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Topic: Inside the Labour Movement(s) in Southeast Asia

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A recent publication by the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (2017) called Asia the “continent of labour” – a characterisation that also applies specifically to Southeast Asia. The successful economic development of the region has been based on the expansion of capital relations and on the ongoing proletarianisation of its population. However, the labour “side” of the economic “miracle” in Southeast Asia usually remains hidden from view. Apart from occasional mentions of larger strike movements, labour as a class and as a collective agency is usually ignored in political analyses of the region. This also applies to political activists and civil society, which, for some decades, have downplayed class as a category of analysis and the collective struggles of the working class as a strategic moment.

This issue of Südostasien hopes to begin to rectify this state of affairs, firstly by unearthing working class struggles and secondly by stressing their significance for the social and political transformation of Southeast Asia. We understand the working class and the labour movement in the broadest sense, i.e. as waged employees in industry, services and agriculture (i.e. blue and white collar workers, both formal and informal) and their everyday (“unorganised”) struggles, the trade union movement, related civil society organisations and political parties.

We would also like to stress that the labour movement in this broad sense is made up of women and men, of different nationalities and ethnicities, of different sexual orientation etc. While common struggles can unite different segments of the working class, they do not automatically do so, and workers can often be divided and fragmented by social differentiation, repression and discrimination. The purpose of this issue is not to glorify the labour movement, but to critically examine its current state and the politics and strategies that are influential today.

In addition to offering an overview of labour movements in Southeast Asia and an analysis of some of the most important and major struggles of recent times, we particularly welcome articles that discuss issues listed below. In identifying these themes, we realised how many of them correspond to challenges also experienced by the labour movement in Germany and Europe. We hope that this issue is therefore interesting and relevant for labour activists in Germany and that it contributes to forging closer ties of understanding, analysis and solidarity.

Labour and the rise of fascism and authoritarianism

The rise of fascism and of right-wing populist authoritarianism is a global phenomenon. In Southeast Asia Duterte in the Philippines, the military government in Thailand, or Islamic fascism in Indonesia are some of the more prominent examples. Labour movements are not unified in their response to these threats. Authoritarian figures hold some sway within the working class and some unions actively support populist and authoritarian figures, such as Prabowo in Indonesia or Prayuth in Thailand. How can we explain this support? And what forces within the labour movement are developing anti-fascist strategies?

Strategies against precarisation, contractualisation and outsourcing

Precarisation, contractualisation and outsourcing are major issues, also in Southeast Asia. How have workers and the labour movement responded to these challenges? What successful examples of

struggles against informalisation, for more job security, or that include outsourced labour such as homeworkers can we learn from?

The politics of labour movements

Across Southeast Asia, the lack of influential labour parties is a striking phenomenon. This contrasts unfavourably with the middle of the last century, where particularly communist parties were major forces in the struggles for national liberation. How can we explain the failure of labour to organise on the political terrain? And what political strategies hold forth in different countries?

Labour's social and political goals

Many labour struggles and strikes are fought for higher wages, an important goal given the low-wage model of economic growth across the region. But what other issues does labour mobilise around? How does labour take up occupational health and safety issues in their struggle? And is labour a relevant force in generalised struggles for example against free trade agreements or fordemocracy and human rights?

Gender and the labour movement

A substantial part of the working class in Southeast Asia is female. Women workers dominate certain sectors, including the care industry, but also in manufacturing industries such as textile, garment, and electronics. How do women workers deal with issues such as sexism, sexual violence, the double burden of social reproduction work and the lack of representation in often patriarchal union structures? What struggles are led by women workers and what is the relation between feminism and the labour movement?

Migrant workers and their struggles

Migrant workers are an important part of the labour movement in Southeast Asia. But often, unions fail to organise migrant workers and sometimes see them as a competition with local workers. How do migrant workers organise across borders? How do they deal with racist discrimination within the labour movement?

Labour and Environmental Justice

Across Southeast Asia, there are many struggles against land grabbing, plantation monocultures, mining and pollution. But how do these relate to labour struggles of those workers in these industries? What examples are there of successful alliance building between labour and the environmental movements? And what traditions of working class environmentalism exist in the region?

We would like to address these (and other) questions in as many different forms of expression as possible: in-depth-reports, portraits, interviews or photo essays. We are looking forward to your ideas

Deadline for submissions (max. 15.000 characters) is the 9th of January 2019. Please include relevant and titled photographs of sufficient quality (300dpi) and make sure the copyright is dealt with beforehand. We are also looking for short reviews of books, films and music about or from Southeast Asia. Contact email: oliver.pye@uni-bonn.de