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Abstract: Purpose – This paper aims to analyse the class dimensions of racism in Taiwan against temporary migrant workers and migrants' efforts to build inter-ethnic and labour-community coalitions in struggle against racism. Design/methodology/approach – An important source of data for this study were the unstructured interview. Between September 2000 and December 2005, more than 50 temporary migrants and their support groups in Taiwan were interviewed, specifically about migrants' experiences of racism and their resistance strategies. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, sometimes with the assistance of translators. Between 2001 and 2007, some 70 people were interviewed by telephone, between Australia and Taiwan. Findings – In Taiwan, temporary migrants suffer the racism of exploitation in that capital and the state “racially” categorize them as suitable only for the lowest paid and least appealing jobs. Migrants also suffer neglect by and exclusion from the labour unions. However, migrants have succeeded, on occasions, in class mobilization by building powerful inter-ethnic ties as well as coalitions with some labor unions, local organizations and human rights lobbies. Research limitations/implications – The research raises implications for understanding the economic, social and political conditions which influence the emergence of inter-ethnic bonds and labour-community coalitions in class struggle. Practical implications – The research will contribute to a greater appreciation among Taiwan's labour activists of the real subordination of temporary migrant labour to capital and of the benefits of supporting migrants' mobilization efforts. These benefits can flow not only to migrants but also to the labour unions. Originality/value – A significant body of academic literature has recently emerged on temporary and illegal migrants' efforts to engage the union movements of industrialized host countries. There is a dearth, however, of academic research on the capacity of temporary migrants to invigorate union activism in Asia, including Taiwan.

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Inter-ethnic and labour-community coalitions in class struggle in Taiwan since the advent of temporary immigration

Robert Tierney

Abstract

Purpose: This paper analyses the class dimensions of racism in Taiwan against temporary migrant workers and migrants' efforts to build inter-ethnic and labour-community coalitions in struggle against racism.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach: An important source of data for this study was the unstructured interview. Between September 2000 and December 2005, I interviewed more than fifty temporary migrants and their support groups in Taiwan, specifically about migrants' experiences of racism and their resistance strategies. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, sometimes with the assistance of translators because of my limited Mandarin skills. Migrant rights groups in Taiwan strongly supported the research and arranged the face-to-face interviews, as well as translation. I am also grateful to the Institute of Labor Research at the National Chengchi University of Taiwan, at which I was based during sabbatical leave in the second half of 2000, for arranging additional translation. Between 2001 and 2007, I interviewed some 70 people by telephone, between Australia and Taiwan. All of these interviewees were competent in English. I decided, early in the piece, to transcribe interviews manually because of the anxiety which several migrants felt about being recorded on tape. All interview notes are held by the author.

Findings: In Taiwan, temporary migrants suffer the racism of exploitation in that capital and the state ‘racially’ categorize them as suitable only for the lowest paid and least appealing jobs. Migrants also suffer neglect by and exclusion from the labour unions. However, migrants have succeeded, on occasions, in class mobilization by building powerful inter-ethnic ties as well as coalitions with some labor unions, local organizations and human rights lobbies.

Research limitations and implications: The research raises implications for understanding the economic, social and political conditions which influence the emergence of inter-ethnic bonds and labour-community coalitions in class struggle.

Practical implications: The research, hopefully, will contribute to a greater appreciation among Taiwan’s labour activists of the real subordination of temporary migrant labour to capital and of the benefits of supporting migrants’ mobilization efforts. These benefits can flow not only to migrants but also to the labour unions.

Originality/value of paper: A significant body of academic literature has recently emerged on temporary migrants’ and illegal migrants’ efforts to engage the union movements of industrialized host countries. There is a dearth, however, of academic research on the capacity of temporary migrants to invigorate union activism in Asia, including Taiwan.

Keywords: Labour unions, capital, the state, split labour markets, ‘racial’ categorization, inter-ethnic coalitions

Introduction

Under constant pressure from employers, the state in Taiwan implemented a temporary immigration program in the late 1980s in order to overcome chronic labour shortages in building and construction as well as manufacturing, and to cheapen the cost of labour power. In the second half of 2007, temporary migrant workers in Taiwan totalled approximately 350,000 men and women, largely from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Capital and the state in Taiwan have ‘racially’ categorized these migrants as suitable for the low paid, dirty and dangerous jobs which Taiwanese workers largely avoid. Migrants earn the minimum wage, set at 45 per cent of the average regular (excluding overtime) wage of local workers in Taiwan (Tierney, 2007). Written into their employment contracts is the compulsion to live in company-owned dormitories, which are over-crowded – often 12 migrants to a room of 20 square metres – and overpriced. Migrants and their supporters regard this mandatory contractual condition as an additional layer of economic exploitation.

Taiwan’s migrants are ‘racially’ categorized in the labour market but in divergent ways, with some nationalities experiencing poorer working and dormitory conditions than others. This divergent concentration at the bottom of the job market generates a range of racist stereotypes, among state officials, employers and local Taiwanese employees alike. Thai workers, for instance, who are trapped in the dirtiest jobs in manufacturing and in the dangerous building and construction sector, are regarded as ‘buffalo’: a stigma denoting “intellectual stupidity” and political docility.

The 'racial' categorization of migrants is supported by an array of legislative measures that are designed to ensure that migrants neither escape the minimum wage nor attempt to resist oppressive practices within the labour process.

In Taiwan, temporary migrants are politically isolated, which partly flows from legislation preventing them from setting up labour unions and from seeking union office. The labour unions contribute significantly to the migrants' experiences of neglect and marginalization because they have done little to support struggles for better wages and conditions and for opposing racist violence. The unions have legitimized and reinforced the capacity of ethnically dominant Chinese production workers to monopolize the higher paid and more comfortable jobs and to develop ethnic and 'racial' antagonisms against lower paid migrant workers.

Migrants' struggles in Taiwan often involve people whose only environments are their workplaces and company-owned dormitories. They have little time outside working hours but to rest, yet they have sometimes shown a remarkable ability to develop inter-ethnic solidarities on-the-job as well as labour-community coalitions, generating powerful class mobilization. In recent times, a relatively small number of labour unionists have realised that migrant workers are a potential force for union renewal in Taiwan.

Some theoretical considerations

Unskilled and semi-skilled immigrants suffer the racism of economic exploitation and political exclusion in host countries (Castles, 1996). In Australia,

during the first three decades after the Second World War, capital and the state ‘racially’ categorised semi skilled and unskilled migrants from Southern and Eastern European as people fit for work at the lowest end of the Australian labour market (Lever Tracy and Quinlan, 1988). Class forces in Great Britain and Canada did much the same to ‘black’ migrants during this period (Miles, 1982; Satzewich, 1991). The very nature of these low paid jobs generated racist ideological effects: white workers in Britain, for instance, subordinated ‘blacks’ on the basis of their willingness to work in jobs which no-one else wanted (Miles, 1982).

The mass importation of unskilled and semi skilled labour continues to the present day in advanced industrialized countries, such as the United States, creating split labour markets in the host countries. Employers and employees of the same ethnic background develop, among other things, *caste* arrangements within the job market. These ensure that migrants possess the barest capacity to enter better paid jobs, which are monopolised by the ethnically dominant group (Bonacich, 1972). Furthermore, the dominant ethnic group monopolizes full-time positions in the trade unions, which, in turn, enact policies and practices which marginalise migrants within the union movement (for the Australian experience, see Nicolaou 1991, pp.265-269; Bertone and Griffin 1992, pp.62-64). At best, unions embark on equalization strategies, vis-à-vis wages and conditions, in order to remove the economic incentive for employers to pressure governments to expand migrant intakes (Bonacich, 1979). Consequently, with a few exceptions such as Australia, where wages and conditions are set, among other things, by awards that are determined by formal arbitration, migrant workers are frustrated in their abilities to improve wages and conditions.

While migrant groups are ‘racially’ categorized, they are simultaneously involved in forming strong social networks, together with inter-ethnic and intra-group alliances, devoted to ‘defining and redefining’ their own group identities (Holgate, 2005; Darder and Torres, 2004, pp.54, 65). In this respect, they are constantly engaged in oppositional strategies for improving their economic, social and political lot. Effective and properly built inter-ethnic and labour-community coalitions are important for developing and sustaining local working class political power in the longer term, for migrants as well as ethnically dominant labourers (Black, 2005; Nissen, 2004; Tonkin, 2004). Even those migrants who find themselves extremely marginalized in the union movement often organise against repression from the outset by linking up with neighbourhood groups, church-based organizations, as well as sympathetic individuals within organised labour.

A large mass of migrants, however, possess little or no capacity to forge alliances with community and labour representatives because they are locked into jobs governing almost every moment of their lives. After finishing 16-18 hour shifts, six and often seven days per week, they have little time for anything else but sleep. This, however, does not always preclude resistance. Ness (2005, p.36) has demonstrated that illegal migrants in the United States, trapped in all-pervasive working environments, have developed “strong social ties to the workplace”, which encourage them to establish

their own embryonic organizations and to rely on unorthodox repertoires of struggle against their employers. The new social

organisations developed by immigrants are ripe for union representation.

Migrants, the state, capital and the unions in Taiwan

Taiwan's manufacturing and construction industries experienced labour shortages of skilled and unskilled workers in the mid to late 1980s, which arose partly from the working class's desire to avoid low paid, low status, dirty, demeaning and dangerous jobs (Copper, 1999, p.145; Goldstein, 1989; Kwang, 1998, p.12). Exploiting the dearth of labour, unions showed a heightened preparedness to strike in order to gain significant improvements in wages and conditions. Workers' struggles hit a post World War II peak in the mid to late 1980s and wages rose dramatically – for instance by 60 per cent in manufacturing (Minns and Tierney, 2003).

Employers urged the establishment of a temporary immigration program to alleviate labour shortages and to contain wage costs. In response, the state permitted companies in 1989 to employ migrants in the construction sector. A few years later, it promulgated the *Employment Services Law 1992*, enabling the employment, initially under one-year contracts, of temporary migrants in the worst jobs of manufacturing as well as construction. Since 2006, the temporary migrant has been eligible to work under consecutive visas of three-years duration, so long as s/he applies for the second visa in the home country. In October 2007, there were some 356,000 legal temporary migrants in Taiwan, of whom 31 per cent were Indonesians, 48 per cent were Filipinos and Thais (a roughly equal number of each), and around 20 per cent were Vietnamese (Council of Labor Affairs, 2007a). These temporary migrants represented 3.3 per cent of the total workforce. Partly as a result of the temporary migrant

program, labour shortages fell to 3.4 per cent in 1997, then to 2.6 per cent in 2005 (Tierney, 2007, p.208).

The temporary immigration program roughly corresponded with declining job security for the local Taiwanese. Between 1993 and 2002, the rate of local unemployment rose from 1.45 per cent to 5.17 per cent, falling to 3.91 per cent in 2006 (Council of Labor Affairs, 2007b). These unemployment figures are not high by comparative international standards. Nevertheless they are unacceptable to most Taiwanese, partly because of the sense of shame which they generally associate with joblessness. According to Tsay and Ling (2001), the immigration program has caused a rise in domestic unemployment in manufacturing, construction and domestic help and care, however this is offset by temporary immigration's positive effect on local job creation in the managerial and professional echelons. The main cause of local unemployment has been the accelerating off-shore relocation of manufacturing capital, first to the cheap labour countries of Southeast Asia, then to the even cheaper People's Republic of China (Tierney, 2007, p.212). Rising unemployment has weakened workers' wage struggles: in the four year period ending 1997, for instance, manufacturing wages increased nominally by only 7.4 per cent, representing far weaker gains than those in the mid to late 1980s (*Ibid*).

Temporary immigration has provided a large pool of much cheaper labour than Taiwanese workers. The state shackles migrants to the minimum wage system, under Article 21 of the *Labour Standards Law 1984*. Employers have vigorously opposed the labour unions' and human rights groups' demands on the state to lift the minimum wage, and the fact that the minimum monthly rate of NT\$15,840 (approximately

AUD\$640) did not change over the ten-year period, ending June 2007, clearly indicates capital's disproportionate influence over wage policy.

Taiwan's employers believe that the 'racial' and national 'otherness' of temporary migrants somehow constitutes them as a stratum beneath Taiwan's own working class. The employers believe that these 'negative' characteristics merit the payment of substantially lower wages. The racism of exploitation also resonates loudly in the institutions of state. The Council of Labor Affairs (CLA), which has carriage of the temporary migrant program, exploits strategies of 'racial' and xenophobic discrimination against migrant workers in order to sustain the minimum wage system, which is only 45 per cent of the average regular wage of the Taiwanese (Tierney, 2007, p.213). Priests and social workers have told me that at meetings with the CLA, Council representatives deride temporary workers' supposed lack of cultural and national sophistication to legitimate this wage disparity.

The state has protected the foreign labour broker industry, which is one of the major sources of economic and social hardship experienced by temporary migrants (Lindio-McGovern, 2004; 223-4). Although it regulates the temporary immigration program intensely, the state has resisted calls to intervene in the broker industry because of the lucrative kickback system involving brokers, employers, senior civil servants and legislators (Tierney, 2007, pp.223-224). Brokers' fees typically absorb 10-12 months of the migrant's regular wages, impelling heavy overtime burdens (Tierney, 2002, p136). They dread the thought of losing their jobs before the brokers' debts are cleared and this fear can create an unwillingness to struggle collectively or to even to lodge individual complaints.

Deportation by the state is the migrant's greatest fear. Article 50 of the *Employment Services Law* threatens deportation to those who change employment and this imposes severe limits on efforts to organise against repressive employers. Article 54 stipulates that visas 'shall be partially or completely revoked' if migrants violate a statute or corresponding enforcement regulation. The police have used this legislative power to deport migrant workers who engage in collective struggle or even if they attempt to join a labour rally, as such action supposedly violates the peace. The state imposes severe restrictions on migrant participation in organised labour. Migrants are eligible to join unions, however, under an amendment to Article 16 of the *Labor Union Law 1929*, migrants neither are allowed to seek union office nor to establish unions in enterprises where none exists (Cooney, 1996). As a result, labour unions are absent in companies where migrants are overwhelmingly represented on the payroll.

The state and capital have 'racially' categorized temporary migrants in ways that force their allocation to divergent and unequal positions within the lowest echelons of Taiwan's labour market. In October 2007, the manufacturing sector absorbed about 51 per cent of total migrant employment. Thais (men and women) and Filipino men represented approximately 43 per cent and 33 per cent respectively of migrants working in factories (Council of Labour Affairs, 2007c). The Vietnamese and Indonesians were largely women in domestic help and care, as were nearly all Filipina women.

Filipino men tend to be clustered in capital intensive factories while the Thais work in labour intensive manufacturing and in the construction industry. Thai factory

employees work under sweatshop conditions in relatively small and low-value added factories in the ageing textiles, leather and fur, pulp and paper, rubber products and fabricated metals industries (*Ibid*). Line management in these industries is typically despotic and foremen collude with employers in transgressing the country's already weak occupational health and safety laws. Thai men constituted some 85 per cent of migrant jobs on building and construction sites in October 2007 and this has been an entrenched pattern since the late 1980s (*Ibid*). Apart from the very small mining and quarrying sector, building and construction had the worst record for occupational injuries and fatalities in Taiwan throughout the ten year period ending 2003 (Council of Labour Affairs 2007d).

State officials, employers and local workers label the Thais as 'buffalo' (Chen, 2005). This label emerged in the early stages of the temporary migrant program from negative perceptions of the Thais' greater tolerance of poor working conditions. 'Buffalo' is an insulting label, connoting intellectual stupidity and political docility, and functions to legitimate their ghettoization in labour intensive manufacturing and building and construction.

Unlike the Thais, Filipino men are concentrated in high value added, capital intensive manufacturing plants, in the electronic components and computer technology, radio and television production industries (Council of Labour Affairs, 2007b). In these industries, the working conditions tend to be cleaner and more comfortable. Employers prefer Filipinos over other migrants because of their higher educational qualifications and appreciate the Filipino process workers' ability to

double as skilled maintenance workers whenever machinery and equipment break down.

While it is clear that companies will employ Filipinos to intensify the expropriation of surplus value, they realise that Filipino men are more inclined than other migrants to organise and struggle (Tierney, 2002, p.152). Men and women from the Philippines possess industrial and political powers that emanate from past exposure to the depredation of factory work in their home country, especially in the export processing zones (Glanz, 2001). In addition, the Filipinos' concentration in relatively large workplaces in Taiwan endows them with greater collective power than the Thais, and much more than the isolated domestics. Employers, foreign labour brokers, and state officials begrudge this power, and express resentment through racist stereotypes. Filipino men are labelled 'complainers', 'whingers' and 'trouble-makers'.

Taiwan possesses a split labour market, characterised by significant differentials in the prices and conditions of local and migrant labour. Working class racism against migrants emanates, in part, from negative perception of the concentration of migrant workers' in the worst jobs. Exacerbating this problem is the tendency of organised labour to partly attribute local unemployment to temporary immigration. In Taiwan, some labour unions call for the dismantling of the temporary migrant program altogether (Tierney 2007, pp.211-213). Others have effectively pressured the state to impose limits on annual intakes, while turning a blind eye to the degrading experiences to which migrants are exposed in the workplaces and typically overcrowded company-owned dormitories (*Ibid*). Most union leaders demand parity wages for migrants and local workers in the same jobs, or at least substantial increases

in the minimum wage, so that employers will have less incentive to ‘replace’ local with cheap labour (*Ibid*).

Migrants are isolated from the labour unions in a myriad of ways. As stated earlier, legislation forbids them from seeking union office and to establish unions. Moreover, migrants who work in companies where unions exist, are rarely inclined to address their grievances to those outside their countries of origin, for fear of being ignored or ridiculed. This has brought about the absence or marginalization of migrant workers at organised rallies for better wages and conditions (Tierney, 2002, pp.154-157). Union density and working class struggle in Taiwan have been in decline since their peak levels in 1989 (Minns and Tierney, 2003). Most union leaders partly attribute this decline to worsening local unemployment, to which temporary immigration supposedly contributes. In contrast, marginalized activists in migrant support groups and in the Labor Rights Association tell me that if the unions were to change strategic direction, by vigorously supporting the right of migrants to form unions and to be elected as officials, then the immigration program would inject about 200,000 factory and construction workers into the organised labour movement. They argue that this would partly address declining density problems while introducing a new insurgent cohort, possibly inspiring local workers to revisit the militant times of the mid to late 1980s.

Mobilizing against racism

Racism is always repressive, demoralizing and painful. Many migrants in Taiwan believe that union officials are amongst the most racist people on the island.

Frustrated by their failure to obtain support from organized labour, Taiwan's temporary migrants often turn for assistance to some human rights organizations, which provide legal advice as well as political and social support. These include an array of church-based bodies, such as the Rerum Noverum Centre in Taipei and the Catholic Hope Workers' Center in Chung-li. In November 1998, these Christian organizations, among others, assisted Filipinos and Filipinas in establishing a forty-minute weekly program on Radio Taipei International, called *Mabuhay*, a traditional Tagalog greeting which means 'long life'. The program aimed to bridge divisions between the local Taiwanese and people from the Philippines. Quite often, migrants from divergent nationalities embark on activities designed to build social and cultural bridges with local communities and to weaken racism, as instanced at Bair Shar on 11 October 1998, when 40 Filipina women spent the day cleaning a beach. Hundreds of migrants in Chung-li arrange annual food and dance festival days, when locals enjoy a range of foreign cuisine, for free (Anon 1998). The migrants' strongest ally is the Taiwan International Workers' Association (TIWA), established in 2002. Though immensely under-resourced, TIWA has been moderately successful at forging coalitions between migrants, labour unions and local organizations.

Overall, however, Taiwan's temporary migrants possess few social and political ties with local and union organizations. This is the case not only for domestic workers but also for those employed in manufacturing and construction. One of the important factors underpinning this problem is the migrants' experiences of physical and emotional fatigue in the workplace. My face-to-face interviews with Filipino and Thai factory workers in Chung-li disclosed almost insufferable overtime regimes. Quite commonly, these migrants worked 16-hour days, six and often seven days per

week, without any choice in the matter. The employers compelled them to do so, threatening dismissal and deportation to anyone who refused. After finishing work, they would return to their company-owned dormitories, yearning to sleep. They had almost no time for leisure. One Filipino, employed at a PC-board factory between early 1999 and late 2001, said he was exposed to only four physical and social settings – his work station, the workplace canteen, the workplace toilets and his dormitory. He spoke about a life without colour, fragrance and sound, except for the repugnant chemicals used in the labour process, the unceasing clamour of the process line and the drab grey factory walls. Others bitterly complained about their claustrophobic and expensive dormitory conditions. They described their lives as empty, almost devoid of sensory pleasure, except for their beloved, though irregular, visits to the Hope Workers' Centre and adjacent St Christopher's Church.

For migrant factory and building workers, the industrial and port city of Kaohsiung in the south west of the island imposes a particularly severe environment of isolation. As is the case throughout Taiwan, Kaohsiung's migrants are subjected to excessive overtime regimes. However, they feel even more 'cut-off' because they are disproportionately concentrated in small factories: the only mass employers of migrants in Kaohsiung are those contracted to build the Mass Transit System. Most of Kaohsiung's migrants are unable to tap into the potential collective strength that people in large manufacturing establishments commonly feel. In addition, TIWA has a relatively small presence in Kaohsiung and the vast majority of the city's migrants seem to have no knowledge of its existence. As Tessa Chang, social worker at the Stella Maris International Service Centre in Kaohsiung states, "for migrants it can be very lonely in Kaohsiung" (interview, 10 December 2007).

The city in which migrant resistance is greatest is Chung-li, south of Taipei. An event at Chung-li in 1998 was a watershed in the evolution of migrant militancy in Taiwan. On 8 October, the 180-strong local and foreign workforce at textile manufacturer Ching Yang marched against the plant's sudden closure and demanded the payment of NT\$6.8 million (about AUD\$275,000), representing unpaid wages. It was alleged that, on the day before the rally, a senior CLA official telephoned the Manila Economic and Cultural Office, the Philippines *de facto* Embassy in Taipei, warning that all migrants taking part would be deported (O'Neill, 1999). The rally went ahead as planned without any arrests, largely because of the extraordinary solidarity between Ching Yang's foreign and local employees and the strong political coalition between them and the Catholic Hope Workers' Centre. On 16 October, 100 migrants and 80 local workers from the Ching Yang factory "stormed" the office of the Taipei Labour Affairs Bureau, demanding equal rights for all employees participating in demonstrations, irrespective of nationality (*Ibid*). This surprised everyone, including the Hope Centre, because their demand had potentially powerful repercussions. If the state were to permit migrants to participate freely and fearlessly in rallies, then the migrants could then try to establish their own unions. The Bureau was clearly concerned about the political backlash if the police were ordered to dismantle the group as it consisted of citizens as well as migrants. It thus permitted a meeting with elected employee representatives, which lasted eight hours. Rev. Peter O'Neill of the Catholic Hope Workers' Centre described the atmosphere thus:

One of the Thai workers asked Mr Lin Mow-shan, Director of the Bureau: "If our employer does not give us our money, will he be

arrested?” The reply was “No!” The same worker asked: “If migrant workers join legal and peaceful rallies to demand their rights, will they be arrested?” The reply was: “If they break the laws of the Republic of China they will be arrested.” I sat in awe at the courage and forthrightness of the migrant workers as they challenged the government to fulfill their responsibilities in resolving the abuse they [had been] suffering (*Ibid*).

The upshot of this militancy was a greater preparedness of temporary migrants to resist state repression. None was arrested or deported and the CLA and Taipei Labour Bureau subsequently resolved to find alternative employment for all Ching Yang employees. Prior to the event, migrant support groups encouraged prudent forms of migrant activism in order to curtail the risk of deportation but in the aftermath of Ching Yang, the Hope Workers’ Centre, among other bodies, shifted that position. Reverend O’Neill addressed the former Ching Yang employees – Taiwanese and migrant workers alike, stating:

Many [migrant] workers are afraid that if they join legal and peaceful rallies or protests, they will be arrested or repatriated. The Taiwan government is [now] saying that you will not be arrested or repatriated. You have a right for your voice to be heard. The question is – do you want your voice to be heard (*Ibid*)?

The following month, some 300 foreign workers participated in a rally in Taipei for shorter working hours, among other things. The rally was a disappointment in that

only 2,100 people attended but migrants were the most militant section and comprised some 15 per cent of the aggregate, far exceeding their relatively small presence in the capital's job market. One of the migrants from Ching Yang managed to address the rally – an unprecedented action – and stated: ‘We came here to protest because we can't take it anymore. That is why we came here – to show people that we want to fight for our rights’ (*Ibid*).

In spite of the increased confidence that some migrants now possessed in their capacity to struggle, entrenched prejudices continued to pervade the labour leadership. At a labour rally in Taipei in November 2000, I asked the organizers to pass the microphone to migrant supporter Lorna Kung, representing some 50-60 migrants at the rear of the march – always their place. The organizers, however, told me that the suggestion was unsound as the migrants had ‘stolen’ jobs from local workers.

The inter-ethnic solidarity which emerged at Ching Yang gave each individual considerable protection in the face of the threat of state repression. Some migrants, however, find it immensely difficult to form bonds with others, especially domestic helpers and caregivers. These are the least protected migrants because they rarely leave the workplace, working alone six and in many cases seven days per week, from dawn until well into the evening. They seldom benefit by sharing their experiences with other migrants and by developing strategies to improve their lot. Moreover, they are the most vulnerable to sexual abuse. But an event in early 2005 created the kind of political environment that negated this isolation. On 7 March, the *China Times Weekly*, one of Taiwan's three largest circulation newspapers, published a bigoted and misogynist article claiming that Filipina domestics had ‘fabricated’ stories of

harassment and rape to extort money from their employers, especially the rich and powerful. It labeled the Filipinas as ‘disappearing fairies’ – women who lured men into sexual liaisons for blackmailing purposes (Coates, 2005a). This stigma dovetailed with the widespread notion of ‘trouble-making’ Filipinos in the factories. The article tried to whip up public sympathy for Hu-hsiang (Elmer) Fung, New Party representative of the Legislative Yuan, who had been charged with raping his Filipina house-maid. Two Filipina domestics in Taipei, Blessie and Jojie, used their cell phones to inform other Filipina domestics about the article and to devise oppositional strategies.

Blessie and Jojie were among the most active Filipina women in an organization named *KaSaPi* - a merging of Tagalog words meaning ‘united we stand’ - established two years earlier. *KaSaPi* devoted itself, among other things, to building labour-community coalitions in a number of districts throughout Taipei. The racism of the *China Times Weekly* article increased the size of the organization as well as its political momentum. It arranged “several rallies” outside the newspaper company’s premises in Taipei, demanding an apology from the management, handing out leaflets in English, Tagalog and Chinese, outlining the real conditions under which domestics laboured and insisting on the imprisonment of Elmer Fung. The protests were televised nationally and many hirers of domestic labour sat in their lounge-rooms, astounded by the behaviour of employees who had once seemed so gentle and timorous. More than thirty local enterprise unions, including the print workers at *China Times Weekly* itself, supported the rallies (*Ibid*). The Taiwan International Workers’ Union put *KaSaPi* in close contact with most of these unions. Labour representatives attended the rallies and organized volunteers to build a wider

distribution of *KaSaPi's* leaflets. *KaSaPi* committed itself, among other goals, to extending membership to all nationalities of domestics, especially the Vietnamese, whom the Filipinas regarded as the most sexually abused migrant women in Taiwan.



Some members of *KaSaPi* among others from the Philippines in Taipei, celebrating Christmas. *Source: Wu Jingru, Taiwan International Worker's Association, private collection.*

After promising a formal apology, the newspaper's editors published a small statement of 'regret' and 'sympathy' for the domestics, which fell short of a formal apology. This, of course, was a disappointment to the Filipinas, but they were nonetheless galvanized by their achievements. Some five months later, the judicial system convicted Elmer Fung of raping the Filipina domestic, sentencing him to

prison for four years. The event was another important development in migrant political organization because not even the migrant support groups had previously imagined that domestics could mobilize so effectively. The women of *KaSaPi* were optimistic, as reflected in a statement by experienced activist Blessie: “We forced Marcos to step down off his throne. We can win if we are united, unity is strength” (quoted in Coates, 2005b).

KaSaPi has endured as a political organization, meeting every Sunday at TIWA’s head office in Taipei. Its membership declined in 2006 because of the resignation of its talented leaders, Blessie and Jojie, who returned to the Philippines upon the expiration of their visas. As a result, it lost momentum in efforts to extend membership to other migrant nationalities. As Wu Jing-ru, Executive Director of TIWA, laments, ‘*KaSaPi*’s goal to recruit Vietnamese and nationalities is still a long way off’ (interview, 11 December 2007). In late 2007, *KaSaPi* had up to 200 members – all Filipinas. Although most were unable to attend meetings, because of their employers’ insistence that they work every day of the week, they stayed in close touch with one another.

In starkest contrast to the social environment of the lone domestic worker is the migrant workforce at the Formosa Plastics plant at Mailiao in central Taiwan. It employed some 18,000 migrants in the late 1990s, directly and indirectly through its 43 subcontracting firms. The Formosa Group is the most powerful conglomerate in Taiwan, led by Wang Yung-ching, one of the island’s most intimidating corporate leaders, commonly referred to as Taiwan’s ‘patriarch of business’ (Moore and Barnathan 1997). In September 1999, hundreds of Thai and Filipina men at Mailiao

attacked one another with metal pipes, sticks and petrol bombs. Authoritarian management practices, excessive overtime burdens, and over-crowded dormitories contributed to a profound sense of isolation, frustration and despair, which ultimately found an outlet in mass, inter-ethnic violence (Shu 1999).

The lesson learned by migrant workers at Mailiao in 1999 was the shared realization that they had little hope of improving their working and dormitory conditions whilst they remained bitterly divided, not only between migrant nationalities but also within nationalities. Since the event, migrant workers at the Mailiao site have developed social and political relationships across ethnic borders. Although they are still trapped in the plastics plant and company-based dormitories for almost 24 hours per day, seven-days per week, they somehow have managed to build work- and dormitory-based relationships devoted to developing inter-ethnic bonds. Since the 'riot', a significant though unknown number of migrants have volunteered to foster an environment of empathy and solidarity between the Filipinas and Thais, introducing a range of rules, such as alcohol bans in dormitories. These efforts have met with considerable success. On 13 and 14 March 2006, some 3,000 workers, representing 60 per cent of the Mailiao site's Filipinos and male and female Thais, went on strike demanding that the principal contractor, Formosa Plastics, pay the brokers' fees in full, together with increased workplace accident and illness insurance. Fearing a protracted battle, the company agreed to pay the brokers NT\$18,000 (AUD\$750) for each migrant employee (Shan, 2006, p.3). Not one striker was arrested or deported and the company's concession set a precedent which may eventually impel other companies to follow suit.

The mass protest in August 2005 of some 300 Thai migrants, employed by the Mass Transit System in Kaohsiung, had a convulsive impact on Taiwan's ruling class, in that it led to the resignation of national and provincial government figures and to a public inquiry into corporate, broker and state corruption (Tierney, 2007, p.224). The event discredited prejudiced notions of Thai docility – far fewer Taiwanese employers and workers now tag them 'buffalo'. For a short time, the protest led to some local union support: for instance the Chunghwa Telecom Union, one of Taiwan's largest and most powerful enterprise unions, established a dialogue with the Thai workers (Tang Shu, Chair of Taiwan Labor Rights Association, interview, 10 December 2007). A Kaohsiung representative of the Chinese Federation of Labor contended:

We think the Thai workers' disturbance was totally legitimate because they have endured inhuman treatment and swallowed insults for so long. What they did was to revolt against abuse (quoted in Huang, Chiu and Chuang, 2005, p.2).

Unfortunately, these labour unions withdrew support after the event had died down, causing some to suspect that senior officials desired to reinforce the status quo position of blaming migrants for local unemployment. Tessa Chang of the Stella Maris Centre in Kaohsiung points out: "I try to contact the unions regularly but with no success. The unions don't even want to see me" (interview, 10 December 2007). Nonetheless, the conditions of labour which sparked the 2005 revolt are unchanged and further uprisings seem more than possible. She adds:

In December 2007 the dormitories are the same as they were two and a half years ago. We [in the Stella Maris Centre] say – ‘maybe they [the Thais] need another fire again’ (*Ibid*).

In 2006 and 2007, TIWA and other migrant support groups organised two national days of political marches for migrant workers, held in Taipei, urging organised labour to provide much greater support to migrants. Each of these rallies was entitled – ‘I WANT MY DAY OFF’, though the events also embraced important secondary demands, namely the abolition of the broker system, ‘free transfers’ in employment, the abolition of the six-year ceiling on work permits, the extension of labour legislation to domestics, and the right to form labour unions. The 2006 rally was disappointing because it was washed out by rain. The employers’ insistence that migrants work seven days per week also hindered attendance.

Organizers regarded the second rally, held on a clear Sunday 9 December 2007, as a moderate success. It comprised some 1,500 participants, half of them locals from labour unions as well as gay and lesbian activists (Wu Jing-ru, interview, 11 December 2007). The attendance of 400-500 local unionists reflected an element of sympathy amongst the rank and file for migrants’ demands. But the union leaders ignored requests for support.



Scenes from the 9 December 2007 rally. *Source: Lilibeth Sabado (social worker, Catholic Hope Workers' Centre), private collection.*

The Chinese Federation of Labour, the Taiwan Confederation of Trade Unions, and the Taiwan Labour Front once again refused to publicize and attend the rally because of the temporary immigration program's so-called pernicious effect on local unemployment. Wu Jing-ru of TIWA continues to feel frustrated and disappointed with the organised union movement (interview, 11 December 2007). She, like Tang Shu of the Labour Rights Association, and several marginalised others, are convinced that migrant militancy and migrant unions, once established, could provide a major fillip to Taiwan's union movement, after nearly two decades of slumber.

Conclusion

The capitalist state in Taiwan introduced the temporary migration program in order to overcome labour shortages, which had contributed to escalating wage costs. It also aimed to supply a cheap source of labour under the minimum wage system, less than 50 per cent of the average regular wage of local workers. The 'racial' categorization of temporary migrants to the jobs which local workers both shun and disdain has provided a basis upon which migrants are demeaned and subordinated. Racist stigmas legitimate this 'racial' categorization, as evidenced by the particularly insulting derogation of the Thais. Legislative provisions severely restrict the capacity of temporary migrants to resist exploitation.

Working class racism against migrants in Taiwan emanates, in part, from negative perceptions of the concentration of migrants in these jobs. It also flows from the substantial differential in the prices of local and migrant labour and to the tendency of organised labour to attribute local unemployment to temporary immigration.

Labour unions have a responsibility to unite with migrant workers in cases of victimization and abuse and during strikes and rallies. They also have an obligation to disabuse the local rank and file of the notion that temporary migrants constitute a threat to job security. Migrants have an economic and political interest in pursuing the abolition of legislative provisions that prevent them from seeking union office and in forming unions where no others exist. Union leaders can play a helpful role in this struggle, linking up with migrant support groups in the churches and elsewhere and

with potentially sympathetic workplace organizations in order to mobilize solidarity action, especially in the event of deportations. The support of men from more than thirty local enterprise unions for *KaSaPi*, for instance, indicates that many rank and file Taiwanese are prepared to dispense with racism and to institute class solidarity in its place.

Most migrant workers' lives are deprived of experiences external to the workplace and company-owned dormitories. Yet they succeed, on occasions, in building social and political ties, concentrated in the workplaces and dormitories themselves, fostering unity across ethnic boundaries as well as class mobilization. This article supports Ness's thesis that even those trapped in all-pervasive physical and social environments can be 'ripe' for union representation. Some labour activists in Taiwan are sympathetic to migrant struggles, though they are confined to marginalized union organizations. They, together with an array of migrant supporters, tell me that migrants have the potential to invigorate Taiwan's organized labour movement, by strengthening existing enterprise unions and by establishing new and militant ones. Unfortunately, at this stage, few union leaders are inclined to agree.

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