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The Vietnamese Confederation of Labour and International Labour

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VIETNAM UPDATE SERIES

LABOUR IN VIETNAM



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“AWAKENING THE CONSCIENCE OF THE MASSES”

The Vietnamese Confederation of Labour, 1947–75

Edmund Wehrle

In 1948, Gilbert Jouan, a French colonial customs officer with twenty years' experience in Indochina and an abiding faith that trade unions would form a bulwark against Communist intrusion, took the first tentative steps toward organizing Vietnamese workers. Working with the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC), Jouan and other Catholic trade unionists in 1947 formed a “delegation” representing CFTC interests in Vietnam, and notified French authorities of his intention to organize “an authentic Christian trade union in Indochina ... for the Indochinese themselves”.¹

Strictly speaking, Jouan's actions violated the law. Trade unions, explained one colonial official in 1948, had “absolutely no legal standing; groups such as these are merely tolerated by public officials”.² Still, the French invested great hope in Jouan's work. An official report on Christian trade union organizing described Jouan as “worthy of our esteem”. The

colonial government even arranged time off from the customs office for Jouan so that he could focus on the organizing work that officials obviously hoped would counterbalance the appeal of the Viet Minh.³ “The consolidation of the support of the working class in Vietnam is mainly to be achieved by close collaboration with the Christian Trade Union”, explained the Vietnamese Minister of Social Action.⁴ The result was an awkward *modus vivendi* between the nascent, still-illegal labour organization and the colonial state.

Within a few years, Jouan’s Christian labour movement grew in numbers and clout, and eventually took the name the *Confédération Vietnamienne du Travail Chrétien* (Vietnamese Confederation of Christian Workers, known best by its French acronym, CVTC). The organization had far-reaching ambitions — to be an activist and independent voice for the oppressed workers of Vietnam. Its survival for the next two-and-a-half decades remains a testament to the skill and commitment of its leadership and rank-and-file. Likewise, frequent strikes, workplace actions, and political activism sponsored by the confederation suggest a genuine militancy on the part of South Vietnam’s unions and workers. Yet true autonomy and independence of action in South Vietnam proved virtually impossible to maintain. In order to survive, the CVTC entered into compromising alliances with the French (described above) and a succession of problematic Saigon governments. This awkward balancing act between serving the interests of the state and acting aggressively on behalf of workers plagued the CVTC throughout its existence — and in some ways represents the central paradox facing today’s labour movement in Vietnam. In the case of the CVTC, this limitation proved an insurmountable handicap.

This chapter discusses at length the CVTC’s ill-fated struggle to preserve its autonomy. It explores the history of the organization from its inception (depicted in the opening vignette) to its end in 1975 as Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. Understandably, an organization dedicated to mobilizing workers and remaking society faced an uphill struggle during the colonial era. Obstacles impeding the CVTC, however, further increased under the repressive Diem regime, which sought to harness South Vietnamese labour for its own political purposes. Ngo Dinh Diem’s death and the U.S. intervention portended better days. The CVT (Vietnamese Confederation of Labour; the term “Christian” was later dropped from the Western translation) made great advances in the mid-1960s, organizing

throng of workers and negotiating beneficial contracts, especially with U.S. employers. However, while it sought to avoid conflict with Saigon government officials, labour–state tensions simmered. Seeking tighter control as war ravaged the country, state officials grew increasingly suspicious of a movement with its own agenda of empowering the lower classes. Rumours swirled constantly that the National Liberation Front (NLF or Viet Cong) had infiltrated the labour organization. These tensions came to a head in 1968, when the government moved to break a strike initiated by CVT militants.

Despite the devastating strike and the equally challenging Tet Offensive of 1968, the CVT managed to recover. It remained an active force, entering politics in the late 1960s and contributing to major legislative reforms, including the 1971 Land-to-the-Tiller Act. Still, caution — a reluctance to push its government and its American allies too far — continued to characterize the organization to its demise in 1975.

For the most part, scholars have overlooked the struggles of the CVT — despite its impressive membership numbers and political successes.⁵ This is partly due to a lack of sources. With most CVT records apparently destroyed in 1975, researchers are forced to tease out information from available sources, including a 1969 official history of the CVT, U.S. and French government documentation, and oral interviews with surviving members. The contested and politicized atmosphere surrounding the Vietnam War also presents challenges to telling the full story of an organization caught between historical currents. Indeed, despite a paucity of evidence, several scholars have dismissed the CVT as a pawn of the brutal Saigon government and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). As immediate memories of the divisive war fade, one hopes that balanced treatments, neither vilifying nor sanctifying the CVT, will emerge — providing the integrated treatment this fascinating movement deserves.

THE LABOUR QUESTION IN VIETNAM

While the tortuous history of organized labour in South Vietnam — the focus of this chapter — began in the waning days of French colonialism, the “labour question” in Vietnam had deep roots. From the earliest days of French rule, rapacious labour practices in Indochina, especially conditions on rubber plantations, where workers toiled often as little more than slaves,

drew international rebukes and violent resistance from Vietnamese workers. The worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s — felt deeply in Vietnam — lent new urgency to the issue. Reformers and radicals alike focused on organizing workers as a defence against the ravages of capitalism and colonialism. Throughout the decade, strikes at rubber plantations, smaller industries, and Saigon's docks presented a constant challenge to the French, who often launched brutal counteroffensives.

As tensions smouldered, the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of colonialism, rooted in a blistering critique of labour exploitation, gained a growing following. In 1929, activists founded the Red Federation of General Unions and in 1930, the Indochinese Communist Party.⁶ While earlier nationalist campaigns focused on the small, educated elite of Vietnam, Communists targeted the country's proletariat (numbering roughly 200,000, including small factory employees, shipyard workers, and coal miners) and the large masses of the peasants in their recruitment drive.⁷ By the late 1930s, French authorities began to shift tactics somewhat. In 1936, a reform-minded "Popular Front" government under Prime Minister Leon Blum came to power in Paris. Blum introduced a broad program of reform legislation granting new rights to colonial workers. Labour unions, however, remained illegal.⁸

Blum's government fell quickly, but colonial leadership in Vietnam remained in transition. During Second World War, the Axis-allied Vichy government took over in Indochina, but its hold remained fragile. The Japanese presence grew, while anticolonial groups coalesced into the umbrella organization known as the Viet Minh in 1941, which opposed both the French and Japanese.

With the defeat of Japan in August of 1945, Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh seized on the power vacuum to declare an independent Vietnam. The labour question quickly emerged to play a central role in Ho's initiatives. Announcing the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in September 1945, Ho Chi Minh set about organizing workers into what he foresaw as "one big union", the Vietnam Federation of Trade Unions (VFTU), modelled on the French *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT). After initial Viet Minh successes, the French moved to reassert authority, and by late 1946 the first Indochina War was under way. As a result, the VFTU made little headway either in the South or in Vietnam's cities still controlled by the French.⁹ Even so, by 1949 the VFTU could boast some 258,000 members.¹⁰

BUU AND THE BIRTH OF THE CVTC UNDER FRENCH COLONIALISM

As the French struggled against increasing Viet Minh resistance, Jouan began his work in the South with the welcome addition of an energetic nationalist named Tran Quoc Buu. From his teens, Buu, who hailed from Binh Dinh Province in central Vietnam, devoted himself to the nationalist cause. In 1940, French authorities sentenced him to a lengthy term at Poulo Condore island prison. Following his release in 1945, Buu fought alongside the Viet Minh. After a time, disillusioned by Viet Minh excesses, Buu met Jouan, who quickly became his mentor.¹¹

In particular, Jouan taught the virtues of corporatist labour relations, stressing the utility of *chambres mixtes de métiers*, or trade councils, in which employers, employee representatives, and local and national government authorities would meet and jointly make management decisions — ideas strongly promoted in Christian trade union circles as alternatives to radical socialism.¹² Despite their interest in such tripartite arrangements, Buu and Jouan stressed that labour unions must be separate independent forces, acting solely in the interests of their membership. Buu believed that he had found a “third force” capable of unifying and reconstructing Vietnamese society non-violently. This ideology remained at the core of his movement until 1975 — although circumstances, especially a hostile state and employers, thwarted any real implementation of such corporate labour arrangements.

Disregarding legal prohibitions, Buu and Jouan launched an aggressive campaign to organize workers and recruited approximately 8,000 members by the end of 1950. The organization quickly grew to include at least ten ‘illegal’ unions, representing the employees of Citroen and the airline Air Vietnam, as well as shoemakers, typesetters, tailors, and barbers.¹³

French authorities, while tolerating the burgeoning labour movement, at times sought to circumscribe its activities. For instance, colonial officials denied Buu’s petition to hold a public demonstration on 1 May 1950, in honour of May Day. Manifesting a determined militancy, Buu and his fellow budding unionists instead organized a “requiem mass” at the Cathedral of Saigon. Following services, union leaders directed members to the federation’s headquarters where they approved a series of resolutions to be presented to the government. Demands included new labour codes decriminalizing labour unions, the closure of a Cholon gambling house, and an end to the subcontracting system at Saigon’s port.¹⁴

In 1952, under pressure from Viet Minh gains, Bao Dai, the head of state installed in 1949 by the French to allow the Vietnamese limited self-government, finally issued a new series of labour regulations which at last permitted workers to organize.¹⁵ The decrees generated strong opposition from Vietnam's bourgeoisie, both French and Vietnamese. Nonetheless, the Bao Dai government and French officials clung fatuously to hopes that the reforms might generate support among the working classes for Bao Dai's struggling government.¹⁶

Buu and Jouan, seizing on their newly legal status, officially named their organization the Vietnamese Confederation of Christian Workers.¹⁷ Perhaps to appeal to non-Christian workers, the organization did not use the designation of "Christian" in the Vietnamese name (Tong Lien Doan Lao Cong Vietnam). From the start, the CVTC focused considerable energy on recruiting rural workers, especially plantation workers and tenant farmers; the organization's rural unions quickly became and would remain the confederation's largest constituency, since the population was overwhelmingly involved in rural activities. It was estimated a little over a year later that the CVTC's membership had grown to 38,990, including around 1,300 unionists in Hanoi.¹⁸ Despite the organization's ties to the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU), Christians remained in the minority. Officially, the CVTC "was open to all workers" and set out to attract a diverse membership, inclusive of all religious and minority groups.¹⁹

While on the one hand seeking to maintain peace with French and Vietnamese authorities, on the other the CVTC strove to maintain an active militancy. In 1953, the CVTC initiated strikes by employees of Air France, 500 shoemakers in Cholon, and workers in the five largest printing houses in Saigon. That same year, when government officials in the north moved to curb CVTC operations, Buu and Jouan protested loudly, "unleashing a violent campaign in the press for trade union freedom".²⁰

The awkward dance between labour and colonial state, however, would soon be over. French colonialism was on its last legs by 1953, and CVTC officials began preparing for its aftermath. The organization adamantly opposed the temporary division of Vietnam mandated by the Geneva Accords in July 1954. Banners strung across the confederation's headquarters denounced the Geneva Accords with slogans such as "To Divide Vietnam is to Open the Door of Southeast Asia to Communism".²¹ In particular, Buu and Jouan feared for the fate of the CVTC's northern

affiliates. CVTC-affiliated workers at the Cai-Da mines in northern Vietnam launched a successful work stoppage in early 1954. The strike enhanced Buu's reputation and fed hopes for further organization in the more industrialized north.²² Within a year, however, as feared, distressing news began to pour in from the north of persecution and union-breaking, including reports that the DRV government in the north, apparently viewing the CVTC as subservient to Western colonialism, had sentenced trade unionists to forced labour on the Chinese border.²³ The CVTC was "living though a real nightmare", an unnerved Buu wrote to a supporter.²⁴

As the CVTC struggled, the VFTU became the sole legal union for all workers in the north. While serving as a representative agency for workers, the VFTU also served the state, mobilizing, training, and disciplining workers. It has remained closely associated with the Communist Party to this day.²⁵

COOPERATING WITH NGO DINH DIEM

Seeking to accommodate itself to new circumstances, the CVTC underwent important changes. Jouan, perhaps recognizing that a labour organization headed by a former colonial official would send the wrong message, decided to return home to France and leave the movement in the hands of Vietnamese, in particular Buu. CVTC officials also began seeking the leverage of new alliances as life grew more dangerous and complicated — alliances that would prove enormously problematic. The organization made contact with the CIA, establishing a long-lasting, shadowy relationship.²⁶ Additionally, despite the organization's avowed commitment to independence, the CVTC cautiously embraced the rising ambitions of Ngo Dinh Diem and his politically ambitious family, after Diem was appointed prime minister by Bao Dai in June 1954. As early as 1954, the French CFTC described the Ngos as "already for a long time having exercised a useful and discreet influence" on the CVTC.²⁷ Buu joined the Ngo family in forming the Can Lao Party (Revolutionary Personalist Labour Party), which Diem envisioned as his chief vehicle for promoting both social reform and his own control over the country.²⁸ Yet relations between the CVTC and Diem always retained a certain tension. On several occasions Buu and other labour leaders publicly blasted Diem for the latter's efforts to co-opt the confederation.²⁹

Still, the CVTC supported Diem during the pivotal Battle of Saigon in 1955. With Diem firmly in power, the ranks of labour grew, as did organizing campaigns. The Tenant Farmers' Federation expanded dramatically under the personal patronage of Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother and chief political advisor.³⁰ By late 1955, the CVTC publicly claimed half a million members, although privately it admitted to the still-substantial figure of around 350,000.³¹ The confederation expanded membership services, opening several consumer cooperatives and ambitiously planning a "worker city" to provide low-cost housing and services for urban workers.³² It moved to set up *chambres mixtes de métiers* arrangements and to open a series of "Raiffeisen Cooperatives", modelled on the rural savings and loans associations begun by Friedrich Raiffeisen in Germany in the 1860s.³³

The clashing visions of the Ngo family and the CVTC, however, could not be suppressed. Diem clearly intended to control the organization, while the CVTC remained determined to preserve its autonomy. Buu told confidants he was "reluctant to become over-obligated" to the government by "accepting outright grants from it or any of the political parties".³⁴ In a meeting with the president in February 1956, Buu bluntly told Diem that "his idea of democracy was not [Diem's] hand-picked assembly".³⁵ The CVTC followed up by amplifying its attacks on local officials who harassed union members. Such brazen outspokenness stoked the fires of Diem's and Nhu's obsessive suspicions. The final straw, according to U.S. Embassy observers, came when the CVTC failed to pass a resolution pledging support to Diem's government.³⁶ By late autumn 1956, Nhu unleashed a hostile campaign against the CVTC, targeting in particular the Tenant Farmers' Union. Soon rumours swirled that authorities planned to arrest Buu himself.³⁷

Over the next several years, relations worsened. Soon Diem had virtually rendered the CVTC an organization in name only, and its agenda had largely stalled. Increasingly, Buu relied on his CIA ties and other American friends to offset the threat of the Ngos. Buu complained bitterly to allies in the CIA of recent arrests of CVTC officials designed to "intimidate labour", and warned that workers were growing "restive", some being attracted to Buddhist calls for a general strike against Diem.³⁸ In early autumn of 1963, he went public with complaints about the Diem presidency, sharply criticizing the Ngos before a United Nations committee investigating Vietnam.³⁹

Clearly, Buu had ties to those conspiring against Diem, but if the CVTC leadership hoped that labour–state relations would improve following the coup resulting in Diem’s killing in November 1963, they were sorely disappointed. The new Saigon government took Buu into custody, apparently concerned over his previous ties to the Diem regime. Only the personal intercession of the U.S. embassy allowed for his release.⁴⁰

TOWARD THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR

For several months, the CVTC waited for the tumult sweeping South Vietnamese politics to settle. By early 1964, a new government had been formed under General Nguyen Khanh. Again the U.S. embassy aided organized labour’s cause by pushing Khanh to meet directly with Buu, a meeting where the two worked out an agreement allowing the CVTC vital room to organize.⁴¹ By the mid-1960s, key U.S. officials clearly had come to view the CVTC as prime evidence of emerging democracy in Vietnam — evidence they could use to support intervention, as the White House and Congress began pondering the future of South Vietnam.

Seizing the newly liberalized atmosphere, the CVTC embarked on a flurry of new organizational activity. The plantation and tenant farmers’ unions, decimated by Diem, rebounded as tens of thousands of Vietnamese farmers and workers joined CVTC-affiliated unions.⁴² Seeking to broaden international support, Buu’s federation dropped the term “Christian” from the Western translations of the confederation’s title and was known from then on as the CVT, although it retained its affiliation with the Christian International.⁴³ Buoyed by success, in mid-1964, a CVT cadre ecstatically declared at a Singapore labour conference: “The activities of our syndicate are not like a thatch fire, burning for a short time and often dying out. But on the contrary, her activities persist like a coal fire under a layer of ashes”.⁴⁴

In the summer of 1964, a protracted conflict with the American-born Chinese owner of Vimytex textile factory provided Buu with an opportunity to stoke some of the ashes. Typical of the Asian textile industry, Vimytex, purchased with a US\$6 million loan from the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), had a reputation for dismal labour conditions.⁴⁵ Foreign-owned and linked to the Americans, Vimytex offered a tempting target — an opportunity for the CVT to play on mounting anxieties about expanding outside influence in South Vietnam. The mill owner, however, showed no

signs of acceding to workers' demands. Eventually he locked out three-quarters of his workers, roughly 120 employees, and transferred others to a military camp.⁴⁶

As the CVT mobilized, General Khanh suddenly threatened the campaign. On 19 August 1964, amid growing political chaos, the general declared a state of emergency, partly in reaction to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, but also to quell mounting protests in the streets of Saigon. Assuming total authority, Khanh banned all strikes and mass meetings.⁴⁷ Once again the state was determined to threaten labour advances.

In response, Buu upped the ante by announcing a general strike to involve all labour unions in Saigon. A general strike would demonstrate to all of Vietnam the independence and potency of the CVT.⁴⁸ "We have arrived at a point where we must take chances. We are taking this one now with the conviction that for the world of labour we represent the only solution outside Communism," Buu explained to French journalist Jean Lacouture.⁴⁹

On 21 September 1964, the CVT shut down Saigon. With the city's electrical workers joining the strike, South Vietnam's capital city sat in darkness for a full day, without water, electricity, phone services, or bus transportation. Sixty thousand CVT members joined in the work stoppage. Buu led a parade of several thousand strikers through Saigon to Khanh's offices where they presented their demands. With the general conveniently out-of-town, his aides negotiated with strike leaders.⁵⁰ Thousands of workers waited outside for news of the deliberations. Finally, to great fanfare, Buu appeared, announcing a tentative settlement easing labour restrictions.⁵¹

Impressed by the militancy of Saigon workers, Lacouture wondered if the one-day mobilization marked the emergence of a potential third force: "For the first time a force arose that could be either a possible replacement for the present regime or a link to the enemy regime or the first pillar of a regime to come."⁵² Buu's organization, however, was badly overextended — especially with regard to its relations with Saigon officials. While dramatically asserting itself, the CVT created new enemies and infuriated old ones. Buddhists as well as Buu's foes within the labour movement now viewed the confederation as a surging threat. More seriously, the CVT moved to the top of General Khanh's enemy list. Then on 10 October, General Khanh included Buu's name on a list of thirteen military officers and seven civilians to be arrested on charges of conspiring against Khanh in a failed coup on 13 September.⁵³

Fortunately for Buu, on 22 October a military court, no doubt responding to pressure from the U.S. embassy, found him innocent of all charges; loud cheers reverberated through the courtroom when his acquittal was announced.⁵⁴ Following his exoneration, Buu sidestepped any direct condemnation of Saigon officials, doubtless understanding that he still depended on the state for survival. He still expressed the hope that the verdict signalled a new openness to democratic governance, and that Khanh, at last, was “ready to show sincere comprehension and cooperation with a free and independent labour organization in the national struggle”.⁵⁵

While the CVT had made remarkable gains since the fall of Diem, it obviously remained subject to a number of pernicious forces. First and foremost was the Saigon government, but there were also divisions within the trade union movement. While it was the largest and most influential labour organization in South Vietnam, it was not the only one. Upstart organizations, such as a military-led effort to organize longshoremen on Saigon’s piers, presented constant annoyances — always presenting a threat but never rising to a substantial challenge.⁵⁶ A former CVT officer, Bui Luong, who had had a severe falling-out with the organization and formed a rival group, constantly hurled accusations at Buu, at one point charging him with accepting US\$200,000 from the North Vietnamese to build a house and simultaneously with pocketing US\$45,000 from the U.S. embassy.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, in early 1965, the Buddhist Institute for Secular Affairs began organizing workers. Quickly, the institute attempted to launch general strikes in several cities, including Hue, Quang Tri, and Da Nang.⁵⁸

Even greater trials followed in 1965. Khanh fell from power, eventually to be replaced by a government headed by Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky as prime minister. Buu and the CVT concluded that the new prime minister considered them an enemy. Ky, they feared, meant to “thwart, if not destroy, the CVT”.⁵⁹ The full-scale U.S. military intervention in the summer of 1965, fully endorsed by the CVT, also presented challenges and opportunities. With ever-growing leverage over the South Vietnamese leadership, the Americans, very much aware of the need to make South Vietnam appear democratic, pushed Ky to work with organized labour. Thrown on the defensive, Ky soon was insisting that his government was both “pro-worker and pro-peasant”.⁶⁰ Again, a temporary *modus vivendi* allowed the CVT to continue its work.

The CVT leadership gained new appreciation for Ky when the prime minister moved against Buddhist protesters in Da Nang.⁶¹ The Buddhist

Institute's drive to organize workers, of course, helped persuade trade unionists of the need for Ky's hard line; the CVT hoped to organize all workers, and competition from the upstart Buddhists was not appreciated. In August 1966, following decisive anti-Buddhist raids in Da Nang and Hue, the CVT invited Ky to its headquarters as its honoured guest. There, 500 unionists greeted the prime minister as a hero, interrupting Ky's speech with applause ten times.⁶²

Buu's improved relationship with the national government allowed the CVT yet another opportunity to expand. In particular, the Tenant Farmers' Federation, a key CVT affiliate, flourished, expanding to nearly 100,000 members. At times, the Tenant Farmers competed directly with the Viet Cong for the loyalty of farmers and farm labourers. In early 1965, Viet Cong guerrillas, relying heavily upon violence and intimidation, drove away the French management of South Vietnam's largest rubber plantation in Binh Duong Province. The Viet Cong, however, quickly proved unable to pay or feed workers. A "delegation of workers therefore made their way to Saigon", where the CVT tenant farmers took up their cause, and successfully negotiated a new contract with Michelin.⁶³

CAUGHT BETWEEN UNION MILITANTS AND THE STATE

Its entente with Ky, however, hardly made up for the myriad challenges facing the CVT. As U.S. soldiers swept into the country, so too did painful inflation. The meagre wages paid to South Vietnam's workers, especially its rural workers, lagged behind rising prices, soaring at an annual rate of 124 per cent in 1966.⁶⁴ The CVT also remained at the mercy of the police. Buu openly worried that General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the near-psychotic head of the national police, would kill him and blame it on the Viet Cong.⁶⁵

It was in fact a clash with General Loan that set off the next big challenge facing the CVT — an episode that almost shattered organized labour in South Vietnam. While the CVT had grown tremendously since 1963, especially organizing campaigns on behalf of Vietnamese employed by Americans, the confederation worked to avoid direct confrontations with government-owned operations and Republic of Vietnam officials, especially the Saigon police. CVT leaders fully understood the mercurial nature of their government, but the organization's reluctance to take on

the state irked many younger members eager to press democratization and workers' rights.

The first sparks of labour–state conflict flared in the summer of 1967 when the French-owned *Compagnie des Eaux et d'Electricité* (CEE) agreed to transfer operation and control of a large power plant serving Saigon to the South Vietnamese government.⁶⁶ Plant employees anticipated job losses, and the CVT-affiliated Water and Electricity Workers Union demanded a fair severance package for those who became unemployed. For employees who would remain, the union demanded a 12 per cent pay hike. When concessions failed to materialize, workers threatened to strike. Vo Van Tai, leader of the CVT's militant "young Turks" and chief of Saigon's labour council, aggressively pushed the electrical workers to take a strong stand. Buu obviously preferred moderation but feared stifling the ambitions of militants in his ranks.⁶⁷

Both the CVT and state officials briefly put the mounting conflict aside as national elections won by General Nguyen Van Thieu consumed the country, but almost immediately thereafter the smouldering conflict returned. Seeing no signs of concessions from the government, Tai and CVT radicals scheduled a strike for early in the new year. On 30 December 1967, General Loan issued a communiqué declaring that the National Police would "no longer refrain from intervention in the growing number of strikes".⁶⁸ Ignoring the general, on 11 January 1968 1,000 power plant employees walked off the job.⁶⁹

A few hours after declaring the strike, the CVT Saigon Labour Council arrived at the Labour Ministry's offices to open negotiations. Suddenly Loan's men burst into the room, and arrested six labour leaders, including Vo Van Tai.⁷⁰ Word of the arrests spread rapidly, and sympathy strikes broke out across Saigon. Bus drivers quit their routes, and longshoremen abandoned the ports.⁷¹ However, these protests only spurred Loan to take harsher action. He loaded five garbage trucks with police, directed the convoy to CVT headquarters, and personally delivered "requisitions", ordering workers back to their jobs immediately. Police ripped down strike banners and arrested any who dared resist. Loan's violent reputation persuaded enough workers to return to their jobs to allow the electrical plant to reopen at full capacity. In the wake of Loan's crackdown, sympathy strikes petered out, but bitterness remained.⁷²

Never enthusiastic about the strikes, Buu privately blamed CVT militants and moved to negotiate a settlement with the government before

the upcoming *Tet* holidays. On 16 January he ordered remaining strikers back to work. In return, the Saigon government agreed to a 12 per cent pay increase, and General Loan released the labour leaders still in his custody, including Vo Van Tai.⁷³

An uneasy stillness settled across the Saigon labour scene, but the Viet Cong, who had been applauding the strikes through radio propaganda, warned that “[o]n the eve of Tet, the stormy fire of revolutionary struggle of our workers and labourers will kindle fiercely right in the cities”.⁷⁴ Only days later, the Viet Cong launched its Tet Offensive. As the conflagration spread, swelling violence destroyed the homes of more than 1,000 trade unionists.

Militant CVT members argued that, in light of the government’s recent suppression, the confederation should assume a stony silence, sending authorities a pointed message. Again the organization faced a tough decision, weighing activism against good relations with its government. Buu and the CVT leadership decided to focus on the immediate terrorist threat from the Viet Cong and support their government. The organization issued a sharp condemnation of the “criminal action of the enemy”.⁷⁵

If the CVT hoped to be rewarded for its loyalty, it was sorely disappointed. As the dust settled in Saigon, General Loan rearrested a key trade union leader. The police action mystified Buu, who could only speculate that Loan “must be insane”.⁷⁶ Another round of interventions by Buu and his American allies finally effected the release of the jailed CVT official.

Despite the extreme setbacks of the first half of 1968, the roller coaster pattern that defined the CVT’s existence persisted. Following the Tet Offensive, the CVT managed to expand its influence, defying all expectations. Surprisingly, the CVT also found its relations with Saigon authorities improving, especially with the retirement of General Loan, who had suffered a severe injury in a Viet Cong rocket attack.⁷⁷ Likewise, as the Viet Cong retreated following what was certainly a military defeat, confederation organizers expanded their rural activities. “The sky was bright again after several months of tempest”, a CVT official explained.⁷⁸ The South Vietnamese economy entered into a brief period of economic expansion, especially in the countryside.⁷⁹

The CVT also continued aggressively to organize Vietnamese employed by the U.S. military and associated contractors — a workforce that at its peak included several hundred thousand workers, who were among the best

paid in South Vietnam. The American military, with its focus on nation-building and winning “hearts and minds”, sought to avoid confrontation with its Vietnamese employees at all costs. Likewise, informed by a New Deal worldview, official U.S. policy encouraged unionization. To this end, the military established a single agency, the Office of Civilian Personnel (OCP), to oversee labour relations with all employees. From the start, the OCP faced a restless, often militant workforce. While American employees signed a no-strike pledge, Vietnamese workers showed little reluctance to walk off jobs. Hundreds of wildcat and CVT-sanctioned strikes plagued the U.S. military and associated contractors throughout the war. Most related to wage issues, as inflation swept across the South Vietnamese economy, but issues of safety, treatment of employees, and the hiring of so-called third country nationals (usually Koreans or Taiwanese) also caused worker protest. Seeking to avoid full-scale labour conflict, the OCP tolerated brief strikes and worked hard, increasingly in alliance with the CVT, to appease its workforce.⁸⁰

“AWAKENING THE CONSCIENCE OF THE MASSES”: TOWARD POLITICS

Even as CVT members relied upon the Americans for jobs in a labour-friendly environment, many in both the rank-and-file and leadership recognized that South Vietnam’s heavy dependence on outsiders was a double-edged sword that delegitimized their country as much as it represented a necessary lifeline. They looked forward to the promise of Vietnamization. An American departure, Buu optimistically forecasted, would inspire an “awakening of the conscience of the masses”.⁸¹

Recognizing that its chief vulnerability was its often-tense relationship with Republic of Vietnam government officials, the CVT, which long eschewed direct involvement in politics, began testing the political waters. In 1968, breaking with precedent, it joined in forming a coalition called Lien Minh Dan Toc Cach Mang Xa Hoi (National Alliance for Social Revolution), composed of several political and ethnic parties, including Catholics, the Hoa Hao religious sect, the CVT, and Senator Tran Van Don (a perennial political player and one of the plotters of the 1963 coup against Diem).⁸² From behind the scenes, President Nguyen Van Thieu encouraged the development, arguing that the alliance would bring political stability and, presumably, political security for himself.⁸³ The alliance, however, fell

apart quickly, largely due to diverging ambitions of all parties and Thieu's meddling efforts to control the political organization.⁸⁴

Undaunted, the CVT leadership moved to organize the Cong-Nong Party (the Worker-Farmer Party), a political party to represent the confederation's interests. Established in November 1969, Cong-Nong was purported to be an entity independent from the CVT, yet its connection to the labour movement was obvious — essentially an open secret.⁸⁵ Borrowing the CVT's pluralistic aims of uniting farmers, labourers, urban workers, minority groups, and various religious sects, Buu proposed to include a diverse conglomeration of largely underrepresented groups, possibly including his old allies in the religious organization Cao Dai, in his new political party.⁸⁶

The CVT's political venture did enjoy considerable success. Using CVT unions and social centres as a base, the Cong-Nong Party, which aimed to train a cadre corps of some 3,000 organizers, quickly spread to forty provinces and many cities. Voters elected Cong-Nong Party candidates to seats in the General Assembly and local offices.⁸⁷ From positions of influence, Cong-Nong pressed such measures as civilian military training (with the aim of mobilizing South Vietnamese against Communists) and the 1971 Land-to-the-Tiller Act, which proposed to transfer three million acres of prime farmland in the Mekong Delta and central lowlands from landlords to tenant families.⁸⁸ The CVT seemed on the verge of becoming a major political force with its populist, reformist agenda.

By the end of 1971, however, progress seemed to stall. Inflation became an ever-greater problem, and unemployment rose as refugees filled South Vietnam's cities. The U.S. drawdown of troops and investment in Southeast Asia worsened the situation, as thousands of Vietnamese employed by Americans lost their jobs.

Meanwhile, the CVT faced increasing opposition from its trade union rivals. Vo Van Tai, the militant who had been imprisoned by General Loan during the labour tumult of early 1968, left the CVT shortly thereafter and established the rival National Confederation of Labour (LCL) to challenge what he saw as lethargy in the CVT. Obviously committed to aggressive action (which Buu and other CVT leaders increasingly saw as needlessly dangerous), in the summer of 1971, along with the Federation of Railroad Workers, Tai attempted to launch a general strike to protest against rising income taxes. While the two-day strike had little impact short of closing some banks, Tai's militancy reminded some of the CVT's shortcomings.⁸⁹ Within the CVT, younger, more militant members complained of the

organization's stagnation and charged Buu and the confederation leadership with corruption — accusations not without some merit. Indeed, while the CVT became increasingly involved in politics, contributing to some impressive developments, a tendency to seek compromise and shy away from militant trade union action increasingly plagued the organization. No doubt, part of this reticence stemmed from anxiety about confronting the Saigon government, both out of fear of a backlash and concerns that such a challenge would only aid the Communist enemy.

The dilemmas of coexistence with the Saigon government in fact grew more taxing as the war dragged on. In the wake of the 1972 Easter Offensive, during which the North Vietnamese made impressive gains before being repelled by American airpower, President Thieu declared martial law and banned all strikes. Since its founding, the CVT regarded the right to strike as an indispensable component of democracy. Nevertheless, Buu, who had resolutely resisted such incursions in the past, chose to acquiesce and support the ban. His action appeared to many a sad capitulation to a corrupt, authoritarian government. Buu insisted the CVT was now on the inside and needed to make sacrifices to maintain stability. "Now the situation — the danger — is different", he explained.⁹⁰ With the imminent departure of American troops, Buu now felt it necessary to stand with the Saigon government, even as the CVT's Cong-Nong Party continued to press for reforms.

With the announcement of the Paris Accords in January 1973, ending the United States' direct participation in the war, Thieu seemed even more determined to rein in labour — and all potential political opponents. Without American leverage, Thieu felt no obligation to continue fostering democracy. Reminiscent of Diem's Can Lao, Thieu announced the formation of the "Democracy (Dan Chu) Party" and made it clear that it would be the dominant force in South Vietnamese politics. Buu's refusal to join the "Democracy Party" prompted a spiteful Thieu to launch a labour wing of Dan Chu to compete directly with Cong Nong.⁹¹ CVT officials recognized the threat, viewing the Democracy Party's labour wing as a first step toward creating a national labour union under Thieu's direct control.⁹² Under the surface, resentment smouldered, but Buu and other CVT leaders (to the lasting bitterness of more militant members) resisted direct confrontation with Thieu. Again, labour bent.

Paradoxically, as South Vietnam crumbled, the CVT's political clout seemed to grow. Buu became an important ambassador/lobbyist to

Washington, able to gain meetings with antiwar Democrats. By the fall of 1974, he was using his leverage to criticize the government openly, charging that it was “inefficient and corrupt”. Both Thieu and the North Vietnamese, Buu insisted, needed to dedicate themselves honestly to implementing the Paris Accords.⁹³

In Saigon’s final hours, Buu travelled to Washington in March 1975 for one last desperate round of lobbying, meeting with President Gerald Ford and Senator Edward Kennedy. “Give us sufficient aid to survive. Do not let us die slowly, agonizingly,” he pleaded.⁹⁴

Buu was wrong, of course; the death of South Vietnam would come quickly — in fact, within a few short weeks. Buu managed to find a space on the infamous American airlift, while key CVT leaders and their families escaped out into the South China Sea on a barge. Floating toward safety, the CVT refugees listened in grim silence as radio announcers read lists of those wanted by victorious North Vietnam authorities; some heard their own names crackle over the airwaves. In the vanquished city, an observer noted constant activity at CVT headquarters as the new government moved in, eager to use the compound for its own purposes. In the midst of the bustle, for several days no one thought to remove a portrait of Buu from the wall.⁹⁵

CONCLUSION:

LINKING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

From its inception, the CVT walked a fine — and dangerous — line. While extolling independence of action and autonomy from the state and all other forces, it was compelled by circumstances to engage in compromising alliances, especially with a succession of problematic Saigon governments. In the late 1940s, French authorities had allowed the formation of what became the CVT, in the hope that the organization might attract mass support for the struggling colonial regime. Meanwhile, confederation leaders sought to forge a militant and anticommunist labour movement without falling afoul of the colonial government. After the French departure and the division of Vietnam, the same treacherous pattern persisted. Buu and the CVT leadership sought to work with the repressive Diem government, while maintaining some level of independence. As a result, the organization was tainted by association with the Ngos, and suffered at the same time from government repression. Later, the CVT strove to work with the Americans

and with the Thieu regime, going so far as to acquiesce in Thieu's ban on strikes in 1972. Such compromises allowed the confederation to navigate the dangerous shoals of South Vietnamese politics, yet tarnished the organization in the eyes of many. What was left was a public perception of dependence on outsiders — hardly the goal of an organization aiming to establish itself as an independent voice for Vietnam's workers.

This labour history, however, certainly makes Vietnam fertile soil for labour activism and agitation, to hibernate and re-emerge when the time comes. During its brief existence, South Vietnam saw a remarkable number of strikes, as hundreds of thousands threw in their lot with trade unions and activism. The tradition of anticolonialism and militancy seems to have lived on, to organize and challenge social and workplace injustices, though two-and-a-half decades separate the experience of the CVT and present-day labour upheavals in Vietnam. While the vast majority of strikes have occurred in the southern region, especially around Ho Chi Minh City, participants are very unlikely to have memories of the CVT. Older workers and union officials might have been activists in those tumultuous war years. For instance, VGCL President Dang Ngoc Tung was a construction worker in Saigon in the 1970s.⁹⁶ Between 1975 and 2008 came the experiences of war, collectivization, *Doi Moi*, globalization, and a population 60 per cent of which is under the age of 30, yet parallels between the earlier movement and current developments are evident. To paraphrase American humourist Mark Twain, while history does not repeat itself, it frequently rhymes.

As in the early 1970s, inflation combined with soaring energy costs have resulted in serious economic hardship and large-scale strikes. A massive migration of rural peasants into cities took place during the second Indochina War; similar migrations clearly contribute to challenges faced by workers today. Employee complaints about corruption and being given no time off for the *Tet* holidays are as familiar today as in the pre-1975 period.⁹⁷ Fiscal deficits and balance-of-payment concerns also plagued pre-1975 South Vietnam, much as similar factors worry Hanoi today. However, two intriguing commonalities stand out: awkward labour–state relations, and workers targeting foreign-owned enterprises.

That strikes and workplace protest would focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) firms is no surprise. That is where the jobs are; since the early 1990s, FDI has dramatically outpaced the growth of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As will be seen in several subsequent chapters, these foreign, mostly Asian investors are also notoriously exploitative. Hence,

the vast majority of strikes in Vietnam are directed at such foreign-owned firms. Additionally, there is, as Irene Norlund has suggested, a certain “political correctness” about strikes in a socialist country aimed at intensively capitalistic firms.⁹⁸ Targeting foreigners, in a country with a history of exploitation at the hands of outsiders, may both play into this political correctness and reflect a continuing perception that SOEs are more responsive to workers’ needs. Concurrently, government officials walk a fine line — seeking to continue attract foreign investment, while pacifying worker discontent.⁹⁹ In a similar fashion, workers and trade unions in the 1960s and 1970s targeted foreign employers and operations, especially American-owned firms and the U.S. military. Workers responded enthusiastically, launching several thousand strikes in a few years.

Conversely, in the past the CVT and organized workers generally avoided direct challenges or confrontations with the government. Trade union leaders fully understood the dangers inherent in challenging the state. The events of 1968, when several labour leaders found themselves gaoled, certainly reinforced the wisdom of focusing on outsiders rather than challenging one’s own government. A working relationship with the state — particularly with the Labour Ministry and other government offices — was imperative. Beyond this, the CVT’s philosophy from its earliest days stressed corporatist labour relations and systematic cooperation between unions, the state, and employers. The CVT strove to establish such a working relationship with a host of Saigon governments; the results, however, were decidedly mixed.

Today’s Vietnamese General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) is obviously much more closely associated with the state and Communist Party.¹⁰⁰ Without question, the Vietnamese state has a great deal invested in a globalized economy; strikes and labour agitation already have made foreign firms wary of Vietnam. The VGCL finds itself uncomfortably between its government and an increasingly angry workforce.¹⁰¹ The Party and police today have more capacity to infiltrate and neutralize illegal unions than was the case under Ngo Dinh Diem or Nguyen Van Thieu in South Vietnam.

Despite the legitimate discontent of some of its members, the VGCL, like the CVT before it, has not been ineffectual in pursuing workers’ interests.¹⁰² VGCL officials have not been silent as pressure builds. In autumn 2008 at a Hanoi conference on labour protection, confederation leaders blamed the recent wave of strikes on employers who flout labour laws

and disregard commitments made to workers. Officials also acknowledged “some shortcomings in the State’s management of the issue”.¹⁰³ At the Hanoi conference, Truong Lam Danh, deputy chairman of the HCMC City Federation of Labour, bemoaned strikes prompted by employers’ “broken promises”.¹⁰⁴ Still, as with the case of the CVT a generation earlier, workers have ample reason to doubt the state-controlled VGCL’s absolute dedication to their interests. Workers frequently call wildcat strikes, circumventing the confederation.

Tran Quoc Buu and other leaders of the pre-1975 South Vietnamese labour movement insisted that trade unions must be independent of the state (even as they habitually compromised their autonomy). Today, in some circles, critics of the VGCL have made tentative steps toward forming independent trade unions.¹⁰⁵ Such initiatives, however, have met with swift reprisals from the state. In 2006, authorities sentenced eight activists involved in organizing independent trade unions to prison terms.¹⁰⁶

Given the long history of the socialist state in Vietnam and its persistence despite globalization, however, the VGCL is unlikely to be challenged by independent trade unions. While the state has an obvious stake in expanding and facilitating FDI, it remains rhetorically committed to creating a “civilised and equitable society”.¹⁰⁷ Workers and the VGCL have played off that premise and, linking up with the lingering distrust of foreigners and capitalism, have made such gains as the recent increase of the minimum wage.

The militancy of today’s Vietnamese workers would hardly surprise the leaders of the CVT, who witnessed the dramatic proliferation of strikes and worker action during the 1960s and 1970s. They would also certainly recognize and perhaps even sympathize with the VGCL as it struggles with limited success to give voice to worker discontent. A host of debilitating dilemmas burdened the confederation. Yet, in the words of Melanie Beresford, the “voice of the poor” may still “offset the growing influence of public–private business networks.”¹⁰⁸

Notes

- ¹ Gilbert Jouan to M. Scherer, “le Consoler aux Affaires Sociales”, 25 September 1948, “Travailleurs Chrétiens” folder, HCI, CS/109, Le Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (henceforth CAOM).
- ² H. Guiriec to Haut Commissioner, 5 February 1948, HCI, CS/109, “Confédération des Syndicat Libre” folder, CAOM.

- ³ Le Chef du Service Central d'Action Sociale to M. le Gouverneur Général, 23 January 1951, "Travailleurs Chrétiens" folder, HCI CS/109, CAOM.
- ⁴ John G. Dean, "Memorandum for Files: Discussion with Nguyen Van Huyen, Minister of Social Action", 19 January 1954, box 3, Mission to Vietnam, Office of Director, Subject Files, 1950–54, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (henceforth NA).
- ⁵ "In one of the least well studied activities of the second Indochina war," noted Alexander Woodside, "representatives of world Catholic labor unions and the largest American labor unions (which strongly supported the American war machine in Vietnam) visited Saigon frequently and sponsored training classes for southern labor union cadres, after 1956." Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 287. Also see James L. Tyson, *Target America: The Influence of Communist Propaganda on U.S. Media* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1981), pp. 145–54. Tyson charges the Western media of the time with deliberately dismissing the significance of the South Vietnamese labour movement as part of a "continuing world-wide Communist effort to destroy free labor unions by propaganda" (p. 149).
- ⁶ For general background on the Viet Minh's labour organizing and the history of the VGCL see Irene Norlund, "Trade Unions in Vietnam in Historical Perspective: The Transformation of Concepts", in *Labor in Southeast Asia: Local Processes in a Globalized World*, edited by Rebecca Elmhirst and Ratna Saptari (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), pp. 111–12.
- ⁷ D. R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p. 49; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). The "idiom of class-based social analysis," Tai explains, "produced a drastic intellectual reorientation" toward recruitment of the working classes (*ibid.*, p. 226).
- ⁸ Denis MacShane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 248; Bernard Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 27; John Loss, "The Rise of the Labour Movement in South Vietnam" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1975), pp. 3–10.
- ⁹ Bernard Fall, *The Viet Minh Regime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), p. 140; Alice Shurcliff, "The Trade Union Movement in Vietnam", *Monthly Labour Review* 72 (January 1951): 31.
- ¹⁰ Pip Nicholson, "Vietnam's Labor Market", in *Law and Labor Marketing in East Asia*, edited by Sean Cooney *et al.* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 124.
- ¹¹ Edmund F. Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 35–37.

- ¹² Joseph Zisman, “Labour in Indochina”, October 1952, box 4, Office of Labour Affairs, Far East Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA; Su Tri Nguyen, interview by author, Houston, Texas, 7 February 2003. Su Tri Nguyen, CVT Commissioner of Information, Research, and Propaganda in the late 1960s, also recalled the contribution of Father Alexis Parrel of the Société des Missions Étrangères to shaping the early CVT. Parrel remained in Indochina into the 1960s. On Catholic corporatist teaching regarding labour relations during this era, see Gary Gerstle, “Catholic Corporatism, French Canadian Workers, and Industrial Unions in Rhode Island”, in *Labour Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labour Struggles, 1835–1960*, edited by Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 213–15; Woodside, *Community and Revolution*, pp. 286–87. Buu, according to Woodside, later advocated policies based on a “triangular principle” in which business, labour, and government representatives would gather to resolve problems. The “triangular principle” clearly evolved from Jouan’s advocacy of *chambres mixtes de métiers*.
- ¹³ Trinh Quang Quy, *Phong Trao lao-dong Viet-Nam* [The labor movement in Vietnam] (Saigon: no publisher listed, 1970), pp. 32–33; Donald Heath to State Department, 15 December 1950, box 3, Office of Labour Affairs, Far East Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA; “Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Chrétiens”, 22 January 1951, HCI CS/109, CAOM.
- ¹⁴ Quy, *Phong Trao lao-dong*, p. 37.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 158; Douglas Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development: South Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1, 10, 111. Alongside labour reforms, Bao Dai also initiated “a soft approach to agrarian reform based on land tenure”. Economist Douglas Dacy describes the Vietnamese economy in the early 1950s as “top-heavy”, with roughly 80 per cent of the population involved in agricultural production, and circa 150,000 Vietnamese civilians either serving in the French army or involved in military-type service. Industry was limited to a few factories, producing beer, soft drinks, and textiles. In addition to recruiting urban workers such as pedicab drivers and dock workers, the CVTC focused considerable attention on organizing rural workers.
- ¹⁶ Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967), pp. 780–81.
- ¹⁷ Quy, *Phong Trao lao-dong*, pp. 30–38.
- ¹⁸ Estimate by the French Sûreté Générale, “Tableau d’effectifs du Syndicats affiliés à la CVTC”, 22 February 1954, SPCE/77, CAOM Buttinger (1967, p. 1,066) estimated the number as 45,000.

- ¹⁹ Jouan to Ministre de l'Outre Mer, 2 February 1956, 5H 37, Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT) Archives, Paris.
- ²⁰ "Note de Renseignements concernant la CVTC", July 1954, SPEC-77, CAOM.
- ²¹ J.R. Deborde to M. Commissaire General, 4 May 1954, HCI SPEC/77, CAOM.
- ²² "Notes pour M. le General D'Armee Commissaire General de France", 6 December 1954, HCI SPEC/77, CAOM; Alexis Parrel, "Le Syndicalism Chrétien au Vietnam", 5H 37, CFDT Archives.
- ²³ "Labour Report", 5 February 1955, box 15, Office of Labour Affairs, Labour Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA. A rough total of some 900,000 refugees fled from the North to the South (Dacy 1986, p. 2).
- ²⁴ Buu to Lucien Tronchet, 22 July 1954, 31/3, Country files, International Affairs Department Papers, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, MD (henceforth GMMA).
- ²⁵ Norlund, *Trade Unions in Vietnam*, pp. 110–12.
- ²⁶ "Briefing for the Ambassador and Charge d'Affaires", folder C2768, "Top Secret", Summer, 1954, box 1, Viet Nam, Saigon Embassy, Top Secret Subject Files, Records of the Foreign Service Posts, Department of State, RG 84, NA. The story of the CVT's tortuous relationship with American trade unionists, intelligence officers, and other U.S. government officials is told in detail in Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain*. It is unclear whether Buu or the CIA initiated the contact.
- ²⁷ "Note", June 1954, 5H 37, CFDT Archives; "Bulletin de Renseignement", 4 July 1954, HCI, SPEC/77, CAOM.
- ²⁸ CIA, "Current Intelligence Memorandum, Subject: Cast of Characters South Vietnam", 28 August 1963, box 128a, President's Office Files, Vietnam General, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston MA; Elbridge Durbrow to State Department, 2 March 1959; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960* (Washington, D.C., 1990) 1: 145–48 (hereafter *FRUS*, with year and volume number). The full name of the Can Lao was Can Lao Nhan Vi Cach Mang Dang [Personalist Labour Revolutionary Party]. According to Durbrow, Buu joined Nhu's organization as early as 1952. The NLF later excoriated the CVT for its ties to Diem: "Through yellow trade-unions, it [the Can Lao Party] took over the General Federation of Trade Unions, which had a Christian leadership, whose prestige it tried to raise by various means (giving trade-union cadres American-style training, providing relief for workers)", Ton Vy, "The U.S.-Diem Regime", *Vietnam Studies* 18–19 (1968): 35.

- ²⁹ “Bulletin de Renseignements”, 2 July 1954, “CVTC” folder, HCI, SPEC/77, CAOM.
- ³⁰ Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 146–47.
- ³¹ Durbrow to State Department, 2 March 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960*, 1: 145–48. Jodie Eggers to State Department, 12 December 1955, box 14, Office of Labour Affairs, Labour Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA; “Rapport Moral Prononce le 7 Mars 1954 par Tran Quoc Buu”, SPEC/77, CAOM. Roughly two years before, French authorities estimated CVTC membership at 40,000. CVTC insistence on including non dues-paying “members” (or members who paid nominal dues) in membership estimates no doubt contributed to confusion over actual numbers.
- ³² Eggers to Leland Barrows, 8 May 1956, box 12, Office of Director, Classified Subject Files, Office of Director, Subject Files, RG 469, NA; McCarthy to Barrows, Director of USOM, “Activities of CVTC”, 13 December 1954, box 12, Mission to Vietnam, Office of Director, Classified Subject Files, Records of U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA.
- ³³ Buu to Gaston Tessier, 22 November 1955, 5H 37, CFDT Archives.
- ³⁴ Eggers to State Department, 12 December 1955, box 14, Office of Labour Affairs, Labour Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA.
- ³⁵ Eggers to Barrows, 14 February 1956, box 14, Office of Labour Affairs, Labour Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA.
- ³⁶ Eggers to Barrows, 15 October 1956, box 15, Office of Labour Affairs, Labour Programs Division, Far East, Country Files, 1948–1961, Records of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Agencies, RG 469, NA.
- ³⁷ Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, pp. 146–47; Durbrow to State Department, 5 September 1960, *FRUS, 1958–1960*, 1: 560–61.
- ³⁸ *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, 15 October 1963, CIA-RDP79T009-75A007 30014001-S [accessed through CIA Records Search Tool, Declassification Database].
- ³⁹ Jose Maria Aguirre to Ernest Lee, 13 December 1963, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA.
- ⁴⁰ Dean Rusk to Saigon Embassy, 3 November 1963; Saigon Embassy to State Department, 4 November 1963, *FRUS, January–August 1963, Vietnam, 1961–1963*, 4: 550–51, 560–61; Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 110. In this autobiography, coup leader General Tran Van Don seems to admit that the new government had

- arrested Buu and then released the labour leader at the request of Ambassador Lodge.
- 41 Henry Cabot Lodge Jr to State Department, 6 February 1964, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964–1966, Labour and Manpower, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA. Khanh’s charges against Buu appear to have no merit. Most likely Khanh saw Buu and the CVTC as a political threat.
- 42 Saigon Embassy to State Department, 5 May 1964, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy Files, Labour and Manpower, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA. Reforms instituted by General Khanh included the ratification of International Labour Organization provisions against discrimination in employment, inspection of industry and commerce, and the abolition of the labour contracting system on the waterfront. In addition, Khanh appointed Nguyen Le Giang, a former vice president of the CVTC, as his labour minister.
- 43 *Le Croix*, 4 January 1964. IFCTU President August Vandistendael pronounced in early 1964 that the qualifier “Christian” in the CVTC name was not of “primordial importance”.
- 44 To-Thanh-Tuyen, *Speech Delivered on the Occasion of the Seminar of the PSI Secretariats, Singapore, 1964, Subject: “Vietnamese Workers Movement”* (Singapore, no publisher, 1964).
- 45 On current conditions in the Asian textile and fashion industries see Jee Young Kim’s chapter in this volume.
- 46 Lovestone to Dr Phan Quang Dan, 8 October 1964, box 707, Lovestone Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California (henceforth Hoover). John Condon to State Department, 10 October 1964, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy Files, Labour and Manpower, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA; *Saigon Post*, 23 September 1964.
- 47 Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam Between Two Truces* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 196; *New York Times*, 21 September 1964; Lovestone to Phan Quang Dan, 8 October 1964, box 707, Lovestone Papers, Hoover.
- 48 Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 91. The Viet Cong, like the CVT, were mobilizing to take advantage of the weakness of the Khanh government.
- 49 Lacouture, *Vietnam between Two Truces*, pp. 196–98.
- 50 *New York Times*, 21 September 1964; *New York Times*, 22 September 1964.
- 51 *Saigon Post*, 23 September 1964.
- 52 Lacouture, *Vietnam between Two Truces*, p. 196; *Saigon Post*, 9 October 1964. The Vimytex strike ended roughly two weeks after the general strike. For the National Liberation Front (NLF, the Viet Cong) version of the 1964 general strike see Ton Vy, “The Workers’ Struggle” in *Vietnamese Studies, No. 8: South Vietnam: 1954–1965* (Hanoi, 1966), pp. 104–6. Throughout its existence,

NLF propaganda pointed to South Vietnamese labour strife as evidence of widespread discontent with the ruling regime and U.S. presence. The NLF, however, largely ignored the organizing role of the CVT and dismissed its president as “the reactionary Tran Quoc Buu ... camouflaged as a ‘trade union militant’”.

- ⁵³ *New York Times*, 10 October 1964.
- ⁵⁴ *New York Times*, 23 October 1964; *Saigon Post*, 24 October 1964.
- ⁵⁵ Buu to George Meany, 26 October 1964, 31/3, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA; Meany to Buu, 28 October 1964, micro 81, Office of the President, GMMA.
- ⁵⁶ Victor Riesel, “Hungry Viet Workers”, *New York Journal American*, 25 September 1964.
- ⁵⁷ John Condon to State Department, 8 December 1964; Condon to State Department, 10 December 1964, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy Files, Labour and Manpower, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA.
- ⁵⁸ *New York Times*, 12 February 1965; Robert Topmiller, “The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Struggle Movement in South Vietnam, 1964–66” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 40–45.
- ⁵⁹ Condon to State Department, 30 September 1965, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy Files, General Records of the State Department, RG 59, NA; Su Tri Nguyen, interview by author.
- ⁶⁰ Saigon Embassy to State Department, 2 November 1965, box 1340, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1963–1966, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA.
- ⁶¹ *Free Trade Union News*, August 1966.
- ⁶² Lodge to State Department, 5 August 1966, box 1339, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1963–1966, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA.
- ⁶³ C.E. Pestill, 9 November 1965, Foreign Office 371/180600, Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, Richmond, London (henceforth PRO).
- ⁶⁴ “Statement by the Vietnamese Plantation Workers”, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, RG 59, NA; E.H. Peck, “The Economic Situation”, 10 November 1965, FO 371/180600, PRO. The CVT’s Federation of Plantation Workers issued a statement in the summer of 1967 detailing the problems of rural workers: “The cost of living has been increasing without respite, giving much trouble to the working class in general and to the plantation workers in particular. Workers in other fields of production have been granted wage increases or some form of allowances. Only the plantation workers have been forgotten.” Also see Directorate of Intelligence Memorandum, “The Situation in Vietnam”, 26 April 1967, CIA-RDP79T00826A001900010017-7 [accessed through CIA Records Search Tool, Declassification Database].

- ⁶⁵ Lodge to State Department, 30 October 1966, box 1339, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1963–1966, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA. Edward Lansdale to Lodge, 29 July 1966, box 2, Lansdale Materials, National Security Agency. Buu, hoping the Americans might intercede, also expressed fears of Loan to Lansdale aide and infamous CIA operative Lucien Conein.
- ⁶⁶ Jacques Despuech, *Le Trafic des Piastres* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974), pp. 28–29. The CEE, founded by the French in 1900, actually encompassed three plants in the Saigon vicinity: in Cho Quan, Cau Kho, and Cholon. The Saigon government purchased the plants from the French in 1967 for close to one billion piasters. “Round-Up Letter”, 29 November 1967, FCO 15/1012, PRO. British observers described the CEE sale as marking “a further stage in declining French economic influence in South Vietnam”.
- ⁶⁷ Ellsworth Bunker to State Department, 14 December 1967, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA. “Activities Syndicales: Creation du syndicat de la Compagnie des Eaux et de l’Electricité installée à Saigon”, 2 March 1954, SPEC/77, CAOM. Founded in March 1954, the CVT’s Water and Electrical Workers Union dated from the waning days of French colonialism.
- ⁶⁸ “Communiqué Issued by National Police”, 30 December 1967, box 1301, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, RG 59, NA.
- ⁶⁹ Bunker to State Department, 11 January 1968, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA; *Saigon Post*, 10 January 1968; “Round-Up Letter”, 24 January 1968, FCO 15/482, PRO. The negotiations between the CVT and electrical company were complicated by a debate between South Vietnamese officials and the French former owners of the CEE as to who would pay the severance packages and raises.
- ⁷⁰ Saigon Embassy to State Department, 11 January 1968, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA; Quy, *Phong Trao lao-dong*, p. 102; “Round-Up Letter”, 24 January 1968, FCO 15/482, PRO.
- ⁷¹ Saigon Embassy to State Department, 11 January 1968, box 1226; Bunker to State Department, 12 January 1968, box 1227, Central Foreign Policy Files, Viet S, General Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA; *Saigon Post*, 15 January 1968; *Saigon Daily News*, 13 January 1968.
- ⁷² *Saigon Post*, 15 January 1968; *Saigon Daily News*, 14 January 1968; *Le Monde*, 15 January 1968; Bunker to State Department, 15 January 1968, box 1227, Central Foreign Policy Files, Viet S, General Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA; Saigon Embassy to State Department, 19 January 1968, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, Viet S, General Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA.

- ⁷³ Arthur J. Goldberg, "The Electrical Workers Strike in Vietnam", 18 January 1968; Goldberg, "The Electrical Workers Strike in Vietnam", 29 January 1968; Goldberg, "Latest Report from Saigon Situation", 23 January 1968, 31/8, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA; *Le Monde*, 17 January 1968. The events of the strike are also detailed in Quy, *Phong Trao lao-dong*, pp. 101–22.
- ⁷⁴ Bunker to State Department, 24 January 1968, box 1301, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, General Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA.
- ⁷⁵ Bunker to State Department, 19 February 1968, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, General Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA.
- ⁷⁶ Calvin Mehlert to Lansdale, 28 February 1968, box 106, NSC Files, Vietnam Files, Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) Library. The arrests of Tai and Quyen were part of a larger post-Tet Offensive police roundup, which included Truong Dinh Dzu, runner-up to Thieu in the recent presidential campaign who advocated recognition of the NLF.
- ⁷⁷ *Saigon Post*, 4 June 1968; Minutes of Labour Advisory Committee on Foreign Assistance, 17 June 1968, and 12 November 1968, box 594, Secretary of Labour, Papers of Willard Wirtz, General Records of the Department of Labour, RG 174, NA; Bunker to Johnson, 29 May 1968, box 105, NSC, Country Files, Vietnam, LBJ Library. Thieu's appointment of Dam Sy Hien, a CVT official, as Labour Minister also helped ease tensions between the CVT and Saigon government.
- ⁷⁸ "What the CVT has done for the Country during 1968", *Cong Nhan*, 8 February 1968. Dacy, *Foreign Aid*, p. 12. Improved security allowed the South Vietnamese economy briefly to enter the most productive period in its history. Between 1969 and 1971, rice production rapidly rose and the net domestic product increased 28 per cent.
- ⁷⁹ Dacy, *Foreign Aid*, pp. 10–15, 71–72, 113; T. Louise Brown, *War and Aftermath in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 234–35; Hiroshi Tsujii, "Rice Economy and Rice Policy in South Vietnam up to 1975", *Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 3 (December 1977): 265; Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), pp. 79–80.
- ⁸⁰ On the OCP and strikes against the U.S. military and contractors see Edmund Wehrle, "'The Nucleus of Craftsmen Needed to Build a Firm National Foundation': The Office of Civilian Personnel and Nation-building in Vietnam, 1965–1973", paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations, Columbus, Ohio, 26–28 June 2008.
- ⁸¹ "Press Conference", 19 November 1969, box 429, Lovestone Papers, Hoover.
- ⁸² "For the President from Bunker", 4 July 1968, in *The Bunker Papers: Reports to the President from Vietnam, 1967–1973*, Vol. 2, edited by Douglas Pike (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 494.

- ⁸³ Berger to State Department, 13 August 1968, box 1300, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, Records of the State Department, RG 59, NA.
- ⁸⁴ Bunker to Secretary of State, 16 January 1969, box 6, Saigon Embassy, Files of Ambassador, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of Department of State, RG 84, NA; “Round-Up Letter”, 10 July 1968, FCO 15/483, PRO; CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “The Situation in South Vietnam”, 30 September 1968, box 68, NSC, Country Files, Vietnam, LBJ Library; Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War, 1965–1971* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 295.
- ⁸⁵ Bunker to State Department, 7 November 1969, box 1301, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, Records of the State Department, RG 59, NA. Shaplen, *The Road from War*, pp. 314, 346. Journalist Robert Shaplen noted that Buu might “finally be ready to come out in the open and lead the party personally. If he does, it could be an important development, he controls several hundred thousand workers and peasants” (*ibid.*, p. 314).
- ⁸⁶ “Press Conference”, 19 November 1969, box 429, Lovestone Papers, Hoover; C.M. MacLehose, “Call on Mr Tran Quoc Buu, President of the CVT”, 17 April 1969, FCO 15/1012, PRO.
- ⁸⁷ Tran Quoc Buu, “Memorandum on the Political Party Situation in South Vietnam and the Position of the CVT”, 31/10, International Affairs Department, Country Files, GMMA. On Cong Nong and political parties in South Vietnam see Theresa Tull, “Broadening the Base: South Vietnamese Elections, 1967–1971”, in *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam*, edited by John C. Donnell and Charles A. Joiner (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1974), pp. 35–52.
- ⁸⁸ Stuart Callison, *The Land-to-Tiller Program and Rural Resource Mobilization in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam* (Athens: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1974), pp. 327–44; *Christian Science Monitor*, 31 March 1970; Dacy, *Foreign Aid*, pp. 15, 113; Stephen B. Young, “Power to the People: Local Development in Vietnam, 1968–1971”, in *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam*, pp. 89–91. South Vietnam relied heavily on the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) promises of money to fund the Land to the Tiller program.
- ⁸⁹ Bunker to State Department, 3 August 1971, box 1436, Subject Numeric Files, Records of Department of State, RG 59, NA.
- ⁹⁰ Saigon Embassy to State Department, 18 July 1972, box 1436, Subject Numeric Files, 1970–73, Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA. Buu issued his no-strike pledge on 15 July 1972.
- ⁹¹ *Washington Post*, 23 June 1973. On Thieu’s Democracy Party, see Ta Van Tai and Jerry Mark Silverman, “Elections and Political Party Constraints Following the 1972 Offensive”, in *Electoral Politics in South Vietnam*, pp. 125–49.
- ⁹² Saigon Embassy to State Department, 28 June 1973, box 1435, Subject Numeric Files, 1970–73, Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NA.

On 27 December 1972, Thieu issued a decree placing further constraints on party organization, ostensibly to quell the fragmentation and chaos so much a feature of South Vietnamese politics. The decree limited political participation to “broadly based and publicly known parties”. Although Buu publicly approved of the changes, the new restrictions were so stringent that the CVT’s Cong Nong Party proved unable to qualify for elections. In desperation, it joined with other parties to form the Democratic Socialist Alliance (Lien Minh Dan Chu Xa Hoi).

⁹³ *New York Times*, 30 October 1974; Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1983), pp. 322–23. In attacking Thieu, Buu aligned the CVT with Roman Catholics, veterans, and other Saigon interest groups protesting governmental corruption.

⁹⁴ *Free Trade Union News*, March–April 1975.

⁹⁵ *New York Times*, 3 May 1975; Tiziano Terzani, *Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), pp. 183–84.

⁹⁶ While the CVT has little to no resonance with Vietnamese today, it is worth noting that VGCL President Dang Ngoc Tung grew up in Saigon and was a construction worker in the early 1970s (in his early twenties). Without doubt he would have been aware of the CVT.

⁹⁷ On the problem of corruption in present-day Vietnam, see Mark A. Ashwill and Thai Ngoc Diep, *Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 2005), pp. 58–60.

⁹⁸ Norlund, *Trade Unions in Vietnam*, p. 126.

⁹⁹ Long S. Le, “Labor vs. Market Vietnam”, *Asia Times Online*, 5 April 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Norlund, *Trade Unions in Vietnam*, p. 123. The VFTU changed its name in 1988 to Vietnamese Confederation of Labour.

¹⁰¹ On the many pressures facing the VGCL, see Quynh Chi Do, “The Challenge from Below: Wildcat Strikes and the Pressure for Union Reform in Vietnam”, paper presented at the Vietnam Update, 6–7 November 2008, The Australian National University, Canberra.

¹⁰² See Do, “Challenge from Below”.

¹⁰³ “Vietnamese Trade Union said Failing to Protect Workers, Prevent Strikes”, BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 8 September 2008.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Tran, *Our Endless War*, p. 444. Long S. Le, “Labor vs. Market Vietnam”, *Asia Times Online*, 5 April 2008.

¹⁰⁶ “Vietnam: End Crackdown on Labor Activists”, Human Rights Watch New Release, 4 May 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Melanie Beresford, “Doi Moi in Review: The Challenges of Building Market Socialism in Vietnam”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38 (May 2008): 226.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

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3

STATE ENTERPRISE WORKERS “Masters” or “Commodities”?

Michael Karadjis

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) claims to be still running a socialist-oriented political system, and continues to cite the state economy as a key sector in the country’s development. There has been an ongoing debate between the more socialist-oriented wing of the party, which advocates retaining significant state ownership throughout the economy, and the more market-oriented wing, which wants majority state ownership only in areas such finance and infrastructure while leaving the rest to the private sector. By examining one aspect of the state sector that can be considered an essential element of the CPV’s “socialist orientation” — worker participation in management — this chapters seeks to interpret this debate.

In line with Leninist ideology, the CPV officially claims that workers must become “masters in social production”.¹ However, as in other communist regimes that have diverged from their democratic ideals, making Vietnamese workers complete “masters” seems to be an impossible goal. In the pre-reform era, one may be led to assume that, like the Soviet and Chinese models it outwardly resembles, the Vietnamese state was totalitarian and thus had complete control over society, state enterprises, and workers

Two decades after Vietnam introduced a programme of economic renovation commonly known in *Doi Moi*, the country today allows market competition in industry, and a new working class has been created. This is the first book to focus on the role and conditions of workers in the new economic regime. Ten of the world's leading scholars on Vietnamese industrial relations trace Vietnam's labour history and the circumstances today of state-sector workers and of migrant workers in both the cities and rural industries. While some authors explore the impact of the socialist legacy, others examine the reasons for the large number of recent strikes. The book provides insights into the workforce of one of Asia's most rapidly developing industrial economies.

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*Emeritus Professor and Visiting Fellow, School of Culture, History & Language,
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