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THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN THAILAND : A BRIEF OVERVIEW *

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The workers still feel they have no power at all, so it never occurs to them to try to organize themselves and demand their rights. I felt that an education program was needed to combat these problems; a real workers education program, done by the workers for the workers so that they could begin to articulate their situation... I realized that people needed to be trained to spread the ideas of a labor movement more widely among the workers themselves, for I don't believe those who maintain that we should wait patiently and follow the government's lead — the workers must move themselves, otherwise no government will help them of its own accord. (Translated excerpts from special interview with labor leader Snan Vongsuthee, 1974.)

General Background

Prior to enactment of the Labor Law of 1956 (which was not implemented until January 1957) protective labor legislation for the urban working class was virtually nonexistent. Although labor associations within Thailand can be traced back as far as 1897 with the establishment of the Association of the Tramway workers,¹ organization of Thai workers in the sense of a labor movement did not even begin to emerge until after World War II. As Thailand was not heavily industrialized — and is still predominantly an agricultural country — there was considerable confusion as to what a “labor movement” really implied. It was generally assumed by most Thai that a labor movement applied only to workers within industrial factories or dockyards. Moreover, within the Thai cultural context, as is the case in many developing countries, common laborers are

* This paper was prepared for presentation and discussion at “The Workshop on Democratic Processes in Thailand” as part of the Annual Conference of ASPAC, June 17-19, 1977 at Eugene, Oregon.

¹ Sukdi Pasuknirunt, “*A Comparative Analysis Between the Thai Labor Law and U.S. Labor Legislation*” (unpublished Ph.D., Indiana University, June 1959), p. 23.

considered to be of a very low and inferior class. These factors help explain why the first labor movements were not organized by the workers themselves, but rather by others on the outside who sought to use the workers for their own political purposes.² These and other obstacles had to be overcome by the labor movement.

U.S. Role in The Thai Labor Movement

In the early 1950's, Thailand's close association with the United States resulted in much anti-communist propaganda, which became another obstacle to the establishment of trade unions. Trade union developments were viewed as synonymous with communist activities.³ Hence it was not until 1958, that a genuine workers' union movement gained momentum. At that time there were approximately one hundred and fifty-four registered unions and two national-level coordinating movements. The most notable among these organizations was the Free Thai Labor Movement which was affiliated with the IFTU (International Federation of Trade Unions).⁴

This trade union movement in 1958 was actually allowed to develop under the administration of Prime Minister, Phibul Songkram. Some observers expressed the theory that, Phibul, having returned from an extensive tour of foreign countries, had noticed that all "democratic" countries had a trade union movement. Therefore, it is believed that he allowed the trade union movements to develop in the midst of the revival of democratic institutions at this time (e.g., constitution, elections, etc.). Moreover, it was Phibul's administration that drafted the liberal Labor Law of 1956.

Labor Law of 1956

This statute was idealistic in many respects for a society which was principally agrarian based. However, the three major divisions were practical for an economically developing nation. These divisions were: labor protection measures, procedure for establishing a union or a federation, and rules governing industrial relations. Provisions

² This was the opinion expressed by labor leader Snan Vongsuthee in a special interview by *RONIN* in July 1974.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The IFTU was at the time a U.S. backed international labor union organization which had previously withdrawn from the ILO (International Labor Organization) over policy disagreements.

under the protective measures division included prohibition of women under 18 years of age engaging in certain types of work, a minimum age for child labor of 12 years of age, equal pay for equal work regardless of sex, time and one half for overtime, and a maximum forty-eight hour work week with an eight hour day (which was in accordance with International Labor Organization standards in effect at that time).

However, the liberal provisions of the law did not reflect the more conservative actions taken by the government. As the trade unions developed, trade unions in communist countries quite naturally invited many labor leaders to visit their countries. Many of the leaders responded to the invitation and went to Moscow and Peking, only to be thrown in jail upon their return to Thailand. These actions on the part of the Phibul government only increased union demands for broader, more general "workers rights".

Basically, there were two substantial deficiencies in the Labor Law. First, there was no provision for a minimum wage. Second, there was no effective method of mediating employer/employee disagreements. Disputes between employers and employees continued to be settled through intervention by local administrators, police, central government ministries, or direct action by the Prime Minister.⁶ Ironically, even with these deficiencies, the Labor Act of 1956 was found to be too liberal by the military junta in power at the time and it was subsequently abrogated by "Announcement of the Revolutionary Party Number 19," dated October 31, 1958, by order of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat.

Sarit and The "Dependency" Model of Development

Elimination of the Labor Law of 1956 resulted in the termination of all labor organizations. Authority for formulation of protective labor legislation was transferred to the Minister of Interior. The Minister of Interior was further charged with the responsibility for settlement of labor disputes and inspection of the labor establishments.⁷ This particular conflict was temporarily resolved in favor of the government when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat led a successful

⁵ *Op. cit.*, interview with Snan.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ U.S. Department of Labor, "Labor Law and Practice in Thailand" by Daniel Wit, (Washington 1962), p. 33.

coup against the Phibul government. Sarit, an avid anti-communist military leader and strongly supported by the United States overseas mission, banned the trade union movement completely and arrested most of its leaders.

Sarit was completely in agreement with the Western "dependency" model for development — that of priming the pumps of underdeveloped countries with foreign aid and investments. Hence, the suppression of indigenous labor movements became a prerequisite to Sarit's plans for development. Sarit, in an attempt to attract foreign capital, even sent a special commission abroad to seek out potential foreign investors.

Under the Thai laws of Sarit's reign, foreigners could totally own their companies. For example, Toyota motors — set up in this period — is 100 % Japanese owned; the Thai Gas Company is 100 % Australian owned.

One of the biggest attractions offered to foreign investors was Thailand's cheap labor force, the lack of a Trade Union movement and the illegality of strikes. Under Sarit's rule, any striker could be jailed.⁸ After October 1958, work stoppages due to strikes and lock-outs were minimal for the period 1958-1969.⁹

Although trade unions were effectively banned during Sarit's administration, there were some workers' strikes. In 1962, there were seven very short strikes in which demands were limited to better wages, facilities and conditions. During the six years of Sarit's rule the longest strike involved workers at the Firestone Tire Company, which lasted two months. Many of the leaders of this strike were jailed for terms ranging from 6 to 8 years. This is in sharp contrast to the over one hundred strikes that occurred in the aftermath of the Student Revolution of 1973, in which none of the leaders were jailed, and most of the workers' demands were met.

Thanom and the Labor Law of 1971

Interestingly enough, even Thanom, who replaced Sarit as Prime Minister, promulgated a new labor law in April of 1971, when the country was once again experimenting with democratic institutions after the elections of 1969. The Labor Law of 1971 allowed workers

⁸ *Op. cit.*, interview with Snan.

⁹ Department of Labor, Ministry of Interior, *Yearbook of Labor Statistics*, 1969 (Bangkok, Thailand 1970) pp. 202-3.

to form Employees' Associations. It was surmised at the time that Thanom wanted to build support from the labor movement once legalized, to meet the eventuality of elections in the future. It was thought that Thanom would win over worker votes through these associations. However, workers were rather suspicious at this sudden change of attitude on the administration's part and only three Employee Associations were registered at first.¹⁰

Six months after this labor law was passed, pending labor disputes were once again temporarily "solved" by direct government action when in November 1971, Thanom decided to put the country under martial law and rule by executive decree. It was not surprising, therefore, that the most articulate labor leaders were of the opinion that periodic government supported labor laws were not the solution to the workers' problems. Instead of laws without adequate implementation, some labor leaders felt that in-country training for workers was the most important need to spread and maintain a labor movement.

Worker Training Programs

Snan, labor leader of the Brotherhood of Asian Trade Union (BATU) once asserted that, "We don't need training abroad, we need much more basic training here. Also, none of the real labor leaders speak any English. When I was a laborer working in the movement, I couldn't speak a single word of English."¹¹

Snan became well aware of the value of training when he was trained by the Young Christian Workers group (Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne). Snan was originally sent to the Philippines for training and is of the opinion that the trip was more a "pleasant holiday" rather than a serious worker training session.¹² Hence, Snan was instrumental in the organizing of in-country training programs which included over 400 workers from the railroads, and the tobacco and textile industries.¹³

Included in these training programs was an important educational component to increase the political awareness of the workers, and help

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* Snan added that this group even included "a few white collar workers."

sustain the momentum of the movement. Also discussed in these sessions were strategies of collective bargaining, including strikes, walkouts, and the viability of the "students-workers alliance."

Just prior to the October 1973 uprising, various student leaders (e.g., Saeksan, etc.) had been in contact with labor leaders and some students even assisted in the development of the political education aspect of the worker training programs. Also during this time, it was the students who helped warn various worker movements that the police were planning a complete crackdown on the political activities of the workers. The Special Branch of the Police Investigation (CID) in Bangkok had already begun monitoring the training activities. As one labor leader stated, "They (the police) used to follow us to our training sessions and would be waiting for us outside when we finished."¹⁴

Students Role in the Worker Movement

Students were a great help to the workers' cause after 1971, but as labor leader Snan recalls the October 1973 revolt;

... It wasn't all students; whatever they may say, the students didn't drive the buses at the time of the demonstrations and confrontations — workers did! But many of the student leaders were very stupid at that time, to be frank, Thirayuth Boonmee and NSCT especially; on the 13th, when Prupass announced that the 13 prisoners would be released unconditionally and a new constitution would be prepared within a year or so, Thirayuth Boonmee and the NSCT wanted to disperse — they went home! The Government already had the list of the 100 names of those who had signed the original demand for a constitution and some influential businessmen had supplied Narong with a list of ten persons active within the labor movement, including my name. If events had stopped on the 13th, and the Trio remained in power, what would have happened to those 110 people? They might have killed us; yes — even killed us. We would have had to flee to the countryside, or something.¹⁵

The successful efforts of the collaboration between the students and workers became particularly evident about 8 months after the October revolt of 1973. During the months of May and June 1974, Bangkok witnessed a series of student supported strikes. In mid-May, Thailand witnessed its first strike by public school teachers. One teacher cut his wrist while addressing a crowd of protesting teachers

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

demanding the resignation of Education Minister Abhai.¹⁶ Three days later Abhai resigned and teacher demands were met. On May 23rd, three hundred Bang Kae Transportation Company bus conductors went on a five hour strike demanding a pay raise from two baht (U.S. 10¢) to four baht (U.S. 20¢) per hour, and a paid holiday. One bus conductor was clubbed and stabbed to death while trying to get the conductors to return to work. Eventually the bus company yielded to the demands of the strikers.¹⁷ Thereafter, a small group of bus conductors staged a brief strike demanding an increase from 5 to 7 percent sales commission on tickets sold. Hundreds of passengers were stranded. Within hours the transportation company yielded to the demands of the strikers.¹⁸

About one week later (June 4, 1974), garbage collectors went on strike leaving 200 garbage trucks standing idle. Workers' demands included one year retroactive wage increase, a shift to a permanent public payroll to replace the then day to day basis of payment, and three months compensation for the high cost of living.¹⁹

These strikes were only a slight indication of what was fast becoming a formidable student-worker movement. The organizational ability and political strategy of this new political force was particularly evident in the student-supported textile worker strike.

Textile Worker Strike

During the first week of June 1974, three Thai student groups, the National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT), People for Democracy Group (PDG), and Thai Federation of Independent Students of Thailand (FIST), began assisting textile workers in their slowdown protest against mill owners. The workers and students claimed that the mills were owned by "foreign capitalists" who were "not interested in Thai development."²⁰ On June 5th, Deputy Industry Minister Prakaipecth Inthusophone responded to student inquiries and stated that the textile manufacturers had promised to keep their labor forces intact despite the 25 percent production cut."²¹ Soon thereafter the

¹⁶ *Nation*, May 19, 1974.

¹⁷ *Nation*, May 22, 1974.

¹⁸ *Nation*, May 25, 1974.

¹⁹ *Bangkok Post*, June 5, 1974.

²⁰ *Nation*, June 6, 1974.

²¹ *Nation*, June 6, 1974.

textile manufacturers requested government assistance in lowering the tax for raw materials to compensate for the production slowdown. When the Thai government rejected the proposal for the tax cut, the textile mill owners then laid off 25 % of the work force. Labor leaders and students groups rallied to the workers' cause and organized 3,000 mill workers from the town of Om-noi in Samut Sakhon Province to force the reinstatement of the laid-off textile workers. The workers went in bus loads to the industrial Phra Pradaeng area where major textile mills are located in an attempt to rally the support of some 10,000 workers there. The protesting workers had six demands:

1. reinstatement of workers laid off jobs;
2. revision of the labor law;
3. upgrading the lowest scale of wages in the factories;
4. shifting the temporary workers to the permanent monthly salary scale;
5. welfare improvement;
6. no retaliation against the protesting workers.

The protesting workers ranks began to swell as the demonstration was joined by 3,000 more workers from the town Samut Prokorn. On June 9th, 1974, the protesters moved from Pra Pradaeng to the Department of Labor to present their demands. At the same time, student organizations (NSCT, PDB, and FIST) assisting the workers demonstrations, were joined by the Teachers Rights Protection Group (TRPG). During the demonstrations students and teachers representatives tried to keep a low profile and publicly denied leading protesters. Rather, they claimed to be acting as observers and advisers. However, newsmen, observing the protesters march to the Department of Labor, reported that it was led by a student of Ramkhanhaeng University who purported to be a labor leader. Moreover, it was reported that student-organized "Worker Commando Squads", prevented some "unpoliticized" workers from leaving the demonstration.²² When the workers demands were not responded to by the Minister of Labor, the protesters seized the Labor Department compound for an all-night vigil. Student leaders from Ramkhanhaeng University proudly stated to the press that "we are fighting not only for the textile workers, but for the benefit and security of workers

²² *Bangkok Post*, June 10, 1974.

throughout the country." By the next day (June 10th), most of the worker's demands were met in principle by the employers.

However, there was still no agreement on the following workers' demands:

1. minimum wage increase from 16 baht (approximately U.S. 80¢) to 25 baht (U.S. \$1.25 a day);
2. compensation clauses to be changed in the Labor Law;
3. striking workers to be paid retroactively for the time on strike.

As the labor unrest entered its third day, the protesters shifted from the previous emphasis on the textile related dispute to direct pressure on the government to press for broad changes in the Labor Law. There were some indications at this time that there was a split among the top leaders of the 34 workers associations that represent Thailand's total labor force. In reference to the strike, Corrugated Sheet Metal Association President, Kent Trikasen, expressed that he was rather "suspicious of the textile leaders... (because) these new demands might be intended to ignite something unprecedented in the history of labor."²³ Mr. Kent Trikasen and thirty other leaders of major labor organizations had already reached an agreement with the employees on June 8th. It was reported that the group protesting at the Department of Labor represented membership from only three labor organizations.²⁴

Student leaders were apparently not at all impressed with the cautious remarks of leaders like Mr. Trikasen. Most of the students assisting the workers were "veterans" of 1973 revolt and other student protests. These seasoned protesters were well aware of the difference a sustained labor protest might make in the further development of organized labor and in the labor laws in Thailand.

As the protest entered its fourth day, students from Thammasat University began distributing leaflets to striking workers explaining the political terminologies, and various student associations contributed money to keep the strike going. The student organizations also provided political education and entertainment. Student leaders gave speeches against the "capitalists" during the day and student sponsored bands provided entertainment at night.²⁵ Labor leaders of the 31 labor association were apparently impressed with the sus-

²³ *Bangkok Post*, June 11, 1974.

²⁴ *Nation*, June 11, 1974.

²⁵ *Nation*, June 12, 1974.

tained protest, and on June 11th, 1974, joined the leaders of the three striking organizations in issuing a joint statement. Namely, that the six demands of the striking textile workers were the demands of workers of all occupations.²⁶

Alarmed at this new development, the Minister of Interior, Attasith Sidhisunthorn, indicated to the press that the government would not be pressured. In apparent response to the joint statement by the 34 labor organizations, Attasith stated: "This is not a dictatorial government where we can say outright what is okay and what is not... the 16 baht minimum wage has been extended to the two provinces of Samut Sakhon and Nakhon Pathom as demanded."²⁷ Attasith indicated he could have no immediate answer to the demand of raising the minimum wage on a national basis until the end of June.²⁸

The strikers were seemingly not satisfied with Attasith's explanation and by the next day (June 11th) the number of strikers who were now camped out at the Pramaine Ground swelled to over 10,000. Labor organizations continued to pledge reinforcements, and even workers from such state-run enterprises as the Thai Tobacco Monopoly and the Internal Trade Organization gathered to support the strikers and made donations to the cause.²⁹

The momentum of the movement increased at a pace reminiscent of the October Revolt, as Thailand's 400,000 strong organized labor force, represented by the 34 workers associations decided to unite behind the strikers. Student groups also stepped up the pressures as student leaders and other activists continued their speeches denouncing the "blood-sucking foreign capitalist".³⁰

On June 12th, Prime Minister Sanya, after a special cabinet meeting, ordered Interior Minister Attasith and Industry Minister Aron to step in and settle the unrest.³¹ However, that very evening, after a meeting between the labor leaders of the 34 workers' associations and representatives of the various student groups at Thammasat University, an ultimatum was presented to the government. The ultimatum stated that the government had 40 hours to take positive action on the six demands of the strikers or 20,000 workers employed

²⁶ *Nation*, June 12, 1974.

²⁷ *Bangkok Post*, June 12, 1974.

²⁸ *Bangkok Post*, June 12, 1974.

²⁹ *Bangkok Post*, June 12, 1974.

³⁰ *Bangkok Post*, June 12, 1974.

³¹ *Ibid.*

at 16 textile factories in the central areas would go on strike as an initial step.

Interestingly enough, when Prime Minister Sanya was pressed to comment on the explosive situation, he blamed the "industrialist capitalists"³² for dropping the labor problem in his lap. Moreover, he stated that contrary to some reports, there were no Communist elements behind the workers, and added that "the students are only trying to be helpful to the workers".³³

In the meantime, striking workers were given a boost when workers from the railway, plastic producing factories and glass producing factories joined the protest. An effigy representing "Japanese Capitalists" was hung from a wooden pole during the protest at the Pramaine Ground. After six days of labor unrest that bordered on the edge of violence, the government offered to the striking workers an employment plan which provided for unprecedented job security. The plan called for:

1. six months severance pay for workers employed over three years;
2. three months severance pay for workers employed over one but less than three years;
3. one month severance pay for persons under one year.

The government offer also included a compromise minimum wage increase, which called for a 20 baht pay raise instead of the workers' demand for 25 baht.³⁴ After some debate between the leaders of the various worker and student organizations, the strikers decided to accept the government offer for job security and reject outright the compromise pay raise. Thereafter, it was reported that the student "heroes" of the October 1973 revolt urged workers to fight on.³⁵

Some workers from the State Railway of Thailand followed the students' directions and regrouped to protest alleged stalling on welfare improvements. Students continued the speeches against foreign capitalists and some speakers even accused Prime Minister Sanya of supporting capitalist goals in Thailand.³⁶ However, the majority of the workers were of the opinion that they had already won a great victory for their cause — and eventually agreed to accept the compromise 20 baht minimum wage. Meanwhile, the Thai government

³² *Ibid.*, June 13, 1974.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1974.

³⁵ *Nation*, June 4, 1974.

³⁶ *Nation*, June 14, 1974.

pressured the heads of the Thai textile companies to comply with the demands of the workers in accordance with the agreement on the job security plan and the 20 baht minimum wage.

On June 15th, at a special meeting, Prime Minister Sanya promised the leaders of the 20,000 striking workers that workers would be paid for strike time and the government would extend the 20 baht minimum wage awarded to textile workers to all workers throughout the country. Sanya then requested the labor leaders to deliver these promises to the workers' rally and have the crowd at the Pramain Grounds disperse. However, some labor leaders returned to inform the government that they were unable to disperse the crowd as requested because students had taken over the rally — and had turned it into a political forum to attack the government.³⁷ The students continued to make speeches attacking the "foreign capitalists" and, particularly, the Japanese, who the students claimed dominated the textile industry and were now trying to dominate the Thai economy.³⁸

As the tempo of the rally began to rise, news came from several leaders that while the government had only offered a 20 baht minimum wage they did promise to increase it to 25 baht as workers had originally demanded, as soon as possible. Also, leaders brought news to the rally, that the economic advisory board chaired by Dr. Puey Unprakorn, had a proposal for a basic guaranteed income to low wage earners — which was tantamount to establishment of a social security system. Moreover, it was reported that labor unions would be allowed by the passage of a new labor law, and that the Decree 103, which expressly forbid workers from establishing unions would be repealed. Apparently, the news came just in time to prevent overt violence. Just prior to these government promises, workers and student commandos armed with knives, sticks, and bottle bombs began to commandeer buses with plans to spread the strike and violence to other parts of the city.³⁹

After the crowd had dispersed, Dr. Puey, speaking on national television, gave reasons for the government action... "the 20 % wage increase was justifiable due to the rate of inflation since the beginning of the year."⁴⁰ He explained further that even though the original demand for a 60 % wage increase "is justifiable in the name of social

³⁷ *Nation*, June 15, 1974.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

justice, such an increase would inevitably bring about adverse economic effects.”⁴¹

By all indications it became obvious that the workers — supported by the students, had won another victory for social justice. Unprecedented labor organization and tactics had produced unprecedented concessions on the part of the government and industry. Government and industry leaders soon experienced the implications of this victory for labor in Thailand, as was witnessed by a series of events in the two weeks following the strike.

On June 19th, the Thip Metal Company agreed to pay its 80 workers a daily wage of 20 baht as prescribed by law. Investigation revealed the owner was only paying a daily rate of 12 baht and there were charges of the owner beating employees when he was dissatisfied with their work. The very next day, Sanya's cabinet approved an increase in teachers' salaries in private schools. Increases amounted to some 65 million baht annually, based on teacher qualifications.

On June 22nd, the National Assembly voted 55 to 10 in favor of a bill allowing each provincial organization to set up a credit union with the approval of the Finance and Interior Ministries. On June 24th the Labor Department called for the establishment of labor courts in order to protect the rights of both employers and employees. The labor officials were now allowed to intervene immediately. As the law was previously written, it took the government one month before it could act.

On June 27th, sixty (60) firms promised the Interior Ministry that they would cooperate closely with the authorities in preventing a recurrence of labor crises and to observe the new ministerial regulations on minimum wage and severance pay.

On the same day a page was taken from the books describing work houses of London of 100 years ago, when police rescued 55 boys and girls with an average age of less than 12, from a garment factory in Klong Tan where they worked as slaves. Police charged the owner with “hooliganism”, illegal detention of children and violating provisions regarding child labor.

On June 29th, a new civil servant law was proposed to separate the permanent civil servant from the political appointee. According

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Dr. Puey left the Thai government after the election of 1973 to become Rector of the Thammasat University. He was selected as a member of the Board of Governors of the East-West Center (located in Honolulu) in January 1976.

to the new law, political appointees were no longer allowed to hold a civil servant job simultaneously with their appointed position.

These events ushered in an unprecedented attitude toward change on the part of the many common Thai laborers. Though the average Thai worker was still basically culture-bound in the sense that his lowly position was perceived as his "karma" (destiny) for this life, many Thai laborers became aware of the advantages of direct confrontation as a means of change. Workers apparently were no longer completely intimidated by a tradition which demanded strict adherence to one's "naa tii" (duty) in occupational status and place in society vis-à-vis the "phuu yai" (superiors). In a significant departure from previous labor movements in Thailand, workers demanded rights and privileges in addition to financial benefits. This attitude on the part of a significant number of the "phuu noi" (common laborers) in Bangkok, contagiously spread to other laborers in Bangkok and the provinces.

A good illustration of the example set by the textile worker strike is the case of the Hotel Workers union which emerged as a new and significant force in the Thai labor movement. Theraphun Chairdee, a former student of Thammasat University, became a dynamic and charismatic leader of the Hotel Workers Union which by June 1975, claimed over 5,000 members in Bangkok.

Labor leaders and many of their followers also sought representation through promotion of their own candidates in the general elections of 1975 and 1976. Protest marches and demonstrations, which became a prevailing mode of political participation during this period (1974-1976), were adopted by even the most unlikely civil service employees. Several incidents involving rank and file policemen and soldiers witnessed the use of slow-downs, strikes, and protest demonstrations. One such demonstration by soldiers in 1975 culminated in the looting and vandalizing of Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj's private residence.

Problems and Limitations of Labor Unions Development

While the textile workers strike was a landmark in the Thai labor movement and subsequent union activity provided an impetus to labor union development, serious problems involving continuity and organization continued to plague the labor movement. Although the prevailing political environment was conducive to labor union activity, there

seemed to be as one labor leader remarked "more heat than light". Union gains were often paper promises without any agency to implement the newly enacted laws. Almost all major labor disputes were settled through government intervention at the cabinet level. The Legislature, the Courts, and Ministries of Labor and Industry were rarely involved in the process of mediation and arbitration. The labor unions were able to obtain a minimum wage law but were not able to legitimize the process of collective bargaining with management. This was due as much to the failure of labor unions to organize themselves properly internally as much as it was due to the resistance of management to officially recognize the unions as representative of their employees. Intermediate union officials between the union president and the employees such as shop stewards, or their equivalent, were almost non-existent.

Most unions did not provide the customary manual of rules, regulations, or procedures to its members but rather distributed occasional pamphlets and leaflets describing a particular issue during a strike. Through such pamphlets, union leaders sought to make employees aware of their exploitation by management and that employees were in a position to get higher wages if they went on strike. Union membership was not required nor were its advantages completely understood by workers. This became evident after the author interviewed over 200 striking workers from Sony and other factories during the summer of 1975.

A few union leaders, recognizing the need to formalize their organizational development in order to sustain the labor movement, sought assistance in this endeavor from several professors at Chulalonghorn University and Thammasat University. However, these proposals failed to be adopted either because they involved a reduction in control of the union leadership or as in one case, the proposal was seen as unduly influenced by Japanese modes of collective bargaining.

Another problem facing the labor movement, generic to most social movements, was the problem of cooperation among the various unions. The unity of purpose of the various labor unions and labor leaders which marked the success of the textile worker strike unfortunately followed the process of disintegration that faced the NSCT several months after the successful student Revolt of October 1973. Power struggles for leadership positions within unions as well as the lack of cooperation of leaders between unions detracted from efforts on the part of some union leaders to achieve unity. Disputes

between labor leaders ranged from petty personality conflicts to ideological differences involving the role of a labor movement. Ideological differences among labor leaders usually involved the different approaches to achieve workers gains and the Russian vs. the American experience were often cited as models for development of the labor movement.

Postscript

The gains of the Thai labor movement and the attempts at union organizational development came to an abrupt halt, in the aftermath of the government's bloody battle with students at Thammasat University in October 1976. Worker training sessions and strikes were outlawed, and all forms of union activity became suspect by the new right wing regime, which sought to attract new investments by appeasing the business sector. Previous labor legislation was superseded by the new regime's right to rule by "executive decree" which included the extended use of "Article 21".⁴²

⁴² Article 21 which has long been a part of martial law in Thailand allows the police to arrest and jail without trial anyone, at anytime, who is suspected of disturbing the peaceful order of the Kingdom or is believed to be a threat to the country.