

The Constructed Meaning of Thai Laborer by the State

Tawan Wannarat, Silpakorn University, Thailand

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Abstract

Most studies on labor control in Thailand primarily focus on the state's oppressive and suppressive actions against the labor movement. These studies examine how the state utilizes violence and direct power to render laborers powerless in bargaining. However, a significant and often overlooked question seeks to explain why laborers are considered to have a low social status in Thai society and why the middle class lacks pity or sympathy for them. This study explores the dynamics of pity and sympathy among the middle class towards laborers when the state suppresses them. Despite feeling pity, the middle class still tends to align with the state due to the state's construction of meaning regarding laborers. The state portrays laborers as individuals with low education and knowledge, associating labor movements with potential danger. The state shapes the perception of laborers and the labor movement in two distinct ways: the ideological portrayal of laborers and the labor movement and the real-world representation in Thai society, where they are often depicted as aggressive, irrational, and manipulated by politicians. By examining the construction of the laborer's image and the state's portrayal of the labor movement, this study sheds light on the factors influencing societal perceptions and the middle class's alignment with the state's perspective.

Keywords: Labor Control, Constructed Meaning, State Oppression

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1. Introduction

Labor control in Thailand encompasses the regulations, policies, and practices enforced by the government to ensure fair working conditions, protect workers' rights, and regulate employment relationships. While existing studies on labor control in Thailand primarily focus on the state's oppressive actions against the labor movement, this article aims to shed light on the meanings of key terms as a preliminary step. Understanding the term "laborer" is crucial in this context. This article primarily refers to unskilled workers, particularly those employed in the industry and construction sectors. It also encompasses labor unions and the broader labor movement. The concept of the "state" in this study refers to the power elite. It highlights how those who govern the state often differ from the political parties that win elections. Instead, the power elite comprises soldiers and government officials who have attained authority through coup d'état scenarios. Lastly, the term "labor control" originates from Marxist studies. It signifies the endeavors of capitalists to generate and retain surplus value from employment and the production process for their benefit. By clarifying these key terms, this article sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of labor control in Thailand, moving beyond the prevailing focus on the state's oppressive actions against the labor movement.

2. Concept of Labor Control

The concept of labor control requires a thorough understanding of its fundamental elements. A key question arises: why does the state, despite not being capitalist itself, seek to exert control over labor? The answer is quite straightforward: the state aims to uphold the elite's social status and ensure the continuity of the capitalist mode of production.

Commonly, when discussing labor control by the state, people tend to associate it with acts of violence, such as the arrest of labor leaders or the implementation of laws against cooperative unions. However, labor control extends beyond mere repression. It encompasses a range of methods that go beyond the use of power and violence, focusing on justifying such repressive actions. The state fundamentally seeks to justify its suppression of individuals seen as insurgents or threats to society as a whole. As a result, the state actively shapes societal perceptions of laborers and the labor movement in two distinct ways. Firstly, it presents an idealized image of virtuous laborers and commendable labor movements. Secondly, it portrays labor and the labor movement negatively, highlighting perceived issues and challenges that purportedly exist within Thai society. The state often characterizes the labor movement in Thailand as aggressive, irrational, and driven by political motives, thereby legitimizing its crackdown on such unions.

Nonetheless, the state pursues specific objectives, including economic stability, growth, and securing votes from the population. While the state frequently intervenes in conflicts between capital and labor, there are instances where it may adopt policies that favor labor as a whole, benefiting the overall economy and garnering support from voters. However, the state never overlooks the necessity of maintaining control over labor as a means to achieve its goals.

The second question addresses how the state regulates labor. Expanding on the previous content, the answer encompasses the state's use of both repressive mechanisms involving power and violence and ideological mechanisms that shape workers' perceptions, justifying the exercise of power to suppress them for societal peace.

In his work "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," Louis Althusser argues that the state regulates labor through two main avenues: repressive force and ideological apparatus. This aligns with Somsak Samakheetham's perspective in the article "The Tripartite System and the Building of Industrial Peace" (1989), which examines labor control. In the Thai context, labor regulation by the state takes three forms:

1. Control through violence, including the arrest of labor leaders.
2. Political and legal control involving appointments to political positions.
3. Ideological control, where labor bargaining is portrayed as violent or causing social chaos. Workers are encouraged to make responsible decisions, avoiding recklessness influenced by individuals with harmful intentions towards the country. The state portrays workers' demands as detrimental to the economy.

Most studies on state control of labor in Thailand, conducted by labor leaders, master's degree students, or labor scholars, tend to focus on control mechanisms employing violent methods such as arresting labor leaders, non-registration of unions, and abolishing labor laws. Although some studies touch on ideological control, particularly examining the state's use of a tripartite system to regulate labor, research delving into the use of ideological mechanisms to shape the perception of laborers for labor control remains limited.

Sipim Sornbanlang (2012) sheds light on creating images or narratives to instill fear and distrust of workers and labor movements in society. This research explores explicitly the portrayal of migrant laborers as a state security concern. It reveals that the Thai state seeks to control Burmese workers by fostering societal mistrust and suspicion, thereby justifying restrictions on their rights in various areas. The state employs methods such as news releases and interviews with government officials and civil servants. Mass media, particularly newspapers, often employ fear-inducing headlines using terms like "illegal labor," "brutal Burma," "Burma Occupation," and similar expressions.

3. Thainess and National Culture

Previous studies on state labor control have primarily concentrated on examining the utilization of violent mechanisms as a means of exerting control. However, a significant gap in research exists regarding the understanding of the Thai middle class's perspectives, awareness, and sentiments toward laborers. Investigating the middle class's perception of laborers would yield valuable insights into their attitudes and behaviors concerning laborers and their participation in labor movements. By delving into this aspect, a more comprehensive understanding of the middle class's stance and engagement with labor movements can be achieved.

In order to understand how the middle class perceives and feels about the laborers, it is essential to examine the value system that the middle class embraces. However, to fully grasp this value system, it becomes necessary to trace its roots back to the national culture and the long-established traditional Thai culture that has been nurtured and inherited since the time of the absolute monarchy. By delving into these historical and cultural factors, we can gain valuable insights into the fundamental beliefs and attitudes that shape the middle class's perspective on laborers.

Saichol Satyanurak (2008) sheds light on the difficulties faced by economically disadvantaged individuals in fully embracing Thai identity and culture. The concept of Thai national culture officially recognized and often tied to financial resources like education,

appropriate attire, and participation in Thai arts, poses a significant challenge for those with limited means and free time. Thainess and national culture are crucial in determining one's position within Thailand's centralized social structure.

Laborers, representing a marginalized segment of society characterized by poverty, often lack access to Thai identity and national culture. This exclusion further reinforces their marginalized status. As a result, individuals with low social status face barriers to obtaining the legitimacy and opportunities needed to negotiate and improve their socioeconomic standing. The lack of access to Thai identity and national culture perpetuates the marginalization experienced by laborers and restricts their ability to navigate and transcend their socioeconomic circumstances.

4. The Meaning of Labor Created by the State

This section is comprised of three subsections: "Laborers are those with Low Labor Productivity," "Laborers in Thailand Face Limitations in their Ability to Form Independent Organizations and Advocate for their Rights through Negotiations," and "Laborers have been Observed to Have Demanding and Aggressive Bargaining Positions."

4.1 Laborers are those with Low Labor Productivity

The Thai state consistently maintains that workers' wages are sufficient for their living expenses and commensurate with their productivity levels. According to the state's perspective, low wages result from workers' limited knowledge and skills. Even scholars critical of state policies often cite studies indicating that the state's industrial promotion policies reduce the necessity of knowledgeable or skilled labor from the viewpoint of capital owners. Consequently, uneducated and unskilled laborers face challenges when demanding higher wages.

Thailand's investment promotion policy prioritizes protecting and privileging capitalists, reducing the incentive for capital owners to enhance labor productivity. As a result, workers who benefit from this policy have little motivation to acquire new knowledge or develop their skills. Those lacking knowledge or skills encounter difficulties in improving their abilities or advocating for higher wages. Additionally, the education received by the Thai labor force has historically been limited, with a majority having completed only primary school. This restricted educational background leaves workers ill-prepared for semi-skilled jobs, thereby keeping their wages at the minimum standards. While these perspectives may initially seem sympathetic towards underpaid laborers, they also highlight that workers bear responsibility for their low wages due to their perceived lack of knowledge, competence, and labor productivity.

4.2 Laborers in Thailand Face Limitations in their Ability to Form Independent Organizations and Advocate for Their Rights through Negotiations

The state consistently depicts workers as lacking competence, which extends to their incapacity to establish strong labor unions without outside assistance. Instead, the state emphasizes that politicians typically organize **influential unions**. In Thailand, political parties and politicians often carry a negative reputation due to their perceived dishonesty and involvement in corrupt practices. Consequently, Thai labor laws explicitly restrict labor

unions from engaging in political activities. This grounds the state to dissolve militant labor movements, citing alleged political entanglements.

However, the state's role goes beyond simply dismantling trade unions. It selectively supports certain unions to demonstrate that it only suppresses labor movements that fail to meet its requirements. Compliance with state expectations and obedience leads to the state providing care and protection through the enactment of labor protection laws.

A Director-General of the Department of Labor highlighted the historical support that labor movements received from the administration and academics. Workers often remained in the background, but they have become more visible in recent years. Despite this increased visibility and a favorable democratic environment for labor leaders, they have not taken advantage of the opportunity to advocate for the reinstatement of labor laws revoked since the time of Field Marshal Sarit. This statement underscores the notion that workers cannot independently form organizations and negotiate with employers or the state. Consequently, it becomes the state's responsibility to safeguard and support workers, preventing their exploitation and deception by employers.

These dynamics exemplify the state's efforts to establish a narrative that Thai laborers lack a leading role and significant influence in demanding negotiations, particularly regarding major national issues, due to their perceived lack of knowledge and competence. Instead, government officials and academics have played vital roles in advocating for laborers. Paradoxically, the strength of workers' movements and trade unions is attributed to politicians' involvement rather than the laborers' inherent capabilities.

4.3 Laborers have been Observed to Have Demanding and Aggressive Bargaining Positions

While the state has occasionally encouraged laborers to form organizations to enhance their bargaining power with employers, there have also been instances where the state has portrayed laborers' demands as unreasonable and accompanied by violence, particularly from 1974 through 1975. A prominent Director-General of the Department of Labor noted in his book, "Following failed negotiations, workers resorted to severe attacks on employers," and "Towards the end of 1974 and throughout 1975, workers' behavior turned violent. They often disregarded government advice and openly canceled previously agreed-upon arrangements. There were even threats to use force." In the case of the Standard Garment incident in 1975, laborers accused the police of overreacting and causing injuries. However, the state explained that the police response was necessary due to the violent actions of the laborers. The state asserted that the police had to regain control of the situation, which unfortunately led to worker injuries.

These instances highlight the complex nature of laborer demands and their interactions with the state. While the state has sometimes encouraged laborers to organize and strengthen their bargaining power, it has criticized laborers for employing aggressive tactics and resorting to violence during negotiations. The Standard Garment incident serves as an example where laborers and the state have differing perspectives on the events that transpired and the appropriate responses to maintain order.

In conclusion, analyzing labor control in Thailand reveals several key findings. Firstly, the Thai state consistently argues that low wages result from workers' limited knowledge and

skills, reinforcing the notion that laborers have low labor productivity. Secondly, laborers in Thailand face limitations in their ability to form independent organizations and advocate for their rights through negotiations. The state's portrayal of laborers as lacking competence and restrictions on unions' political activities further hinder their ability to assert their demands. Thirdly, laborers have been observed to have demanding and aggressive bargaining positions, which has resulted in conflicts and tensions with the state during negotiations. These findings highlight the complex dynamics between laborers and the state, with the state's construction of meaning regarding laborers and labor movements shaping societal perceptions and influencing the middle class's alignment with the state's perspective. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in comprehending the challenges and power dynamics involved in labor control in Thailand.

5. Conclusions

In order to uphold the elite's status and preserve the capitalist mode of production, the state employs various strategies to legitimize labor control. One such strategy involves shaping the societal understanding and perception of labor, whereby the state influences how labor is viewed and accepted by society at large. The state's depiction of labor can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the state portrays laborers as uneducated individuals with low labor productivity. As a result, laborers have limited employment options and are compelled to work diligently despite receiving low wages. While the state may express sympathy for the plight of laborers, it cannot provide substantial assistance due to their perceived lack of knowledge and competence. Secondly, the state presents the concept of Western trade unions as highly significant and beneficial for labor administration. However, the state asserts that Thai trade unions differ from Western ones. The state emphasizes that Thai trade unions often encounter political interference and are led by self-interested individuals. Worker rallies are depicted as irrational, aggressive, and prone to violence.

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Contact email: wannarat_t@silpakorn.edu