

Thailand: A Labor Strategy Beyond Elections

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On May 14th, Thai voters will cast their ballots in what is being touted as one of the most 'high stakes' or 'monumental' elections. Many claims this is an opportunity to dismantle the military dictatorship 'once and for all.'

The two primary opposition parties, *Pheu Thai* and *Move Forward*, are urging their supporters to secure a decisive victory, arguing this is the only way to topple the junta. *Pheu Thai* aims to capture the discontent of the urban and rural poor fed up with the lost years under the junta, while *Move Forward* is set forth to gain the votes of the disgruntled youngster and urban, educated workforce wishing to see a wide-ranging societal change.

Their proposals offer the possibility of aligning electoral politics with the working class's needs, marking a crucial step toward ending paternalistic politics. Individuals within the working class may benefit from aggressive campaign tactics through generous proposals of popular welfare. But what does this mean for the labor movement?

Organized labor requires more than a political shift to secure its future. The relationships between organized labor and political parties are strategically important to rebuilding the labor movement. Yet new political parties established by sections of the labor movement have struggled to be heard in the elections, while ongoing agreements between pro-democracy parties like *Move Forward* and labor tend to be one-sided and extractive, putting further strain on the already scarce resources of the declining organized waged workers. This dynamic stands a chance of further exacerbating the challenges faced by the labor movement.

On the Campaign Trails

In the past eight years, what the military-backed Prayuth administrations have accomplished in reversing the labor's progress, among others, is to put the minimum-wage determination system back into the hand of bureaucrats and businesses. The junta has successfully deepened what Jim Glassman called Thailand's 'lazy capitalism,' namely the use of sweatshop strategies (e.g., low-wage and weakening of organized labor) as disciplinary tools.

Following Yingluck Shinnawatra's election victory in 2011, the daily minimum wage was increased to 300 baht nationwide. This move benefited informal and migrant workers without collective bargaining rights, disrupting the Thai state's long-stand strategies of controlling worker mobility. For the junta, which generally views foreign migrant workers as a form of non-conventional threat, the politicization of minimum wage intended to give migrant workers more economic power and social mobility. For these reasons, a special committee was formed after a military coup in 2014 to reverse the wage determination system. As a result, the Thai minimum wage has remained stagnant since 2016.

Since the last elections in 2019, political parties have used minimum wage raises as the selling point. These 2023 elections are no exception. For better or worse, elections campaigns have opened the field, and popular politics have already restored the missing link between politics and the

working class. With the mismatch of stagnated minimum wage and rising inflation, it is understandable why the wage issue takes center stage in the campaign. An equally important issue—strengthening workers’ freedom of association and rights to collective bargaining—which has been on top of organized labor’s demands for several decades, seems to receive much less attention.

Collective Freedom and Bargaining Rights

Since the 2014 coup, the Thai government has increasingly used laws like the *Public Assembly Act* and the *Computer Crimes Act* to limit freedom of expression and associations. The trend has worsened during the pandemic, with authorities using the *Emergency Decree* and *Communicable Disease Act* to charge labor activists and trade unionists.

These threats and the expenses of hanging lawsuits have demoralized those labor activists who supported the youth-led pro-democracy movement. In contrast, migrant workers without grievance mechanisms who joined the labor rally often faced deportation.

After the 1997 financial crisis, the Thai state and businesses adopted laissez-faire economic policies that have contributed to the gradual decline of the Thai trade union movement, predating the 2014 coup. The rise of contract and agency workers replacing permanent employees has further exacerbated this decline, along with an increased reliance on migrant workers by businesses and growth in the informal economy. These external factors have resulted in a significant number of workers lacking legal rights to unionize, in addition to the internal conflicts and divisions within the trade union movement.

Recent government crackdowns have only exacerbated the trend. One notable case is the heavy fines and sentences imposed on the State Railway Workers’ Union executive committee, one of the country’s most influential trade unions, for staging strikes. Migrant and informal workers are still largely denied the right to form their unions. Moreover, my research indicates that since the 2014 coup, labor rights defenders in Thailand have faced an alarming increase in Strategic Lawsuits Against the Public. Large corporations have used criminal defamation lawsuits and trespassing cases to silence criticism and obstruct workers from organizing unions.

Despite facing multiple challenges, organized labor has not yet leveraged its strong membership base to effect change. Instead, it has become stuck in a cycle of submitting petitions and mobilizing, often without successfully pressuring elected officials to meet their demands. Within this context, two models of political representation have emerged. The first is the establishment of organized labor’s own parties, such as the *Thai Social Democratic Party* (TSDP) and the *Nation Building Labor Party* (NBLP). The second is the model put forth first by the Future Forward Party and then by its successor, Move Forward Party, in incorporating trade unionists and labor activists on its party list.

Political Representation and Labor’s Power

Led by long-time trade union leaders, the TSDP and NBLP advocate for issues relevant to the needs of waged workers, such as the ratification of ILO conventions on freedom of association and the establishment of labor-specific banks and hospitals.

Although their platforms primarily focus on the perspectives of formal workers, the intense competition during election season encourages them to develop policies that resonate with all sectors of the working class. One such policy is expanding the social security scheme to all, regardless of their employment arrangements.

Unfortunately, under the 2017 constitution written by the junta, minor political parties such as the TSDP and NBLP could only afford to send a handful of candidates to the ballots. These parties are

hardly known outside of small circles, let alone have a chance to secure a seat in Parliament.

By contrast, Move Forward, a political party with one of the most progressive platforms, has the potential to form the government. Its predecessor, Future Forward Party, trailblazed an interesting model in which the party selected activists from various single-based issues along with influencers to create an ensemble of the star-studded party list.

In past elections, several trade unionists were chosen to represent the party's labor wing, and they played a critical role as the labor's allies in national politics. Having such a strategic ally in the legislature can be highly beneficial to organized labor, even though the opposition could not really push forward their progressive versions of the labor laws because of the junta's control of the Senate.

This experience only reinforces the significance of having more unionists and labor activists in Parliament. In these elections, Move Forward continues the same model and raises our eyebrows by nominating a former unionist, who is practically unknown outside the labor community, as the number 4 on their party list, signifying its seriousness in attracting more votes from the working class.

Building A Strategy Beyond Election Cycles

Over the past four years, labor issues have attracted more media and public attention thanks to Move Forward's model. With that said, it is vital to recognize a potential pitfall if the relationship only goes one way: political parties are extracting resources from organized labor and using them to win over voters. Despite having such strategic allies, independent, organized labor has struggled to take root in the working-class community over the past half-decade.

The organized labor movement in Thailand is missing effective strategies to capitalize on the momentum. Ideally, labor organizers and trade unionists would rally their members behind policies that align with their interests and values, thereby simultaneously strengthening their membership base.

One emerging group that can capture the political energy proactively is the Workers' Union, an organization recently established by young activists with aspirations to create a general union. However, their members are no longer traditional waged workers who find themselves in the same workplace. They are primarily in services, casual, and freelance jobs—a group of workforces that the traditional Thai trade unions are reluctant to incorporate within.

What the Workers' Union has achieved so far is impressive. Still, it could learn so much from the traditional trade unions movement in its failure to build member-led unions, democratize the class movement, and work strategically with the political forces.

The new labor movement could take a page from the traditional trade unions movement's book and learn from its shortcomings. One crucial step towards rebuilding this movement is understanding the fundamental differences between organizing, unionizing, and mobilizing, which can go a long way in movement-building work.

However, in Thailand, labor efforts have mainly focused on mobilizing rather than organizing with the rank-and-file. Organizing is the most powerful tool to bring working people into the movement, while mobilizing is often concerned with a handful of technicians, leaving the mass on the margins. By contrast, unionizing aims to get the union recognized, especially from a legal standpoint.

As discussed, one of the significant obstacles facing the trade union movement is creating a

collaborative relationship with political parties that are mutually beneficial and reciprocal. Moreover, the movement must establish a clear plan for engaging with political parties. It should build a strategy beyond election cycles and encourages its members to think strategically about their relationships with the parties—whether or not that party only dedicates its wing or claims to give its whole heart to labor.

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