

# Taiwan: Sweatshops and Assembly Halls

Saturday 9 December 2023, by [DINKELAKER Samia](#), [RUCKUS Ralf](#) (Date first published: 30 November 2023).

## The Class Composition of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Taiwan's Manufacturing Industry

For more than three decades, Taiwan has relied on the exploitation of hundreds of thousands of racialized migrant workers from Southeast Asia. These perform difficult, dirty, monotonous, and devalued labour and thereby keep the economy and society running. In this article, we look at the particular situation of Indonesian migrant workers in the manufacturing industry using the perspective of 'class composition.' We suggest using this perspective to shed light on how these factory workers experience their labour and respond to their exploitation and discrimination in particular ways. [1]

We first introduce the perspective of 'technical' and 'political' class composition, which implies an analytical distinction between context and conditions on the one hand and forms of organizing and resistance on the other. We then describe the technical class composition, particularly the work of Indonesian factory workers and the labour migration regime regulating their lives. We begin the part on the political class composition with comments on cases of migrant workers' open workplace struggles in Taiwan. We address why such struggles remain relatively rare and discuss covert and everyday forms of resistance in which Indonesian factory workers counter their conditions. We close this article with a suggestion to further investigate migrant workers' sources of power.

### The Class Composition Perspective

The [perspective of class composition](#) captures the relationship between particular modes of production and reproduction and workers' forms of behaviour, protest, and self-organizing. This perspective helps to understand the conditions that enable or impede open, collective workplace struggles while considering the forms of everyday contestation at work and forms of organizing among factory workers outside work. [2]

The notion of class composition originates from Marxist discussions in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Italy, in which 'workerists' inside and outside the official workers' unions and political parties were engaging. The notion foregrounds class conflict immanent in all capitalist relations of production and reproduction, and it acknowledges the desire of exploited subjects to take back control over important aspects of their lives. Furthermore, such a perspective acknowledges the tension between this desire and capital's control over workers' time, labour, and mobility.

In common representations of workers, and especially of migrant workers, they are often perceived as passive, as victims, and as ignorant of the mechanisms that underlie their exploitation. In contrast, the class composition perspective recognizes workers' particular forms of agency and focuses on the workers' conditions that shape these forms. For this purpose, it distinguishes between 'technical' class composition' and 'political' class composition.'

Technical composition refers to how "labour power is divided, managed, and, ultimately, exploited". [3] Employment in particular industries and different types and sizes of workplaces, the allocation of particular jobs to local or migrant workers, the immediate labour process and use of

different machines, the regulation of employment and migration, and forms of accommodation are central aspects of the technical composition.

Political composition, meanwhile, refers to the workers' particular forms of behaviour under such conditions: the forms in which they turn against their exploitation, their ways of self-organization, and their possibilities to struggle for their own needs and interests. This includes both open struggles at the workplace and beyond as well as covert, everyday practices.

The workerists used this vocabulary to describe the massive, immediate, and connected struggles of unskilled 'mass workers' that occurred in Italian factories in the 1960s and after, especially in the automobile industries. They analyzed how practices such as wildcat strikes, slowdowns, and sabotage of these mass workers became generalized and related them to the workers' concrete experiences at their workplaces. To a large degree, these mass workers were internal migrants from Italy's south. Mass workers' unrest also occurred in other migration contexts, such as in the series of wildcat strikes of 'guest workers' in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s over working and living conditions [4] or the struggles of internal migrants in Mainland China in the 2000s and 2010s. [5]

We now turn to the Indonesian factory workers in Taiwan and their technical class composition: the particular conditions of their employment, their work, and the government's migration regime.

### **Migrant Labour in Taiwan's Manufacturing Industry**

Junaedi has lived in Taiwan for four years. He works at a small sandal shoe factory with 15 workers. He operates a press to produce sandal soles. "I like about my work that I do not have to carry heavy loads. But I do not like the sweltering heat," he says. Hot air blows out whenever he opens the machine, making him sweat.

For nine years, Jamal has worked at the assembly line of a producer of fitness gear that employs over two thousand workers. He is busy with the same step of assembling the leg and arm parts of cross trainers. Jamal acknowledges that, unlike other Indonesian workers, he does not have to deal with toxic chemicals or unsafe working tools. "My work is not dangerous," he admits. "But it's very boring."

Junaedi and Jamal are among the 90,000 Indonesian factory workers in Taiwan today. All in all, more than 300,000 Indonesian migrants work in Taiwan on ships, in private households, in nursing homes, in the fields, on construction sites, and in factories. [6] In the late 1980s, Taiwan opened its borders to migrant workers mainly from Southeast Asia. The recruitment of 'cheap' migrant labour was offered as a solution to shortages in unskilled labour. At the time, parts of the manufacturing industries moved abroad, mainly to mainland China. Meanwhile, local workers refused to do the harder manufacturing jobs and moved into service jobs. Today, around 800,000 so-called low-skilled migrants work in Taiwan in total, and Vietnamese and Indonesians make up the two largest groups.

The migration, work, and lives of these migrants in Taiwan are organized and regulated through a multiplicity of rules and actors. In combination, these reduce Southeast Asian migrants to temporary and flexible labour, and they reinforce the [racialization of migrant workers](#).

Immigration rules stipulate low-skilled migrant workers' right to stay in Taiwan is tied to a work contract. Work contracts are usually valid for three years and can be extended, but the overall period factory workers can stay in Taiwan is limited to twelve years. [7] Moreover, they are not allowed to bring in their families. Migrant workers' precarious immigration status is aggravated by workers' dependence on private broker agencies. The Taiwanese government relies on these brokers to channel migrant workers into vacant 'low-skilled' jobs. Migrant workers are made to pay

excessive placement fees, for which they often go into debt, as well as additional monthly fees. Meanwhile, these agencies constrain migrant workers' freedom to choose their workplaces.

The labour migration regime engenders systematically different treatment of Southeast Asian migrant workers from local workers. According to government regulations, migrant workers are channelled into 'unskilled' jobs with difficult conditions, or [what the government classifies as "3D"-jobs](#): dirty, dangerous, and demeaning.

To neutralize the opposition of Taiwanese labour unions against labour immigration, the government only allowed the employment of migrant workers in certain sectors: manufacturing, agriculture, fishing, construction, and caretaking. It also set upper limits for the number of migrants employed in specific industries and introduced a quota system for the employment of low-skilled migrant workers in certain manufacturing sectors. The upper limits of migrants and the quota have been gradually raised in the past few years. [8]

Usually, migrant workers are accommodated in dormitories, where employers can call them in for work if needed and where interaction with other members of the Taiwanese society is limited. Migrant factory workers are paid the Taiwanese minimum wage, but various deductions for services and lower bonuses lead to net wages below those of Taiwanese co-workers. Meanwhile, some workers report having longer working hours than their Taiwanese co-workers and getting allocated the most unfavourable shifts and tasks.

Most Indonesian factory workers we have met are, like Junaedi, employed in small or sweatshop factories. Indonesian factory workers' concentration in small factories reflects the [significance of small- and medium-sized enterprises](#) in the Taiwanese economy: these constitute 98 percent of all manufacturing enterprises and almost 70 percent of manufacturing employment. In these factories, Indonesian workers handle low-tech tools such as cutting machines, punches, or furnaces, and they deal with toxic chemicals, such as bleachers. A smaller number of Indonesian workers we have met are, like Jamal, employed in larger assembly halls or factories with higher-tech equipment and do monotonous tasks: pressing car parts, assembling equipment or motor vehicles, or stocking CNC machines that produce the spare parts of electronic devices.

We now turn to the 'political' class composition, the forms of migrant workers to mobilize and organize against their exploitation.

## **Migrant Worker Struggles in Taiwan**

In the earlier stages of migrant labour recruitment, Taiwan saw some larger open conflicts. For instance, in 2005, a few hundred Thai workers hired for the construction of the Kaohsiung subway [launched a riot](#) against their degradation at the workplace, their conditions in the dormitories, excessive broker fees, and racist law enforcement.

More recently, a few cases have been covered by the media in which mostly Vietnamese workers launched spontaneous protests. For instance, in 2018, more than [100 female workers in New Taipei protested](#) against poor conditions in their dormitory. [In 2019](#) and [2021](#), a few dozen employees at a food company in New Taipei went on wildcat strikes to resist excessive working hours and confinement during the pandemic. They claimed overtime payment and protested against arbitrary line leaders. In 2021, [a few dozen workers at a Taichung cookies factory staged a wildcat strike](#), demanded the payment of overdue overtime remuneration and protested excessive deductions for accommodation.

Such larger open workplace conflicts remain relatively rare. Indonesian workers we have met are

well aware of the racialization that underpins their exploitation. However, we are told: “Everyone is aware of the different treatment. But we don’t rebel as long as our employers don’t excessively break the rules.”

The reasons why open struggles remain limited are plentiful, and the result from the particular technical class composition that shapes migrant workers’ experience:

*Firstly*, migrant workers’ potential to develop collective power remains limited due to their multiple fragmentation. As mentioned, many migrants work in small factories with small numbers on the shop floor. In addition, these factories are scattered all over the island, especially along the Western coast, where most manufacturing is located. This narrows the possibilities for workers to get together in bigger numbers close to their workplaces.

Even in large factories, due to the quota system, migrant workers mostly form only a relatively small group. This contrasts, for instance, the situation in many workplaces in the German manufacturing industries of the 1960s and 1970s. Migrants at these workplaces made up the majority of low-wage mass workers. They constituted the critical mass on the shopfloors that were able to engage in a series of wildcat strikes. Large groups of migrant workers also characterized the situation in Mainland China’s manufacturing industries in the 2000s and 2010s. Most migrants lived in dormitories in the factories or nearby. The proximity and the concentration of migrant workers in the dormitories allowed employers to tightly control them. At the same time, migrant workers with similar working and living conditions used the fact that they were concentrated in great numbers to organize and stage labour actions. [9]

*Secondly*, particularly in the smaller Taiwanese factories, paternalistic relationships between employers and workers can blur experiences of exploitation and discrimination and divert conflicts. Traditionally, small businesses in Taiwan are family-owned. Indonesian migrant workers ponder the differences between working in smaller factories – they call them ‘home-industry’ factories – and larger high-tech factories. Work in the smaller factories may be harder, but “migrant workers in the home-industry factories receive more attention,” we are told. According to some workers, employers at the smaller factories tend to give their workers bonuses and, on holidays, *hong bao* (red envelopes with money). However, we also learn that apart from care, a personalized relationship with employers often also means exposure to their arbitrariness – for instance, in imposing additional work outside the factory or demanding workers to perform excessive overtime if an order must be finished and a deadline is met.

*Thirdly*, migrant workers are not only divided from Taiwanese workers through the different treatment they receive. They are also divided along their nationalities. In earlier years of the recruitment of migrant workers, [larger violent conflicts](#) between migrants of different nationalities occurred and attracted public attention. These were fostered by, amongst others, working and living conditions that were even poorer than nowadays. Besides, stereotypes among migrant workers of different origin contributed to these conflicts. These were reinforced by migrant workers’ divergent experiences in the job market, which are a consequence of the employment of certain nationals in certain industries that are seen, for instance, the dominance of Philippine workers in high-tech electronic manufacturing. [10] Today, exchange between migrant workers of different nationalities is limited through their separated accommodation in their dormitories, and language barriers put constraints on communication among them.

*Fourthly*, why migrant workers rarely engage in open workplace struggles is, importantly, also a consequence of their precarious immigration status. When they openly resist their bosses or do not work as hard as expected, they risk their contract not being extended, or worse, they will be sent back to Indonesia. They depend on their source of income abroad to retain their families’ standard of

living or to cover their children's or siblings' education at home. In Indonesia, they would only earn a fraction of the amount they make in Taiwan. [11]

In some cases, private broker agencies have facilitated the repatriation of workers who were seen as troublemakers. This was experienced by Hari, who had ignored the curfew hours at his dormitory. With the help of the agency responsible for his placement and providing services to migrant workers, his employer intended to send him back during the Covid-19 pandemic when production at the textile factory was slowed down. The agency circumvented the regulations that are supposed to protect workers from arbitrary repatriation. Hari was intimidated by agency workers, so he would 'voluntarily' return to Indonesia. With the help of support groups, he could prevent his repatriation.

*Fifthly*, and finally, the Taiwanese workers' movement has remained weak in the past three decades, with few workplace struggles migrant workers could join, support, or imitate. This weakness of the local workers' movement – or their political class composition – is a consequence of the authoritarian labour regime developed during the martial law rule of the Kuomintang (1947–1987), the large-scale closure and relocation of manufacturing in the 1990s [12], and other reasons that also impede migrant workers to develop collective power, for instance, the mentioned fragmentation of labour forces and the dominance of small factories. [13]

### **Willful Workers: Covert and Everyday Forms of Protest**

Migrant workers rarely engage in open workplace struggles. However, in their accounts, everyday practices in which they assert their interests and contest daily experiences of devaluation are ever-present and part of their particular political class composition. We address some of these practices in the following: making use of their labour mobility, filing complaints against their employers, engaging in everyday conflicts at work, and organizing outside their workplaces.

#### *Making use of their labor mobility*

Workers seek to exit heavy, dangerous work and pressure from their bosses and foremen by switching to other jobs, using their mobility to contest their conditions. Labour mobility is, however, restricted: if workers seek to prematurely quit their three-year contract and seek a new employer on the job market, an agreement between the old and the new employer, as well as the worker, must be signed. [14] Workers who have only recently started to work in Taiwan may be discouraged from switching jobs when they still have to pay off their placement fees.

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to travel and immigration restrictions, it was difficult for employers to hire new migrant workers from abroad. Migrant workers already in Taiwan used the situation to pressure their employers to pay higher wages. And they attempted to get other jobs in sectors with better conditions, especially domestic care workers who transferred to jobs in manufacturing. After pressure from employer associations, cross-sector transfers were subsequently banned. [15]

Amidst recent declines in production and dismissals of migrant workers in some manufacturing industry sectors, private brokers have charged migrant workers seeking new jobs on the Taiwanese labour market illegal fees, discouraging workers from leveraging their labour mobility. According to accounts of workers and support organizations, private brokers prefer to hire new migrant workers from abroad and earn more in fees than to recruit migrant workers who are already in Taiwan, wanting to prolong contracts or seeking jobs. Thus, the brokers [seek to make up for the shortfalls in the revenues](#) from brokerage fees during the Covid-19 pandemic when hiring new migrants was blocked.



Workers might anticipate that even in a new job, as migrants, they will most probably encounter heavy and 'uncomfortable' work. Nevertheless, some migrant workers do regain limited control over their conditions by making well-considered choices when finding a new job. For instance, we have met workers who move to factories where friends and members of their social networks work or workers who move to workplaces where they can apply the skills and experiences they have acquired during previous jobs.

Some workers also 'go into hiding' and move into the labour market for undocumented workers, especially in construction and agriculture. These workers thus circumvent the restrictions set for legally switching workplaces, and some circumvent the twelve-year limit for legally staying in Taiwan. [16]

### *Filing complaints against their employers*

When experiencing labour rights violations, some migrant workers file complaints against their employers, for instance, via a [counselling and protection hotline for migrant workers](#) run by the Ministry of Labor. Indonesian migrant workers also establish their own support networks. GANAS Community is one such self-organized group of Indonesian migrant workers. Their members provide information on how to complain when employers, for instance, do not meet their responsibility to compensate and continually pay workers when they experience work accidents.

Claiming their rights demands courage from the workers, especially when they face broker agencies who would rather repatriate them than help them obtain their rights. Therefore, besides sharing information and linking other workers to NGOs which provide legal assistance, those networks of migrant workers give moral and emotional support. In the face of geographical fragmentation, social media has become crucial for communication among workers.

### *Engaging in everyday conflicts at work*

Migrant workers also dispute demeaning work tasks, work pressure, and control over their time in an everyday manner at their worksites. We learn about such conflicts from Anwar, who works at a scooter factory. During several weeks of suspended production, the migrant workers at his factory were given work tasks outside their actual jobs. While the Taiwanese co-workers were to take a leave, the migrant workers were to do painting work or pull up weeds on the factory premises. Anwar first carried out his superior's instructions but soon laid down his work. "My task is to produce scooters, not to pick weeds," he tells us.

Mukhtar, who dyes textiles in a small factory, uses the hierarchies at his workplace to assert his interest and take leave according to his plans. When we meet, he shows us the photos of a concert he attended the previous night with a victorious smile on his face. He took a leave from his night shift to see the band that was touring in Taiwan from overseas. Mukhtar predicted that his immediate foreman would not approve his request for leave. He describes the foreman as a grumpy person, "more of an old-school type," who likes to demonstrate his authority. Therefore, Mukhtar sought approval from his foreman's superior, who was supervising the production process and whom Mukhtar found more helpful.

We also hear of cases in which workers slow the pace of work as a response to increased labour intensity. When, for instance, their employers and the broker agencies are unwilling to release them from their contract to find another job in Taiwan, migrant workers have laid down tools to pressure their employers and get the release. They also lay down their tools when they are made responsible for mistakes they did not commit. When using these tactics, migrant workers risk punishment, including the termination of their work contract and, eventually, extradition.

## *Organizing outside their workplaces*

While the isolation in different workplaces and the fragmentation of the workforces constrain the immediate organization at the workplace, Indonesian migrant factory workers are far from individualized outside the workplace. This becomes visible when groups of migrants occupy public spaces on weekends. They maintain various forms of organizations: religious organizations, hometown organizations, or associations in which they pursue their hobbies. Relatively cheap public transport in Taiwan makes it easy to travel and meet up.

Indonesian factory workers engage, for instance, in a thriving underground music scene. The organization and regulation of their migration, their accommodation in shared dormitories, and high work intensity and or long overtime hours appear to reduce the workers to their function as mere labour power. Factory workers defy this role and use the limited time and space to [create and produce songs](#), play gigs, organize their concerts, and maintain a community. They describe the [loud sound of metal](#) and [punk music](#), their rhythms, their cries, and the wild dancing in the mosh pit as a form of insubordination to the monotony, the fatigue, and the pressure at work, a way to counter the worries about their families caused by the physical separation through border and migration regimes.

## **Conclusion**

The class composition perspective enables us to see the Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan not just as individual or collective victims of the Taiwanese migration regime that shapes the racialized system of exploitation. It is a materialist analysis of migrant workers' labour and living conditions, their fragmentation and collectivity at work and beyond. It allows us to see migrant workers as active subjects with particular constraints and potential for organizing and resisting their conditions. In addition, the class composition concept does not constrain migrant worker agencies to formal labour organizing but recognizes a variety of ways in which migrant workers turn against exploitation and control over their lives and labour.

Taking into account their particular technical class composition and the material conditions migrant factory workers encounter in Taiwan, in this article, we discussed the limitations of their political class composition and, in particular, the question of why large, open workplace struggles remain relatively rare among migrant workers.

We complemented this by discussing the covert and everyday forms of resistance by Indonesian migrant workers through which they confront their conditions as racialized and exploited labour power, in particular, through using their mobility, filing complaints against their employers, engaging in everyday conflicts at work, and organizing outside their workplaces.

While the Indonesian migrant workers are not mere victims of their conditions and actively seek to improve their situation, the question remains: which leverages migrant workers can mobilize to effect meaningful change? To further engage with this question, we suggest a closer look at migrant workers' sources of power emanating from collective organizing inside and outside the workplace and their position in the economic system.

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**Samia Dinkelaker**  
**Ralf Ruckus**

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] The article is based on the authors' research into the situation of Indonesian factory workers and fishers in Taiwan that began in spring 2022.

[2] Battaglia, Alberto. 2018. "Mass Worker and Social Worker: Reflections on the 'New Class Composition' (1981)." *Notes from Below. No Politics Without Inquiry*.  
<https://notesfrombelow.org/article/mass-worker-and-social-worker>; Kolinko. 2001. "Class Composition." [https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e\\_klazu.htm](https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/engl/e_klazu.htm); Mohandesi, Salar. 2013. "Class Consciousness or Class Composition?" *Science & Society* 77 (1): 72-97.

[3] Mohandesi, Salar. 2013. "Class Consciousness or Class Composition?" *Science & Society* 77 (1): 85.

[4] Birke, Peter. 2023. "Wildcat Strikes Between 1960 and 1973: A German-Danish Comparison." In: *Trade Union Activism in the Nordic Countries Since 1900*, edited by Jesper Jørgensen and Flemming Mikkelsen, 303-26. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG.

[5] Pun, Ngai. 2016. *Migrant Labor in China. Post-Socialist Transformations*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Ruckus, Ralf. 2021. *The Communist Road to Capitalism. How Unrest and Containment Have Pushed China's (R)evolution since 1949*. Oakland: PM Press.

[6] This number includes nearly 270,000 documented workers, over 26,000 undocumented workers, and over 14,000 registered fishers working on Taiwanese distant water ships.

[7] In the face of an ongoing labour shortage, lately, the Taiwanese government opened the possibility for experienced migrant workers to upgrade their status, which allows them to stay in Taiwan as "semi-skilled" workers beyond the twelve-year limit. Furthermore, it provides prospects for them to apply for permanent residency. The requirements that qualify workers as "semi-skilled" workers are, however, difficult to meet, and hence, as a realistic option, this will be only available to a limited number of factory workers.

[8] Employers in manufacturing industries are, for instance, allowed to hire a certain number of migrant workers, which equals up to 40 percent of the workforce in the company. Currently, the Taiwanese government plans to open another sector, the hospitality industry, for the employment of migrant workers.

[9] Smith, Chris, and Pun Ngai. 2006. "The Dormitory Labour Regime in China as a Site for Control and Resistance." *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 17 (8): 1456-1470

[10] Chen, Tingchien, and Daniel Schiller. 2022. "The Migrant Labour Regime and Labour Market Intermediaries in the Taiwanese Semiconductor Industry." *Work in the Global Economy* 2 (2): 248-71; Tierney, Robert. 2011. "The Class Context of Temporary Immigration, Racism and Civic



Nationalism in Taiwan." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41 (2): 289-314.

[11] The 2023 minimum wage in Taiwan to which migrant workers are entitled (TWD 26.400 or about USD 810) is five to six times as high as the 2023 minimum wage in some of the Javanese districts in migrants' regions of origin, such as Tulungagung (IDR 2,23 mil. or USD 140), Indramayu (IDR 2,54 mil. or USD 160), or Cilacap (IDR 2,38 mil. or USD 150).

[12] Ho, Ming-sho. 2014. *Working Class Formation in Taiwan. Fractured Solidarity in State-Owned Enterprises, 1945-2012*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

[13] Minns, John, and Robert Tierney. 2003. "The Labour Movement in Taiwan." *History* 85: 103-28.

[14] Lan, Pei-Chia. 2022. "Shifting Borders and Migrant Workers Im/mobility: The Case of Taiwan During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 31 (3): 225-246.

[15] Lan, Pei-Chia. 2022. "Shifting Borders and Migrant Workers Im/mobility: The Case of Taiwan During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 31 (3): 225-246.

[16] Parhusip, Jonathan S. 2021. "The Making of Freedom and Common Forms of Struggle of Runaways in Taiwan." *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 120 (3): 664-69.