

The role of labour activism in Vietnam's coronavirus success

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In February, garment workers at Praegear Vietnam launched a strike to demand the factory implement measures to protect workers against the coronavirus. In response, local union officials organised training and talks by medical experts, and the company introduced such things as free masks, temperature checks, and spraying disinfectant. Other factories in the same region followed suit.

Vietnam has, rightly, been praised for its incredibly impressive and effective COVID-19 response. At the time of writing, there have been [334 cases, including 323 recovered, and no deaths](#). Health experts have attributed Vietnam's success to its quick response after the first case in January, including closing schools, good communication, a rapid track and trace system, and quarantining all cases and contacts. The country is now more or less back to normal, with the exception that international flights have still not restarted; some routes plan to reopen in July.

In addition, the country announced [a support package of \\$2.6 billion](#) for poor families and others who have lost their livelihoods due to the economic impact of the virus. Those who have been fired or furloughed without pay, along with families already categorised as poor or near-poor, and the self-employed, such as street hawkers, whose incomes have disappeared, receive a monthly allowance from the government. It is modest and imperfect, but it provides a vital lifeline to those who would otherwise be without anything. [‘Rice ATMs’](#) have also been dispensing free rice to those who need it.

“Largely missing from commentary on Vietnam's coronavirus response, however, has been the important role of grassroots pressure from workers.”

The country is a one party state with a single state-led union federation, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) and no freedom of association (although [January 2021 will see some reforms](#), allowing ‘worker representative organisations’ at the factory level). At the national level, the VGCL is subordinate to and dominated by the ruling Communist Party. This does not mean that it is totally impotent, and scholars disagree about the extent to which the confederation is or can be effective and representative. At the workplace level, though, the VGCL is dominated by employers; many union reps are companies’ human resource managers or similar. Consequently, at this level, the VGCL does not do much for workers at all.

There are also hundreds of wildcat strikes each year. They are self-organised by workers, and overwhelmingly concentrated in the industrial sector. The VGCL has never led a strike. They are often successful, with at least some demands regarding workplace pay and conditions usually being met. Strikes have also had some broader, national level impacts; [reversing a change to the social insurance law](#), contributing to [forcing a plan for new special economic zones](#) to be delayed, and helping drive the freedom of association reforms mentioned above, for example. They are often resolved when a taskforce consisting of officials from the local union office and Department of

Labour arrive to negotiate a resolution with employers. Strikes have continued during the period of coronavirus.

A double-pronged worker response

Wolfgang Daubler, a labour relations consultant, suggests that Vietnam's labour relations system consists of a 'dual structure'. Writing in [a freely available ebook](#) in 2018, before coronavirus, he argues that the VGCL pushes for national-level changes, while workers' self-organised struggles deal with bread and butter, enterprise-level issues of pay and conditions. He asserts that this system is effective; 'although it has its shortcomings', Daubler says, 'there is no real reason for fundamental changes'.

I do not entirely agree with Daubler – I think, for example, that there is a more dynamic relation between the VGCL and wildcat strikes than he suggests – but it is an interesting and unusual perspective which deserves to be taken seriously. Perhaps we have seen the 'dual structure' in action with Vietnam's coronavirus response. The VGCL was engaged in pushing for education about how to prevent coronavirus and the distribution of such things as masks and hand sanitisers, and has played a part in developing the social support package. Workers' actions, on the other hand, forced companies who were reluctant to do so to implement COVID-19 prevention measures at the enterprise-level. Then, as the economic impact has started to bite, wildcat strikes have acted as a bulwark against companies pushing all of the costs onto workers.

In February, strikes were demanding such things as personal protective equipment (PPE) and other measures to prevent the virus in factories. A number of strikes were over Chinese nationals who, having celebrated the Lunar New Year in China, were allowed to return to work in Vietnam without being properly tested. Workers at the Domex garment factory, for example, [went on strike](#) suspecting that a recently returned Chinese employee had coronavirus. In response, health authorities tested the Chinese national and put them in quarantine for 14 days.

At the end of March, two workers at Pinetree garment factory fainted due to lack of oxygen, [triggering a strike](#) in which workers demanded to be allowed to stay at home as a precaution against COVID-19. The factory owner refused, but many workers left anyway. In the end, management agreed to implement preventative measures, such as providing masks and hand wash, to create an airy environment, and to pay salaries for any worker who needed to be quarantined.

“As the economic impact of coronavirus has begun to be felt, with factories losing orders and facing difficulties sourcing materials, workers have launched strikes to oppose being furloughed without pay or laid off without compensation.”

One of the biggest disputes has been at the Seethings shoe factory, a company which has had a number of labour issues in the past. On 22 and 23 May, around 1,000 workers [went on strike](#) to demand unpaid bonuses, overtime payments, and social insurance contributions (which give workers access to healthcare, unemployment benefits, and pensions), owed from before the COVID-19 outbreak, in response to a company announcement that it would not be paying these as it did not have money.

Seethings then released a statement saying that, because they were experiencing difficulties, they would pay overtime payments by the end of May, some bonuses by the end of June, and the rest in July. The company also said that because of coronavirus difficulties, they would arrange for a number of workers to come to work as normal, but the rest would have to take leave without pay. Workers protested this announcement, gathering outside the factory on 25 May. Authorities then intervened, telling the company that the announcement did not follow legal regulations, and asking

them to continue to pay workers' wages.

Vietnam's 'dual structure' has by no means been ideal. Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their livelihoods, either temporarily or permanently, and the impacts will be felt for a long time. But workers have been active in demanding that they are shielded from the worst effects of coronavirus, in both health and economic terms. Strikes and protests have played an important role in shaping the COVID-19 response of both employers and the government, and deserve to be recognised as an important element of Vietnam's coronavirus success.

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