

Thailand: Centering Alternative Forms of Labor Organizations

Saturday 9 September 2023, by [TEERAKOWITKAJORN Kriangsak](#) (Date first published: 18 August 2023).

Organizing as an informal worker comes with numerous obstacles, but it is remarkable to witness the resilience and innovative approaches demonstrated by migrant workers and gig workers in many countries. These workers find commonality in the precarious nature of their work, the struggles associated with organizing, and the intersecting issues they face. Their collective power presents an opportunity to reinvigorate labor movements on a global scale.

In this article, I align with scholars who propose a departure from the conventional dominance of trade unions as the primary form of labor organizations. Furthermore, I suggest that researchers draw upon the accumulated knowledge from previous studies that have examined the complex dynamics between precarity, labor organizations, and the shared experiences of these workers.

Migrant workers and gig workers often find themselves trapped in similar precarious and informal work arrangements. Gig workers, who rely on digital platforms for short-term and on-demand employment, frequently face job insecurity, lack of benefits, and inadequate protections. It is precisely the shared experience of precarious work that lays the foundation for collective action among both groups.

While some progress has been made in understanding organizing approaches among gig workers, research on migrant workers' organizing efforts remains underdeveloped. This gap in knowledge leaves labor researchers ill-equipped to comprehend the specific challenges and strategies employed by migrant workers.

By shedding light on alternative modes of collective organization and their potential to empower workers, we can better understand effective strategies that enhance the power of these marginalized individuals. Through this article, I aim to strike a conversation with other labor researchers in Southeast Asia, highlighting the urgent need for a constructive and engaging approach to research, one that embraces emerging forms of labor organizations.

Precarity as Shared Experiences and Traditional Labor Organizing

The concept of precarity has become a key focus in contemporary discussions, shedding light on the shift away from permanent employment and the challenges workers face in securing traditional forms of work (MacDonald 2018). [1]

Rather than considering precarity as an exceptional circumstance, I align myself with critical scholarship that emphasizes its widespread nature and its presence beyond the Global North. This broader understanding encourages us to move away from perspectives that highlight divisions and fragmentation among workers, and instead promotes a narrative that unites all workers (Jonna and Foster 2016). [2]

In Southeast Asia, where contractualization, informalization, and precarity are increasingly prevalent, exploring the relationship between precarity and labor collective organization can open up new possibilities for innovative organizing strategies.

While studies on workers' collective organization have traditionally focused on industrial settings in the Global North context, where trade unions played a crucial role in representing workers' interests, critical scholars argue for a shift in perspective that recognizes the challenges posed by precarity and the dynamics of the Global South. They emphasize the need for labor organizations to foster unified class power, going beyond the narrow workplace or industry scopes (Atzeni and Ness, 2016; 2018). [3]

The debate surrounding organizing approaches becomes complex when influenced by assumptions about the effectiveness of organizing models and the politics surrounding non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from a narrow vantage point. During my discussions with various international experts working in the region, it became evident that international experts and NGOs who play critical roles in funding the groundwork tend to have deep-rooted biases towards the trade union model and scepticism towards alternative forms of organizing.

In one of my interviews with an expert, we acknowledged the challenges imposed by laws that restrict the freedom of association for migrant workers, highlighting the necessity of determining an appropriate organizing model. However, when asked about the organizing approaches employed by migrant support organizations, this expert casually dismissed their organizing efforts and even refused to recognize the existence of a community-organizing approach.

Assessing Gig Workers' Activism and Organizational Forms

Current research on gig workers' activism sheds light on new and effective ways workers in the informal economy tackle their challenges. Take, for example, a study comparing two groups of transport and delivery workers in Buenos Aires and Dar es Salaam conducted by Rizzo and Atzeni (2020). [4] They found that unorganized and informal workers could improve their conditions by coming together and fighting for their employment rights.

Interestingly, they argue that it was workers' own initiative, rather than traditional trade unions, that led to the formation of collective organizations. They also emphasize how existing trade union structures, industrial relations frameworks, and socio-political contexts shape the specific forms these organizations take. Despite not being officially recognized as trade unions, these groups find ways to operate effectively, leveraging their flexibility and collective strength.

One primary advantage of not being bound by regulatory requirements, which usually restrict the scope of trade unions, is the newfound flexibility in their actions. These groups can act more freely and are not bogged down by cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. This enables them to respond quickly to emerging issues and challenges.

However, one downside of not having legal recognition is the absence of a binding tool to compel employers to engage in negotiations. As they lack the legal leverage that traditional trade unions possess in enforcing collective agreements, their success relies primarily on their ability to rapidly mobilize the base as well as the economic and social disruption they could create.

Moreover, recent research on gig workers highlights the need for labor activism beyond the traditional formal representation. For example, successful case studies of fast food workers in London show the importance of unions being responsive to worker self-organization and giving workers control over collective action. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) opted for direct

action when statutory collective bargaining wasn't possible. At the same time, the Bakers, Food, and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) focused on building collective action among workers instead of just aiming for high membership numbers.

These studies demonstrate innovative approaches to organizing, emphasizing action-oriented strategies and flexibility in addressing workers' grievances (Cant and Woodcock, 2020) [5]. These findings challenge the idea that formal trade unions are the only path to empowering workers, highlighting the significance of workers' own initiative and creativity in overcoming structural constraints, even if they adopt the trade union form as a means to that end.

Several points are worth discussing concerning these emerging initiatives. Despite not being officially registered as trade unions, these organizations often intentionally adopt a trade union form as a guiding model. The extent to which they operate like a trade union is a key question, as it has significant implications for their organizational structures and long-term sustainability.

For instance, among the gig workers groups I have worked with in Thailand, several struggle to collect membership dues, leading to limited resources and commitments from their members for the organizations' long-term prospects. Operating outside the industrial relations framework means they must rely on power resources outside of or not limited to organizational power (i.e. institutional and societal power). This proves challenging in Southeast Asian economies, where labor law violations and disregard for workers' rights are normalized and facilitated by state tolerance and support.

While they are not bound by labor laws, their societal power still requires strong public support and the ability to leverage collective power in politics at large. Therefore, research must understand the larger context of the political economy in which these organizations operate, to ensure that our research helps the workers understand their potential strengths.

Recognizing Diverse Forms of Collective Actions Among Migrant Workers

Migrant workers face complex challenges shaped by labor migration regimes, employment relations, and their own agency. It is not just about their economic positions dictated by laws and institutions; their migration status also plays a significant role (Ford 2020). [6]

Legal restrictions, language barriers, and limited social networks in host countries often hinder their ability to mobilize and advocate for their rights.

In addition, labor rights and freedom of association for migrant workers are weaker than national gig workers due to restricted access to official documentation and limited freedom of movement, which makes migrant workers vulnerable. And, their inability to register trade unions or participate as executive committee members further undermines their collective agency.

Despite these formidable challenges, migrant workers in Thailand and elsewhere, demonstrate remarkable resilience. They form grassroots groups and actively contribute to improving the well-being of their fellow migrants, establishing valuable support networks.

For example, research conducted in Mae Sot, a border town and organizing hub for Burmese migrant workers from the late-1990s until the mid-2000s, reveals their creative initiatives and resilience (Arnold 2013; Campbell 2013; 2018) [7]. According to Dennis Arnold, over time, collective organizations among these workers have evolved through different phases. Initially, their responses were minimal, but spontaneous strikes emerged, leading to broader community and cultural organizing. From 2002 onwards, Burmese workers and political activists in Mae Sot played a crucial role in protests, negotiating with employers or pursuing legal actions to influence working conditions.

Stephen Campbell's study on migrant workers' organizing along the Myanmar-Thailand border challenges the assumption that flexible employment discourages collective organization and fosters class fragmentation (2013) [8]. Campbell argues that within labor-intensive manufacturing contexts, flexibilization facilitates collective action and self-organization based on solidarity among Burmese-majority workers.

In Mae Sot during the 2000s, despite facing abuse and unfair regulations, migrant workers, especially women, engaged in collective action to improve their working conditions. Even though they faced limitations on forming trade unions, they utilized alternative mechanisms such as employee committees and welfare committees to protect themselves during negotiations. Grassroots labor rights organizations also played a vital role in supporting these workers throughout their collective efforts.

The recent study conducted by the Mekong Migration Network (2022) [9] examines the forms of collective actions undertaken by migrant worker groups in Thailand, specifically focusing on membership-based associations and community-based organizations. These groups, predominantly comprised of agricultural workers and workers on the fishing boat, face precarious working conditions, limited legal rights for unionization, isolated conditions of living, demanding and uncertain working schedules, and opposition from authorities, local communities, and employers.

Despite these obstacles, the study reveals that migrant workers continue to form and participate in grassroots groups to address cultural, religious, and welfare issues. They are found to employ various strategies to overcome these challenges. For instance, they engage in dialogue with local communities and employers to foster understanding and mitigate antagonism. Building relationships with non-governmental organizations helps them mediate with Thai authorities and legitimize their operations. Furthermore, these groups organize events during religious and cultural gatherings to disseminate information on workers' rights, preventing authorities from shutting down labor rights.

It is crucial to recognize that such collectivization is impossible in isolation; they heavily rely on the support provided by civil society organizations and social movements, thus making labor movements more powerful and better understood as a collective force.

Toward A New Participatory Research Agenda

As I delve into researching migrant workers' activism, a notable observation emerges: akin to gig workers, migrant workers are also engaged in organizing to improve their working conditions. However, a dilemma arises as they balance immediate needs with long-term aspirations. While their focus may lie on immediate concerns, such as day-to-day survival and basic rights, they may not have the privilege to dedicate attention to more enduring matters like organizational structure and sustainability - issues that NGOs often prioritize.

To address this challenge, the implementation of participatory and action research becomes indispensable. Such an approach can help workers navigate these questions as they progress. It is also essential to adopt a non-biased research stance that does not favor any specific form of activism, or prioritize the long-term over the short-term. Instead, the focus should be on understanding how short-term-oriented labor activism can inform future pathways effectively.

An important aspect to consider is the potential impact of labor activism on shaping laws in the desired direction. As the nature of work and employment continually evolves, it becomes paramount to explore how research can enable workers to envision previously unattainable possibilities. The transformation of work arrangements presents challenges and opportunities, and understanding these shifts can be a key factor in shaping future research for labor activism.

Depending on geographical contexts, important unanswered questions remain regarding where workers perceive their power lies and their ability to devise strategies as a collective bargaining unit effectively. The existing research on migrant workers' collectives only scratches the surface, leaving much more to explore regarding the various organizational forms they could adopt.

The shared experience of precarious work has opened doors to collective action among informal groups, showcasing the transformative potential of alternative labor organizations in empowering workers and invigorating labor movements in the region, rather than restricting them within legal boundaries. Looking ahead, it becomes paramount for labor researchers and activists to be innovative in recognizing and understanding the various creative organizing methods employed by these workers. This exploration will unlock novel avenues for labor movements in Southeast Asia, fostering solidarity among diverse worker groups and effectively advocating for their rights.

Moreover, researchers must be critical of the existing institutional and organizational impediments to workers' collective, such as resource constraints and legal limitations. Participatory and action research can prove instrumental in assisting workers in navigating these obstacles and shaping their collective endeavors effectively. By engaging in unbiased research that remains attuned to both day-in and day-out experiences and long-term concerns, we can create a foundation for a labor movement that advocates for workers' rights, shapes labor laws, and envisions a more equitable future of work in the region. This approach will ensure that our research contributes meaningfully to advancing workers' rights in Southeast Asia.

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P.S.

Asian Labour Review

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Footnotes

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