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Guest workers in Taiwan: Experiences of racialization and racism

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Abstract

Taiwan’s guest worker program, introduced in the late 1980s, has always been racialized in that divergent nationalities of guest workers are expected to engage in different kinds of work, producing variable racist experiences and stigmas. This contributes to the intensification of the rate of corporate exploitation of guest workers. The racism of exploitation is accompanied by the racism of exclusion – the latter emanates from the labour unions’ hostility towards guest workers for causing” local unemployment. The paper analyses the ways in which immigration and racism in Taiwan are closely inter-connected, utilizing a Marxist framework.
I. Some theoretical considerations

Neo liberalist theorists generally regard racism as a phenomenon logically antithetical to capitalism. For Bernstein (2005), only the unfettered market has the potential to eliminate the injustices of poverty and class, and to abolish racism. The key to the dissolution of racism, as typically claimed, is not the state but the workplace itself because capitalism impels employers to compete in markets which demand the rewarding of merit and the recognition of achievement. As Reisman (1982: 5) contends, for employers and managers “race [sic: ‘race’] is simply irrelevant. Any consideration of race means extra cost and less profit; it is bad business in the literal sense of the term.” Some specializing in the field of business ethics and human resource management argue along similar lines (see for instance, Sintonen, 2006: 1).

The problem with neo-liberal treatises is that they ignore evidence that racism is not abating, despite the rapid rate of market deregulation, and may even be getting worse. Griffiths (2005: 160) has contended that “Australia became a significantly more racist society” in the aftermath of the election of the Howard government in 1996 and that this racism has provided a means of deflecting working discontent away from the government’s market reforms. The sources of racism are complex, irrespective of the country under study, but among the most significant institutions which create and reproduce racist tensions and violence in contemporary capitalism are capital and the state (Callinicos, 1993; Mahammdallie, 2002).

According to Griffiths (2005: 163), Australian racism has always served class interests:
Governments and employers used racism as a *divide and rule* tactic to contain challenges to their authority. From the first, racism divided convicts from Aborigines. Later, prejudices against the Irish weakened a working class solidarity that mostly came from the British Isles. After World War II, southern Europeans and, more recently, immigrants from the Middle East and Asia have been the targets of this *divide and rule* racism.

The emphasis on class stratagems of *divide and conquer* has been an important element of Marxist analyses, dating back more than 30 years. In their seminal though flawed analysis of immigrants and class in western Europe, Castles and Kosack (1973) proposed the existence of racist and xenophobic aristocracies of western European labour, who were economically, socially and politically isolated from the mass of imported workers, who existed as an industrial reserve army of cheap labour - exploited for the benefit of capital accumulation and functional to the overall hegemony of capital over labour.

The positing of mutually-causal relationships between capitalism and racism, however, is problematical because it depicts racism as something structurally and functionally orchestrated by the ruling class to secure the dominance of capital over labour, and because it portrays the working class as some kind of “empty vassal into which has poured bourgeois ideas” (Miles, 1982: 85). It also offers little explanation about how racism originated (Ibid). It is not only reductionist and functionalist (Solomos and Black, 1999) but can also be ahistorical.
It is true that *divide and rule* can be a powerful ruling class stratagem, but it can also create the opposite effect. Social isolation does not always diminish class conflict; it can also foster industrial militancy (Tierney, 1996: 105). Moreover, there is an abundance of evidence demonstrating that workers can resist and overcome *divide and conquer* strategies. Griffiths (2005: 168-172) himself is aware of this and goes to considerable lengths to explain inter-ethnic solidarity in class struggle. In so doing, he eschews functionalism.

A more convincing framework than functionalism is one which identifies racism not as the direct outcome of capital accumulation but rather as an ideology “structured by [capitalist] economic and political relations” (Miles, 1982: 85). Racism is not determined by class but is rather structured or grounded by it (Ibid; Rath, 1999: 148-149).

This perspective recognizes that workers can be agents of anti-racist struggle and change. It can also explain how workers themselves can be the authors of racism, though not under economic and social circumstances of their own choosing. Trade unions can embark on exclusionist practices against migrants in the “interests” of local members. Although racist and xenophobic unions are rarely successful in abolishing immigration altogether, they are nevertheless able to force the state to limit intakes. Guest worker intakes in Taiwan have been the outcomes of class compromises between capital and labour, brokered by the state (Tierney, 2007). Whereas the racism of employers, managers and the state against foreign workers is the *racism of exploitation* designed to increase the expropriation of surplus value, the racism of organized labour is the *racism of exclusion*, emanating from trade unions’ attempts to minimize foreign workers’ presence in the job market in order to “protect” local
workers’ job security and to prevent capital from pushing down the cost of labour power (Castles, 1996: 26-27).

Furthermore, viewing racism as something structured by economic and political relations of production allows greater scope for recognizing disparities in the victims’ experiences of racism. There is no such thing as a homogeneous experience of migrants within any host country, partly because the state racializes migrants in divergent ways, incorporating them into different sites of production relations. Different migrant nationalities accordingly undergo divergent experiences of racism. The Canadian state’s racialization of foreign workers in the post World War II era, for instance, corresponded with their allocation to unequal positions in the labour market (Satzewich, 1990; Satzewich, 1991). The job market and broader experiences of permanent settlers were fundamentally different from Carribeans who arrived in the mid 1960s and who were locked into temporary jobs under lower pay and poorer working conditions (Ibid). The concept ‘mode of incorporation’ facilitates the analysis of the multiple racializations and of the heterogeneity of experiences of racism as it further eschews reductionist and functionalist problems associated with a singular set of foreign worker experiences (Satzewich, 1991; 35).

II. Racialization, racism, Thais and Filipinos

Cheng (2004) argues that Taiwan’s domestic employers construct and naturalize the “Otherness” of their female guest employees along an “axis of difference”, utilizing
imagined foreign national identities, nationally-based class differences and ‘racial’ characteristics, integral to their economic, political and social marginalization in Taiwan. Taiwan’s employers of domestic labour evoke images of the supposed superiority of their own ‘race’ and imagined national culture in order to define the class inferiority of their domestics, regardless of economic and social background, and this in turn legitimates the domestic helpers’ low wages and often insufferable working conditions (Ibid: 56).

There is an element of Cheng’s impressive study which makes the overall thesis less than convincing - her treatment of guest worker “Otherness” as an all-pervasive subordinated experience.

The fact that Taiwan’s domestic helpers labour under substantially similar conditions has contributed to Cheng’s treatment of guest worker “Otherness”. All guest workers earn the minimum monthly wage of NT$15,840. However, in early 2007, about 54 per cent of them were employed outside the domestic help industry - in building and construction and in particular manufacturing (Council of Labour Affairs, 2007a), and the ways in which these guest workers were racialized varied appreciably between nationalities as well as industries of employment.

Taiwan had some 342,000 legal guest workers in February 2007, 3.2 per cent of the total workforce (Council of Labor Affairs, 2007a). Just over 53 per cent of these migrants were Thais and Filipinos (a roughly equal number of each), 27 per cent were Indonesians and 20
per cent were Vietnamese (Council of Labor Affairs, 2007b). Manufacturing employed slightly less than 50 per cent of the aggregate guest worker population. About 3.5 per cent worked in building and construction (Council of Labor Affairs, 2007c).

The ethnic and gender divisions of labour revealed clear patterns. The vast majority of Indonesians and Vietnamese were women employed as domestic helpers, although there was also a large presence of Filipino women in this sector. In February 2007, Thais and Filipinos represented 47 per cent and 34 per cent respectively of guest worker jobs in manufacturing (Council of Labor Affairs, 2007c). The bulk of Thai factory workers, male and female alike, were concentrated in labour intensive sectors, dominated by sweatshops producing textiles, leather and fur, pulp and paper, rubber products and so forth (Ibid). Conversely, Filipinos – mostly men - greatly outnumbered the Thais in capital intensive manufacturing, comprising a large number of technologically advanced companies in electronic components and computer technology, radio and television production. About 82 per cent of migrants in construction were Thais (Ibid).

The ghettoization of Thai workers in small sweatshops intensifies their exposure to despotic management practices, to dirt and grime, and to the increased risk of injury and illness. However the construction sector is even worse, as job opportunities are concentrated in the subcontracting sphere, which has a reputation of by-passing Taiwans’ already weak occupational health and safety laws and of evading workers’ compensation (Tierney, 2005). Thai building and construction workers suffer these problems disproportionately.
Thais are overwhelmingly drawn from their country’s rural-based and economically underdeveloped north and north east regions, with fewer traditions of industrial activism than the Filipinos, who are largely derived from large industrial cities back home (Tierney, 2006). Employers and employees typically label Thai workers as “buffalo”, which conjures images of a greater preparedness to work long hours, while remaining timid in the face of unceasing calls for overtime, without due payment, and under dangerous conditions (Ibid).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that employers and managers, as well as officials employed in the Council of Labour Affairs (the government instrumentality responsible for allocating jobs to foreign workers), began to apply the “buffalo” label at the very outset of the guest worker program in order to legitimate the concentration of Thais in sweatshops and building sites (Ibid). “Buffalo” legitimates the Thais’ incorporation into labour market sectors which other nationalities of guest workers, and the local Taiwanese, are unprepared to enter.

Guest workers can be repatriated to their home countries and this constitutes one of the most terrible forms of state violence against imported labour. Early repatriation can be made for any reason, and alleged inefficiency on-the-job is one. Oftentimes, accusations of inefficiency are accompanied by bullying, as a Thai process worker in a footwear plant explains:
Supervisors really like[d] to give us a threat of deducting our salary or sending us back home. We were all scared to be sent back home, especially in the early period because we [had] not yet paid back all the [brokers’] debt yet (Quoted in Yimprasert, 2000: 5).

Deportation is one of the reasons why guest workers infrequently resist oppressive practices in the labour process. It is also associated with and supported by racist images of “inferior” social class backgrounds, of “unsophisticated” foreign cultures, of darker and (by definition) “repulsive” skin pigmentations, and of “backward” nationalities (Tierney, 2006). Almost invariably, early repatriation follows police harassment and violence and is legitimated by reference to the “national interest” – only the most compliant should be permitted to participate in this “tiger” economy (Tierney, 2006).

Many employers appreciate the Filipinos’ English language skills, industrial experience and relatively high levels of education. However they are also prepared to apply negative and demeaning labels justify violence against them. Employers, foreign labour broker firms, politicians and civil servants share the perception that Filipinos tend to be “complainers”, “whingers”, “trouble-makers” (Tierney, 2006). They believe that Filipinos are more willing to strike than any other foreign nationality (Tierney, 2002: 151-152). These labels, in turn, legitimate police “crackdowns” on Filipinos.
These “crack-downs” are supposed to rid Taiwan of illegal workers, who are somewhat evenly represented across nationalities. One would expect that all guest worker nationalities are evenly targeted in “crack-downs”. However, church-based groups in Taiwan contend that Filipinos disproportionately suffer from harassment in police raids – not because they are more heavily represented among illegals but because the state is prepared to resort to violence in order to intimidate a cohort deemed to be militant (Ibid). Corporate and state violence has always been fundamental to Taiwan’s guest worker system and to ruling class expectations of compliance and docility. The existence of foreign “trouble-makers” directly violates these expectations.

III. Racism of exclusion

Much of the racism of migrant exclusion in Taiwan emanates from the labour unions’ idea that the guest worker program has been a major cause of local unemployment (Tierney, 2007: 211-213). In the second half of the 1990s, annual unemployment rates in Taiwan roughly accorded with the intake of imported labour. Between 2000 and 2005, unemployment rose from 3 per cent to 4.3 per cent. During this period, unemployment overtook guest worker intakes – in 2005 there were some 314,000 legal migrant workers and 429,000 unemployed locals. Labour unions have long accused employers of replacing local labour with cheaper foreign labour (Ibid: 211).
While there is some evidence of replacement of local labour by migrants (Chan, 1999), caution is recommended to those who make exaggerated claims that these problems have long been out of control. There is little indication that unemployed locals are prepared to re-enter the types of jobs which they vacated to the migrants almost two decades ago. Wu Chun-ming (until 2003 Director of the Work Permit Division of the Council of Labour Affairs) has spoken publicly against perspectives linking the guest worker system to rising unemployment. At a policy conference on foreign workers, organized by the Council in June 1999, Wu stated that the “unemployed are those whose industries have closed. Foreign workers do not have anything to do with the unemployment problem” (Anon, 1999a). In November 2000, Wu made a similar contention to the author, emphasizing that there was little or no evidence that local workers were prepared to engage in the so-called 3-D (dirty, demeaning and dangerous) jobs and that the main source of unemployment on was the outflow of manufacturing capital to cheaper labour countries in Asia (Wu Chun-ming, interview, 29 November 2000).

Some union organizations have called for the abolition of the guest worker program altogether, as instanced in January 1998 when representatives and supporters of the Taiwan Labor Front, regarded as one of the principal organs of Democratic Progressive Party influence in the union movement, carried posters outside the Council of Labour Affairs headquarters in Taipei, calling for some kind of ‘humane’ repatriation, carrying banners stating: “Send Back Immigrant Labour Now” (Anon, 1998).
The labour unions are rarely interested in recruiting guest workers (Tierney, 2007: 213). This estrangement of guest workers from organized labour has contributed to union leaders’ and members’ reluctance to extend support to guest workers in the event of corporate and police abuse. It has also brought about the absence or marginalization of migrants at rallies. Migrants are welcomed at demonstrations only in so far as they bolster attendance figures (Reverend Alexander Doan, Catholic Hope Workers’ Centre Taiwan, interview, 7 January 2001).

IV. Racism and dysfunctionality

The application of differential racist stigmas and the indifference and hostility of the unions played a part in the 8-hour bloody protest between 200-300 guest workers at the Formosa Plastics sixth naptha cracker plant in Mailiao on 5 September 1999, in which Thai and Filipina men attacked each other, using pipes, rocks and petrol-bombs as weapons (Kung, 1999). Twenty people were seriously injured. At the time, the plant employed some 18,000 guest workers, including some 8,500 were Thais, more than 7,300 Filipinos and 1,700 Indonesians (Anon, 1999b).

The protest was sparked by claims about the monopolization of public telephone facilities in the dormitories. Church groups and sympathetic local labour activists laid blamed high broker fees; the overcrowded work-based dormitory conditions; the lack of competent
translators (one for every two hundred residents); speed-up pressures; bullying managerial styles; and the compulsion to work under unsafe conditions (Lin, 1999; Shu, 1999).

These explanations, though plausible, may not have exhausted all of the causes. My interviews with Filipina and Thai workers in Chung-li, some twelve months after the riot, indicated Thai concentration in the worst jobs and of corresponding Thai perceptions of “Filipina privilege” at the workplace. According to some interviewees, these factors played a part in the explosion of resentment against those reaping such “privilege.” However, this evidence was anecdotal and far from optimally reliable, sourced from guest workers who did not witness the riot as they were hundreds of kilometers distant from it and had only heard “stories” about it. Unfortunately the author was unable to interview Thais and Filipinos working at Mailiao because they feared the possibility of retribution by the employers (especially the major contractor, Formosa Plastics), by broker companies and by the police.

Some union leaders claimed that the event demonstrated that migrant “violence” represented a threat to national security, and called for either significant reductions in migrant intakes or the abolishment of the guest worker program altogether. The Council of Labour Affairs immediately deported three men – all Filipinas. This effectively absolved Formosa Plastics, the 44 subcontracting companies at the Mailiao site, together with the broker firms, of any responsibility. It also pardoned the Thai workers directly involved in the riot. The long standing stigma of “trouble makers” was decisive in this response. Along with
the horror of the violence, which thousands of people had been forced to witness - guest workers and locals alike, the Council’s hostility towards the Filipinos encouraged 531 employees at Formosa Plastics to return to their home country early – all Filipinos (Anon, 1999d).

Although Formosa and its subcontractors were able to avoid any responsibility for the inter-ethnic hostilities, they now experienced the unavailability of labour. The deported guest workers were not replaced by local workers because of the latter’s desire to avoid 3-D jobs and Formosa found it difficult attract new guest workers. The labour shortfall endured for several months, which caused lengthy delays in meeting production targets and lower than normal profit rates.

V. Class struggle and inter-ethnic solidarity

Guest worker militancy against racism also has the potential to mobilize migrants across ethnic backgrounds and to unite guest and local workers in solidarity. Such demonstrations of militancy occurred during the long dispute at the Ching Yang factory in T’aoyuan in 1998 and more recently at the Formosa plant in Mailiao in March 2006.

In October 1998, local, Thai and Filipina workers employed at Ching Yang organized a demonstration to force their employer, who had closed down the establishment, to pay NT$6.8 million in wages
that were owed. In response, the Council of Labour Affairs allegedly telephoned the Philippines de facto embassy in Taipei, threatening police arrests and deportation, on the grounds of national security (Minns and Tierney, 2005). This further strengthened unity between the Ching Yang workers and on the 16th of that month almost 100 foreigners and 80 locals “stormed” the office of the Taipei Labour Affairs Bureau, demanding equal rights for all employees participating in demonstrations, irrespective of nationality (Ibid). The Bureau permitted a meeting with elected employee representatives, locals and foreigners alike. They continued to demonstrate and not one was arrested. The Bureau resolved to find employment for Ching Yang’s guest workers for the duration of their visas.

The upshot was a greater preparedness of these and other guest workers to resist exploitation and repression. Guest workers represented about 15 per cent of the aggregate demonstrators at a rally the following month for shorter working hours (far exceeding their relatively small presence in the Taipei job market). One of the Ching Yang migrants managed to address the rally – an unprecedented action (Ibid). The labour leaders may not have approved of the guest workers interventions in the rally but the rank and file applauded them nonetheless.

Ever since the disastrous protests of Thais and Filipinos at Formosa Plastics in 1999, the site has comprised many migrant activists determined to foster inter-ethnic solidarity. It would seem their efforts have been successful. On 13 and 14 March 2006, some 3,000 Thais and Filipinos at Mailiao, representing 60 per cent of the site’s Filipina and Thai workforce, went on strike demanding that Formosa pay the broker fees in full, together with workplace insurance. Fearing a protracted battle, the company agreed to pay brokers NT$18,000 for each foreign worker employed at the site - an unusual position for a Taiwanese company
which employed guest workers to find itself in. Several migrant lobbies were active in the dispute – as everyone expected - but so too were representatives of the Chinese Federation of Labour, the island’s largest labour body. Since then, the Federation has intervened in the attempted deportation of a Filipina woman on the basis of her close associations with the Catholic Rerum Novarum Labour Centre in Taipei (Anon, 2005).

VI. Conclusion

The operations of the free market and of the capitalist state ensure not only the continuance of racism but the intensification of it. This is due, in part, to the role the state plays in racializing imported labour. The racialization of guest workers engenders the racism of exploitation while the exclusionist practices of the labour unions create the racism of exclusion.

Taiwan’s guest workers are concentrated in the lower echelons of the labour market and earn the lowest wages, however their labour market experiences are not homogeneous. The divergent ways in which employers and the state have racialized foreign labour has meant that guest workers do not engage in substantially similar work. In manufacturing and building and construction, the workplace experiences of Filipina and Thai workers vary significantly and the construction of racist stigmas has legitimated their unequal sites of labour market incorporation. Racist stigmatization reinforces widespread perceptions of
docility (in the case of Thais) and legitimates state violence against those who are seen to be less likely to adhere to expectations of compliance (Filipinos).

Taiwan’s employers and managers, together with state officials, may exploit racist hostility to divide the working class and to promote capital accumulation but they do so under economic and political risks. Formosa and its subsidiaries faced a protracted dearth of labour in the aftermath of 1999 protest at Mailiao and found it impossible to meet production targets for several months afterwards. Employers and managers discovered, during the 2006 dispute in Mailiao, that inter-ethnic hostilities between Thais and Filipinos had long ceased to exist, forcing the Formosa company into paying its guest workers’ brokers’ fees. Class struggle has also engendered solidarity between local and foreign workers, forcing at least some leaders of the Chinese Federation of Labour to abandon its exclusionist practices against guest workers. Though most union leaders are unwilling to follow suit, the evidence suggests that struggles by guest workers, supported by locals, may break down this racism of exclusion emanating from the union bureaucracy.
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