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Asia

Labour's Polycrisis

- Features -

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A concept that takes on a life of its own often says a lot about the material conditions and structure of feeling of the time. Polycrisis, recently re-popularised by the historian Adam Tooze, was first coined in an earlier era of multiple crises in the 1970s. For Tooze, polycrisis points to "this experience of not a single crisis with a single clearly defined logic…but this coming together at a single moment of things which, on the face of it, don't have anything to do with each other, but seem to pile onto each other", and he locates the beginning of the current polycrisis in 2008 at the point of the Great Recession.

Polycrisis captures something that is being widely felt: we are facing an array of crises that seem everywhere, overwhelming and only growing worse. But it signifies not only the presence of multiple crises, but the fact that they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The labour movements in Asia – and globally – have our own polycrisis: it is a crisis of neoliberal capitalism, a crisis of joblessness, a crisis of survival, a crisis of social reproduction, a crisis of the trade union movement, a crisis of working-class power, a crisis of political vision, and a crisis of (movement) care. They are not crises in isolation but are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, producing feelings of powerlessness and disorientation.

Asia is at present and historically a continent full of struggles. In the last century, it has experienced revolutions, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, and waves of democratisation. Today, there is still a strong spirit of resistance, especially in some of the most repressed places, often not despite repression but because of it. With the largest working class of any continent, what is happening with the working class in Asia matters by default. Yet, with all the struggles, there is a shared feeling that things are stuck or even moving backwards, and why this is so matters.

In the past few years, I have travelled and spoken with dozens of labour activists and researchers in Asia to find out more about labour struggles on this continent of labour. They generously gave me their time, took me to visit organisations and sites of their organising, and shared their observations on the state of labour movements. Over the course of these conversations, some insights, sentiments and frustrations appeared again and again. I have been encouraged to write down some of these observations and ideas developed out of these visits and conversations. Still fragmented and necessarily generalisations, these notes are meant to serve as starting points for critical discussions, reflections, criticisms, and elaborations.

1

One of the most memorable conversations of the last three years was with the national organisers of a call centre union in the Philippines. The union had been organising call centre workers in the Philippines. Their job is to answer calls from customers of companies based in the global north that outsource customer services. Thus, they start their shift in the evening in the Philippines and only end their shift in the morning. For a number of years, unions and other social movements had been grappling with the real threat of physical assaults from the Duterte regime. Dozens of community organisers had been assassinated, arrested, and more were disappeared.

One of the call centre worker organisers, sleep-deprived when we met at noon in their office just after the end of their shift, told me that just the month before, one of their core organisers, whom they all knew personally and worked closely with, was assassinated. The union itself has been heavily surveilled and is a regular target of red-tagging. Yet, the organisers continued their organising, knowing what happened to their colleagues could happen to them as well. But this is not due to a lack of fear. They expressed their safety concerns, but they believed they had no choice

but to continue their organising work.

I often think of this conversation, and the sentiment is echoed by many others I have spoken with. Everywhere you turn in Asia, you see workers organising, resisting, pushing back, protesting on the street, staging strikes, often under some of the harshest political conditions. You see workers in all kinds of sectors, industrial or service– garment workers, transport workers, platform workers, healthcare workers and more – determined to fight for dignity and a better future for themselves and their children.

2

Recognising the heroic efforts by workers everywhere should not obscure the fact that we are at a low point of worker militancy. Arguably, we are at the end of a cycle of labour struggles in many parts of Asia. This cycle started in the 1980s and 1990s, toward the end of the Cold War and the ascent of neoliberal globalisation, when a number of countries in Asia opened up their market for foreign direct investment; capital in more industrialised economies in Asia, such as Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan, heading off higher labour costs and a more organised working class, moved their production into other Asian countries.

This created new working classes, as well as restructured and made redundant the old working classes, who are now congregated in massive industrial zones. Before long, in their hundreds of thousands, they started to resist the extreme forms of exploitation that are a core feature of the special economic zones (SEZs). Strikes, organised by unions or autonomously, became increasingly prevalent. Led by industrial workers, these strikes ushered in a period of growing worker militancy. This peaked in the late 2010s and early 2010s, with strike waves in multiple countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Myanmar and more. They were fueled by the export market shocks as a result of the Global Financial Crisis, and boosted by years of worker organising and growing confidence of the working class. It was Asia's striking decade.

Transnational solidarity in Asia flourished in this period, with movements, unions and organisations making connections and collaborating to build networks and alliances around issues of worker safety, transnational capital and social protection. Two key moments – the transnational advocacy following fires at factories in Shenzhen and Bangkok in 1993 that produced for global brands, and the coming together of social movements to protest against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Hong Kong in 2005 – marked more than a decade of intense transnational resistance. Uniquely, Hong Kong served as a critical node connecting East Asia and Southeast Asia labour movements, and those in the global north. And, new networks were built in Asia around occupational health and safety, transnational capital and social protections.

This reflects the fact that, facing similar conditions, workers organically came together to share experiences and develop campaigns against the forces unleashed by neoliberal capitalism. It produced a sense of shared struggle and fate. While struggles never cease, the high level of worker militancy that came about in response to neoliberal capitalism has since passed. De-industrialisation, capital relocation and state repression are among the factors contributing to the decline. By the end of the 2010s and early 2020s, we are at the end of this cycle of labour struggles in Asia. How should labour movements strategise and build power in a period of low worker militancy?

3

"The union is like a boss", said one Indonesian labour organiser in a recent conversation. A long-time organiser with many years of experience in organising industrial workers, she doesn't mince words about the state of the trade union movement. Her forthright criticism of the leadership in Indonesian unions caught me by surprise, not because I hadn't heard of criticism of one's own organisation, but the very direct way in which she framed her criticism. She

went on to say that the union leaders run their unions like their own families. Under this paternalism, according to her, workers are not given space to exercise their decision-making power; instead, the union leadership conditions them to follow orders rather than learning to build their power. “Union leaders are holding onto power and want to control everything”, she shared in dismay.

The end of the Suharto era, during which independent unionism was suppressed but labour groups actively participated in the resistance, promised a new era of political democracy. Having gained the legal right to organise trade unions, workplace unions, and federations and confederations of unions proliferated in Indonesia. And, the country experienced a wave of industrial strikes between 2012 and 2014. However, following state repression and what has been described as “premature de-industrialisation”, it has since struggled to rebuild power, particularly the industrial unions. While state repression or de-industrialisation are obvious and crucial factors in explaining the erosion of worker power, labour organisers have shown a great deal of frustration with their own unions and with the labour movement at large.

Similar criticisms are surprisingly common. Asia experienced a round of democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s, in places like South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia. The role of the labour movement in democratisation is uneven across countries, with the strongest role in South Korea, weakest in Taiwan, and Indonesia in the middle, as a rough comparison. But in all places, as independent trade unions emerged during and after their democratic transitions as counterparts to state-controlled unions, the proliferation of unions has not necessarily translated into greater strength of the labour movement and, in many cases, arguably has produced the opposite effect of fragmenting and weakening the movement.

Notably, many of the new trade unions emerged in a period of high neoliberalism in Asia, with the new, democratised states leading in implementing or deepening neoliberalism. Democratisation, therefore, coincides with the assaults on the working class and trade unions. While direct state repression may have lessened in those democratised states, the legal structures regulating trade unions and strike actions, stipulating strict conditions under which unions can legally strike, also function to restrain trade unions from taking more radical actions.

More troubling is the fact that some labour organisers have criticised many trade unions are replicating the structures of the despised state and business-controlled unions in their hierarchical structures and bureaucratism, characterised by a lack of democracy and top-down approaches to organising. Across a number of countries, women union organisers widely feel excluded from union decision-making processes and leadership positions. These are significant contributing factors to the alienation of workers from even independent trade unions. Furthermore, many point to the fragmentation and deep divisions between unions and federations that undermine unity in the labour movement.

4

Voicing criticism of our own movement, even from a sympathetic perspective, can be very uncomfortable. In conversation after conversation, labour organisers shared about problems they have experienced and observed in their own unions and in the broad labour movement, which have weakened the movement and undermined their abilities to organise workers. It takes courage to acknowledge that our movement has problems, but it is an essential first step to strengthen the movement.

Evidence of our movement’s weakness is plain to see. We see an extremely low level of union density almost everywhere in Asia. In most Asian countries, usually less than ten per cent, quite often, just five per cent or so, of workers are in unionised workplaces. Trade union density is typically higher in the public sector, whereas in the private sector, where the majority of workers are, it is typically much lower. And, the union membership is also divided between the more independent trade unions and those affiliated closely with states or controlled by

employers. Even in places where there may be higher union density, this may not necessarily reflect or equate to worker power in their workplace or their broader political power.

This is not to argue that trade union density is the only or even the most important measurement for working-class power. Often, non-unionised workers going on wildcat strikes is a clearer indicator and demonstration of their power. Indeed, in places where independent unions are banned, such as China and Vietnam, as well as where independent unions do exist but hardly organise any informal workers, workers have staged wildcat strikes as the main form of collective action, and quite often succeed. But in many place where there are independent unions, often wildcat strikes are a substantial percentage of the overall strike activity, or even outnumber legal strikes or strikes organised by trade unions.

Yet the other side of this story is that in China and Vietnam, not only do independent trade unions continue to be banned, but even limited union reforms in the 2000s and early 2010s in both countries have either stalled or reversed. The wildcat strikes, while securing immediate demands, have not left any organisational legacy. This weakness in workers' organisational power is even more evident at the workplace level, where workers feel they have little say in what's happening in their workplaces. Politically, trade unions are hardly in a position to influence political decisions on labour laws and policies.

What is left of the trade union movements is deeply divided within nations, along ideological, political, and strategic lines, making unity at the national level extremely rare. In country after country, I learned about the animosity between rival unions and organisations that often work in the same areas, topical and geographic. This is not unique, but with a weak labour movement, such divisions are deadly, and there is little will to reconcile. And, at the regional and global level, national trade unions' connections with global union federations are often stronger and more dominant than connections with other trade unions in the region.

This is further complicated by geopolitics, where territorial disputes, direct conflicts, and competition over political influence can further divide labour movements in different countries where nationalism increasingly reigns supreme over international solidarity. But it is not just geopolitics; the economic reordering of the world, expressed most immediately in the trade war, rising tariffs and protectionism, will have profound destabilising effects on workers in Asia who work in the export economies, who are always susceptible to fluctuations in the export markets and global economy.

5

Is there any source of new and promising worker organising? For a number of years in the 2010s and early 2020s, platform workers appeared to offer a new hope for the labour movement, as traditional industrial unions seemed to be losing steam. The proliferation of platform-based ride-hailing and food delivery suddenly led to the influx of hundreds of thousands of workers into the platform economy under conditions of extreme precarity, but, at first, with better pay and more autonomy. And, the pandemic years further deepened the reliance on food delivery, creating a booming market and employment opportunities, especially for young people hoping to escape from industrial work or simply unemployment.

However, as a few major companies consolidate market shares – usually two or three platforms dominating the entire sector, they start to reduce incentives, bonuses and pay. And, with the reality of algorithmic control causing road injuries, and the lack of legal and social protection setting in, workers' anger burst into strikes all over Asia. This gave a boost to the labour movement. Yet the fact that strikes become so regular masks two issues: the impact of the strikes is often limited in terms of participation and economic impact on the platforms, and can often be safely ignored by the companies with little repercussion, and the organisational strength behind the strikes remains weak leading to inability to force the companies to agree to worker demands. The platform economy is a sector prone to strikes, with

workers staging strikes because of a combination of factors: lack of supervisors to mediate conflicts, ease with which workers can simply refuse to take orders, and the fact that they cannot be fired because of their strike actions. But it is not always a straightforward indication of worker power.

Platform workers are not without victories: some countries have updated legislations to offer more protection; organizationally, mutual aid groups and associations sprang up and quickly became critical forms of mutual support and mobilisation. But unions have not yet fully captured the momentum of worker mobilisation, and often seem outdated in the eyes of platform workers. Platform labour organisers would say that they are not interested in building a union when they can coordinate to strike on their own.

6

Given this, it is not easy to avoid the conclusion that trade unions are in crisis. If barely anyone is in a union, or so many workers don't even want to be in a union, how relevant are the trade unions to the labour movement? The answer is that right now, trade unions, at least in the forms they have taken, often feel distant, unresponsive and irrelevant. It seemed jarring when many workers and activists shared that they feel unions do not represent them. Trade unions well recognise the difficulties in attracting young workers, especially outside of manufacturing sectors. Unions often fail to address the specific conditions of young workers who do not work in factories. In some cases, there is a deep distrust of trade unions. For some, unions are seen as outside organisations that try to take control of workers' initiatives. It is the nightmare of unionism: workers feel alienated from trade unions.

This is evident particularly in the informal sectors. A significant challenge for the labour movement is the difficulty that highly informal labour arrangements present to organising. In Asia, with over 60 per cent, in some countries such as India, over 90 per cent, of the labour force in the informal economy, informality is the rule rather than the exception. Even in an otherwise formal economy, there are vast islands of informal arrangements through two-tier labour systems: a core of secure workers and a periphery of insecure workers. Labour movements may use different words to describe these conditions: in Korea and Japan, activists speak of irregular workers; in the Philippines, activists have been fighting against casualisation; some use the more formal-sounding term non-standard employment; still others refer simply to informal workers. But they all point to the same phenomenon of work being made more precarious, less secure, more short-term, and less protected.

For decades, labour movements have emphasised the importance of organising informal workers, including millions of migrant workers and platform workers. The labour movement demands to bring informal workers under formal systems by extending legal and social protection to them. Yet, for informal workers, trade unions are either absent or alienated; indeed, some don't even see themselves as workers. There is certainly interesting organising work done, for instance, to organise young workers in the media and creative industries. But it seems the calls for organising informal workers for years have not reversed the trend of informalisation. This is also one reason why, if we focus only on the activities of trade unions, we may overlook much that is happening with informal workers.

The labour movement's weaknesses have historical origins. During the Cold War, in countries aligned with the U.S., states decimated the revolutionary left and more radical unions. Subsequently, the trade unions are prone to taking up a more liberal political orientation. In countries that are state socialist, states would not allow an independent left and an independent trade union movement to exist. For the former, under anti-communism and anti-left wing politics, the vision of trade unions are often narrowly focused on workers' material interests and extend at most to engagement with liberal politics; for the latter, it is even more challenging to develop a radical union movement, as labour activists are likely to blame communism or socialism for their plight than market economy. Some leading labour activists I encountered in China were pro-market, arguing that more market and less state intervention is the key to protecting workers' rights.

This critique of the trade union movement is by no means an argument for doing away with unions or worker organisations. On the contrary, it is an urgent call for reinventing unions or new forms of worker organisations that do not repeat the same mistakes and problems of traditional trade unions. How can we reinvent the unions? Or, what else are alternatives, but not necessarily replacements, of unions as vehicles of the working-class movement? We cannot be content with just saying that we want more workers to join unions. What kind of unions, worker organisations, and movements do we want?

7

It is not just a crisis of trade unions; neoliberal capitalism in Asia is also in deep crisis. The neoliberal form of capitalism began to be developed in the 1980s and 1990s with the promise of delivering fast growth. Driven by similar global capitalist, competitive pressures and domestic crisis and incentives, countries in Asia have pivoted away from state socialist or state developmental models and adopted one or another variant of neoliberal capitalism.

However, neoliberalism has become exhausted, facing a major crisis in the Global Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008. It has managed to produce a low level of economic growth in most countries in Asia. For labour, neoliberalism, having first created hundreds of millions of industrial jobs, has increasingly failed to generate any half-decent jobs for young people. Real wages adjusted to the costs of living are stagnant after the period of industrialisation. Increasingly, the problem is not simply that work has become more informal and less secure, which has been with us for decades; instead, it is this sense of no future.

Perhaps aided by this sense of despair, this condition has prompted some young workers to desire short-term work, so that they can be free from the oppressive jobs that control their time and life, and anti-work sentiments. This means working just enough to earn a living to sustain a low-consumption lifestyle – young people in China speak of a “low-carbon” lifestyle. And, in the face of persistent scarcity of good-paying jobs, “lying flat,” a concept coined by Chinese youth, has long entered into the lexicon, while Korean youth are “taking a break” from searching for jobs. This condition is, in fact, quite universal. Labour movements have not quite figured out what to do with the shifting attitudes and sentiments in response to the fundamental change in the economies. While continuing to demand stable and protected jobs is central for many workers needing such security for their livelihood, this is far from a real possibility or even a desirable outcome for many other workers.

This is not to contrast the present moment with some imagined golden period of neoliberalism, as it has always been based on the degradation of labour and less than decent protection. However, the pervasive sense that neoliberalism is unable or unwilling to provide a decent living is very real. This condition has also created a social reproduction crisis. Asia, and in particular East Asia, has some of the lowest birth rates: South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and now even China are seeing their populations in decline for many years. As work becomes degraded, the job market becomes overly competitive, and welfare provisions are lacking, the working classes find themselves unable to afford childcare, healthcare, housing and education, and are too pessimistic about the future to want to start a family and have children. The result is a crisis of reproducing the working class. The crisis of care, in particular, has become a key challenge facing working-class women, who are sometimes blamed for the neoliberal conditions, as in the case of Korea.

8

Trade unions and labour NGOs are confronting states that are, by and large, not responsive to the movement’s relatively modest demands for social protection. Instead of making some concessions for a social compromise, the typical state response in Asia over the last few years has been growing authoritarianism in both authoritarian states and liberal democracies alike. This increased authoritarianism has been experienced and analysed by civil society as shrinking civil society space or democratic backsliding in report after report. This certainly captures something about

reality. However, the way this is presented is often ahistorical, with the shrinking rarely contextualised, or simply reduced to the personality of authoritarian, populist leaders and elite politics.

Seldom asked is why states are becoming more authoritarian. It is more helpful to see that states, whether democratic or authoritarian, are increasingly turning authoritarian in response to the same set of regional and global economic pressures and intensifying social conflicts. The states are unable and unwilling to accommodate the currently relatively modest demands of working classes for legal and social protections; instead, they are further degrading their conditions by legislating anti-labour laws to weaken protection and increase exploitation or resorting to direct forms of state repression, such as attacking trade unions and imprisoning labour organisers, or a combination of both. This is often done in the name of attracting foreign direct investment and growing the economy, and sometimes on national security grounds, as states compete for capital to exploit their resources and labour force and to eliminate working-class militancy to stabilise the investment environment.

9

Coming back to resistance and political power, there has been a strong popular pushback in South Asia. Uprisings in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where massive popular protests against neoliberal capitalism and for jobs and affordable living have sprung up, managed to topple leaders and governments. This demonstrates the possibilities for political transformations. Yet, organised labour movements have rarely led these movements of the past decade.

If we take a step back, the political power of the working classes is defined by its absence. In none of the Asian countries is there a working class, labour party in government at the national level, or exercising enough political power to contest state power, excluding the nominally socialist governments of China, Vietnam and Laos; efforts to create labour parties to contest in elections have not led to any substantial electoral success in Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia. Worse, even social democratic parties of the moderate left are mostly absent, with only left of centre or centrist liberal democratic parties dominating the political space, but hardly leading with pro-labour policies, or as is often the case, implementing neoliberal policies. There is hardly any mass political movement of the working class capable of contesting state power.

This weakness limits our political horizon and aspirations: social and legal protection, while vital, are basic demands, and even as basic as they are, we are making these demands from a position of weakness and more often than not, we are hardly able to make substantial gains. It is not surprising that we rarely consider how we could shape the direction of our society or build a different kind. Our own limits are in part the result of being constantly under attack and on the defensive for years. But trying to be moderate and reasonable within the current institutions might have further limited our possibilities.

The other side of the political power imbalance is the rising power of the conservative and populist right-wing political forces. They have been mobilising, tapping into sentiments – resentment, anger, frustration, desperation – against elites, institutions and a system that manifestly doesn’t work for them. They channel these sentiments into a right-wing, nationalistic, conservative agenda that is anti-labour, anti-gender equality, and often anti-democracy. We have little chance to compete with them, if our goal is to defend the current institutions and systems, aiming merely for a better version of them. It is not the time to patch up the system. Rather than sticking to moderate and reasonable demands, which we are barely getting, there is good, strategic ground to escalate the demands.

There is also analytical and intellectual work to be done. We should not see Asia as the exception to the European or American norms of what labour movements would or should look like, or a source of case studies to illustrate or critique a theory developed elsewhere. We should reevaluate certain concepts and frameworks dominant in our movement, interrogating ideas and practices like social protection, social dialogue, and (tripartite) collective bargaining. What are the assumptions underlying these concepts and practices? What are the contexts in which they

were developed, and are they relevant to our present context? Have they worked? If not – and mostly they have not, why? Should we look for alternatives? And, what should we study? We have produced a lot of research on worker organising and collective action, which are important and necessary, but should we understand more how specific national and transnational capital operates in specific ways subject to both constraints and opportunities just like labour?

10

How we position ourselves as labour movements in the period of exhausted neoliberal capitalism matters. The crisis of the labour movement is not only made worse by the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, but the labour movement is unable to take advantage of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism to advance the working-class agenda. We are in serious need of radically rethinking and redirecting our movement. That has to start with recognising and analysing the weakness of our own movement, not shying away from our failures in the name of protecting our own side, and instead posing critical and painful questions about why this is the case. We need to challenge our long-held assumptions and frameworks, asking why they have not worked.

Apart from the obvious cases of state and employer attacks, what else weakens our movement? What is the analysis of the current moment that we need to inform our movement-building? Do we understand well enough how capitalism works and how capital operates? Why are so many workers feeling alienated from the movement? What builds worker power, and how do you evaluate it? Is the mobilisation and advocacy supported by and grounded sufficiently in grassroots organising? Or, are we just looking for shortcuts? What should we demand beyond higher wages and better conditions? How do we go beyond the often depoliticised and ahistorical (or even anti-historical) mode of rights advocacy? How do we start to sketch out something beyond a compromise with the dying neoliberal capitalism? What kind of labour movement do we want to build? How should we address the climate and ecological crisis, especially if our approach remains productivist? Is de-growth a desirable political goal, and if so, how should the labour movement change? We don’t need to have all the answers before taking action. Still, without the willingness, encouragement and patience to grapple with these questions and live with the uncertainties and incompleteness of answers, we are likely to be stuck in our current polycrisis.

And…

It is not only neoliberal capitalism that is exhausted – we, too, are exhausted. When the movement is at a low point and after several years of emergency mobilisation during the pandemic, it unavoidably takes a psychological toll on organisers, as strong-willed and committed as they are to building the movement. We don’t talk enough and openly about the psychological aspect of organising and movement building – personal feelings are supposed to be subordinate to the mission of movement building, and we cannot appear vulnerable. Yet, left unaddressed or worse actively suppressed, our exhaustion, mental and physical, will only get worse. Conflicts arise and sharpen within the movement, particularly in periods of retreat or stagnation, when we already experience physical tiredness and psychological stress that are often connected. We need to recognise the state of our physical and mental exhaustion, and find ways to take care of ourselves through collective care. I want to suggest that central to the collective care should be purposefully building a culture of slowing down, of practicing radical patience toward each other and movement building, of accepting our mistakes and limits, of offering and accepting apologies, of giving each other more time, and of not feeling guilty to take time to rest. Rest may not be quite exactly resistance, but it is a necessary part of sustaining ourselves and our movement.

*I would like to thank Kriangsak Teerakowitkajorn and Fahmi Panimbang, close comrades and partners in crime with whom I have developed many of the ideas in this article, for reading an earlier draft and providing valuable feedback.

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