliver within a few days those spilt-over pathogens to global cities.

A New Agenda for Asia's Labour Movements

Since the 2010s, it has become apparent that neoliberal doctrine is incapable of patching this wound and restoring global neoliberalism. The collapse of global neoliberalism has meant that we live in the decaying age of neoliberalism. Without any visible alternative to neoliberal doctrine in sight, the crisis of global neoliberalism brought back 'authoritarian statism', eroding democracy everywhere. [24]

Beginning with a military coup in Thailand in 2006, outright authoritarian governments took over democratic governments, and existing authoritarian governments were becoming more suppressive in many places in Asia, such as Thailand, Korea, Cambodia, India and China, since the mid-2000s. By the mid-2010s, most Asian countries were under authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments. The outcry of people in Cambodia in 2014, Korea in 2016, Hong Kong in 2019-2020 and Myanmar in 2021-2022 shows the trend of the authoritarian state becoming the supreme vehicle for ruling elites

to reproduce neoliberal order.

The result of the Philippines' 2022 presidential elections was truly symbolic of the return of authoritarianism in Asia, allowing the son of the former draconian dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the daughter of the recent dictator Rodrigo Duterte to become the president and the vice president of the Philippines respectively.

Indeed, authoritarianisation was not limited to the global south. The post-democratic crisis in rich countries clearly shows democracies in these countries experienced a backward development to the extent that 'national wealth' no longer matters for the welfare of ordinary working people.

What would be the best strategy for Asia's labour movements to survive this unprecedented challenge of authoritarian neoliberal powers and their rivalry ahead? One thing we can assure is that a better and peaceful future for Asia would be possible when Asia's problems are addressed by workers' struggles rather than nationalistic clashes between East Asian economies or the imperialist expansion of stronger economies of Asia.

In order for Asia's labour movements to play such a role in this transition, it is urgent for us to rethink *the main agenda, the agency of workers, the means to achieve workers' welfare and the common forms of solidarity building* altogether.

Perhaps the most important precondition for such rethinking is that Asia's labour movements need to consciously move away from the implicit 19th-20th century agenda of bigger wages for (male) breadwinners in factories once and for all. The pursuit of the old agenda most of all risks ignoring the transformation of *workers' agency* during the previous four decades of neoliberal development.

Global neoliberalism brought new actors to the front in labour disputes, including women workers in reproductive sectors, irregular or informal workers in diverse forms of insecure employment, platform workers, internal and international migrant workers, seasonal agrarian workers and many more. The mobilisation of the new workers takes disparate forms of protests and organisations at diverse frontlines against different social problems of neoliberal development.

Many alternative values and proposals are being raised in their fights for justice. With a handful of exceptions, however, existing trade union centres across Asia showed a disappointing track record in recognising and capitalising on the agency of those marginal workers, making them vulnerable to emerging right-wing populism that underpins emerging authoritarian statism.

Many labour struggles during the era of global neoliberalism strived to dismantle rather than amplify different cleavages imposed upon Asian workers by the rural-urban divide, nationalities, different employment statuses and positions in hierarchical TLRs. This trans-boundary movement building teaches us an important lesson for the forms of solidarity-building in the era of post-global neoliberalism.

The alliance of global neoliberalism broke down once neoliberalism revealed its incapacity to deal with contradictions and conflicts emerging from neoliberal development. When *their* alliance broke up, what about *our* alliance? Will it also break down? Will it follow the tragic example of the European labour movement in the wake of the First World War between imperialist rivals, whose main actors chose to confront one another in the imperialist clash? What do we need to do if we do not want it to be repeated?

The point of departure is to make an effort to rebuild the current infrastructure of international solidarity built along the lines of national divisions and borders, whose ultimate goals are often

reduced to *national* reforms. It is possible for us to reshuffle existing intra-Asian and global initiatives of the labour movements and turn them into a vehicle for the trans-boundary labour movements (TLMs). We can also establish new transnational associations of activists and organisations in which common struggles are prioritised vis-a-vis the reform agenda of individual nations.

Last but not least, it is imperative for Asia's TLMs to go beyond seeking alternatives within capitalist development. During the heyday of global neoliberalism, we were tamed into seeing demanding concessions from capital and the state as the primary form of labour activism.

The most important concession for us to earn was higher wages. However, pursuing higher wages as the ultimate goal of the labour movement and building institutions such as social dialogues and bargaining structures around the supreme goal presuppose that workers' welfare relies on nothing but wages paid by capital. Wages as monetary compensation for the sale of labour power commodity should not be the only way of making our living and enhancing workers' welfare.

On the contrary, wages should become a smaller part of resources available to us for better welfare. Workers' welfare should not be limited to welfare offered through the state either. Rather it should be expanded to include welfare provided through communities and solidarity.

In other words, we need to begin imagining bottom-up alternatives rather than demanding top-down concessions. Only by doing so, labour can dissociate itself from the growth paradigm built upon class, gender, racial and colonial hierarchies. An important lesson we can learn from the recent regressive transition from global neoliberalism to authoritarian neoliberalism is that limiting our quest for the welfare of Asian workers to 'alternative within' often produces a worse rather than better alternative.

Dae-Oup Chang

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P.S.

Asian Labour Review

<https://labourreview.org/challenges-to-the-asian-labour-movements/>

Footnotes

[1] Fukuyama, F. (1992). *End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

[2] McMichael, P. (2012). *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective (Fifth Edition)*. London: Fine Forge Press, p. 120.

[3] Chang, D. O. (2009). *Capitalist Development in Korea: Labour, Capital and the Myth of the Developmental State*. London: Routledge, pp. 121-123.

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[5] Chang, D. O. (2009). "Informalising Labour in Asia's Global Factory." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39(2): 161-179. Also see Chang, D. O. (2015). "From Global Factory to Continent of Labour: Labour and Development in Asia." *Asian Labour Review* 1: 1-48.

[6] Figures estimated from various sources in ILOSTAT.

[7] 1982 figure from ILO's Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM), <http://www.ilo.org/global/statistics-and-databases/research-and-databases/kilm/lang-en/index.htm>. All other figures of labour force in this section are from 2017 figure from ILO database. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data>

[8] Harvey, D. (2006). *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Toward a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, London: Verso.

[9] All FDI figures are from UNCTADSTAT, <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/EN/Index.html>

[10] See Chang, D. O. (2022). "The Continent of Labour and Uneven Development: The Making of Transnational Labour Regimes in East Asia." in Baglioni, E., Campling, L., Coe, N. M. and Smith, A. (eds.) *Labour Regimes and Global Production*, Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, pp. 137-153. See also Chang, D. O. (2022). "Transnational Labour Regimes and Neo-liberal Development in Cambodia." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52(1): 45-70.

[11] Figures from IMF World Economic Outlook database.

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