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Abstract

This PhD dissertation project focuses on the collective agency of Thai organized workers—a group of regional migrant workers in one of Thailand’s most industrialized areas—whose labor geography and organizations were conditioned by Thai state-capital-labor relations. It examines how the social, political and geographical organizations of Thai workers shape their practices of labor activism. By linking workers’ ties to their place of origin with the new geography of automotive production in Thailand’s Eastern seaboard, this dissertation examines the agency of workers through labor activism and its relationships to migration—a geographical mechanism that bridges production and reproduction across workers’ multi-sited households.

This dissertation builds on the critical traditions within Human Geography as well as the work of feminist geographers to center the role of households and cultural practices of labor activism. By bringing together processes of production and social reproduction often examined separately, it sheds light on the ways in which gender and class politics within labor activism are inextricably linked to the division of labor within spatially extended households of Thai migrant workers. It highlights how workers draw on their collective resources (i.e. the regional ethnic culture) and social reproductive network stretched across the geography of household reproduction, which sustain labor struggle strictly seen in the sites of production.

**Masculinized Labor Activism and Geographies of Household
Reproduction in Thailand's 'Detroit'**

by

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

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May 2019

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List of Abbreviations

ACILs	American Center for International Labor Solidarity
ACT	American Corporations for Thailand
AHDRIP	Automotive Human Resources Development Institute Project
ALCT	Automobile Labor Congress of Thailand
BMR	Bangkok Metropolitan Region
BOI	Board of Investment, Thailand
ELRG	Eastern Labor Relations Group
ELUG	Eastern Labor Unions Group
ESDP	Eastern Seaboard Development Plan
ESIE	Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates
FTI	Federation of Thai Industries
IEAT	Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand
IFCT	Industrial Finance Corporation of Thailand
JICA	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
METI	Ministry of Economy, Trade and Investment, Japan
MOI	Ministry of Industry, Thailand
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OLUC	Organizing Labor Union Center
PAD	People's Alliance for Democracy
PDRC	People's Democratic Reform Committee
RNAUG	Rangsit and Nearby Area Unions Group
SERC	State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation
SEWU	State Railway Workers Union
TAI	Thailand Automotive Institute
TAPMA	Thai Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association
TAW	Federation of Thailand Automobile Workers Union
TCI	Thailand Competitive Initiative
TEAM	Confederation of Thai Appliances, Electronics, Automobile and Metal Workers
TLSC	Thai Labor Solidarity Center
TRT	Thai Rak Thai party
TWFT	Textile and Garment Workers Federation of Thailand
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
US-TDP	United States-Thailand Development Partnership

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Introduction

My PhD dissertation project focuses on the collective agency of Thai organized workers—a group of regional migrant workers in one of Thailand’s most industrialized areas—whose labor geography and organizations were crafted by Thai state-capital-labor relations. As labor geographers view migration as a form of labor’s geographical agency (i.e., Herod 1997; Rogaly 2009), autonomous feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa goes further to say that migration reveals the relationships between production and social reproduction—the latter being the main pillar of defense for the working class (1977 [1974]). This research examines labor activism and its relationships to migration, a geographical mechanism that bridges production and reproduction across workers’ multi-sited households. It aims to shed light on workers’ collective resources within the reproductive domain, which sustain labor struggle strictly seen in the sites of production. It also investigates how unionized workers, constrained by the limited scope of the labor-relation regime, drew on their collective resources from the regional ethnic culture and social reproductive network that stretched across the geography of household reproduction.

Research Questions and Methodologies

To wholly understand *how* and *why* the place-based workers organized themselves the way they did, this dissertation examines organizing practices, internal dynamics to labor activism and gender relations among regional migrant workers in one of Thailand’s most industrialized areas. It seeks to understand three main questions. First, how did strategies of the state, capital, and organized labor shape the labor geographies

and agency of workers in Thailand's Eastern seaboard? Second, how did labor and gender politics within spaces of activism inform the way in which Thai migrants organized their labor for household reproduction? Third, how did the intersections of class, gender, and regional ethnic identities inform the political and class consciousness of labor activists?

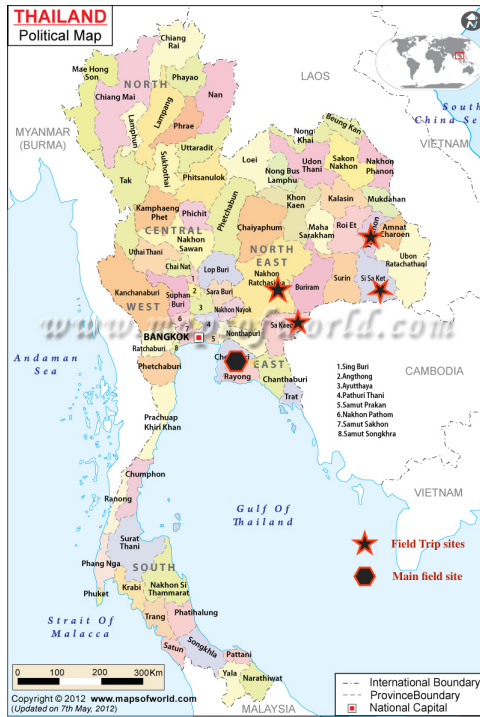
The processes of waged labor subjectivity are primarily concerned with the making of disciplined workers through production of consumers (Mills 1999a) and breadwinners (Cunningham 2001). However, the questions posed by scholars tend to be *either, or* (see Schmidt 2017). In this dissertation, I focus instead on the making of labor, simultaneously as consumer, breadwinner and caretaker, and the choices they make. I argue that, such making can be disrupted when labor-organizing attempts lead to labor disputes (i.e., corporate reprisals, dismissals, and lawsuits). This research investigates the way in which a group of 'disruptive' workers grappled with the tensions between material and financial gains and the sense of purpose in wage work, on the one hand, and a personal and collective sense of justice and belonging, on the other. This dissertation explores how a group of workers relied on their organizations, households, communities, and culture, as pillars of defense, to tackle the materiality of labor struggle, as well as the conflicts between their aspiration and disillusionment.

Methodologically, this study employs primarily ethnographic research methods to study unionists and labor activists working and organizing themselves in Thailand's Eastern Seaboard. These sites have been chosen on the basis of workers' concentration and the density of labor unions, as well as the sites' significance for the production of auto parts in global commodity chains.

Between July-November 2015 and April-August 2016, I spent ten months conducting research with a group of trade unions organizing themselves under the ‘Eastern Labor Relations Group’ (ELRG) in Thailand’s Eastern Seaboard, a region promoted by the government as an Asian hub of automobile production and dubbed the ‘Detroit of Thailand’ by industrial estate developers. It is the new geography of automotive production not only in Thailand but in Asia as well. Since the 1980s, the Eastern Seaboard has hosted multinational automotive manufacturers such as American carmakers Ford and General Motors, Japanese parts and car-makers Yokohama, Mazda, and Suzuki, and several hundred joint venture and local auto-parts suppliers. As waves of foreign investment turned local farmland into assembly lines, a series of migrant workers drawn from the poverty-stricken region of Northeastern Thailand cultivated traditions of labor militancy in the Detroit of Thailand.

During the field research, I conducted participant observation of meetings, often organized weekly and monthly, by labor union members of the Eastern Labor Relations Group—a core-working group of the Thailand Confederation of Trade Unions (TCTU)—that planned activities, analyzed political situations, and reported on industrial relations and labor rights problems. I also conducted participant observation with unionists and labor organizers as they engaged in their everyday life activities such as organizing events, socializing, interacting with partners, participating in training, attending meetings with officials during labor disputes, as well as their attendance at several general meetings of unions that each hosted over a hundred members. Moreover, I conducted semi-structured interviews with over 50 union executive committee members, and undertook a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews with over 25 workers. Finally,

I supplemented my research with in-depth interviews with an industrial estate official, a local supplier of subcontracted workers, a manager in an automobile company, and three episodes of participant observation over a period of six months with the extended families of four unionists, one male, one female and one couple, in the Northeastern provinces of Yasothon, Srakaew, Nakorn Ratchasima, and Sisaket (see map below).



Picture 1.1 Map of Thailand

Source: adapted from mapsoftheworld.com

I chose to conduct my research with the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG) because it was one of the most politically active and militant union movements in the Eastern Seaboard. In addition, its leader was well known for human rights and political activism on a national scale. Practically speaking, I had previously developed a personal connection with the group’s leader—at a level of trust I did not have with other labor groups in the region—as a result of my own activism with pro-democracy and labor movements in Thailand. Accordingly, one of the implications of this research is that it is

not a representative of Thai organized labor as a whole. Instead, it is concerned with a group of Thai workers whose experiences, both inside and outside the workplace, are closely linked to those Western counterparts subjected to transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism.

Building on this personal relationship, I relied on the ELRG leader, who introduced me to other active members and their partners. In this sense, the selection of most research participants was based on a snowball sampling method. After observing active ELRG members, I approached those who fit my criteria—Northeastern workers who were active in both workplace unionism and the ELRG. In many cases, they consented to my request for house visits, in-depth interviews about their personal history, and if relevant, interviews with their partners.

Over the course of my research, I also collaborated with the ELRG on several projects. For example, I served as a Thai-English translator for the ELRG when a network of Asian labor activists visited the ELRG office, as well as when the ELRG delegates attended the network's conference in Bangkok. During a one-day field visit of the group, I also volunteered to be the main English language guide for the Eastern Seaboard industrial estates. In fact, my engagement with international activists in this solidarity movement later led me to play an important liaison role in supporting the ELRG to file a set of grievances with international labor rights organizations.

During the first half of field research, I initiated a leadership development training, which the ELRG agreed to organize twice during field research. I took this opportunity to collaborate closely with several ELRG activists as my co-trainers. By doing so, I was able to develop closer relationships with these activists rather than relying

solely on the leader. These collaborative relationships subsequently allowed me to conduct in-depth participant-observation research on their everyday life and family histories. These training sessions also gave me an opportunity to interact with other members and rank-and-file workers, setting the snowball rolling in several directions. Most importantly, I had the opportunity to conduct research with a few women-led unions—groups that were invisible on the ELRG level.

The fact that I divided field research into two extended periods (and alternated my field research with my wife's, Emily Hong, who conducted field research at the same time in Myanmar) helped deepen my relationship with research participants. As my wife also stayed in the field site with me, her occasional presence while participating in social activities with workers' families greatly facilitated my access to women workers. In the second part of field research, based on workers' requests, my wife—a native English speaker—and I also volunteered to organize a weekend English class for workers at the ELRG office. The classes were an ideal space to talk about 'non-work' topics when mostly women regularly attended, as it was a safe environment. In addition, women often brought their children and sometimes husbands—who were not in the unions—along with them. These were excellent opportunities to have conversations about a gendered division of labor. Finally, since I always documented ELRG activities by taking notes or photos during special occasions, by the end of field research, I became known as the ELRG's photographer.

Based on these interactions, ELRG members voluntarily shared information, such as drafts of their collective bargaining agreement, with me. Women workers and union executive committee members were also willing to confide in me regarding problems

related to labor organizing.

I am greatly aware that my unique positionality—as a labor advocate and trainer—greatly influenced my interactions with research participants and shaped the interpretation of my findings. With this said, during my research, I was also very conscious of my differences—as an outsider. My positionality as an activist and advocate in many ways further complicated my other identities, particularly as a well-educated, middle-class person from Bangkok. I argue that most researchers with education and class background like mine would not have been able to access information from Thai unions, let alone gain their trust—because of class barriers and the general mistrust toward outside researchers. Methodologically speaking, I would argue that my position as both activist and advocate thus strengthened rather than weakened the reliability of the data I collected.

My research questions and methodology are primarily informed by the traditions of feminist and labor geographies, as well as working-class studies. Following the Marxian tradition within labor geographies, which views workers as historical and geographical agents (Herod 1997, Mitchell 2005), I understand labor activism within the sites of production – the struggle not only for wages but also for the fulfillment of basic needs – as a form of contestation over the usage (i.e., use values) of the built environment for social reproduction (Harvey 1976). From capital’s perspective, labor organizing is a threat to the process of capital accumulation and circulation, yet labor organizing is, at the same time, indispensable for sustaining workers’ wellbeing and community (Hayter and Harvey 1993; Harvey 2006). It is thus the nature of such contradictions, the tension between the day-in and day-out reproduction of labor power (and of capitalism) and long-

term political struggle and community building, which is the main focus of this research.

While building on Marxian theories, my research pays particular attention to the role of households, the sphere of everyday life, and cultural practices of labor activism – the importance of which has been stressed by feminist scholars (Cravey 1997, 1998; Katz 2004; Silvey 2003, 2006). My project draws specifically upon the work of four geographers: Rachel Silvey (2003, 2006)'s gendered geographies of labor activism; Cindi Katz (2004)'s terminology of resilience, rework, and resistance; Jane Wills (1998)'s tradition of trade unionism; and Altha Cravey (1997; 1998). Building on this work, this project contributes to understanding the challenges labor activists face when making political and personal choices, as well as those they encounter as a result of internal group dynamics within a context of organizing, where males are often dominant. Furthermore, it contributes to existing knowledge about organized labor in the global labor force by showing how industrial estates in Thailand were constructed in ways that rework and divide the spaces of production and social reproduction, and shape the dynamics of domination and marginality.

My research seeks to contribute not only to radical research theory but also to its activist praxis. Thus far, my findings shed light on some of the critical barriers that women labor activists face in both gendered households and masculinized spaces of organizing. This research is also part of a larger attempt to refine the theorization of labor agency and problematize the notion of resistance. Recently, labor geography has seen the 'moral turn' that has put moral and ethical questions at the center of theoretical inquiry, as well as attention to other geographies (McDowell 2015; Smith 2016). I welcome this turn, with the realization that labor geography is dominated by 'Fordist Marxism'. For

this reason, I heed feminist geographer Winders (2016), who points to the need to de-colonize geography by moving the experiences of those working and living outside the Global North into our main focus. This move also implies decentering the experiences of particular workers who have otherwise occupied a prominent place in our theorization about production and social reproduction.

With this geographical lens, I wish to discern the ties that migrant workers had with their places of origin—the Northeast region—one of Thailand’s poorest regions, and thus understand the disciplinary role that household members play for capital. This insight, first developed by the domestic work debate (Dalla Costa 1977 [1974]; Mies 1994 [1986]), originally applied to waged male workers and their unwaged female counterparts within a gendered division of labor. In the context of the Global South such as Thailand, working-class households had experienced a sort of spatial reconfiguration (Rigg and Salamanca 2011), whereas the unwaged included farm-based family members in places of origin. These family members were considered ‘unwaged’ because they were normally engaged in the informal economy. Similar to the arguments made by Marxist Feminists about waged men and unwaged women, I will show in this dissertation that the family members encouraged workers, men and women, to become involved in waged labour but because of fears of potential threats to household reproduction, discouraged their participation in labor activism.

Highlighted Research Contributions

My research findings enrich the literature on labor activism by foregrounding the internal dynamics of organizing, the roles of gender equality within such dynamics, and

the broader conditions structuring workers' participation. Specifically, this research complicates theoretical debates around labor militancy, particularly the dichotomy between political and business unionism. Labor scholars (e.g., Aronowitz 1973; Edwards 1979) tend to argue that workplace activism represents the institutionalization of class compromise and labor bureaucracy. For instance, Thai scholars have employed such views to explain aspects of Thailand's trade union movement (e.g., Napaporn 2001, for example¹). Contrary to an essentialist approach that assumes models of 'true' class-consciousness and class-based actions, my research focuses on activists' personal stories, aspiration and tensions within labor organizations and communities, to understand conditions that shape the consciousness.

The literature on labor activism in general has explained workers struggle as involving demands for dignity and recognition, while studies of Thai migration from rural to urban waged work highlight consumption and modernity as cultural resistance (e.g., Mills 1999a). This research contributes to these debates by theorizing consumption via a social reproduction framework and so joins sets of concerns that have hitherto been disconnected. As a part of production circuits, consumption meets the needs for daily reproduction of labor, household reproduction and long-term generational workforce reproduction. In other words, from households' perspectives, social reproduction is the primary form of collective consumption. From individuals' perspectives, consumption can also express a quest for social status and self-development. The social reproduction framework thus recognizes that workers' struggle for dignity and self-development are both connected and deeply contradictory—although this may not always necessarily be the case.

¹I follow the tradition of Thai studies, which uses the author's first name in the reference.

Lastly, this dissertation aims to capture the deep sense of injustice felt and articulated by workers as their main motive for participating in labor activism. The locally embedded concept of justice also helps explain indignation and inter-class conflicts at the intersection of class and ethnicity. While such sentiments became social and political resources for collective actions, the building of collective agency could also be undermined by organizational shortcomings that include gender inequality and women's marginalization. In short, this research contributes to theorization of labor agency by shifting the scope of study beyond sphere of production to account for the underlying connection between production and social reproduction. Moreover, it enriches the concept of labor agency by foregrounding dialects of collective and individual agency, its intersectionality (i.e., class, gender and ethnicity) and embeddedness in places.

Outline of the dissertation

In Chapter 1, I offer a comprehensive review of the literature on labor and feminist geographies, where theoretical debates around labor agency from geography are put in conversation with work on migration and labor activism from other disciplines, in particular anthropology and sociology. Methodologically, I enrich the first debate by borrowing insights from social reproduction theories and intersectionality, and propose a nuanced integrated framework for understanding labor, its social totality, and the co-constitution of labor, class, gender and ethnic identities.

The next two chapters start with the historical-geographical settings of Thailand's Eastern Seaboard. In Chapter 2, *Introducing Detroit of Asia*, I sketch the historical

development of the Eastern Seaboard, which started in the 1970s with the conception of the Eastern Seaboard as a spatial development project on the regional scale. This chapter is divided into two main parts. First, I illustrate the way in which the Thai ruling class and foreign capital used geographical concepts such as clusters in the crafting of Thailand's Eastern Seaboard as a spatial solution to declining competitiveness. While these geographical concepts provided American capital with economic discourses to push forward a laissez-faire agenda, Japanese carmakers emphasized the principles of the human resource paradigm to discipline manufacturing workers. Thus, in the second part, I focus on the automobile industry and how the Japanese carmakers used a human resources paradigm in their effort to produce a desirable workforce.

In Chapter 3, *Labor Geographies of Thailand's Detroit: Pineapples and Powertrains*, I illustrate the shift from farmland to factories in the area and how state policies, foreign investment, and migration came together to create the stage on which the production and reproduction of workers took place. This chapter describes Eastern Seaboard's transformation using stories of local inhabitants who experienced first-hand changes in family and career prospects that occurred during the period of economic development. By contrast, I also draw heavily on my interviews with a group of workers and unionists whose stories show their social and geographical agency—the way they creatively made this new place 'home'.

In Chapter 4, *A View from Above: Labor Politics and Trade Union Movements in Thailand*, I explore the question of labor's collective agency through an examination of workplace activism. I call into question two seemingly contradictory pre-conceptions about labor unions in the Eastern Seaboard: that they are economic unions and

conservative, but at the same time more militant than their counterparts in other areas. By examining what Autonomous Marxists call ‘class composition,’ I turn the gaze inward and look at the ways in which the labor movement has organized and divided itself. The intra-class hierarchy created by the Thai political economy shaped how workers’ class power—what Harry Cleaver calls ‘the power of workers to resist’—was articulated in, but not limited to, the organizational structure, organizing practices, and strategies of labor unions such as the Eastern Labor Relations Group. This chapter focuses on a view from above—structural and organizational composition— which, I argue, helps explain differences and conflicts within Thai organized labor. However, such a view does not exhaust an understanding of the ways in which local labor groups such as the Eastern Labor Relations Group operated. Therefore, in the next chapters, I switch my vantage point to that of activists.

Chapter 5, *A View from Below: Workplace Activism and Limits of Militancy in Thailand’s Detroit*, is based on two cases of labor dispute that occurred at the sites of two global carmakers: American and Japanese factories, which deeply impacted organized workers’ personal and political lives. The two cases of American and Japanese factories encourage examination of multinational companies’ strategies, responses from the Thai states, and local trade unions’ organizing practices. Most importantly, the two cases raise the central question of labor’s collective agency, particularly regarding the effectiveness of workplace activism and the extent to which activists were constrained by the legal framework of the industrial relations regime. I tackle the issue of constrained agency by pointing out both the possibilities and limits established by such legal frameworks. By showing the creative way in which Thai workers breathe new meanings into workplace

activism in the Eastern Seaboard, I underline the opportunities created by the formal labor-relations framework. On the contrary, through the case studies of other two labor unions in the process of formation, I foreground the real challenges faced by activists and workers, from two types of class composition: technical and political class compositions.

Chapter 6 explores workers' collective agency at the intersection of class and regional ethnicity. Workers' narratives reveal their prime motivations to be demands for bonus payments, a strong sense of injustice, and a need to provide material resources for their larger familial networks of social reproduction with material resources. With regards to labor agency, I propose the concept of empowerment—lived experiences that inform workers' entitlement to their demands and faith in collective—which is central to, but often missing from the theorization of agency in labor geographies. To capture labor agency's purposeful and creative elements, I broaden the concept of work and labor beyond capitalist social relations by utilizing a feminist materialist approach that weaves together labor agency, subjectivity, and social reproduction. This chapter also explores Thai workers' sources of cultural and political beliefs in equality and fairness by examining the meanings of justice in Thai society, before focusing on the structure Isan workers' feelings, in particular. Following Chakrabarty's (1989) notion of non-liberal concepts of equality, I offer a communitarian concept of justice that is embedded in a system of class domination and ethno-regional oppression.

I dedicate Chapter 7 to issues of gender dynamics within labor activism, gender norms, and divisions of labor in the context of broader social relations. I discuss the distinctive ways in which male and female activists perceived the time and space of everyday life, as well as in the different ways they coped with work-related struggles.

These differences were embedded in personal historiography and gendered construction of life's work. By broadening the concept of work and labor to include both productive and reproductive work, I offer a more encompassing analysis of workers' participation in activism attuned to workers' gendered, temporal, and spatial experiences. From this analysis, it is imperative that we understand labor activists' agency in the totality of production and social reproduction, which is the focus of the final chapter.

The final chapter, *Organizing from Hidden Abodes*, thus builds on the insights of social reproduction theorists (e.g., Ferguson 2017; Bhattacharya 2018) to conceptualize labor's collective agency at the intersection of migration, social reproduction, and class struggle. Against all odds, workers managed to retain their ability to shape the geography of household reproduction through reproductive strategies. In Thailand's Eastern Seaboard, for instance, workers negotiated with both their long working hours and low pay by stretching the geography of social reproduction over their extended network of households. The households and villages thus became a space in which the education of children, inter-generational caring work, and reproduction of the workforce were organized. In a sense, not unlike corporate strategies, workers outsourced part of the reproductive work through the relocation of childcare and social reproductive work. This stretching of household reproduction marks a form of collective resilience, not only for labor organizations but for the working class as a whole.

From this perspective, the main purposes of labor organizing—collective bargaining for higher wages or a yearly bonus—were motivated as much by the needs for social reproduction—as collective consumption—as by workers' sense of injustice and demands for a fair share. Accordingly, the motives behind the labor struggles were

primarily based on conflicts between the interests of production (and accumulation) and labor's goals of consumption—to improve their standard of living—in the realm of social reproduction. Looking at workplace activism from the perspective of the working class and social reproduction, this chapter attempts to theorize workers' struggle for higher wages and less working time as a form of purposeful and anti-capitalist consumption, anti-capitalist because of workers' desire to retain their labor-power for the non-productive purposes and labor struggles.

Chapter 1.

Situating Labor Struggle and Social Reproduction in Theories

While geographers view labor migration as a form of geographical agency (see Bauder 2006; McDowell 2013), scholarship focusing on the Global North pays disproportionate attention to workers and their workplaces, leaving out their places of origin. This omission seems to make sense when the focus is on the relationship between migrants and work. Nevertheless, as the Marxist-Feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa points out, migration also reveals the relationship between production and social reproduction (1977 [1974]),² highlighting social reproduction as the main pillar of defense for the working class. Understanding the relationship between two places bridged by migration processes, thus, becomes indispensable when examining workers' agency and resilience during labor struggles. It sheds light on the often-neglected collective support within the reproductive domain for labor struggles that occur at the sites of production.

This dissertation focuses on unionized workers' individual and collective agency as they respond to processes and forces of industrialization through activism and social reproduction strategies. In Thailand's Eastern Seaboard—one of Asia's automobile production centers—migrant workers from the Northeastern region struggled with increased work intensification by forming unions and engaging in workplace activism, that led to labor disputes and disruption of employment. The research examines how unionized workers, constrained by the limited scope of labor-relations regime, drew on

² *Reproduction and Emigration*, translated by Sylvia Federici and Harry Cleaver and published on <http://zerowork.org/DallaCostaReproductionEmigrationA.html>

collective resources derived from their regional ethnic culture as well as their own familial support, to strengthen labor organization during labor struggles. Conceptually then, it connects questions of labor agency with migration and activism, stressing the role of working-class households and communities, against the backdrop of labor activism at the point of production.

This research engages with two major methodological debates in labor geography; inspired by Marxist Feminism, labor history, and studies of working class's resistance from the Global South. The first debate is concerned with the theorization of labor agency and criticism of the overemphasis on trade union agency.

Conceived as a corrective to economic geography, labor geography examines labor's geographical agency from workers' perspectives (Herod 1997; 1998). Marxist geographers emphasize how labor agency impacts the ways in which geographies of capitalism are produced and agency itself is constrained and enabled by such changes (Herod 2001; Mitchell 2005). While empirical studies of labor agency are burgeoning, scholars argue that the concept of labor agency is theoretically underdeveloped as it is based mainly on case studies (Castree 2007; Lier 2007; Hastings 2016).

While the most recent period in labor geography scholarship has seen an advancement and cross-fertilization with other disciplines especially labor history and labor relations studies, labor geographers seem to be caught up in new dilemmas, one of which concerns nature of agency (i.e., it is either purposeful or consequential). As a result, some geographers propose the moral economy as an analytical framework for theorizing labor agency (e.g., Hastings 2016). This dissertation joins a group of labor geographers (i.e., Hastings 2016; Hastings and MacKinnon 2017) in welcoming such an

intervention but maintains that an analytical framework is also required to explain the dynamics of the working class, as well as the tension between short-term interests and long-term goals articulated in the struggle, to shed light on the conditions shaping the workers' agency. Further, I contribute to this debate by engaging with the literature on migration and labor activism from both geography and other disciplines, in particular anthropology and sociology.

The second debate, central to the research methodology, is about social reproduction and the conceptualization of analytical categories including class, gender, and ethnicity. This research builds heavily on insights and guidance of Marxist Feminist geographers, including Cindi Katz (2001; 2004), Linda McDowell (1997), Jane Wills (1998), Rachel Silvey (2003; 2006) and Altha Cravey (1997; 1998; 2005). Cindi Katz and Linda McDowell in particular argue for embodied, spatially located forms of agency without denying Marxist analytical categories of class, as well as gender and race. As will be shown, this dissertation adopts a social reproduction feminist framework, which is highly compatible with the dialectic concept of labor and the relational view of agency discussed in the first debate.

1.1 Labor Geography and Labor Agency

Andrew Herod (1997; 2001) distinguishes between geography of labor—studies of how capital takes advantages of labor's geographical differences, and labor geography, how workers attempt to shape the capitalist landscape and spatiality of their lives. Building on such a vision, labor geographers contend that labor is not a passive, but an active geographical agent (e.g., Herod, 1997). Labor geography is thus a normative project that opposes “what portrays as the victimisation script embedded in more

orthodox forms of political-economic geography” (Peck 2013, p. 109).

Labor geographers argue that in the same way as capital produces space, workers have an ability to shape spaces (Herod 2001; 2012), jump scales (Herod 1998; Savage 2006), and make landscapes (Mitchell 2012). Moreover, labor geographers understand the significance of place and space to capital and labor relations (Herod 1995; 1997; 2001). For example, in the series of seminal work in labor geography, Herod analyzes the scalar strategies of American trade unions, and how economic globalization both constrained and facilitated the workers’ agency (Herod 1992). His work has spurred scholastic interests, both inside and outside geography, in examining and theorizing ‘labor’s spatial fix’ (e.g., McKay 2006).

In their review, Coe and Jorhdus-Lier (2010) summarize four main thematic strands within studies of labor geography: collective organization of workers through labor unions and groupings; formation of local labor market and regulation regime; intersections of employment relations with workers’ identities; and the material landscape’s roles in shaping labor struggle (p. 212). A Marxian tradition of labor geography characterized as ‘pro-worker’ or ‘the Left leaning’ politics involving a political commitment to tell ‘the stories of labor from their own eyes’ (Herod 1997; Castree 2007)—is most concerned with the first of the four themes. Inspired by such conscious commitment toward workers’ collective power, geographers often focus their empirical attention on organized labor or trade union movements (e.g., Herod 1998, Bergene *et al.* 2010, Wills 1998). As a result, collective labor agency is often equated with workers’ *organizational* abilities to shape and rework geography (Herod 1995; Mitchell 1996).

The focus on collective agency has been accompanied by the growth of research into informal groups of labor and other forms of labor activism. These studies have variously focused on public sector workers (see Jordhus-Lier 2012), feminized, low-paid unions in the service sectors (see Savage 2006; Tufts 2006, 2007, 2009), community-based unionism (Tufts 1998; Wills 2001; Savage and Wills 2004), unorganized workers in the Global South (Rogaly 2009), and even consumer-based campaigns (Johns and Vural 2000). In this work, scholars tend to identify certain types of labor, framed as either community-based or social movement, as proxies for workers' collective agency.

Since the 'broadening out' phase of labor geography that occurred in the 2000s (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010), new directions in labor geography reflect empirically the transformations that have taken place in the structures of global capitalism (especially the widespread resort to outsourcing and privatization). Not only in labor geography, but in geography more generally, is a fragmentation in approaches, which is in turn influenced by post-structural approaches (McDowell 2008; Rutherford 2010). In the labor geography, Andrew Herod and Jane Wills have played important roles in advocating for an 'anti-essential' re-reading of Marx and Gramsci by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Resnick and Wolff (1987) and Gibson-Grahams (1996; 1997). Such approaches have challenged the theoretical status of formal workplace and class in labor geography (Rutherford 2010). Furthermore, the growing numbers of studies conducted across scales and places of labor organizing, as well as the interests on global and local processes and interactions (e.g. Global Production Networks and Labor Process Theory), have led to an endless documentation of workers' diverse forms of occupations and agency.

The debates on labor agency revive some of the long-standing themes in social

sciences, most especially questions about the relationships between social structures and human agency. For instance, Jamie Peck (2013) has warned that labor geography's progressive mission could lead adversely to a reification of the structure-agency binary—research program that economic geographers working in the 1980s tried to avoid. Similarly, several geographers suggest ways to address such drawback. Mitchell (2005) has also argued that the focus should not be on the agency of workers alone but also on the conditions that create opportunities and constrain agency. Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) and Peck (2013) assert a need for a relational view of labor agency, structured geographically but embedded spatially in places. Critical of how labor geographers have tended to conflate collective labor agency with trade unions, Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) suggest that studies of labor agency should also address multiple levels of collective agency as expressed in other forms of organizations, not just trade unions. Moreover, they rightly point out that labor geographers are primarily concerned with “grounded processes of reworking and resistance ... manifested in (intersecting) social and cultural relationships and with institutional forms such as global production networks, the state, community networks and labor market intermediaries” (218). Such views echo a call to re-engage with the strategies of capital and state by radical geographers (Castree 2007; Lier 2007; Tufts and Savage 2009; Herod 2010; Peck 2013). This dissertation follows such the call by engaging with the strategies of capital and state as well as the grounded processes of workers' resistance on the local scale.

1.1.1 *Relational, Dialectical, and Class-based agency*

In fact, some labor geographers reiterate Marx's foundational conceptualization of labor in light of the theory of value. According to Postone (1996), labor is both an

abstract entity and sentient and social beings forced to sell their labor power in the market (Castree 1999; Castree et al 2004; Lier 2007). In this sense, labor is a pseudo-commodity, and the contradiction of labor as an abstract and living being is highlighted when ‘put in place’ (Peck 1996). Labor geography thus foregrounds the dialectic that exists between abstract and concrete labor, structured by the global economy, on the one hand, and articulated in place-based differences (i.e. nationality, gender, ethnicity, race), on the other.

This framework emphasizes inevitable tensions and conflicts that arise between labor and capital. According to Castree (1999), Postone (1996)’s re-reading of Marx offers a possible way to link orthodox with post-modern/ex-Marxist approaches in human geography by creating a shift from the project being a critique of capitalism from the point of labor to a critique of labor within capitalism. Despite the insights brought about by this return to Marx’s work, subaltern and critical theorists questioned the hegemony of capital’s universal logics as well as the overemphasis on abstract over concrete time and labor (see also Gidwani 2004; McNally 2004). Therefore, it is not sufficient to stress the dialectic of abstract and concrete labor, but also to highlight labor’s embeddedness and potential conflicts between capital’s interests of production and accumulation and workers’ goals of consumption and social reproduction. This dissertation argues that these conflicts are primarily the underlying cause of most labor struggles.

In concrete systems of social domination, the concept of labor is plural (i.e. gendered, racialized, etc.) and subject to heterogeneous forms of power (Castree 1999, 150-151). Castree (1999) argues that this approach advances the political left’s goal that promotes both a politics of redistribution/equality and a politics of recognition. By

contrast, other, more orthodox Marxist geographers have attempted to enrich the concept of agency by reviving the importance of the class project. For example, Raju Das (2012) criticizes the post-Marxism-inspired labor geography that reduces class to identity and subjective experiences, what he calls ‘subjectivism’. Accordingly, place-based differences wrongly outshine class as a shared relation. Das (2012) argues for moving away from a narrow focus of labor geography on spatial agency to class geography—a “class approach to the study of socio-geographical issues”(30). He is right to point out several problems in labor geography approaches, including a lack of focus on materiality of labor process in the analyses and being “oblivious of the class character of labor organization”.

Similarly, Rutherford (2010) contends that despite the contribution of post-structural approaches in questioning the primacy of class, the theoretical status of formal workplaces and class in Marxian labor geography remains significant. Das’s and Rutherford’s (2010) critiques can serve as important guidance that can be used to evaluate the growing number of studies (in the next section), which grapple with questions of agency and resistance. Most importantly, the focus on abstract labor should not be made primary over concrete labor, but rather held dialectically interdependent, with an emphasis on its embeddedness in space and time.

1.1.2 Resistance from Below: Micro-revolts versus Transformative Actions

One of the most interesting developments from outside labor geography but gradually merging into it has been the conceptualization of labor agency found in the Local Labor Control Regime (LLCR) and Global Production Networks (GPNs) literature.

Based on Jonas's (1996) concept of Local Labor Control Regimes (LLCR, or sometimes LCR – Labor Control Regimes), the literature is inspired by the debate about the politics of production (see Burawoy, 1985 and Braverman, 1974) and enriched by regulation theory (Peck 1996; Walker 1999). The literature is now growing. For example, Hastings and MacKinnon's (2017) recent study of resistance at the point of production in Glasgow call centers exemplifies an attempt to enrich the concept of agency by improving the 'top-down' account of Labor Process Theory (LPT) with resistance 'from below' emphasized by the LCR approach. It is also a nod to Rutherford's call on the significance of the workplace. Ironically, such an attempt has had the reverse effect of narrowing down the analysis to oppositional, everyday resistance (see Ellem and Shields, 1999). Another strand of work is the focus on the local labor control regimes in the newly industrialized spaces of the Global South (Kelly 2001; Coe and Kelly 2002; McKay 2006; Neethi 2012). For example, Kelly's (2002) study of the roles of spaces in labor control of several Southeast Asian industrial areas effectively shows the diverse ways in which spatial strategies are distinctively used and deployed by local actors at different scales. While Hastings and MacKinnon (2016) criticize Kelly (2001; 2002) for underplaying the role of worker agency in accommodating, adapting and challenging local regimes (108), their focus on 'resistance from below' also risks of inflating micro-resistance at the expense of an understanding of how agency is constrained. This dissertation aims to find the balance between the two approaches.

Similarly, Cumbers, Nativel, and Routledge (2008) insert labor onto the GPNs and Global Community Chains (GCC) literature, highlighting social relations of production and class struggle within the capital accumulation process. Inspired by

Autonomous Marxism, this framework is useful in showing the trade union as a site of ongoing struggle, as well as explaining divisive and conflicting positionality among members of the trade unions. By studying a global union network, Cumbers *et al.* (2008) make the case for nuanced understanding of organized labor movements by presenting uneven political and organizational geographies within the trade union movement.

By contrast, Carswell and De Neve (2013), who work in the same tradition of GPNs, propose that labor agency is not only acts of resistance but rather “constitutive of particular capitalist regimes.” Using Katz’s classification (i.e. resilience, reworking, and resistance), Carswell and De Neve argue for more attention to micro-struggle of individuals in everyday, informal practices, in the sphere of both production and social reproduction. This line of arguments has recently gained more purchase among labor geographers who study unorganized workers whose formal rights are denied (see Rogaly 2009; Lund-Thomsen 2013; Hauge and Fold 2016). For example, Hauge and Fold (2016) attempt to answer the question whether Katz’s classification entails intentions or outcomes. By looking at the gaps between intentions and consequences, they propose the concept of ‘transformative trajectories’ supposedly attentive to the dynamics of agency. However, Hauge and Fold (2016) is one of the growing number of studies that seek to capture the elements of agency by riskily resorting to functionality, posing the question whether actions are intentional, and hence strategic, or inconsequential. This trend toward a more functional approach can be considered a result of what Ellen M. Wood (1986) calls the ‘randomization of the history’, and separation of politics and class agency. In other words, the study of labor agency is not situated in the historical-geographical materialist analyses of class struggle (E. P. Thompson 1963).

In the most recent period, Coe and Jordhus Lier (2010) have inspired geographers to shift their studies of agency outside the sphere of production across spheres connecting production and reproduction and toward other spheres shaping workers' identities (Hastings 2016). Thomas Hastings calls this most recent phase starting from the 2010s "labor process and labor history." In fact, Hastings (2016) and Hastings and MacKinnon (2017) encourage a moral turn in labor geography, which seeks to bring moral and ethical concerns into theories. Hastings (2016) argues that despite labor geography's possibilities for explaining self-interests-based actions and internal conflicts among workers, more recent work often focuses on workers' inter-class conflicts, ignoring the moral dimensions of one group's domination over others (see also Gough 2010). In fact, labor studies scholars have long drawn from the moral economy framework, inspired by social theorists including Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and Antonio Gramsci, to understand the impacts of capitalist work process on workers, as well as possibilities for changing exploitative and alienated social relations (Bolton and Laaser, 2013). Hastings and MacKinnon (2017) comment that the emergence of work in this vein is a welcome development for labor geography. Nevertheless, interests in the moral economy should not be limited to a narrow focus of explaining discrete disputes and workers' contradictory actions across different geographies.

In Nancy Fraser's attempts to reconcile the binary of economic and cultural struggle, based on two seemingly distinctive paradigms and conceptions of collectivities, she argues that a "false antithesis" is created between the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition (1997; 2005; also Fraser and Honneth 1995). Through examples of groups socially located between the two extremes, what she calls a two-dimensionally

subordinated group who suffers from both maldistribution and misrecognition, Fraser and Honneth (2007, p. 19) show that neither the politics of redistribution nor the politics of recognition alone suffices. For her, axes of social division (i.e. gender, race, class, and ethnicity) are all two-dimensional social differentiation. For example, gender can operate as a class-like division and a status differentiation. In this sense, most social groups facing injustice need both redistribution and recognition. In her attempt to fill the gap with regard to political injustice, Fraser (2009) later added a third dimension into her framework, hence the politics of *representation*. The concept of misframing is indispensable “to interrogate the mapping of political space from the standpoint of justice” (p. 7), in which “the ‘who’ of justice is itself unjustly defined, ...(thus) excluded from consideration” (ibid.).

This research examines the labor struggle within the workplace, labor organization, and broader network of household reproduction. While the lens of labor politics (i.e., a politics of redistribution and recognition) is typically used to explain conflicts in the workplace or the labor relations regime (e.g., workers’ strikes), it is not so useful to understand worker conflicts within the organized labor movement and working-class community. This additional dimension—politics of representation—is thus relevant in the context of minority workers who contest the rules of the game, as “it tells us who is included in and... excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition” (Fraser 2009, p. 17). Not only does this research seek to capture material and moral elements of workers’ demands, as in the expression ‘dignity and daily bread’,³ which serve as driving reasons activists organize, but it also pays attention to the

³ The phrase that Rowbotham and Miller (1994) borrowed from the slogan of the Indian women workers.

political economy of struggle in which workers are excluded and discriminated as an ethnic minority.

1.1.3 Constrained, but Autonomous Agency of the Working Class

The debate about labor agency reveals a wanting element in the literature, a framework which explains the dynamics in agency of labor itself during the ongoing process of labor struggle. While moral element is crucial for the analyses, studies of agency should aim to explicate tensions and contradictions between workers' short-term interests, on the one hand, and long-term goals of the labor struggle, on the other. In order to do so, it implies an approach that captures how working class internally negotiates competing material needs, and conflicting political aspiration inside the families, communities and labor organization.

This research project re-centers the roles of working class struggle in the dialectic of production and social reproduction. While the historical materialist feminism offers methodological skeleton for centering gender, class and social reproduction in the research, *Autonomia* or Italian strand of Autonomous Marxism, lays out several analytical concepts to enriching the concept of labor agency and resistance within the labor geography literature. Due to a lack of engagement with Autonomous Marxism within the discipline, comprehensive reviews of materials are rare. For this reason, I take this opportunity to mention larger arguments and crucial concepts used in the research.

Autonomous Marxist scholars define labor in the framework of class struggle, where capital is always in the process of drawing a part of the labor power (i.e. surplus value) into itself through production. Labor is defined as non-capital, representing both the objective/dead labor and subjective/living labor (Tronti and Murphy 2010). Two

concepts are crucial to conceptualize the materials of this research. The first is the concept of autonomy, defined by Marie Mies (1994 [1986]) as “the innermost subjectivity and area of freedom, without which [workers] are devoid of human essence and dignity, without which they become puppets without an element of free will and consciousness ... (40).” Such concept of autonomy is commensurable to objectives of the research that seek to capture inspiration and aspiration of workers, as well as the material and social organization.

On the fifth-decade anniversary of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), scholars attempted to create a dialogue between Thompson-inspired labor study and labor geography (see Ellem and McGrath-Champ 2012). Thinking through the experiences of labor in the context of urban deindustrialization, Cumbers, Helms, and Swanson (2010) borrow E. P. Thompson’s history from below and blend it with self-valorization class struggle perspective from Autonomous Marxism. Aware of the potential weakness of Scott’s everyday forms of resistance, as well as charges of romanticizing resistance by autonomous agency, Cumbers *et al.* (2010) remark that “there is a complex ethics and morality to class resistance, with a need to be able to differentiate resistance – in a sense of “getting by” within capitalist social relations – and the kinds of self-valorisation projects”(p. 60). In other words, a line must be drawn between non-transformative micro-revolts and transformative collective actions. For this purpose, they combine Katz’s terminology with Cleaver’s *cycle of struggle*. A key element of the cycle of struggle, Cumbers *et al.* (2010) note, “is capital’s attempt to decompose working class unity through various strategies, while labor struggles for the recomposition of a united class” (p. 58; original emphasis).

According to Cumbers *et al.* (2010), what Autonomous Marxism and E. P. Thompson share is the perspective that puts the processes of production and social reproduction together as a social totality, “emphasizing how labor agency and resistance necessarily take place both within and outside the workplace” (p.48). As they summarize, “a critical element in this approach is to perceive the agency of capital and labor as bound up in a dialectical totality” (p. 67). In fact, based on their discussion of different campaigns, Cumbers *et al.* (2010) point to three elements that resonate with research on labor struggle and labor organizing: first, connecting production and social reproduction (e.g., issues of decent wages and conditions with welfare and public service provision); second, grassroots mobilizations, denial of formal party or politics, and appeal to alternative ethos of dignity, cooperation, and mutual aids; and third, the inclusion of social groups and identities (p. 66-67).

Featherstone and Griffin (2016) also highlight Thompson’s commitment to multiple and political forms of agency as a corrective to static accounts of constrained agency proposed by Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010). According to Featherstone and Griffin (2016), such constrained agency is prone to be treated as given, rather than generatively practiced, in the sense of antagonistic relationships constantly renegotiated, reworked, and politicized (p. 380-381). Moreover, labor geographers could learn from the Thompsonian labor history as well as subaltern theories, to think through the ways in which agency, space, and political economy are constructed and negotiated. Most relevant here is the engagement, first, with contested forms of experience and exclusions of the working class shaped through labor struggles and organizing and second, with the power relations through which such processes are shaped in spatial terms (p. 389).

These multiple and political forms of agency are in line with Jane Wills's (1998) concept of the geographical constitution of workers' tradition in place. Citing Gramsci's (1977) account of the Turin autoworkers and their empowerment in realizing their connectedness with workers in other places, Wills (1998) sketches out the skeleton for conceptualizing the spatial and temporal constitution of organizing tradition:

“Although workers' traditions are shaped by specifically local historical conditions, by the actions of local trade union activists, and through the formation of collective repertoires, institutions, and memories of resistance, at the same time the external is perennially influential.” (133)

By external, Wills means the transmission of ideas and people across space through different means, including migration, media campaigns, and solidarity making. Wills (1998) emphasizes the strike's role as part of a “tradition” (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and ‘collective repertoire of resistance’ which supports the consolidation of unions across national space. The tradition of striking, as Wills (1998) argues, exists partly because previous generations of workers struck before, and hence the existence of supportive institutions. Therefore, the repertoire of resistance is an accumulation of experiences, especially sentiments of power and strength derived from successive strikes. In short, Wills (1998) highlights the production of scale by unions through the diffusion of ideas accumulated in such repertoire (e.g., via communication, *demonstration effect*, and solidarity building) across England. In this purview, Will's space of collective struggle can be understood as *places* in terms of both locale and locus of identity.

This dissertation builds on such insights of labor history and geography in studying organizing practices of Thai migrant workers who combine Northeastern Thai

identities and ways of life transported with them via migration with the tradition of labor militancy embedded in the locale. Moreover, the concept of labor agency that foregrounds the accumulation of experiences, as well as empowerment process through personal realization and collective learning, is attuned to the Autonomous Marxism-inspired framework that puts labor struggle at the center of analyses.

1.2 Feminist Theories and Methodologies: Centering Social Reproduction

The dialectic notion of labor, emphasized by Castree (1999) in the first section, fits well with feminist approaches. It opens up possibilities for complicating, as well as gendering, the concept by clearly presenting how workers are engaged in contradictory forces of production and social reproduction. According to Marx, labor works for capital by creating value (i.e., profit) in the productive realm, but workers also create use-value in the reproductive realm. In feminist terminology, reproductive work done by workers, especially women, is known as the ‘production of life’ (Mies 1994[1986]; Luxton 2006). This research centers the dialectic concept of labor and takes social reproduction as an integral part of labor.

The concept of social reproduction has a plurality of meanings. Traditionally, Marxist theories understood social reproduction as the historical, structural, and long-term reproduction of capitalist relations or the perpetuation of relations of production and class inequality (c.f., Marx 1967; Althusser 2014[1971]). While building on Marxian theories, this research takes feminist approaches in both political economy and feminist geography, which focus respectively on material and dialectical relations of social reproduction and capital accumulation (Picchio 1992; Bakker and Gill 2003; Luxton

2006; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Strauss 2012) and household practices and the sphere of everyday life (Katz and Monk 1993; Katz 2004; Mitchell et al. 2004).

The major contribution of feminist political economy is to foreground the centrality of gender and social reproduction in reconstituting production and exchange relations (Bakker and Silvey 2008, p.1). Social reproduction is often defined as activities engaged both on day-to-day basis for reproduction of labor power and in the long term as the inter-generational reproduction of labor force (Picchio 1992). The strength of this approach is the emphasis on contradiction and correspondences between structures (e.g., state-led social welfare), social relations (e.g., class, gender and race), and practices (Strauss and Meehan 2015, p.8).

Nevertheless, more recent work on social reproduction and global political economy is diverse in approaches and questions, engendering a variety of definitions, overlaps, and murkiness (Bezanson 2006; Luxton 2006; Braedley and Luxton 2015, ix-x). Generally, social reproduction refers to biological reproduction, the reproduction of the working population, and the provision of caring work (Laslett and Brenner 1989; Bakker and Gill 2003). As Braedley and Luxton (2015) recently comment, the reference of social reproduction as the reproduction of the working or laboring population is just one example of the broadening definition, which leads to its fuzziness.

By contrast, feminist geographers define social reproduction as placed processes in which work and lives reside in a non-binary way (Katz, 2001; Mitchell *et al.* 2004; Smith and Winders 2008). Although both groups share the tendency to generalize definition, there is a tension between a geographical approach, which foreground bodies and identity, and feminist political-economy scholars, who insist on a production and

reproduction dialectic. With a few exceptions (e.g., Breitbach 2007), feminist geographers have been more interested in the scale of bodies than other scales, as a contested site, in particular women workers' body (McDowell 1997; Tonkin, 2000 for 'in-appropriate' body; Salzinger 2001), and male workers' body (Leslie and Butz 1998). While the concept of life's work exemplifies feminist geographers' focus on social reproduction, by emphasizing reproductive work as women's labor, the way in which class, gender, and race intersect are not fully theorized (Valentine 2007; Braedley and Luxton 2015).

1.2.1 Feminist Geographies of Work, Migration, and Life's work

Feminist scholars have problematized a naturalized binary between public/private, work/home, and production/reproduction. Most importantly, they have challenged the socially constructed boundaries of 'work' making visible the exclusion and devaluation of women's labor (England and Lawson 2005). According to England and Lawson (2005), on the connection between work and place, a contribution by feminist geographers is the expansion of the concept of work beyond the formal workplace, especially in diverse sites where gendered work is performed and gender identity constructed and reproduced. The most relevant strands of work include geographical studies of scalar politics and studies of migration and activism.

This project draws specifically on the theoretical and methodological initiatives of feminist Marxist geographers, who have offered particularly valuable insights into studies of work at the intersection of production and social reproduction, migration, and labor activism (e.g., Katz 2001, 2004; Silvey 2003, 2006). First, Cindi Katz (2001)

incorporates the realm of social reproduction into relations of production, proposing the study of workers as ‘embodied subjectivity.’ In fact, based on her direct engagement with ontological question of labor, Katz (2004) offers a way in which agency is conceptualized through a grounded theory of resistance.

For example, Katz (2004) highlights children’s agency in her work by acknowledging their creativity and ability to appropriate environmental knowledge through everyday life. As Katz (2004) argues, “through [the] material social practices, social actors become members of a culture and construct their own identities. In these activities, young people (and others) are both objects and agents, acquiring cultural knowledge and reworking it through the practices—*intentional and otherwise*—of their everyday lives” (p. 20, my emphasis).

Accordingly, adults and children alike have agency which can be seen through the act of resistance—*the possibility for the disruption of capitalism* (my emphasis). One of her aims is, thus, to “problematize the notion of resistance” (p.19). As several labor geographers, including Coe and Jordhus-Lier, (2010) argue, Katz (2004)’s categories of *resilience, rework, and resistance* allow for a conceptualization of labor agency that complicates a simplification of agency and overstatement of resistance generally seen within labor studies.

Second, Rachel Silvey (2003; 2006) creatively shows the ways we can imagine gender geographies of labor activism by rethinking the linkage between social and spatial processes, as mediated by power. As Silvey summarizes, feminist geographers are quick to highlight the place-specific meaning of households “through the social practices defining domesticity, tensions around the boundaries separating the public and the

private, meanings of kinship relations, norms of sexuality, and the relationship between various work and caring spaces” (Bondi and Rose, 2003; Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2003) (Silvey 2006, p. 68). Feminist scholarship on gender and migration also foregrounds the significance of households as units of decision-making in which gendered hierarchies of power shape migration patterns (see Lawson 1998; Chant 1992). Moreover, feminist geographers have deepened our understanding of the household as a socially constructed scale (Marston 2000).

Third, geographers like Altha Cravey and Melissa Wright who study global assembly lines are particularly important in documenting the place-based experiences of workers in export promotion zones, showing the complex interaction between the everyday scale and global geographies (Wright 1997; Cravey 1997, 1998, 2005). Studying working-class household formations in the context of Mexican industrial transitions, Cravey (1997) shows that the changing forms of capitalist production have dialectical relations with household organization and composition, as well as a gendered division of labor. Therefore, she concludes, dynamics of household and gender relations are crucial for understanding structural change. Engaged with debates about work and social reproduction, Cravey (2005) broadens the concept of work to include women’s unpaid work such as cooking, cleaning, childrearing, caring, and emotional work, and community upkeep. Her focus on social reproduction helps foreground the analytical emphasis of structures such as state provision of social services, its dynamics, and its relationships to household formations.

By contrast, Melissa Wright (2006) contributes to multi-scalar analyses of the body and workplace wherein workers are subjected to a certain discourse, allowing them

to be seen as social and political agents as well as ideological representations. Her mixed approaches are also helpful to foreground the differentiation between workers, such as skilled and unskilled, men and women, which often dictate hierarchy within the organizing rank-and-file.

Inspired by Wright (2006)'s theoretical toolkit with Marxism, post-structural feminism, and postcolonial theory, Linda McDowell poses a question whether it is possible, both theoretically and methodologically, to work through intersectionality with multiple perspectives, especially with a focus on complex identities without rejecting modern categories including class, race, gender, and ethnicity. In the next section, after situating labor agency in the social reproduction literature, I address this question contrasting an intersectionality and social-reproduction approach.

1.2.2 Political economy, Social Reproduction, and Intersectionality

For political economists working in a feminist historical materialist tradition, Bakker and Gill (2003) offer crucial groundwork. As they explain, their social ontology of global political economy integrates the dialectic of structure and agency and of power/knowledge as a way to distinguish moments of power, production, and social reproduction. Built on Gramsci's concept of work, Bakker and Gill (2003) explain that their "understanding of social ontology involves the analysis of social relations of production and the mediation and transformation of these relations" (p.21). Such understanding encapsulates the Gramscian notion of human subjectivity and "the ways in which this is constituted and constrained by different moments of class formation, racialization, sexuality and gender" (p. 21).

Bakker and Gill's emphasis on 'instrumentality' (the objectification of human

creativity and freedom into a means for profit accumulation) seems to put the primacy more on capital's agency than on labor's. This focus differs from Autonomous Marxism's premise, which goes further than critical theories in seeing instrumentalization but recognizes the antagonistic recomposition of the working class (Cleaver 2017, p. 76). Despite such difference, this research recognizes congruence between Bakker and Gill's social ontology and the premise of Autonomous Marxism that human activities have potential to change and transform social relations, associated with production/reproduction.

Susan Ferguson argues that intersectionality could enrich social reproduction feminism, a framework that highlights the social totality within capitalism, as well as dialectical relationship between the capitalist whole and its differentiated part (2016). Central to this approach is the conception of labor that represents creativity in the broader sense of *life*, not simply economic value (p. 49, original emphasis). Again this is similar to what Gramsci calls 'work,' this framework points to the centrality of the working-class family as the social site for reproducing labor power.

Ferguson explains that there are two main camps within intersectionality feminism (Yuval-Davis 2006). The first is the 'additive' or cumulative camps whose focus is to locate oppressive social relations that affect marginalized subjects. This framework tends to focus on the micro-scale, without investigating larger structures or systematic logic conditioning the subject's experiences. It is also criticized as 'essentialist' in the way it reifies each category of difference (Valentine 2007). By contrast, the second camp, the constitutive approach, proposes that oppression is an outcome of internally relational processes (p. 43). An example would be the co-

constitutive nature of class, race, and gender. This approach, contrary to the additive model, seeks to theorize the ‘diverse-yet-unified nature of power,’ a framework commensurate with transformative politics. With such open-ended conceptions of the social, nevertheless, the constitutive model struggles with theorizing the social totality and the interrelations within it because power is conceived as diffuse and unknowable (Ferguson 2016, p. 44). This research follows social reproduction feminism, with an integrative concept of labor closely related to the concept of work, as defined by Gramsci (1971).

However, by claiming an encompassing notion of work, it does not argue along the same line as Mitchell, Marston, and Katz (2004), who suggest new forms of subjectivity by ‘life’s work.’ While recognize the need to avoid reification of the production/social reproduction binary, this research concurs with Barbara Ellen Smith and Jamie Winders (2015), who contend that the analytical distinction remains important, especially while researching the working class, whose “line between work and life is not necessarily falling away, but instead, is constantly negotiated and made manifest in both spatial and temporal terms” (105). Similarly in my research, working-class families are subject to conditionings that force them to “stretch their labor geographies and fragment the space-times of work” (Smith and Winders, p. 105).

1.2.3 Work and Labor Activism in Social Reproduction Framework

Since Italian Marxist-Feminist scholars including Maria Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati have corrected Marx’s limited vision of reproductive work, housework has become recognized as a process of value creation and hence productive

work (Dalla Costa 1977 [1974]; Fortunati and Fleming 1995 [1981]). According to Fortunati and Fleming 1995 [1981], wage relations have historically affected male and female workers differently. Owing to a historical sexual division of labor, in the West, men entered waged relations first, while women became *indirect* waged workers, or non-waged workers. Therefore, Marx originally viewed male workers as having the capacity to produce, hence creating value—exchange value—while women only had the capacity to reproduce labor power, or use value that appeared as non-value. In other words, women were considered working outside capitalist waged relations and external to the working class and class struggle. When male waged workers ‘consumed’ housework produced by female house-workers in the process of reproduction, according to Marx, it appeared that they consumed only use-value because housework was not presented as possessing exchange-value in the market. However, such ‘use-values’ that reproduce men’s labor power are subsequently consumed by capital in the process of commodity production.

The implications of a historical gendered division of labor are multiple. First, when capital appeared to pay a single male worker at work, capital actually exploited both the male worker and the female houseworker. Capital thus directly controlled the male worker, while indirectly controlling the non-waged female houseworker (s). In other words, a male worker, her husband, mediates her relationship with capital. Even when women become an integral part of the labor force, they are still a major force in reproductive labor (Fortunati and Fleming 1995 [1981]). At work, women directly produce surplus labor for capital, while at home they indirectly do so through domestic work. Second, as a result of the first point, housework possesses dual and contradictory

characters. On the one hand, it appears as ‘natural’ and ‘pre-capitalist,’ while on the other, it serves as a pre-condition for value creation in commodity production. Such a *doppelcharacter* conceals housework’s true nature and significance in the process of capital accumulation. Third, relying on their husbands’ wages, women become a disciplinary mechanism for capital. They urge and encourage men to go to work, while they discipline children and prepare them to be future workers. This work is essential for making a disciplined workforce.

Around the same time, along similar veins, Canadian feminists Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton published critiques of domestic work, albeit with more liberal proposals and a less degree of refinement with regards to Marxist theories (see Chapter 2 in Vogel (2013[1983]) for a comprehensive review). In fact, as Lise Vogel points out, not all socialist feminist scholars agree on the centrality of housework and its relations to the Marxist category of mode of production. On these issues, I disagree with Vogel (2013[1983]), who argues that domestic work is neither productive nor unproductive and that women as housewives are not exploited labor. Instead, I follow Maria Mies, who insists on usaging exploitation and oppression, rather than shunning the former as Vogel did.

In fact, housework includes both domestic and care work. While the former is mainly concerned with material aspects such as cooking, washing, and cleaning (that require tools and machines), the latter entails principally immaterial aspects (i.e., love, affection, companionship, and sex). Housework thus produces both material and non-material use value. For this reason, products of housework by non-waged female houseworkers, namely their ‘dead labor,’ become part of surplus labor. In this purview,

housework should be seen as social use-value, a source of social productivity (Clever 2017). Marie Mies (1994 [1986]) criticizes the analyses of the domestic labor debate as Eurocentric and limited because the debate leaves out non-wage work performed by women, especially in the Global South in the so-called informal economy. Mies contends that the domestic labor debate could provide an analytical basis for other non-wage relations including subsistence peasantry in the colonies and developing countries. In this research, I integrate non-wage work provided by the extended family of workers and activists as an extension of the concept of reproductive work that complements my analysis of social reproduction.

The discovery of housework as productive, exploitative, and internal to class struggle led to a struggle of women against states and male-dominated trade unions in developed countries such as Italy, UK, and the U.S (Dalla Costa and James 1971; James 1973). The women's movements in the 1970s raised the issues of inclusion and real wages (James 1973). In the pamphlet *Women, the Unions and Work, Or...What have not to be done*, Selma James attacked unions that only organized struggles for wages as what workers received but not what they could retain, since companies always found ways to make workers give some wages back to them through inflation. Moreover, unions limited their campaigns around wages, in a narrow sense, and prevented a larger mobilization by organizing only waged workers. In this sense, the struggle organized by unions was not a real working-class movement. As feminist analyses point out, women as non-waged houseworkers are part and parcel of capital's process of value creation. In this vein, it is crucial to organize the struggle with both waged and non-waged workers, hence based on

the family not the factory.⁴ The Western women's movement in the 1970s advocated for autonomous politics, or separate organizing among women only; however, James clearly understood that it was not the form of organization that mattered, but the way in which women or the working class organized. As she argued, power lies in "the way workers get unions formed, organizing together, not the unions" (1973, p. 59).

By contrast, Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) reconciles the tensions between workplace struggle (i.e., demand for higher wages) and class struggle by re-connecting the Marxist theory of the value of labor power with a social reproduction framework. Drawing on Lebowitz's (1992) *Beyond Capital*, Bhattacharya (2017) points out that workers' individual consumption is part of the circuit of capital because the reproduction of labor power is both production and reproduction of capital itself (p. 77). As labor is both commodity and living being and the value of labor power is determined by the value of necessities required to maintain and reproduce labor power (i.e., the means of subsistence), labor is unique in the sense that unlike other commodities, it adjusts its needs according to changes in its own prices. In other words, when the prices of wage goods increase, workers reduce their needs accordingly. Nevertheless, labor's unique nature as both commodity and living being allows capitalists to benefit from the

⁴⁴ This argument is best illustrated in *Salt of the Earth* (1954), a now-classic labor movie—based on the historical strike in 1950 of Local 890 of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMM-SW) in New Mexico. In one powerful scene, Esperanza, a miner's housewife, asked Ramon, her husband and a leader of striking miners, why the union did not have decent plumbing in its demands. Ramon first dismissed her question by responding, "the demand got lost in the negotiation process." Pressed for more explanation, Ramon said that they couldn't get everything at once and that there were more important demands, especially the "safety of the men... You are a woman, you don't know what it's like to be up there [in the mine]." While Esperanza tried to defend the equal importance of sanitation, Ramon finished the conversation by saying, "First, we need to get equality on the job [between American and Mexican coalminers], then we could work on other things. Leave it to the men." Later, during the protracted miners' strike, in which the mining company successfully got a court injunction to ban all miners from picketing, women in the miners' families, led by Esperanza, decided strategically to replace their husbands. While Esperanza was on the picket line, Ramon first resisted the caretaking of three children, including his newborn baby. However, when his wife was finally arrested and put in jail, Ramon had to take domestic work and soon realized how exhausting it was. He complained to a male neighbor that it took him three hours to heat up the water for laundry. "If the strike is settled, which I doubt, I'll never go back to work for this company unless they install hot running water for us. It should have been a union demand from the beginning".

intrinsically reduced value of labor power—always sold at the par value in a labor market. In this regard, Bhattacharya (2017) argues that labor’s struggle for higher wages is connected with a working-class struggle to improve living standards in the realm of social reproduction. Here, based on the historical materialist tradition, Bhattacharya’s social reproduction is a totality: namely, the reproduction of society as a whole, not only the reproduction of daily labor power and the generational workforce. Moreover, Bhattacharya (2017) proposes the second circuit of production, or the production of labor power as a distinct process, but one that is integral to the circuit of capital itself. The second circuit is as follows:

$$M - A_c - P - L_p - M \quad (\text{p. 81})$$

In other words, the reproduction of labor power is the process in which workers exchange money (M) with articles of consumption (A_c). As domestic work scholars have pointed out (e.g., Mies 1994 [1986]), such a process is itself value creation—an integral part of the process of production—that results in labor power (L_p) to be exchanged for money wages (M). According to Bhattacharya, workers’ consumption in the second circuit is purposeful in the sense that workers consume commodities as use-value (e.g., food, clothing, housing, education), for self-development, or even self-transformation, not for capital. Such purposes in the reproduction process contradict the capitalist’s goal of capital accumulation in the first circuit ($M - C (M_p, L_p) - P - C' - M'$).

This research re-centers the roles of working-class struggle in the dialectic of production and social reproduction. While historical materialist feminism offers a

methodological skeleton for centering gender, class, and social reproduction in the research, social reproduction theories lay out several analytical concepts to enrich the concepts of labor agency and resistance within labor geography. Therefore, I combine two key concepts: empowerment, inspired by the concept of self-valorization from Autonomous Marxism, and self-development from Social Reproduction Framework (SRM), to enrich the conceptualization of agency and resistance.

In the context of Thailand's Eastern Seaboard, although wage relations and the workplace remain central to its labor geography (Rutherford 2010), it is crucial to establish that the conditions that create opportunities and restraint for agency have a larger scope than the workplace itself. By saying this, I follow feminist geographers and scholars who highlight the importance of 'extra-workplace' relations (McDowell 2006, 2008, 2015; Wills 2008; Smith 2016), including home and communities of workers.

McDowell (2008) suggests that the focus on class should include overall ways of living and social relations within the home, community, and workplace (p. 21). In this respect, the meaning of working class must expand. The working class encompasses both waged labor and unwaged workers who are part of workers' family and community. Similarly, as Wills (2008) suggests, labor geographers need to be more attentive to the 'extra-workplace' dimension of class, which includes the organizational and societal conditions in which workers find themselves. In fact, focusing on women's labor in the service sector, McDowell shows that the geographies of work and social relations are more complex than 'moving away from the workplace' (2015). While new kinds of work now take place in 'amorphous spaces,' women who perform care labor are moving back into formal workplaces (McDowell 2015, p. 5). In a sense, McDowell proposes a

different labor geography—small-scale geographies encompassing home and community, while at the same time questioning the ‘end of working class’ thesis.

On the same vein, feminist sociology Barbara Ellen Smith (2016), who has closely engaged with labor geography, reflects that the sub-discipline is dominated by what she calls ‘Fordist Marxism’—studies based on experiences of white, waged workers in manufacturing. According to Smith (2016), the issue is also concerned with the overemphasis of production and formal workplace, at the expense of ‘the others.’ Fordist Marxism implies problematic, neat conceptual boundary between work and non-work, workplace and home, and hence space of production and social production. As a result, feminist epistemological transformation is needed. By this, she means the epistemology that conceptualizes class and gender in the way that does not prioritize class at the expense of gender and other analytical categories, especially race. In this purview, labor geographers are better off doing two things: studying labor agency in the multiple settings of spaces and social relations and reconceptualizing gender and class. This dissertation takes these two tasks seriously.

Conclusion

This dissertation heeds a group of labor geographers, who point to relational, dialectical, and class-based view of labor agency (McDowell 2008; Wills 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010; Das 2010; Rutherford 2010; Peck 2013). It also follows hints of certain geographers, including Castree (1999), Cumbers et al (2008), and Cumbers et al (2010), who suggest an introspective approach: rethinking the concept of labor with regard to the labor theory of value. Theoretically, this route leads to an underexplored

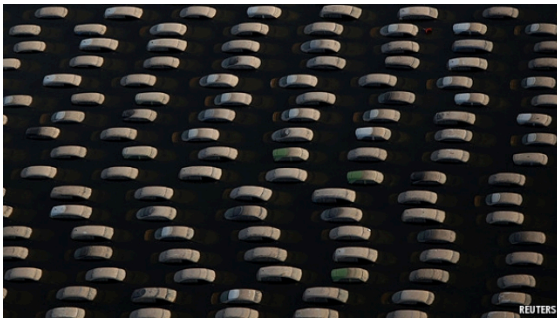
strand of Marxism in labor geography, Autonomous Marxism, which brings class struggle back to center stage. Epistemologically speaking, as Autonomous Marxism is historically guided and enriched by the history of labor struggle in places such as Turin and Detroit, this partnership is fortunate and appropriate.

The debate about labor agency reveals a wanting element in the literature, a framework which explains the dynamics of labor agency itself during the ongoing process of labor struggle. While the moral element is crucial for the analyses, the studies of agency should aim to explicate the tensions and contradictions between workers' short-term interests, on the one hand, and long-term goals of labor struggle, on the other. In order to do so, it requires an approach that captures how the working class internally negotiates competing material needs and conflicting political aspiration inside the family, community, and labor activism.

Chapter 2. Introducing *Detroit of Asia*:

Japanese-American hybrids made in Thailand

During one of Thailand's biggest floods in 2011, aerial images of newly assembled cars submerged in dark water made global news. The scale of production and, hence, the extent of damages were astonishing. One famous image published by *the Economist* (see Picture 2-1.) resembled a post-modern painting: a black surface dotted with a pattern of silver rectangles. As *the Economist* stated, "it made for interesting pictures, but for the Japanese carmakers it was a catastrophe" (2013).



Picture 2-1

For many observers, as the article remarked, the floods revealed "something not widely known: Thailand is the Detroit of the East" (ibid.). *Detroit of the East* was a

nickname that industrial estate developers gave to Thailand, suggesting its importance as one of the Japanese hubs of the global car production. The floods in 2011 actually reduced automotive output significantly, lowering Thailand's world ranking from 10th to the 15th (International Organization of Motor Vehicles Manufacturers 2012).

The article argued that the floods in Thailand had significantly disrupted supply chains of automotive parts, with cascading effects regionally and globally (Vaidya 2011). A halt in production in Thailand held up assembly lines in Japan and even North America (Montblake 2011; Mayne 2011). These reports underscore the fact that Thailand's automotive industry is now integral to global car production.

The floods' impacts on carmakers also disclosed the unfamiliar geography of car production in Thailand. For example, Honda, located in the worst flooded area of central Thailand, suffered most from assembly-line disruption (Vaidya 2011). By comparison, Toyota, Mitsubishi, Isuzu, and Auto Alliance (a Ford and Mazda joint-venture), located in the Eastern Seaboard, were only indirectly affected because of interruptions to the supply of parts (*ibid.*). Their production was halted for a period of few weeks, rather than months as in Honda's case. Further, based on the government's promotions, the Eastern Seaboard houses not only multinational carmakers but also a multitude of small and medium auto-part factories that are part and parcel of the Thai automotive industry.

The *Economist's* report situates Thailand in the regional and global economy by portraying the global economy as if it was an abstract space. This narrative is not uncommon among policy documents and analyses, which generally focus on economic growth and regional planning as well as business and industrial strategies—a focus of this chapter.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that in this chapter, the role of business and political elites, both Thai and foreign, in development planning is central to the analysis. The chapter's first half illustrates how the Thai ruling class and foreign capital used geographical concepts like the cluster as organizing principles and discourse in the development of Thailand's Eastern Seaboard. Hence, I use a bird's-eye view as the main perspective. By contrast, the second half focuses on automobile industry's political economy and how Japanese carmakers used a human-resources paradigm to produce their desired workforce.

This does not mean that working people play passive roles in shaping economic

and labor geography. Central to this dissertation is the argument that the more business and political elites attempt to mobilize capital and the state to create a stern and secure regime of capital accumulation, the greater potential workers have to disrupt the process of capital accumulation. In short, workers' ability to disrupt capital accumulation is inherently and dialectically related to the stakes of capital therein (Clever 2017). One of Italian Marxism writers, Mario Tronti, argues that workers once organized as working class, possess 'the power of attack' while the capital has 'the power of resistance' (Tronti and Murphy 2010). To understand potentials and limitations of labor's power of attack, as well as capital's power of resistance, this chapter introduces the concept of social factory, which requires an elaborate and larger scale planning, as a central concept.

In this chapter, I divide my chapter into five main sections. In the first three sections, I sketch historical development of Thailand's planning processes that have structured Thailand's economy, especially since the 1990s, around the conception of Eastern Seaboard Development Plan (ESDP). As I show through the terrain of development planning, from the late 1980s to 1990s, the Eastern Seaboard became a highly contested spatial development project where American liberal hegemony and Japanese developmental ideologies competed for influence. In the third section, I illustrate the way in which, against the backdrop of Thailand's economic crises, a partnership of Thai and American think tanks played a crucial role in shifting labor disciplining regimes from treating workers as producer to consumer. In the fourth section, the emphasis shifts to the automotive industry and the way in which Japanese industrialists imposed a Japanese-style labor process and work ethos in Thai factories through discourses of human-resource development. In the final section, I discuss how a

process of social factory is contingent on a growing middle class and technical class re-composition in Thai labor force.

2.1 Thailand's Uneven Development and 'Decentralization'

Against the backdrop of Thailand's uneven development, the Thai state has constantly shaped the country's economic and labor geography by means of its industrialization promotion strategies (Parnwell 1992; Rigg 2003)⁵. Beginning in the early 1980s, the Thai state started to focus on decentralization by developing industrial estates outside the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR) and Central region (Glassman 2004). During the third plan of Thailand's social and economic development (1977-1981), the Thai state officials began to realize that rural development alone was insufficient for tackling regional disparity, particularly in view of the growing influx of migration from the Northeast to the BMR. In 1982, as part of the promotion of regional growth centers and secondary cities, the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT) began the construction of the first industrial estate outside the BMR and Central region located in the Northern province of Lamphun (Vutthisomboon 1998; Glassman 2004). With light industries such as textiles, garments, leather, and food processing concentrated around the BMR and the Central region, the Northern Region of Industrial Estate was promoted as a site for the production of electronics and hard disk drives in the 1980s (Glassman 2004). Although rationalized as a decentralization initiative, industrial estates are *de-facto* development strategies designed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI),

⁵ As Jim Glassman (2004) argues, uneven development and social imparity have long histories tracing back to the uses of urban industries as counter-insurgency tactics in the post-WWII period. The consequence was the concentration of urban and industrial activities around the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR: Bangkok and five adjacent provinces) and the Central Region.

often resulting in widened geographical inequalities and class divisions (Glassman and Sneddon 2003).

As noted by Glassman (2004), the Thai state encouraged decentralization by motivating, rather than disciplining, capital by, for example, institutionalizing low-wages alongside tax incentives for foreign investment. Central to this ‘de-concentration process’ was migration out of poor regions, which played a ‘functional dualism’ role (c.f., De Janvry 1981, cited by Glassman 2004, p. 118), where rural working families subsidized urban industrialization processes. This subsidy allowed workers’ households living on less-than-subsistence level at the places of origin, to participate in the social reproduction of the workforce at the subsistence level (Jamaree 1996; cited by Glassman 2004).

Decentralization processes are not possible without disciplining workers via control of the minimum wage rates which varied from province to province (Glassman 2004). For these reasons, two geographical processes — migration and industrial relocation — became essential mechanisms that abetted the perpetuation of low-wage, labor-intensive industrialization in what Glassman calls a “sweatshop’ regime.”⁶ One of the main results of these processes is the constant-but-varied socio-spatial shifting of class structure across regions, with the general trend of increasing the working-class populations in all regions (Glassman 2010).

Starting in the 1990s, the Thai economy faced declining competitiveness in international markets for its agricultural and primary produce (Mieno 2013). As a solution, the Thai state accelerated the replacement of its import-substitution policies with export-led, labor-intensive industrialization, targeting particularly the Eastern

⁶ The way in which Thai states used labor-disciplining measures during the post-war period to the end of 1990s in transforming Thailand’s agrarian-based society into a modern social factory is well documented in Glassman (2004).

Seaboard region (Shimomura 2013). From the state's perspective, the Eastern Seaboard had two major locational advantages. First, as the Gulf of Thailand was a main source for natural gas and the location of deep-sea ports, the Eastern Seaboard had secure access to energy and a means of transportation. Second, due to its relative proximity to the Northeast region, the Eastern Seaboard region was also guaranteed access to an enormous pool of reserve labor (Mieno 2013; Shimomura 2013). For these reasons, Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) explicitly promoted the Eastern Seaboard as the main hub for heavy industry, including automotive and petrochemicals.

2.2 Planning of Thailand's Eastern Seaboard⁷

An international law firm, which recently organized a conference on investment opportunities in Thailand's Eastern Seaboard, advertised that:

The Eastern Economic Corridor is the enhancement of the former Eastern Seaboard, ... [n]ow Thailand moves from the "Detroit of the East" to the manufacturing paradise of Asia. The Eastern Economic Corridor will see investments of US\$ 43 billion during the next five years, mostly through foreign direct investment.

The EEC could be seen as part of the Chinese geo-economic doctrine for OBOR (One Belt, One Road) the transnational connectivity project to connect China with Asia, Europe, and Africa through the land corridor (SREB, Silk Road Economic Belt) and the sea corridor (MSR, Maritime Silk Road) to augment global trade and economic cooperation.⁸

⁷ This section draws heavily on two chapters, Mieno (2013) and Shimomura (2013) in *Aid as Handmaiden for the development of institutions* by Nissanke and Shimomura (eds). Shimomura (2013) notes that the World Bank insisted that the Thai government utilize the already-existing port in Bangkok.

⁸ Thailand aims to create the manufacturing paradise of Asia, *Pugnatorius*, <https://pugnatorius.com/eec/> accessed 20 Sept 2017.

Therefore, for many foreign investors and international developers, Thailand's Eastern Seaboard area now represents a global scale of economy. It is becoming a world-class powerhouse and location for manufacturing and trade.

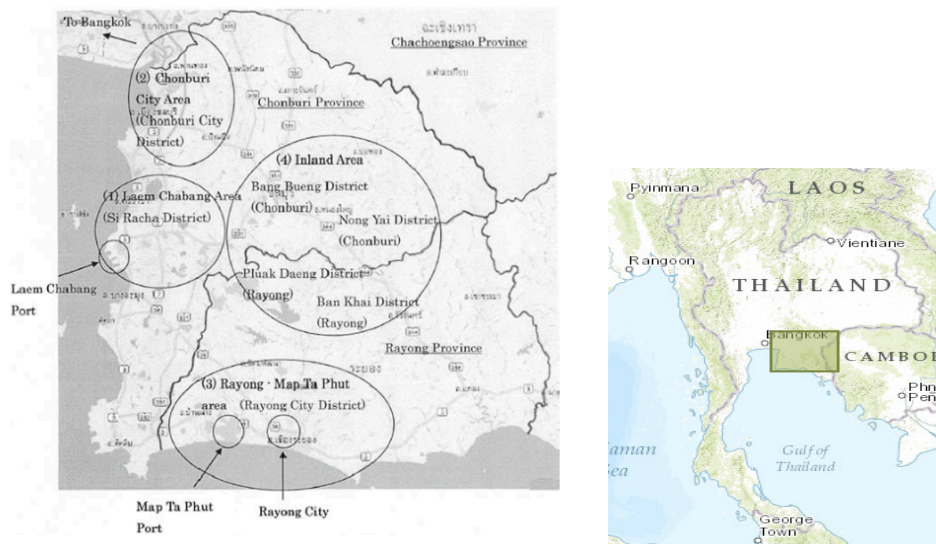
In mid-September 2017, more than 500 Japanese firms, led by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Investment (METI), met with the Thai government to discuss Eastern Economic Corridor's significance.⁹ In fact, Japanese investment has long been a major influence in the crafting of Thailand's industrial policies, especially those concerning the Eastern Seaboard. This section discusses the influence of Japanese capital in shaping development of the Eastern Seaboard.

Since the late 1970s, Thai policymakers and foreign investors have viewed Thailand's Eastern Seaboard Development Plan (ESDP) as a solution to the decline in Thailand's competitiveness. The World Bank conducted a feasibility study in the late 1970s; and in 1981, under the chairmanship of General Prem Tinsulanonda,¹⁰ then-Prime Minister, the Eastern Seaboard Development Committee was established. In fact, the Japanese state was heavily involved from the outset — via the feasibility study — and in planning through several agencies and programs, especially the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) loans program. As Japanese foreign assistance and loans were designed to promote its own private companies operating aboard, the Thai government had to hire Japanese consultants for the construction plans (Hatch and Yamamura 1996). The World Bank also participated in the finances of the ESDP's Master Plan jointly with the British

⁹ "Japanese executives to meet Prayut in September," *Bangkok Post* (Aug 29, 2017)

¹⁰ According to Glassman (2004), Prem Tinsulanonda's policies represented a major break in the Thai political economy when the Japanese quasi-hegemony and more diffuse global neoliberalism replaced US Fordism as the dominant accumulation scheme (p. 97). As a contrast to US interests in its geopolitical influences, Japanese interests were restricted to narrower economic interests such as competitiveness (i.e., production costs and prices).

government through a British contractor (Shimomura 2013). The Master Plan was then incorporated into Thailand's fifth five-year development plan (1982-1986). As Thailand was heavily affected by the global oil price shock in the late 1970s, the Thai government received the first loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1982, under the terms of a structural adjustment program. Through structural adjustment loans, the World Bank, as discussed below, pressured Thailand's government to scale down the ESDP, by cancelling the construction of two deep-sea ports, Laem Chabang in Chonburi province and Map Ta Phut in Rayong, with an industrial complex inside each projects. However, the Thai government wanted to promote the two major industrial projects to be the key economic revival plans.



Map 2-Error! No text of specified style in document.-1 (Source: Mieno 2013)

Apart from these two projects, the ESDP was also to be equipped with infrastructure networks including roads, water supply, and other supporting facilities. Moreover, due to the discovery of natural gas in 1973 in the Gulf of Thailand, the Map

Ta Phut Industrial Project was set to be promoted as the first large-scale petro-chemical industrial project in Thailand. It was in the Map Ta Phut site, where a National Fertilizer Plant was originally planned as well. However, in the early 1980s, when the program first began, the World Bank constantly raised concerns about Thailand's budgetary status, especially in light of the huge investment that would be required in the Laem Chabang and Map Ta Phut ports as well as the National Fertilizer Plant. This led to a revision of the ESDP, which was followed by a three-year suspension of the whole project.

In the late 1980s, a Thai newspaper reported a corruption scandal associated with concession of the port construction.¹¹ In fact, this scandal involved Japan's attempts to block other national interests, especially South Korea's, from gaining access to the development project.¹² Nevertheless, Japanese influence increased sharply after the Plaza accord, which resulted in the Japanese Yen's appreciation, and hence, an influx of Japanese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Thailand. Armed with a flood of capital, Japanese investors successfully pressured the Thai government to push the ESDP forward, and ignore the World Bank recommendations (Shimomura 2013). Yasutami Shimomura (2013) argues that foreign industrialist interests successfully convinced the Thai state to resume the Laem Chabang project by framing their concerns around the issues of infrastructural bottlenecks and inefficiencies in the BMR. In light of the drastically appreciated Yen, Japanese industrialists also had to ensure that they could secure a production location abroad. This influx of Japanese investment led East Asian investors to follow *en masse*. In the first half of 1986, FDI from Japan increased 50 percent (ibid., p. 112). The Thai state also facilitated the influx by a series of de-

¹¹Concession Scandal (in Thai), *The Manager* 1989

¹² It is somewhat ironic that Yasutami Shimomura (2013) comments, "it is remarkable that [...] the project was done without serious scandals." It is quite possible that the scandal was not reported in foreign media.

regulations and liberalizations in the financial and capital sectors. In the next decade, however, Thailand would experience one of its worst economic crises, largely attributed to such financial liberalization.

The ESDP scheme strengthened Japan's grip over the Thai economy as Thailand's share of borrowing from Japan rose tenfold. Average net FDI from Japan rose from \$510 million in the 1980s to \$5,418 million annually in the 2000s (Ghazali *et al.* 2011). Since its initiation, the Eastern Seaboard region has received \$40 billion worth of FDI and created at least 460,000 jobs (Ariga and Egima 2000, cited by Hill and Fujita 2012). Due to the operation of the Laem Chabang port as an export base, the massive influx of FDI into the Eastern Seaboard inland industrial estates accelerated in the mid-1990s and peaked in the end of 1990s (Mieno 2013). While FDI continued to flow into the Eastern Seaboard in the late 1990s, most FDI originally planned for the Map Ta Phut project gradually moved to the inland area, Bowin district in Chonburi and Pluak Daeng district in Rayong, at the expense of Chonburi city and the Leam Chabang Area. Toward the end of the 1990s, new factories that followed the foot-loose FDI were mostly small-scale, downstream suppliers that catered to the demands of large corporations, which were, in turn, lured by the BOI investment incentives to locate in the area. Compared to the coastal ones, these newer industrial estates were similar in sizes in terms of total area. They concentrated in auto and parts manufacturing but were managed by private developers.

It is worth noting two important facts here. First, despite claims of industrial upgrading in petrochemicals, the employment contribution, such as new job creation, was low (*ibid.*, p. 101). Second, the analysis of actual factories establishment recorded by the

Department of Factories shows that, throughout the 1990s, only a few large petrochemical factories developed clustering near the coastal Map Ta Phut industrial complex. By contrast, light industries and basic metal production factories began to be concentrated in Chonburi city. In short, beginning in the late 1990s, labor-intensive industries such as electronics, medical and optical machines, and motor vehicles began to attract increasing numbers of migrant workers to the area (Mieno 2013).

According to Shimomura, the Thai state successfully maneuvered conflicting interests between the Japanese and World Bank with two main strategies.¹³ First, the Thai state de-politicized the ESDP and contained it within the scope of the technical realm (i.e., interpreting the issues as simply economic and fiscal problems). Second, a group of technocrats — led by then-Finance minister Sommai Hoontarakool — played a major role in directing Thailand toward a compromise solution guided mainly by Japanese interests (Shimomura 2013, p. 123). It is worth noting that Sommai Hoontarakool studied economics in Japan and started his first professional position at the Japanese Bank in Thailand.¹⁴ I highlight these two points to reiterate that, rather than being a natural process, the success of the Eastern Seaboard is a product of major interventions, through the partnerships of foreign capital and Thai elites.¹⁵ This is one of the central arguments

¹³ Shimomura (2006) suggests that the share of Japan's development aid to Thailand in the 1990s increased while loans from the World Bank's Thailand decreased (cited by Hill and Fujita 2012, p. 273).

¹⁴ By contrast, Sanoh Unakul, the Secretary General of NSDB who wrote a note to PM Prem Tinsulanonda for suspending the plan, was a Columbia University alumnus. Pasuk and Baker (2002) note that Sanoh Unakul was a leader who gathered a group of Thai technocrats, all strong believers in the free-market credo, in a planning group. This group included Kosit Panpiemrat, Suthy Singsaneh, Narongchai Akrasanee, and Nukul Prachuabmoh, the former head of the central Bank—who were all students from US universities “during the time of US patronage of Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, and were affected by the prevailing enthusiasm for market liberalization (p. 165).” Most of these technocrats also played important roles in policymaking in the late 1980s, as well as the currency devaluation in 1984-1985.

¹⁵ An institutional analyst, who focused on Overseas Development Assistance, explained that Japan chose Thailand because of its strong and centralized government, flexible decision-making system, supporting export technocrats, and ultimate goals of economic growth (Ohno 2003a and 2003b, cited by Hill and Fujita 2012). However, such factors were historically specific to Thailand's quasi-democratic regimes, in which political and civil rights were suppressed. As

made by Italian Marxist writers such as Mario Tronti. In the next section, I show how several important players: World Bank, USAID, Thai and American think tanks, and a partnership of Thai and American business, mainstream the cluster concept in Thailand. As a result, the concept has become a major part of Thai industrial policy in the 2000s.

2.3 Clusters Competitiveness as a State's Policy

Starting at the end of the 20th century, the concept of cluster competitiveness became the dominant economic and geographical discourse. In a pamphlet published by Thailand's Board of Investment (BOI), a cluster is defined as a "concentration of interconnected business and related institutions that operate within the same geographic areas (BOI 2015)." Further, the National Board of Economic and Social Development drafted the ninth five-year plan (2002-2006), which highlighted the areas of human resources, competitiveness, and science and technology.

During Thaksin Shinnawatra's administration of (2000-2006), the government identified five strategic sectors to be promoted for the Thai economy, articulated aspiringly in geographical or locational terms: Kitchen of the World (food), Detroit of Asia (automotive), Tropical Fashion of Asia (fashion and textiles), World Graphic Design and Animation Center (software), and Tourism Capital of Asia (tourism). To order to restore Thailand's comparative advantages on international market, the

certain political economists (Pasuk and Baker 2002; Ockey 2004) argue, the so-called bureaucratic polity, in which a military-bureaucrat alliance controlled policy-making, gave way to parliamentary politics in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the state became more susceptible to demands from autonomous social groups. At the turn of millennium, the country's new constitution brought a powerful business tycoon, Thaksin Shinnawatra, and his one-party government into power. Despite his promises to reduce the country's dependency on exports, during Thaksin's administration, the dual-track economy (e.g., expansion of exports alongside the internal market) strengthened the FDI-based export economy even further.

government emphasized, through a series of policies and plans, the concepts of innovation, industrial clusters, and a knowledge-based society (Intarakumnerd 2011).

As many scholars (e.g., Looney 2004) have observed, Thaksin Shinnawatra invented a unique *realpolitik*,¹⁶ where he turned the country into a corporation, and himself a CEO, with layers of managers spiraling down the administrative hierarchy. In his economic approach, known as *Thaksinomics*, he set policy goals and charged state agencies to follow his directives to achieve those goals. His policies were generally well received by many because they were strategically driven by dual-track populist objectives that aimed to increase both the international competitiveness of business and purchasing power of the population. Thaksin Shinnawatra developed a reputation for applying fashionable and accessible ideas such as the clusters to his policy campaigns.

In 2003, Thaksin met with Michael E. Porter, who had been commissioned to prepare a report on the competitiveness of Thailand's five strategic sectors (Bangkok Post 2003). Accordingly, the BOI designed incentive packages, targeting investment in designated strategic industrial clusters. In terms of industrial policies, the cluster concept was applied on national, regional, and local scales. For instance, Thailand was divided into 19 geographical areas for the planning and implementation of its own cluster strategy (Intarakumnerd 2011, p. 47-48).

Ten years following the coup d'état against Thaksin Shinnawatra with the military's prolonged effort of cleansing his influence, his policy legacies remained.¹⁷

¹⁶ Following a fact-finding mission in Thailand, Vietnamese delegates from the Ministry of Industry reported that Thaksin Shinnawatra's administration significantly changed the way Thai state agencies operated (2005). Even though Thailand still relied on state agencies to formulate industrial strategies, they argued, Thailand was not a developmental state *per se*, as Thaksin Shinnawatra was less interventionist and committed to the integration of the global economy, which boded well for the mandate of international organizations such as the World Bank and IMF (MOI-VDF 2005).

¹⁷ Like most of the programs initiated during the Thaksin's administration, the repackaged policies were simply renamed. Not many changes had been made by the coup makers and the reformist government to these so-called

Most recently, the BOI repackaged the cluster policy into two main programs, *Super Cluster* and *other targeted clusters*. The Super Cluster applied, according to the BOI pamphlet, to ‘advance technology and future industry’ including (1) Automotive and Parts Cluster; (2) Electrical Appliances, Electronics, and Telecommunication Equipment Cluster; (3) Eco-friendly Petrochemicals and Chemicals Cluster; (4) Digital-based Cluster; (5) Food Innapolis, and (6) Medical Hub. The Cluster (3) was targeted to locate in Chonburi and Rayong of the Eastern Seaboard, while Cluster (1) and (2) are to cover seven provinces; three in the Eastern Seaboard, its neighboring Prachinburi, Nakhon Ratchasima (connected to Prachinburi), Ayutthaya, and Pathum Thani.

The investment incentive offered by Thailand’s BOI for the Super Cluster has included both tax and non-tax incentives. Tax incentives covered an 8-year corporate income tax exemption and an additional 5 years of 50% reduction afterward as well as personal income tax exemptions for international specialists working in specified areas. Non-tax incentives included permission for foreigners to own land and special consideration for permanent residence granted to the leading specialists.

2.3.1 The Cluster concept and Free Enterprise Ideology

Michael E. Porter’s concepts of the cluster and the competitive diamond have received significant interests, not only from Thaksin, the Thai state agencies and industrialists, but also from policy makers and politicians all over the world. Economic geographers Ron Martin and Peter Sunley (2003) have commented that this attention was a result of many factors, including Porter’s focus on competitiveness and the concept’s

criticized ‘populist’ programs. It is also worth noting that Dr. Somkid Jatusripitak, who had been in charge of the cluster policy under Thaksin, was reappointed after the 2015 coup as the deputy Prime Minister and in charge of the Super Cluster.

association with the so-called knowledge economy. More importantly, owing to its ambiguity and conceptual elasticity, the cluster is more an ideology than a concept *per se*. Most relevant to the case of Thaksin Shinawatra and Thai policy makers is that the notion of cluster “sits well with the current preoccupation with micro-economic supply-side intervention, and especially with the policy imperatives of raising productivity and innovation” (Martin and Sunley 2003, p. 8-9).

In fact, the cluster concept is not entirely new. The idea of the cluster resembles Alfred Marshall’s (1890) triad of external economies: availability of skilled labor, supporting industries, and different firms’ specialization of at different stages (Martin and Sunley 2003; Intarakumnerd 2014). By comparison, Porter proposes that the national competitive diamond, comprising four sets of factors: (1) firm strategy, structure and rivalry, (2) factor input conditions, (3) demand conditions, and (4) related and supporting industries, provides decisive elements for the success of a nation’s exporting enterprises. As Martin and Sunley note, the competitive diamond is essentially a way of decomposing a national economy – that is, turning it into a spatial metaphor – as the key is the interaction within the competitive diamond and how it is enhanced in view of geographical concentration or clustering (p. 7).

However, the cluster concept itself is problematic in a number of respects. First, it lacks clear industrial and geographical boundaries, with the very idea of geographical proximity appearing to be “highly and ridiculously elastic” (p. 11). Second, the concept is deficient in any explanation concerning the geographical range or scales. In other words, as Martin and Sunley explain, it is not clear “whether and in what ways different clustering processes operate at different scales” (p. 12). Most importantly, the theory of

the cluster treats clusters as self-contained and separated from the rest of the economic landscape (p. 17). It is as if the cluster within the neatly bounded location can be developed in isolation from its surroundings. Lastly, the theory of competitiveness is inherently problematic, as in reality, nations do not essentially compete in the same way that firms compete. Nevertheless, Porter reinforces this problem by using ‘competition’ interchangeably with ‘productivity’ (p.15).

2.3.2 Institutionalizing the cluster concept via development assistance programs

However problematic the concepts are, *Washington Consensus* organizations such as the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), quickly took up the concepts. By the late 1990s, they were champions of its application to international development. Between 1998 and 2003, with support from the World Bank, USAID extensively funded cluster-based competitiveness initiatives around the world, spending nearly \$60 million in 26 developing countries, including Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, the Dominican Republic, Uganda, Croatia, Mexico, and Thailand (USAID 2003).¹⁸ As a report prepared by a Texas-based consulting firm to the USAID highlights and clarifies, key elements of a competitive initiative is to *re-position* the industry toward niche markets, greater value-added products with the strategies devised and implemented *by cluster members* — business entities themselves (vi). The report also

¹⁸ In fact, Glassman (2004) documents in great breadth and length the influence of US hegemony on Thai society during 1945 to 1980. To name the most tangible influence, the major Thai development agencies (e.g., NESDB and BOI) were mostly created commensurately with World Bank recommendations, following its 1957-8 mission. In the 1960s and 1970s, anti-communist missions in the region tremendously increased American involvement with Thai politics and, hence, security and economic policies. Until the late 1980s, Thailand received a substantial amount of aid, assistance, and funding, in both financial and technical terms. In sum, the roles of US hegemony in general (as well as the US- Thai counter-insurgency and anti-communist alliance) had largely contributed to the creation of many conditions, including the proletarianization of the Thai peasantry, paving the way for the current industrialization and accumulation regime.

emphasized cluster members' central roles in the decision-making that guides strategic reforms of policies, laws, and regulations.

USAID founded the US-Thailand Development Partnership (US- TDP) which, in 1990, commissioned a group of contractors from Chulalongkorn University, the North Carolina-based Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise (KIPE),¹⁹ and the Brooker Group,²⁰ a Thai consulting company. The group's aim was to

demonstrate new, more private sector-oriented ways of assisting development through support for US-Thai partnerships; ... [and] develop an institutional arrangement that would provide ways to contribute this sort of assistance after the closure of USAID bi-lateral mission (KIASia website).

Due to an unexpected Congressional budget cut, the US-TDP was short-lived. However, aided by a group of Thai elites, the USAID mission finally succeeded in founding the Kenan Institute Asia, a Thailand-based non-profit organization, and an offshoot of KIPE, to continue the work of promoting belief in free enterprise in Thailand.²¹ A central figure in this group was Anand Panyarachun, a former Thai Prime Minister.²²

During his administration, Anand appointed many likeminded technocrats, including Sanoh Unakul (as mentioned earlier, who was responsible for the ESDP's success) who was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister in economic affairs, as well as Kosit Panpiemrat and Suthy Singsaneh who received ministerial appointments. In

¹⁹ KIPE is part of the Kenan-Flager Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, named after Frank H. Kenan, the main benefactor of the university, who also founded the Business School. Kenan, himself a strong advocate of free enterprise, created his family business around oil and transport businesses (New York Times 1996). In the U.S., the KIPE is engaged with scholars and executives who collaborate "for the good of the free enterprise system (KIPE website)."

²⁰ Similarly, the Brooker Group is a financial and real-estate consultancy and capital management company. Since 2003, the firm has been headed by Chan Bulakul, a Thai "pioneer in promoting foreign institutional investment in the Thai stocks in the early 70s" (Bloomberg 2017).

²¹ Private funders, including Citibank and JPMorgan, had also financially supported KIASia.

²² Anand Panyarachun was invited by the military to serve the position in 1991 and 1992. He was also an ex-diplomat and Thailand's Ambassador to many countries, including the U.S. in the early 1970s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when he retired from the civil service, he was heavily involved in the private sector, as chair of a textile conglomerate, as well as chair of the Federation of Thai Industry.

retrospect, these liberal technocrats and their free-market zeal were responsible for the liberalization of Thai financial and money markets in the early 1990s, developments that paved the way for the *Tom Yum Kung* crisis—Thailand’s worst economic crisis which ravaged the economy in 1997 (Pasuk and Baker 2002, p. 166- 167).

Anand Panyarachun has since played an active role as the founding chairman of KIAAsia while KIAAsia became a major platform for Thailand-US corporate participation in the cultivation of a free-enterprise culture. Following the Asian financial crisis, Anand Panyarachun and Henry Kissinger co-chaired the American Corporations for Thailand (ACT)²³ that fundraised 1.7 million USD from American enterprises (led by Unocal and AIG) to support Thai economy’s recovery.²⁴ Between 1998 and 2005, via KIAAsia’s role as the fund manager, 700 Thai trainers and 27,000 trainees went through 50 training projects focusing on *human resources development*. According to Anand Panyarachun, “corporate support has been particularly important for the Institute because it substantiates our central premise that the most effective long-term development depends on an enlightened and well-balanced *free-enterprise system*” (KIAAsia website, my emphasis).

Beginning in 1999, USAID simultaneously used KIAAsia as a primary mechanism to channel and manage its funding under a regional program called “Accelerating Economic Recovery in Asia (AERA).” Over the next decade, KIAAsia would use 23 million USD to implement numerous projects, including the diffusion of and public outreach advocating for the concept of *cluster competitiveness* in Thailand. Under the so-called Thailand Competitive Initiative (TCI), USAID funded capacity-building training

²³ <https://www.unc.edu/news/archives/mar98/usthai.html>

²⁴ Interestingly, American corporations, led by Unocal and AIG, were also interested in giving financial support to Thai students and professional studying in the U.S. after the financial crisis.

for KIAAsia staff and created a ‘competitiveness team’ with coaching from a Virginia-based consulting firm led by a “Harvard Business School’s guru on developing countries.”²⁵ For several years, KIAAsia’s competitive team produced materials on cluster competitiveness and engaged with a network of professionals, including business journalists from at least 23 media institutions (USAID Final report, 2004). One objective was for “Thai media to publish at least 25 articles or television programs on cluster competitiveness. (ibid.)” As a result, the number of articles on cluster competitiveness swiftly increased from 24 articles in 2002 to 71 in 2003 and 66 over a period of only seven months in 2004 (ibid.). Moreover, during the project period, the competitive team organized several conferences with the aim of targeting personnel from NESDB, the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI), the Industrial Finance Corporation of Thailand (IFCT), and the Thai Chamber of Commerce. In 2003, the National Competitiveness Council selected KIAAsia to be an advisor for the Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

2.3.3 Corporate Social Responsibilities and the making of disciplined labor

With funding under the Thailand Competitive Initiative (TCI), KIAAsia has also promoted its central premise of free enterprise through other programs, including the provision of business coaching services to Thai small and medium enterprises via the Business Advisor Center. Since 2009, however, KIAAsia has shifted its focus to the other Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. In Thailand, KIAAsia has most recently promoted the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in collaboration with multinational corporations such as Chevron, Boeing, and CITI

²⁵ J.E. Austin Associates, Inc. claimed to have completed 650 projects in 120 countries. Their main focus was strategy and management consulting for “the development of emerging and developing economies” in “increasing business competitiveness and growth, increasing and enhancing public-private dialogue the process developing mechanisms in the public and private sectors to improve their competitive advantages...(J.E. Austin, 2017)”

Bank. One of the most recent programs (2017) is financial literacy training, in which KIAAsia has partnered with the Federation of Thailand Automobile Workers Union (TAW) and the Department of Skills Development within the Ministry of Labor. The objective is to provide ‘semi-skilled’ workers with financial literacy skills. In fact, this project showed how KIAAsia was deeply interested in micro-managing the way in which autoworkers plan their monthly budget as well as their savings. For example, KIAAsia developed a mobile application called ‘Smart Workers Smart Money’ which, according to KIAAsia’s own words, “[targets] a vulnerable group of semi-skilled factory workers” and “provide[s] practical financial knowledge tailored specifically to the factory workers’ lifestyle” (KIAAsia website). Moreover, KIAAsia has worked to mainstream financial literacy curriculum on the national level.

As the evolution of KIAAsia programs suggests, there is a genealogy that links the way in which the cluster concept and the tenets of human resource development are individually and complementarily used as both scientific and technological management tools in manufacturing a disciplined workforce. As a political vehicle, the cluster concept provides business interests with entry points through which they can influence industrial policy-making and bring about policy changes. In this case, the changes were made to industrial policy conducive to foreign direct investment, such as tax exemptions, land ownership, and access to non-unionized labor. Similarly, framed as a scientific and management technology, the human resource program was a tool that private enterprises have used to both directly and indirectly intensify work in a labor process. As the next section demonstrates, through human resource departments, companies have been able to control workers in the production process by monitoring their productivity and efficiency.

Moreover, the example of Smart Workers Smart Money program shows how companies have also been able to indirectly discipline workers by managing their spending behaviors. This is similar to what Henry Ford did with the enforcement of the five-dollar a day program²⁶. Along with the wage increases, the investigators from the company's Sociological Department regularly monitored how the workers spent their wages and behaved outside of the factory. It is striking how the rhetoric of 'vulnerable' workers and the paternalism inherent in the program, as shown by KIAAsia, are very similar to Ford's initiatives. As scholars argued that one of the results of Ford's five-dollar deal was the company's better control over its flow of work (Beynon 1973, p. 21), as well as the making of a consumer (Pizzolati 2013).

2.4 Japan-dominated Automotive Industry: Working with Japanese Ethos

In 2015, Thailand was ranked globally as the twelfth largest producer of automobiles, producing almost two millions passenger cars and commercial vehicles annually, of which more than half were exported (Oxford Business Group 2016; Hananto 2016).²⁷ In Asia, it was the fifth largest automotive producer, after China, Japan, Korea, and India, albeit without any national car development project of its own. In fact, the absence of national car development is one of the main factors for it being chosen as the regional production hub for Japanese carmakers, which are Thailand's largest producers (Kohpaiboon and Jongwanich 2013).

²⁶ In 1914, Ford introduced the five-dollar day, a package deal that applied only to qualified workers, usually men over the age of twenty-one, who were considered to spend their wages in appropriate ways (Beynon 1973).

²⁷ This rank is lower than in 2014, when Thailand was ranked 10th producing more than 2.5 million vehicles.

Apart from the main car assemblers, there were around 709 tier-1 and 1,100 tiers - 2 and -3 suppliers (Thai embassy 2015). The tier-1 producers were Japanese suppliers for the assemblers, mainly Japanese carmakers, while tiers -2 and -3 were locally owned factories that supply replacement parts (Ghazali *et al.* 2011). According to Natsuda and Thoborn (2013), among the tier-1 suppliers, around 47 percent were foreign majority-owned, 30 percent were Thai majority-owned and 23 percent were Thai owned. While 20 assemblers employed around 100,000 workers, tier-1 employed around 250,000 workers and tiers -2 and -3 employed around 175,000 workers, respectively (Thailand Automotive Institute 2013). In general, the Japanese assemblers dominated around 80% of the sector while the Thai parts sector has been unable to develop its own knowledge base (Doner 2009; McNamara 2009; Doner and Wad 2014)²⁸. Although there are no accurate official statistics, there have been reports about increasing rates of flexible employment in the auto sector, including temporary and subcontract workers, in individual firms. For instance, Wad (2017) notes that in one of the Toyota-affiliated plants, the proportion of salaried to subcontract workers was as high as 50:50 (p. 54).

State - Capital Alliance versus Labor

The automotive industry in Thailand has developed over five decades. Beginning in the 1960s, protectionist and inconsistent policies left the Thai automobile industry underdeveloped over the following two decades (Busser 2008). However, the automotive industry was one of the first sectors to which the state applied the liberal approach: delimiting foreign land ownership as well as offering incentives such as tax exemptions,

²⁸ In 2006, vehicle and parts imports from Japan worth \$2.5 billion, far surpassing the export to Japan of \$500 million, while Japan imported only 15% of the Thailand's export (McNamara 2009, p. 118).

tariff reductions, and other benefits. The growth of import-reliant production and resulting trade deficits then prompted the state to promote a policy mix of localization and rationalization, where minimum local content requirements, along with economies of scale (i.e. limits on the number of assemblers, makes and engine sizes), were enforced (Doner 2009, p. 236). According to Richard Doner, during the period 1961-1977, the contradictory character of the Thai political economy—what he calls the ‘Janus-faced nature of Thai clientelism’ resulted in an influx of assemblers and parts producers, on the one hand, and obstacles to economies of scale on the other (p. 237). Through the 1980s, the agglomeration of parts interest groups clustered around the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, became more organized, and were represented via the Thai Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association (TAPMA). As Doner remarks, “the institutional strengths of this network in autos exceeded anything seen previously” (243). Over time, the Thai state supported the industry by instituting many programs and units, including the Board of Investment Unit for Industrial Linkage Development (1991), the National Supplier Development Program (1994), the Metal Industries Development Agency (1995), the Automotive Development Institute (1999), and the Automotive Human Resource Development Project (2006) (Kohpaiboon and Jongwanich 2013).

Following the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, exports and market forces have shaped the trajectory of the Thai automotive industry (Doner and Wad 2014). Doner and Wad (2014) suggest that the two crises demonstrated the weakness and weakening of domestic auto interests in Thailand. Internally, the establishment of the Thailand Automotive Institute (TAI) in 2001 totally altered the direction of the industry. Modeled after their Japanese counterparts, TAI has

since served as a coordinator and promoter of sector interests, shaping the direction of the industry through the joint crafting of the industry-specific master plans (Busser 2008; Hill and Fujita 2012). One of the main consequences was that, under the guidance of the TAI and its master plans, the Thai state has shifted its approach to the industry from ‘laissez faire’ to one of closer state and capital alliance, where Japanese enterprises have played a central role in shaping the policy environment.

In practice, the Thailand Automotive Institute (TAI) has worked closely with Thailand’s Ministry of Industry (MOI) to draft a five-year master plan, called the Automotive Master Plan. Three industrial associations—TAPMA, TAI and the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI)—have also collaborated to provide overall support for the industry. The current Master Plan (2012-2016) specifies four major ways of ensuring sustainable development for the Thai automotive industry: (1) favorable government policy to promote investment and domestic market expansion through systematic integration; (2) accommodate technology changes; (3) increase domestic value creation through productivity improvement for parts and manufacturers; and (4) quantitative and qualitative human resource development. Applying TAI’s areas (3) and (4) together, for example, in 2017, in partnership with MOI, TAI provided coaching and training on *Just In Time Manufacturing* to local parts makers.

During 2006-2011, Automotive Human Resources Development Institute Project (AHRDIP) had trained 233 small and medium enterprises, and 7,000 employees, with modules and curricula developed by the four biggest Japanese firms in Thailand: Toyota, Denso, Honda and Nissan. As a product of the Japan –Thailand Economic Partnership Agreement, AHRDIP became the main mechanism through which Thai state agencies,

private enterprises and industrial associations, and Japanese state agencies, industrial associations and private enterprises, have shaped the auto and parts production and labor relations.

Toyota Motor Thailand and Denso Thailand have long played predominant roles in shaping labor relations in the Thai automotive sector. With a market share of car sales around 32 percent in 2016, Toyota is by far the most dominant Japanese carmaker in Thailand (Marklines 2017)²⁹. The central role of Toyota in Thailand is such that its history offers a chronicle of the local industry development (McNamara 2009). As the CEO of Toyota Thailand is also head of the Thai – Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Toyota has played an important role in mainstreaming the model of lean production (e.g. just-in-time) and defining the nature and practices of human resources in Thailand. As for Denso, Toyota’s main supplier and close partner in promoting Thailand as a regional hub for Japanese assembly, the emphasis on its core ethos ‘*Monozukuri is Hitozukuri*’, *making things through making people*, became a main tenet in the auto parts industry. For example, one of the AHRDIP training courses, based on Denso’s module, consists of two main elements: *Mind Management* and Manufacturing Skills. The Mind Management element included topics such as Total Quality Management for management and problem solving, Training within Industry: how to relate person (sic.), and how to instruct work, etc. (Thailand Automotive Institute 2013).

In one of the studies conducted with chief executives of five major car manufacturers in Thailand, including Toyota, Nissan, Mitsubishi, Honda and Suzuki, the

²⁹ The market share of Toyota in commercial and passenger cars were around 32% while 1-ton pickups and SUVs were higher, 37.7% and 60%, respectively. (https://www.marklines.com/en/statistics/flash_sales/salesfig_thailand_2016)

author presented the concept and strategies of each company's human resource development as follows:

Toyota and Honda – “The company has practiced on the philosophy of ‘intellectual capital’ human resource development as its human resource is the most valuable asset in the organization.”

Nissan – “The organization has taken the philosophy of ‘business cost’ human resource development in use. The company views its workers as a type of cost that requires effective management.”

Suzuki and Mitsubishi – “The organization values human resources as ‘asset’ or ‘asset’ human resource development like other financial and other physical resources” (Phutrakhul 2014, p. 3220).

In Japanese auto parts factories in particular, the dominance of human resource tenets, especially views that equated labor as *human capital* and *assets*, was so pervasive that labor unions in these companies tended to view their work as supporting the development of human resource. Starting in the mid-1990s, Thai autoworker unions in the Japanese transplants and affiliated factories started to develop cordial partnerships with the management, “in favor of the competitiveness of the company and the employment conditions” (Wad 2017, p. 53). According to Peter Wad (2017), following the Asian financial crisis in 1997, two structural forces appeared to contribute to the ‘evolution of responsible unions’ in the Japanese automakers: a shift from the domestic market focus to an export orientation, and increasingly flexible labor employment in the auto and parts makers. In 2008, around 14 percent, or 50,000 out of 350,000 people, were subcontract workers in Thai automobile production (Serrano 2014, p. 133, cited by Wad 2017, p. 48).

Based on auto production networks and supply chains formed by the Japanese transplants, regionally, and by the local Thai suppliers nationally, Thai autoworkers

unions had been organized around domestic supply chains (Wad 2017). Recently, there has been a reorganization of unions along nationalist as well as political lines. In other words, when the Automobile Labor Congress of Thailand (ALCT) organized in Japanese plants unions, such as the Toyota Thailand Workers Union, the Denso Thailand Workers Union, and the Honda Labor Union, the Federation of Thai Auto Workers (TAW) has organized GM Thailand Workers Union, Ford, and Mazda Thailand Workers Unions (ibid.). As a side note, Wad (2017) has observed that, “the Japanese auto workers’ unions seemed to have shifted sides toward the more royalist-oriented unions including ALCT following the accelerating political conflict between Thaksin and anti- Thaksin supporters in the second part of the 2000s into the first military coup in 2006-2008 and again in 2014” (p. 53).

Human resource development programs have also contribute to reconfiguring the technical composition of the working class, as ‘skilled’, ‘semi-skilled’, and ‘unskilled’ workers. As a result, the concept of human capital has promoted hierarchy and cleavage within the workforce. This has created internal dynamics conducive to the regime of labor disciplining through the lean production system. In fact, as will be discussed later in this thesis, such disciplining regimes, both inside and outside of the production process, has caused frustration and anger among workers, and has led many to seek redress through activism. In a sense, the rise of labor militancy in the area has a direct relationship with the intensification of labor disciplining in the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates and in the automotive industry in particular.

2.5 The Social Factory and Cycles of Class Struggle

Glassman (2004) has documented the roles of American liberalism in modernizing Thai labor laws in the post WWII via USAID, the UN, and the ILO (see Chapter 3 in particular). As one of the residues from American hegemony, the 1975 Labor Act represented the changing ways in which international capital and the Thai states disciplined the workforce, as well as declining influence of the US in the region (Glassman 2004). The 1975 Labor Act has laid the foundation for workers' collective bargaining that the labor unions still benefited.

As Glassman wittingly observes, “the development of a more complex industrial society requires more complex methods of disciplining labor and ensuring not only its subservience to capital but the quality of its work performance (2004, p. 87).” By complex methods, he refers to the use of labor laws and labor unions as a mechanism to control “venues for expression of worker grievances (ibid).” Such change of strategies was a way to response to “pent up pressures” that had been accumulated especially from the higher *cost of living* that “added a new dimension to the workers' difficulties (the emphasis is mine; Halm 1973, cited by Glassman (ibid).” Such enactment of the formal labor law ensued the establishment of the minimum wage in 1972, also recommended by the US official. In short, the co-optation of organized workers worked alongside the creation of labor aristocracy by the American labor movement in Thailand. In other words, the Thai economy became a social factory.

The notion of social factory explains the scope of capital's control that reaches beyond the factory's realm. In *Reading Capital Politically*, Cleaver (2000 [1979]) loosely defines capital as social control, or social factory: “social system based on the imposition

of work through the commodity-form” (Cleaver 2000 [1979], 82). According to Peter Bell (1978), social factory is a form of capitalist society that encompasses “the entire process of social reproduction” involving “all of the social institutions at the disposal of the capitalist class (53).” Writing about cycles of class struggle in Thailand between 1940s-1970s, Bell (1978) highlighted the influences of American imperialism through the roles of international institutions such as the World Bank, ‘think-tanks’, and government agencies in the development *planning*—as a response to the working class power. Peter Bell was actually inspired by the core premise of Italian Autonomists including Mario Tronti, who argues that the capital’s planning has become an important tool for the capital to exercise control over the workers. Highly relevant to the central premise of this dissertation is Bell (1978)’s emphasis on class struggle as *cycle of offensive and defensive strategies* employed by capital in response to the resistance of the working class, particularly their demands for higher wages and less work.

Domestically, after the 1960s, the rapid urban industrialization had given rise to a new cycle of class struggle, what Peter Bell (1978) called a political re-composition of the working class, symbolically epitomized by the popular uprising and the triumvirate of workers, peasants and students alliances in 1973. Correspondingly, the same capitalist development process led to realignment and internal conflicts within the Thai ruling class, hence the capital’s counter-offensive in the form of renewed violent repression and heightened social control in the 1970s (Bell 1978, p. 66). This cycle appeared to end in 1980 when the Thai state succeeded to put an end to the political insurgency, by means of military and intelligence. With the surrender and return of the insurgents, mostly young students, to the city, the head of the counter-insurgency operation, Gen. General Prem

Tinsulanonda went on to become the Prime Minister in 1980, and as mentioned already, skillfully oversaw the implementation of the Eastern Seaboard Development Plan during the transition from the US imperialism to Japanese quasi-hegemony. Interestingly, another cycle of class struggle in Thailand was not observed until 1991, when the military coup was faced with the popular resistance, this time led by the urban middle-class instead.

Meanwhile, over the next two decades, the organized labor movement had found themselves even weakened and fragmented further by the new regime of labor disciplining—a combination of wage disciplining, antagonism of Japanese corporations, global neoliberal order, and diversification of the working class (Glassman 2004, p. 97). I believe that what Glassman calls ‘diversification of the working class’, and what Kevin Hewison would explain as an emergence of “the new social forces” (Hewison 1996; Hewison and Rodan 1994), were two sides of the same process of class re-composition in Thailand. It was in this period of transformation that the Thai state mobilized all social sectors to reach the goal of becoming so-called Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs). One of the results of such policies was that a large section of technician and managerial workforce emerged. In Chapter Four and Five, I explore the implications of such the re-composition further, in the context of technical or ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ class-recomposition, respectively.

Over such the period, the capital as a class was better organized in the forms of business associations (Hewison 1996). Moreover, in the Marxist viewpoint, the emergence of the Thai middle class reflected the maturation of the capitalist production process, which demanded a larger pool of professionals, including managers and shop-

floor supervisors, and hence the human resources skills (ibid.). It is also worth noting that, during this period, most of the working class was not in the formally bounded wage work, but rather the unorganized, informal sector (i.e. street vendors, cab drivers, sweatshop workers and sex workers, etc) (see Bell 1997). In other words, this particular cycle of class struggle starting in May 1992, better understood as ongoing process, rather than a one-off event, was complicated by the dynamics of maturing capitalist production, coupled with the early democratization process³⁰.

Conclusion

This chapter provides some background to the development of Thailand's Eastern Seaboard. The Eastern Seaboard Development Plan is an excellent example of what geographers call a 'spatial fix'—a spatial solution to the declining competitiveness faced by Thailand. This development was buttressed by a geographical discourse that emphasized cluster competitiveness and was crafted in a particular political economic conjuncture where important roles were played by groups of Thai elites and bureaucrats, who represented competing visions of American and Japanese capitalist development. 'Detroit in Thailand' is a unique product of American liberalism, Japanese production models and Thai export-oriented industrialization. The chapter has also discussed the distinctive ways in which American and Japanese capital exported and institutionalized their ideal types of labor disciplining measures. Through USAID development assistance programs, KIAAsia in Thailand worked closely with government agencies and Thai industrial associations to construct a Thai workforce of 'disciplined consumers'. As

³⁰ For an extensive analysis of the cycle of class struggle after the 2000s, see Giles J. Ungpakorn's *A Coup for the Rich* (2007).

shown in this chapter, despite competition and transition from American to Japanese influences, there has been similarity and continuity in terms of free market ideology. By contrast, Japanese carmakers emphasized the making of ‘disciplined workers’ through the promotion of particular kinds of production and work ethics. These differing objectives are crucial to an understanding of the conflicts and struggle that emerged in the two major cases studies presented in following chapters.

Chapter 3. Labor Geographies of Thailand's Detroit : Pineapples and Powertrains

3.1 From Pineapples to Powertrains

At the entrance to my apartment building, a pineapple as tall as a human stood on top of an aluminum gate. I only noticed it after I had moved in; I was surprised to see the pineapple, sculpted



Picture 3.1

to look as if it sprung right out of the concrete structure. To the left of the gate was a big hall, decorated in a traditional Chinese style. Only when standing inside the hall could one tell it was an ancestral shrine. The spacious hall contrasted sharply with the small space of each apartment, evoking ethno-class distinctions between the well-to-do Sino-Thai middle-class landlord and her migrant, working-class tenants.

While the shrine symbolized gratitude for wealth, the pineapple sculpture spoke to the area's past abundance, when the land still produced the famous Sriracha pineapple. The sale of land, previously filled with pineapples, has allowed many landlords to start new businesses under favorable circumstances. Owned currently by the family of a Chinese-Thai woman, the plot of land now houses rows of simple buildings which are rented by workers who are employed in an hinterland area the Eastern Seaboard where Chonburi and Rayong provinces meet.

Since the late 1990s, the Inland Eastern Seaboard has seen the site of a growing number of factories and apartments. In fact, just a few-minutes' drive from my neighborhood to the main highway, lines of pineapples are still grown among the sprawl

of massive factories. Over the past three decades, several farmers and landowners have accepted enticing proposals from private developers who have, in turn, transformed the green fields into barren landscapes made available for industrial estates.



Picture 3.2

Close to the Pineapple apartment compound, where I stayed during the second half of fieldwork, there was a local community. A public school, founded in 1962, laid to the south of the apartment compound. There

were signs that the community around the school had expanded, with old, wooden buildings surrounded by many newly constructed townhouses (see Picture 3-2.).

The buildings' forms and functions were indicative of the differences between locals and outsiders. In other words, the old-fashioned wooden houses were mainly residential; by contrast,

new townhouses were commercial buildings where merchants typically rented the ground floor for their business, while living on the upper floors. These businesses included

convenience stores, mobile phone shops, or

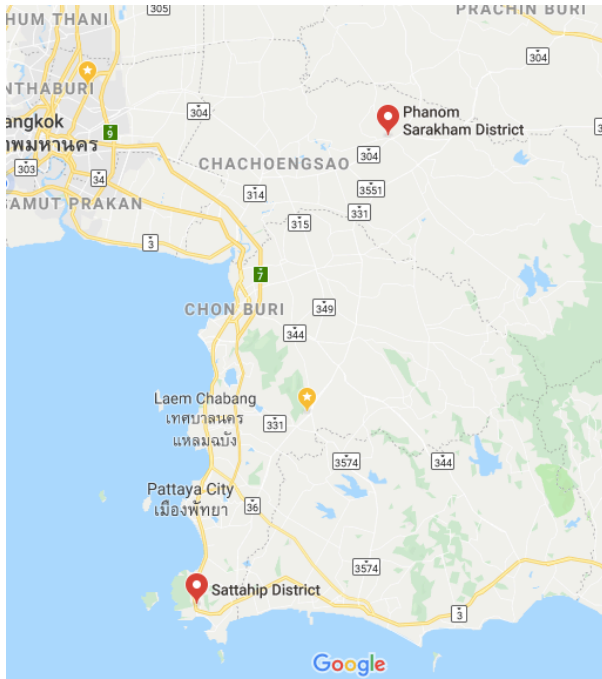


Picture 3.3

food parlors selling everyday necessities to working families. To the west of the apartment, there was a police station and a Thai temple that bore the same name as the school. In fact, when one uses the topography and natural boundary of hills and watershed located next to the temple as the frame of reference, the temple seemed to be at the center of the community. However, from an outsider's perspective, using major

highway no. 331 as a reference, the community continually appeared buried in the land located next to the industrial town of the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates situated in the immediate East.

Highway no.331 is a major highway that connects Sattahib district, Chonburi with Phanom Sarakham district, Chacheungsao Province. This road was previously known as



Map 3.1

a ‘strategic route’ because it was built and opened in 1974 as a major route for the U.S. to transport weaponry and equipment from Sattahib to Air Force bases in the Northeast region, a major strategic hub for the US military during the Vietnam War.³¹ In the Eastern Seaboard, the U.S. built the deep-sea port in Sattahib for supply ships and

installed a sophisticated system of

communication for military intelligence (Pasuk and Baker 2002, p. 294). Years later, instead of military convoys, 10-wheeled trucks and buses now used highway 331 to transport auto parts and workers in and out of the Eastern Seaboard region. Thus, the same road that transported American weaponry to Northeast Thailand now brought fresh labor back from the Northeast to the Eastern Seaboard. Ironically, some of those workers would go to work on the assembly lines of American car companies.

³¹ During the Indo-Chinese war, the U.S. used Thailand as a main strategic post for anti-communism missions in Southeast Asia. In return, the U.S. funded the construction of road networks, especially from Bangkok to the Northeast region, which the Thai state would use to access the hideouts of Thai communists and conduct sweeps through sympathizers’ ‘pink’ villages. Moreover, the U.S. offered material, financial, and technical support to the Thai army and police, which the Thai dictatorial regime also exploited to suppress political dissidents.

I opened this chapter with an excerpt from my field notes, to provide a contrast with the story of the 2011 Thai floods published in *The Economist* mentioned in the preceding chapter. With its main concern being the accumulation travails of Thailand's automotive industry, the narrative in *The Economist* adopted a top-down perspective of capital and the state. The problems experienced by workers were largely absent. Such a perspective reinforces the abstraction of production and social relations from the voices and accounts of material changes concretely experienced by local communities. In contrast to this abstracted top-down and birds-eye view, I began this chapter with a bottom-up perspective—in this case, my own—which takes the micro geography of a community as a point of departure. I believe that such a micro-geography of the community offers a window through which we can understand larger processes of change that have occurred in the Eastern Seaboard region. Moreover, it seeks to set the tone for the rest of the chapter, which aims to highlight the central role of community in mediating the agency of labor, vis-a-vis capital and the state, through the process of the social reproduction of labor power.

Chapter Two introduces the concept of social factory, which explains the process of development planning in Thai society as well as the state's central roles. Actually, the Thai state is not the only actor in this development planning, what Tronti calls rationalization process. This chapter highlights the roles of other players, especially local state agencies and labor unions on the local scale. Further, it introduces the concept of social capital, which elucidates the way in which individual capitals represent the collective capital on the class terms. The social capital is essential to connect the macro analysis in the previous chapter with the micro and meso ones in this chapter through the

process of labor-power socialization (i.e. production process) and workers subjectivity (i.e. work process and capitalist social relations). This chapter shows how state agencies, private developers, foreign and national capitals, and local politicians form a coalition that facilitates interests of their *social capital*. Moreover, they do so by turning a science of human resources into practices and cultivate division among workers.

3.2 Industrial and Labor Geography in Thailand's Detroit

One early morning in the midst of Bangkok's financial district, a group of Asian foreigners were excitedly stepping on a bus, one by one, with small backpacks on their shoulders. For a passerby or street vendor familiar with the area, the group could just be ordinary business tourists who, after long and tense days of business meetings, were embarking on a casual day trip to one of the famous beaches located on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand. As it was an early Sunday morning, the bus cruised through the light traffic of the capital to the highway, heading eastbound.

The eight-lane highway has been open since the end of 1990s and forms part of a larger infrastructure network of the Eastern Seaboard region, now a major platform that connects the Thai economy to regional and global markets (Hill and Fujita 2012; Mieno 2013). The highway connects two major ports, an International Airport, and several Industrial Estates to the nation's capital within a radius of 100 miles.

After fewer than 30 minutes on the road, the scenery gradually changes from high rises to big-gated houses, small warehouse buildings, and, finally, patches of green.

Along the route, inserted between spaces are commercial billboards, one of which reads,

somewhat ironically, ‘Green Industrial

Park’. As this was not my first trip to

the Eastern Seaboard area, I was

accustomed to the contrasting

character of the place. In fact, having

already been involved in field research



Picture 3-4

for a few months, I had been tasked to act as a tour guide for the group. My ‘clients’

comprised a gathering of Asian labor unionists, labor right-organization activists, and

workers. The group convened biannually to discuss future plans for their network as well

exchange information and ideas about the situation of labor rights in the region. In 2016,

they organized a conference in Bangkok and a solidarity visit to a labor group in

Thailand’s Eastern Seaboard, one of the most vibrant regions in Thailand in terms of

labor activism.

When the Asian NGOs activists

and workers arrived at the Eastern

Seaboard industrial estates, the tall

chimneys from one of the local steel plants

welcomed them. Situated by highway 331,



Picture 3-5

the plant, with a production capacity of 800,000 tons of steel per year, cannot be missed. Owned by one of the world biggest steelmaking companies, this plant was the first steel plant in Southeast Asia that produced hot metal from iron ore. To many, the view of the chimneys represents the symbolic entrance to one of the Thailand's most industrialized areas. It has a dual impact, as it stands across from the giant sign of the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates, which lists the automobile and part makers located inside the estates. The list is long and is intimidating rather than informing: one cannot finish reading the list, despite the sluggish rush hour traffic (see Picture 3.7).



Picture 3.6 and 3.7

From the sign, it was another six miles before we actually arrived at the industrial estates. One and a half miles before we arrived, signs indicating the internationalized character of the area began to appear: a high-end service apartment with a gym and swimming pool, a stylish coffee shop, a Japanese restaurant, and Italian restaurant. Before we passed the entrance, marked by a security booth and roadblock, I did not forget to tell my guests to notice the giant sign: ‘Welcome to Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate’. Below it, in even larger emphatic letters, the sign read ‘the Detroit of the East.’³² The name elicited both laughter and awe.



Picture 3.8 and 3.9

Once we passed through the security gate, everything inside the industrial estate looked otherworldly, clean, and orderly. In fact, its physicality was instrumental to opening up discussion about movement and control within the place. For example, some activists asked questions about surveillance and labor control from the estate itself. The visit also prompted comparative accounts of local situations witnessed or experienced by participants in their own contexts.

³² While some analysts speculated that the phrase was coined by Thaksin Shinawatra, it is more likely that David Nardone, the CEO of Hemaraj Land and Development, was the one who invented it.

3.3 Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates as Space of Labor Control

Most multinational carmakers are concentrated in and around the *Detroit of the East*, as industrial estates in the area accommodate 165 multinational companies, including nine of the world's top ten. It resembles an industrial town (Hill and Fujita 2012). This is where global and regional players interact with the local labor control regimes, admixtures of local developers, state development agencies, local politicians, and security officers, not to mention workers and local inhabitants.

State agencies and private developers have actually relied on local networks of political leadership in the development and operation processes of the estates (Shatkin 2004; Hill and Fujita 2012). Decentralization plan promoted by the Thai state has offered local bosses with new political and economic gains related to infrastructure and industrial estate development (Sombat 2000; Shatkin 2004). Comparing Southeast Asia with the U.S., Shatkin (2004) highlights a set of features in the Southeast Asian context: the national government's active roles in deepening the globalization in the local economy as well as local political leaders' presence in development processes (p. 15). Moreover, Sombat (2000) discusses local politicians' roles in the Eastern Seaboard by facilitating the consolidation of land for the development of real estate and industrial estates. In fact, apart from mobilizing resources, such as land and labor, leading political leaders have also played a vital role in suppressing local resistance and labor militancy (see also Sidel 1998).

In a study conducted at a factory in the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates (ESIEs), Hill and Fujita (2012) further observe that a multinational corporation has

actively participated in the conceptualization of the ESIEs in Rayong by working closely with the Industrial Estates Authority of Thailand. This close collaboration among state agencies, private developers and foreign companies accordingly raises issues of their shared interests and exclusion of workers.

Due to their relative physical proximity and centralized governance in the ESIEs, companies coordinated and shared their information concerning industrial relations through Human Resource Clubs



Picture 3.10

(known as HR Clubs). According to workers, local HR Clubs played an active role in facilitating a local regime of labor control by working closely with local government officials, including the labor officers, judges, and security officers.³³

In the ESIEs, estate developers organized training centers, human resource departments, and social clubs within their spaces. The HR Clubs dealt with both conventional and non-conventional human resource issues, including labor organizing and union activities. In fact, developers, not the carmakers, promoted the formation of HR Clubs. In 2010, the land and industrial estate developer organized the Roundtable on Labor Management at a local golf course and resort, which then became a regular venue for meetings. Over time, activists came to view the resort as ‘the headquarters of the HR Clubs.’ The agenda of the first Roundtable included analyses of the local industrial relations situation, updating information about labor laws and regulations, lessons-learnt

³³ Personal interviews

from the *effective* labor relations management, and a session on the establishment of the Employers Association in the ESIEs. Speakers included executives from the human resource department of an American carmaker, from Japanese carmakers and suppliers, local officials from the Labor Department, Labor Court, and private law consultants. This Roundtable actually set a precedent for the agendas and forms of seminars that would subsequently be organized by the HR Clubs, focusing on information sharing about labor unions' strategies and tactics, as well as 'best practices' in terms of management's responses. Moreover, HR Clubs became known for sharing information and ideas about three major issues: collaboration with local officers, strategic responses to labor unions' militant strategies, and negotiation techniques used during collective bargaining. A document from the first Roundtable contained presentation slides titled 'Labor Dispute Prevention and Resolution Measures for Factories in Rayong,' prepared and presented by a local police chief. The presentation was in English and Thai, and it was likely that staff of the industrial estate developer had translated the presentation beforehand. Below is an excerpt from the presentation, exactly as it was written.

“Measures for Employers

Step 1: Employers' measures (prior to police operation):

1. Organize regular meetings and trainings to inform (workers about) company rules and regulations, labor laws and as well as information about wages, compensation and benefits
2. Set up regular meetings to share information and exchange ideas (with workers)
3. Inform the local police immediately if the employer is to reduce wages, compensation or benefits so the proper preparation and coordination steps can take place.
4. Have in place the CCTV system to enable the monitoring and recording of occurrences inside and outside of their facilities
5. Set up a security guard team and assign a team leader to oversee the situation as well as to coordinate with and assist the police as necessary.
6. Set up a central command center to facilitate the monitoring of the situation.

Steps 2: Employers' measures (*during* police operation)

1. Inform the police in their area immediately in case of disruptive events.
2. Set up a team to remedy the situation. The team should consist of a legal counsel or representative from Legal department, a negotiator with decision making authority and a coordinator to work with the police.
3. Check the status and background of the worker and those joining the rally
4. Set up a central command center to closely monitor the situation
5. Summarize the background of the demands, leaders, demands and conditions, behaviors
6. If there is the blockade of the entrances and exits of the facilities or roads and disturbs the general public, the company must assign a legal counsel and provide supporting documents and coordinate file a petition to the court

Step 3: Employers' measures (*following* police operation):

1. Provide evidence and supporting information
2. Provide a team of non-uniformed police officers or a mobile team to monitor the situation more closely on the ground
3. Conduct a preliminary assessment of loss or damage in case there is a loss or damage to property as a result of the rally...

The document also specified the steps to be taken by police officers, and relevant laws that striking workers might violate. It is worth noting that there was no advice to workers suggested by the local police chief. The purpose of this presentation was to prepare employers for the actions taken by labor unions and activists, but similar assistance was not given to workers. It is clear from the presentation that advice and support was framed in the language of warfare and strategies, where employers and police officers viewed workers and their labor unions as enemies. In other words, labor unions' actions were viewed as disruptive and criminal, regardless of legality of their actions.

HR Clubs were routinely run by a committee consisting of delegates from human resource departments of the major companies. Since 2015, the HR Clubs have used social media to publicize their activities, illustrating that local labor officers and human resources personnel from the companies regularly met and discussed labor dispute cases.

The close collaboration often translated into a salient form of pro-business partnership, which sometimes included labor unions' executive committee members from major companies as well.

At one seminar on labor relations organized jointly by the local labor office and a few big labor unions, a high-ranking labor bureaucrat opened the seminar by stating:

Now we might not be aware, but our government is restructuring the economy of our country. Therefore, I would like our activities to be constructive and conducive to the direction and ideas... I don't want to say, to the government's guidelines. But we need to look at the big economic picture, which is the global economy, how it impacts work, employment, national economy as well as economic prospects of Rayong province. Here, the Prime Minister states clearly that everyone needs to walk together toward change. For the provincial office, we have a lot of strategies on that. But for all of us, we (read: workers who participated) may be a small jigsaw and might not see the big picture. If we learn, and try to understand, that we are not simply in a small society of our workplace, for example, we are meeting our friends here who have different ideas and ways of doing things. Anyway, we are all under the currents of this change, and as we are like a partner that the plant cannot do without. At the same time the plant cannot do without us either. I would like us to really think about this, and pay attention to the direction that national economy is going³⁴

In this seminar, the trainers were mostly executive committee members of labor unions from major Japanese car-makers and auto-part suppliers. The key messages were concerned with what one would call 'industrial relations peace.' Therefore, apart from the HR Clubs and local labor officers, some labor unionists, especially those from major carmaker companies/factories, have increasingly played an active role in mainstreaming the notion of industrial peace and eschewing labor activism.

Social Capital and Collective Capital

³⁴ I transcribed this speech from an audio recorded and given by a worker.

The notion of social capital helps us understand the roles of state agencies, private developers, carmakers and suppliers as well as the HR Clubs in the larger process of normalizing social control. Among the concepts proposed and developed by Italian Autonomist writers, nevertheless, social capital is perhaps one the most ambiguous. Although it is closely linked to the concept of social factory, when writers such as Mario Tronti wrote about social capital, they put much more emphasis on the movement of capital and value in cyclical process of capitalist production. In one of his seminal work, *Workers and Capital (Operai e Capitale)*, for instance, in a chapter titled “social capital” Mario Tronti never defines what social capital really means. Nevertheless, Tronti suggests that individual capitals in the society transform into only “a part of the total movement of social capital (1973, p. 98).” Further, he wrote, “(h)ere, social capital is not just the total capital of society: it is not the simple sum of individual capitals. It is the whole process of socialization of capitalist production: it is capital itself that becomes uncovered, at a certain level of its development, as *social power* (original emphasis; p.105).

By “socialization of capitalist production,” Tronti means social organization of capitalist production. As a result, individual capitalist is personification of the capitalist social relations, in the sense that, although behaving in accordance to personal interests, he/she always acts at the behest of the capital—as a social class. In other words, individual capitals become managers of the social capital, as a collective, and its wealth a part of the social wealth (1973, p. 109). Moreover, and it is through this process of socialization that materially necessitates ‘a rational organization of society’ (ibid.)—when the whole society turns into a social factory.

Tronti's and Autonomia's work, as a group, resonate with the experiences of Thai workers for several reasons. First, the Autonomia developed their theories on the actual experiences of Italian workers, themselves internal migrants who moved from the pre-industrial South to the industrializing Northern Italy. Albeit from different times and places, these two groups of internal migrants and waged workers were similarly grappling with intensification of work, increasingly antagonizing class relations, as well as bureaucratization of the labor unions. Like Thai workers, the Italian counterparts came from pre-industrial and rural backgrounds, and thus were not familiar with the tradition of labor's workplace activism. Moreover, they also subjected to work process and work intensification in the car factories like the Thai workers.

In the next section, I describe the industrial landscape as well as the labor geographies in and around the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates. I discuss the transformation of place through personal and familial stories, emphasizing how workers do not simply passively respond to structures and forces imposed from the outside. In following sections, the discussion will focus on the ways that the industrial estates have become sites where the companies deploy human resources as a mechanism for labor disciplining.

3.4 Transformation of Eastern Seaboard hinterland

As indicated in the previous sections, multiple forces and processes combine to structure the lives and labor of industrial workers in the eastern seaboard area. The industrial estates are filled with multinational corporations, mostly American and Japanese, whose headquarters are situated outside Thailand, as well as with joint venture

companies. These multinational corporations operate on a global scale, coordinating with branches and suppliers located across several regions and time zones and regulated by different sets of national and international laws. The economic and political structure that shapes the relations of production is thus multi-scalar by nature. However, from workers' experiential perspective, their lives and labor are embedded in the local scale. In the following section, I turn to the local, so as to focus on the personal and familial histories of workers and the people who live around the Eastern Seaboard inland area. Through field research conducted in the area between 2015 and 2016, I participated in strategic meetings, social activities, as well as the daily lives of Thai union activists involved in the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG). At the time, ELRG consisted of around fifty male-dominated trade unions from automobile and auto-parts manufacturing. With a few exceptions, men accounted for the majority of union executive committees and were disproportionately represented amongst the leadership. I start with the story of Virachai, a worker from Surin in his early fifties who was the president of a labor union in a Japanese parts supplier, because of the vivid memories he has about the area.

3.4.1 Virachai, a union veteran and amateur boxer

Virachai (pseudonym) was sitting in a pickup, looking out the window. His driver, Pong, who owned the pickup truck, was several years younger. They both came from the same village in the Surin province, located on the southern border of the Northeast, or *Isan*, region. Virachai worked at a local factory producing electronic equipment for a Japanese company. He had finished his night shift a couple of hours earlier; however, he was willing to forgo some sleeping time and came with Pong to the

Labor Protection and Welfare Office in Rayong. It was an exciting day for Pong as he was going to register his labor union today.

When Virachai first came to the area in 1995, it was mostly covered by thick trees. As he recalls, it was still a two-lane, red dirt road, where cars only occasionally passed. Local modes of transportation were limited; the only regular transport was the *songthaew* – a red pickup equipped with two rows of seats – running between Pluak Daeng district and Siracha town in Chonburi. There were not many factories, so food and other services were hard to find. When he first opened a bank account for his paycheck, he had to take the *songthaew* to Sriracha, 10 miles away.

Looking out the window now, Virachai reflected on changes the area now so crowded with vehicles – personal cars, company buses, private vans, and container-loaded trucks. It was now easier to travel around. There were two major companies that operated passenger vans which ran every half an hour between Bowin/Pluak Daeng and Bangkok.

Back then, it depended on your luck. If you were lucky, you got a job right away. For some people, it took a month or two. Isan people came with a sack of rice from home, just like that. In a year time, they might finish the rice, and still didn't find a job.

One of the first buildings he remembered was at Pak Ruam intersection, where a fresh market and a modern gated village had opened in 1996. There was a fair on the weekends, during which Virachai and friends went to see boxing matches. Although he and his pals generally liked to go fishing in one of those reservoirs in the area, he boxed a couple of times and made some pocket money. Due to the hinterland's geography, many workers fished at one of many reservoirs that had been built for irrigation purposes. For Virachai and his northeastern comrades, fishing was a pastime activity associated with an

Isan way of life; they fished for food at home. Now fishing was one of the only ways workers could interact with nature after long hours of work inside the enclosed factory. In his early thirties and still single, also Pong fished almost every weekend.

we all went fishing together on the weekends. We went to the green, harvested vegetable, and dug for mice. These are common food for Isan people, in the water, we caught fishes, in the jungle, vegetable, mice and bamboo shoots.

[today] I still go fishing sometimes. But it is different today, hard to get any fish. It used to have a lot of fishes, and I only needed a fishing rod, some time with no bait even. You threw it in and you got a fish. Some time I sat there for a couple of hours, and I got four to five kilos of fishes. I remember that no one fished back then. I would give them away to my friends at the apartments. We shared what we got, that was the Isan way. In Surin, our neighbors had something to eat everyday. Now it had all changed.

Pong and Virachai used to work in the same factory. Pong was working at a new factory that produced hardware and cutting tools for a global Japanese brand in the Pin Thong industrial estate. His current employer used a lot of subcontracted workers and did not treat them well. Having known that Virachai was involved in forming the union in the workplace, Pong contacted Virachai and discussed forming a union with colleagues in his new workplace. To assist, Virachai introduced Pong to the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG).

Virachai was one of the first ‘pioneers’ who came to the area when there was only one industrial estate. Without direct public transport at the time, he came from his hometown in Surin on a motorcycle. Now with a regular paycheck and currently available consumer credit programs, Virachai, like Pong and other workers, had an opportunity to own a pickup truck. Virachai could also afford to rent a bigger place, where he shared one room with his wife and the living space with a friend who stayed in another room. When he first arrived, Virachai stayed in a small room with seven other

workers, all single men from the same hometown. Two shifts of four men would take turns using the mattresses during the day and night.

Sometimes, a lot of people stayed together; within a month we could finish rice. So someone needed to go back home and get a new sack.

In the past, the apartment-sharing arrangement was a common way to save on rent expenses for most workers. Additionally, the rice supply from home was a way that the family or community could support migration. Rham, another worker who was also the president of a union in a multinational tire maker, told me that when he first came to the area, he was surprised by the scarcity of food and apartment options, as well as the high costs of living. He came to the area almost 10 years after Virachai, but it was still not easy to find a place to eat and to stay. When he finally found an apartment, the rent was too high and he could not afford to rent it alone. Finally, another worker whom he did not know offered to share a room with him. Rham himself did not come from the Northeast Thailand, but Samut Prakarn, an industrial province located close to Bangkok. Rham came alone to the Eastern Seaboard because he knew the local factories usually shunned locals and preferred outsiders.

Virachai was a trained welder, so he had skills that were always needed in the area. In the mid-1990s, he changed jobs a few times, mostly following his pals who told him about better opportunities. This occurred before the economy was hardest hit by the 1997 financial crisis. After the crisis hit, Virachai went back home to “grow rice (*tham na*)” for two years, before coming back to the Eastern Seaboard. Despite the slump in domestic demands, Japanese assemblers and parts makers somehow used their international positions to trim the lost and managed to export even more cars (Busser 2008). The post-crisis recovery of Thai economy was driven first by exports, which made

up almost 70 percent of the GDP, and second by FDI that increased 10 times in the post-crisis period (Ghazani *et al.* 2011).

Beginning in 1990, when facilities in the Eastern Seaboard Development Plan began their operation, manufacturing sectors in the two provinces started to expand. Between 1995 and 1999, the borders area of Chonburi-Rayong provinces, Bowin and Pluak Daeng districts, where Virachai came to find work, received a lot of BOI-approved investment, at the expense of the coastal area (Mieno 2013).

Within these larger transformations in the Eastern Seaboard, the experiences of migrant workers from the Northeast, such as that of Virachai, Pong, and Rham, remain largely undocumented. To highlight the changes in historical geography experienced by both migrants and locals, here I offer accounts of my interview with a local woman and her husband. The woman, Ann (pseudonym), was born and raised in the area, and when I met her, she was working at a construction company, the family business, as an accountant. I chose her personal account principally because her family history is deeply intertwined with the locale's transformation. For example, her maternal grandfather went from farming to the apartment business, while her mother took several service jobs that catered to workers. Growing alongside the local economic growth, she and her sibling even experimented with an outsourcing business, which supplied temporary and subcontract workers to factories in the ESIEs. Moreover, she subsequently married an engineer from Bangkok, who had been working for more than 10 years at one of the biggest carmakers, a joint venture of Japanese and American multinationals. I was introduced to her through someone I met at a local environmental NGOs meeting I attended with a worker from the ELRG.

3.4.2 Understanding the transformation of geography

Ann was born and raised in Bowin. She left for Bangkok when she was seven years old and returned at seventeen. I interviewed her at a local construction company located by highway 331. As noted above, she worked as an accountant for the company, owned by her uncle. Most of the company's work was from public construction concessions for which the company tendered.

For Ann, childhood was a time of freedom and happiness. She recalled her grandfather's house at the footstep of a hill, surrounded by pineapple, cassava, and rice crops. She would go swimming in a small stream that coursed behind the house. In 1996, when she was twelve, the inauguration of the Eastern Seaboard Development Plan changed her family's path. Her dad, a civil engineer who worked in Bangkok, was involved with the construction of the Hemeraj Bowin Industrial Estate, the first in the Bowin area. Five years later, when she was seventeen, Ann's grandfather sold his land, moved closer to the highway, and used the money from the sale as a seed fund for his children to start their business. The maternal uncle started a construction business with a few trucks that factories hired for landfilling. According to Ann, her grandfather shifted from growing cassava and pineapple to "growing apartment buildings (*pluuk hor pak*)" to house the influx of workers. During this time, she also remembers that three other industrial estates suddenly appeared like mushrooms in the area: Eastern Seaboard, Amata City, and Siam Eastern Industrial Estates.

Ann's grandfather exemplified stories of many locals whose wealth came from the sales of land to developers. Although it was a familiar story to locals, the sales did not always ensue long-lasting wealth. During my research, I had a chance to talk to another

local business owner who explained that selling land did not necessarily benefit locals, especially the future prospects of their families. Traditionally, when the locals sold their land, they divided the money equally between their children. The owners of the land would use a part of the fund to buy a plot of land further away from the industrial estates, say, for small farming. According to this informant, money that easily comes easily goes. This is because the younger generation tends to use up the money in a short period, sometimes through gambling or drinking. They then become dependent on the older generation, who struggles to make ends meet selling produce in unstable agricultural markets. For these reasons, the arrival of industrial estates and real estate developments were not always beneficial to locals. This informant was lucky that his older sister used the money from the land to invest in real estate. The *Golden Sea Plaza* Project, which she owned, was a location for a local market, night food market, and commercial buildings. While I was dining with this informant at the night market for the interview, he pointed to a building, and then another building with large billboard displaying a brand for ball bearings.

We just sold those two buildings next to the 7-11 to an office for ball bearings sales, so I moved my coffee shop to my own house.

He had an ice factory at the night food market, near the Paak Ruam intersection. Coming along highway 331 from Ann's construction firm past the entrance to the Eastern Seaboard industrial estate, the *Golden Sea Plaza* night food market is located on the left. With Amata City and Eastern Seaboard industrial estates to the South and Southeast, two major golf courses in the West, and one in the East, it occupied a central location where people were always seen eating at one of the street-food sellers. The food vendors paid

fees to the landlord to use the space. The night food market area was also known for its bawdy nightlife, where late night passersby find sex workers standing outside one of the massage parlors waiting for customers cruising by.

3.4.3 The factories needed workers more than the workers needed them

After Ann finished junior high school in Bangkok, she moved back to the area and continued her studies at the local college. At the time, Ann's mother ran a small grocery in front of the grandfather's apartment building. Sales were not great because there were not enough customers. Later, following advice from relatives, Ann's mother turned to selling food for workers inside factories in the Industrial Estates. However, due to her mother's health problems, Ann decided to leave school and help her fulltime. For many years, Ann and her mother sold food to workers in several factories. They generally woke up at three o'clock in the morning to prepare ingredients for three meals and came back home after nine o'clock in the evening.

Catering was still profitable, because gasoline, cooking gas, and eggs were not as expensive. The factories also had lots of money to subsidize workers. We would cook for three meals. For the night shift, the workers would come and order food when they arrive. Around 8 or 9 pm, we would prepare the ordered food and tag their names, so they would come to eat around midnight, but we would pack our stuff and leave around 9 pm.

Back then, there was high demand for workers, so the factories had to please them. The factories really listened to the workers, not us, whatever the workers wanted. Every couple of years, we would move to a new factory, because workers got bored of our food.

The unions did not yet exist; I didn't hear about it until Ford and Mazda (AAT) workers protested. In the first years, they would walk out and shut down the whole industrial estate. Around this time, you would hear a lot about unions. The following year, GM workers also protested, demanding for more bonuses. I think it was around 2005-2006. When they had the union at Somboon, nothing really changed for us, except for a new guy who would really swagger and tell us about our food cleanliness. Before that, we only dealt with the management.

This routine went on for eight years until both of them felt that the lifestyle was taking a toll on their health. Around 2012, the mother opened her own food business at home instead. Owing to the house's location, and the growing population, her business attracted a large clientele. However, she was eventually too sick to work. During this period, Ann worked alongside her mother, making it possible for her younger brother to finish his studies. Although the younger brother originally wanted to study logistics, he chose to be a civil engineer, as suggested by his uncle who sponsored his education. From 2012 to 2013, Ann and her cousin began a new business. Because of her familiarity with how things worked in the factories, Ann saw an opportunity in the labor demands of the factories as well as their urge to avoid unions. She and her cousin opened an office to supply temporary and subcontract workers to the factories.

The local factories needed workers, but labor unions got in the way. At one point, we had 300-400 workers. We supplied workers for big companies such as M (a Taiwanese tire factory), N (a Japanese parts factory), and small parts factories that would say that they need hands for packaging for a few weeks.

There were hundreds of suppliers like this. We would send someone to one of those recruit centers at Paak Ruam intersection. We would approach and tell workers who cannot find a job about the work. The other place is the internship program at vocational schools. The students would get the same amount of payment, but these students are high maintenance because we need to take care of the buses for them. But they work really hard, and they are disciplined to finish the course, especially those from the other provinces. Anyway, we didn't make much profit, because we didn't want to exploit working people. But we used to get a lot of applications, because they knew we didn't deduct much commission from them. We just didn't want to continue like that.

After a while, both Ann and her cousin realized that they would feel more comfortable conducting business with customers in the traditional sense.

We finally quit because it was living off the backs of the workers (tham na bon lang khon: growing paddy on a person's back). I felt really bad because it was not fair to them. Maybe I did not have desire to make a fortune by such means. Normally, the factories would share 27% of commission with us, but that was not feasible, with all the tax and

social security burdens. We just could not make it. Other people can do it, because they give out loans with high interest to workers. They would charge the workers twice for the uniforms, or deduct half of the shift payment. You could make it, if you are willing to do all of this.

Ann's male cousin was running a car-care business at the time that provided cleaning and maintenance services. This was business that appeared suited for the society that saw expansion in the wealth and rising middle class. In 2000, Thailand was reportedly "going car crazy" when domestic sales tripled 1989 sales reaching 571,580 units (Wards Auto 2000). However, this number paled when compared to the historic peak car sales in 2012, when sales more than doubled the 2000 'crazy' rate, reaching 1,436,335 units (Headlight Mag 2017).³⁵ The main factor driving this rapid growth was the consumer subsidy program introduced by the Thaksin administration.

In 2011, the World Bank upgraded Thailand from 'lower middle income' to 'upper middle income' status, with the country's gross national income per capita almost doubled (World Bank 2011).³⁶ Thailand has recently become one of the world's most unequal countries³⁷. The Bangkok Metropolitan and Eastern regions were the richest in terms of gross regional product, while Rayong, Bangkok, and Chonburi were the three richest provinces, respectively, in terms of gross provincial product (NESBD 2013). Interestingly, on a national level, the number of deadly road accident was highest in Rayong, while Chonburi and Chacheungsao, the other two provinces in the Eastern

³⁵ <http://www.headlightmag.com/sales-report-december-2016/>

³⁶ Thailand now an upper middle-income economy, *World Bank* (August 2, 2011). <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2011/08/02/thailand-now-upper-middle-income-economy>

³⁷ Thailand third most unequal country in the world, *Bangkok Post* (Nov 29, 2016). <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/1147468/thailand-third-most-unequal-country-in-world>

Seaboard, ranked fifth and sixth.³⁸ This was attributed to both the quality and size of the roads and the growing number of cars and motorcycles in these provinces.

3.4.4 Workers as both customer and producer

The arrival of the ESIEs had given opportunities to locals like Ann to become involved in business related to supply and upkeep of workers. As noted above, Ann built two side businesses, one related to construction and the other catered directly to workers' sustenance. Apart from scaffolding she rented to local factories, Ann also invested in building an indoor soccer field near her own house. As she expressed during her interview, she preferred to treat workers as customers, rather than simply an input provided to factories. Over the past few years, indoor soccer fields have become a popular business because soccer is very popular among Thai men. It becomes a side business that Ann wants her husband, Ek, to take over in the future. Ek was born and raised in Bangkok. He trained as a mechanical engineer and worked for 12 years at one of the biggest car assemblers in the area. Like other managerial or white-collar workers from outside, Ek stayed near the urban center of Chonburi and commuted daily to the Eastern Seaboard.

From Ann's perspective, Bowin and the Pluak Daeng area used to be places of temporary stay, but not any more. The fact that her husband, who used to be in Bang Saen, a local beach town thirty miles away, now settled in the area testified this shift.

In the past, it was like a gateway town. It was a place where people stopped by, people who were looking for a job. It was like a rest stop, before they left for somewhere else

³⁸ Isra News 2015 (https://www.isranews.org/isranews-scoop/39304-isranews_39304.html)

again. Some people worked here for a year or two, when they had more money, they bought a house in the gated village and they move away.

Right now, you only meet the locals when there is an ordain or merit making event, but we hardly talk. Personally, I don't like it because development comes with danger. In the past, you were not afraid of theft. When I was seventeen, there was a burglary at my grandma's house, so I thought to myself why it happened. I went to a market once, and I saw someone was taking a woman's necklace, so I am afraid. We have four-lane street, and the land price hikes. When my grandpa bought the land, it was a few hundred thousand baht per rai (0.6 hectare), now it costs fourteen million. There was no car in the past, nowadays when my son bikes just outside of the house, I am worried. I think there are a lot of downsides. I'd like the old way better. Now when I give my son a ride to school, it takes an hour. We used to take five minute to Pak Ruam, now we need more time. It is worse than Bangkok. Traffic jam in Bangkok is not like this.

As a result of this transformation, the simple life Ann experienced in her childhood was lost. Now the area was filled with strangers and outsiders, and Ann only saw risk and danger.

The traffic jam is like in Bangkok, and there are many accidents, that happen daily. Once two company buses crashed right in front of my house, and we saw big fire.

Driving in Bangkok is easier. I feel better when I go to Bangkok. We bought two apartments in Bangkok, and my mom was surprised. Everyone else wants to buy a house outside Bangkok, in Khao Yao or Hua Hin. But I bought two condos on the outskirts of Bangkok, where there is a skytrain station nearby.

It doesn't look anything like before; it looks more like Map Ta Phut, surrounded by industrial estates. If you didn't grow up here, you wouldn't know what it was like before. We are going to have eight-lane street soon, how are we going to make a u-turn, I don't know.

In 2010, Ann was involved in a local campaign against the construction of industrial waste dumps in the neighborhood. It was then that she realized that in the three villages where she was involved, three hundred residents out of a total of five hundred came from elsewhere. The local environmental group led by her uncle had been very active in monitoring the environmental and health impacts not only from industrial waste, but also

the processes of industrialization as a whole. Because of this environmental activism, Ann's younger uncle had to move to a nearby province for security reasons. To Ann, like a lot of locals, industrialization brought about livelihood and material gains, especially because of the arrival of outsiders. However, no longer did the opportunities and potential gains outweigh the intrusive impacts, environmental and social, of industrialization.

I interviewed Ann at her office on one afternoon, before she had to pick up her son from school, which is located less than 10 miles away. At the school her son attended, most of parents were outsiders who came looking for work in the area. Around a week later, I met with her husband at their house in the evening. We had a conversation in the living room, where Ann, her mother, and their three-year-old son were also there. The interview was often interrupted by questions from the boy, who was playing with a toy helicopter.

Ek: the [Eastern Seaboard] Industrial Estate grows a lot. Two or three years ago, the traffic jam was critical that people couldn't make it to work on time. This problem led to companies overlapping their working time. When I stayed in Bang Saen, I got on the bus around 6.15-6.20, now I heard that it is moved to 5.45-5.50

During my time here, the factory had gone from hiring 3,000 to currently 8,000 employees, mostly working in production. This is one of the best performing factories. You heard that they talk about declining sales everywhere, but here we still have overtime almost every week. Lucky that it is good timing in our product development, so we have good sales.

The cycles of economic crises and industrial growth have had profound impacts on the dynamics of power between capital and labor, as mediated by the national and local states. For example, the period of growth in car production was favorable for workers, and enabled the emergence of labor union movement in the area. Many people including Ann and workers such as Rham still remember an early mass strike by

unionized autoworkers that happened in the mid-2000s. However, when car production reached its peak in 2012 and thereafter began to decline, labor unions started to confront major difficulties following the introduction of flexible and lean production. In the next chapter, I discuss the history of local trade union movements, and that of the Eastern Labor Relations Group in particular. I highlight two labor struggles that occurred in two multinational carmakers in the ESIEs. In the next chapter, I also examine labor organizing practices and the dynamics of activism, as informed by the material, discursive and ideological factors.

Conclusion

This chapter offers accounts of the Eastern Seaboard's transformation, from the perspectives of economic and human geographies. From an economic geography viewpoint, the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates are the sites in which networks of capital, state agencies and local actors converge to create a social factory—a regime of local labor control in which workers are treated as one of the factors of production.

From a human geography viewpoint, by contrast, the economic transformation translates into personal stories of migration, employment opportunities and familial challenges. Through the stories of labor migration and livelihood changes, this chapter also shows how local workforce played an important part in shaping the Eastern Seaboard's social geographies. Further, it shows how the local business took part in the making of social factory through its ambivalent relations with migrant workers. As consumer, workers are presented mainly as a source of economic gains to the local business. Nevertheless, the workers' accounts which demonstrate the ways they

creatively made their new place 'home' show that they are not far from being simply victims in this transformation.

Chapter 4. A View from Above: Thai Labor Politics and Trade Union Movements

This chapter addresses issues of labor movement's fragmentation, militancy and class-consciousness. It offers an overview of Thai political and economic processes as well as the structural and associational power of the Thai workforce in the past decade. Rather than being the backdrop, such context serves as pre-conditions that shaped the nature and characters of labor activism—issues that are underexplored in Thai labor studies. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section begins with a political-economy analysis of the labor movement, a conventional strand among Thai scholars. While the political-economy approach is useful to explain the processes that shape the strength and limitations of labor movement on a national scale, as the second section shows, it is insufficient to explain internal divisions, political differences, and conflicts within the organized labor movement.

For this reason, the third section introduces and uses the concept of class composition to elucidate hierarchy and domination within the labor movement. By doing so, it calls into question claims made by labor scholars about Thai trade unions' lack of class-consciousness as well as growing conservatism. This section also discusses the way in which the state regimes of political accommodation worsen polarization and fragmentation within the organized labor. By using examples of conflicts around minimum wage rates, I argue that trade unions' different focuses can be better understood as its distinctive positions in class composition and hierarchy, rather than their ideology

and deliberation. Finally, the last sections discuss history and militancy of trade union movements in the Eastern Seaboard.

4.1 Political economy of Thai organized labor

Organized labor in Thailand is small in both scope and scale. It is estimated that in 2015, out of 37.8 million in total workforce, only around 616,169 workers were members of labor unions (Ministry of Labor 2015, cited by SERC 2015). Therefore, organized labor represented only 1.6 percent of the total workforce (SERC 2015). Among waged workers entitled to unionize according to 1975 Labor Relations Act (LRA), approximately 14 million workers, only 4 percent, were organized.³⁹ However, the majority of the workforce, 24 million workers, was in the informal sector, without access to codified legal protection. Among unionized workers, 70 percent were in the private sector and 30 percent in state-owned enterprises (ibid). In early 2016, there were slightly less than 1,453 private unions (as opposed to over 2 million companies), 47 public-owned enterprise unions, and 21 labor federations registered with the Ministry of Labor (ibid.). Most unions (97%) were in small businesses, employing less than 15 workers, and concentrated in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area.

As Glassman (2004) argues, the process of labor institutionalization is deeply embedded in the history of Thai internationalization and democratization. Historically, economic expansion and state intervention shaped the early development of labor's organizational forms. In the post-war period, as political space ebbed and flowed, the Thai state alternately used repression as well as co-optation to contain labor's struggles to

³⁹ A labor historian, Sakdina Chatkul Na Ayudya, had an estimate in 2010 that only 330,000 workers (3.7 percent) in the private sector were unionized. The MOL had a more recent estimate of 616,169 workers in 2015. Given the total number of 15,000,000 in the private workforce, the estimate was around 4 percent.

organize (Napaporn 2002; Brown 2004; Glassman 2004). Often denied the rights to openly form trade unions, workers often had to organize as informal groups and economic and cultural associations, which were often linked into broader political movements. It is worth emphasizing that, up until the mid-1970s, elite hostility and repression had been a defining feature of the experiences faced by urban workers who attempted to organize themselves (Brown 2004; Brown and Sakdina 2013). However, the 1975 Labor Relations Act⁴⁰ formally recognized and granted workers the right to forms trade unions, labor federations and labor councils, albeit these rights have been severely constrained in practice (Brown 2004). Thus, during the 1980s and 1990s, as political economists have observed, a significant gap opened up between labor's formal rights and the everyday actual practices of Thai industrial relations (Brown 2004; Brown and Hewison 2005). This gap between theory and practice needs to be understood in relation to the character and timing of Thailand's capitalist development as well as political regime dynamics (Brown 2004; 2007; 2016).

The Thai labor movement's various organizational forms and the differing arenas of its activism, underscore its diversity as well as the tensions that exist within it. In a strictly legal sense, the labor movement comprises labor unions, labor federations, labor congresses (sometimes known as 'peak council'), as well as state enterprise labor unions. Within the movement some leaders of labor federations have used the formal tripartite system as a vehicle to achieve social status or engage in rent seeking practices (Napaporn 2002; Brown 2004). At the outset therefore it is useful to distinguish between the forms

⁴⁰ The first Labor Relations Act was in fact promulgated in 1957 but shortly cancelled afterward by a coup d'état staged by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (see Napaporn 2002, p. 38; Brown 2010 [2004], p. 66-67).

of labor organizing or organizational structures from the political goal of labor organizing and activism.

4.2 Diversity and Complexity in Thai Labor Movement

Apart from trade unions which are formally recognized in law, the Thai labor movement also comprises a number of civil society-based organizations that have emerged as a result of broader political struggles. The latter included informal associations, national coordination centers such as the Thai Labor Solidarity Center (TLSC), labor-related NGOs, other labor groups, as well as area-based labor collectives (see Napaporn 2002, chapter 4; and Sakdina 2010). Unlike the trade unions, these relatively independent labor groups occupy no formally legal space within the industrial relations system but have nonetheless managed to carve out political spaces to advance a labor related agenda.⁴¹

While organizational forms are rather static, it is crucial to note that relationships between formal and informal labor organizations are highly dynamic and shift over time. As studies of the Thai labor movement have noted, workers who have been effectively excluded from the industrial relations system have developed informal organizing vehicles to mobilize members outside of formal legal provisions (see Napaporn 2002). There are, however, few studies that explore the ways in which activists creatively use both formal and informal organizations, to deal with changing local and wider political circumstances. Rather, the focus has been on collaboration and conflicts between the

⁴¹ Since 2003, Thai Labor Solidarity Center (TLSC) and State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC) organized a May Day event separately from the official one, organized jointly by the Ministry of Labor, and state-sanctioned labor confederations, led by Confederation of Thai Labor (CTL) and State Enterprises Workers Federation of Thailand (SEWFOT).

formal and informal labor organizations, with a particular bias shown against the former. For example, Napaporn (2002) conducted a comprehensive study of collaboration that occurred between the State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC)⁴², and three main area-based labor collectives⁴³, which had emerged as a political force in the 1980s. These interactions illustrated some of the creative ways in which unions and non-unions forms of organizing were able to engage together in political campaigns. Nevertheless, the extent to which formal and well-endowed organizations such as the SERC were able to dominate and dictate the political agenda of informal labor groups has been underexplored in these studies. While formal labor organizations, such as the State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC), were more prone to state sanctions and curtailing of their activities, they were able nevertheless to mobilize mass bases of support from informal labor groups in political campaigns in exchange for providing financial or institutional assistance. Moreover, in a context where state agencies control most of the funding for capacity-building and organizational support, labor-related non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also been able to play a role in financing independent unions, as well as non-union labor groups⁴⁴.

⁴² As an umbrella organization of state enterprises workers, State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC) is one of the most powerful organizations within the Thai labour movement. In the 1980s, SERC was a leading force that supported independent labor groups and helped voice their concerns, especially non-union labor area groups that were organized within pockets of industrial areas.

⁴³ Historically, industrial zones around the periphery of Bangkok Metropolitan Area including Samut Sakorn, Samut Prakarn, Nakorn Prathom and Pathum Thani provinces were strategic sites for feminized light industries, which were important hubs for militant labor activism in the 1980s and 1990s as well. For studies of feminized labor activism in these industrial areas, see Mills (1997; 1999a; 2003; 2005) and Pangsapa (2007).

⁴⁴ While research funding on the labor movement in Thailand has often been sponsored by NGOs themselves, it is no surprise that there is a lack of research conducted on the roles of these NGOs in terms of their contribution to strengthening and/or weakening the labor movement. It is also worth noting that Thai anti-democratic movement has recently used 'NGOs interference' to undermine some NGOs working with the labor movement. On May Day 2007, Somsak Kosaisuk, a leader of SERC and State Railway Workers Union Federation of Thailand, claimed that some NGOs activists were responsible for political divisions in the labor movement (Prachatai 2007).

Within such a complex landscape two caveats for the study of the labor movement need to be noted. First, it is easy to confuse network of NGOs mobilized around the same funded agenda with social movements. Second, the fact that NGOs that control funding system often assume the leadership roles in organized labor should always be explicitly stated or even explored. The insight we gain from such perspective is that labor networks or coalitions themselves can be crucial sites of political contestation. The complex composition of the Thai labor movement (or organized labor) highlights the conflict and contestation associated with organizing workers—organized labor is a site of conflict between contending social forces and interests—within which there are significant political divisions that need to be recognized and explained. The positions that different labor organizations take on different issues and the conflicts that occur within those organizations (i.e., about which issues should be tackled and how they should be tackled) thus require careful investigation and explanation.

In this chapter, I take these two neglected points as my points of departure. Accordingly, I call into question the political economy analysis that generalizes the Thai organized labor movement by taking the decisions made by TLSC and SERC at face value as those of the whole labor movement (see in particular Napaporn 2005; and Brown and Sakdina 2012). By doing so, I argue that more attention is needed to investigate the ways that decisions made by the leaders of these groups at various times and in relation to certain problems have been resulted in further divisions/splits within the movement.

4.3 Labor hierarchy and class composition

In 2001, the Thai Labor Solidarity Center (TLSC) was established by a number of trade unions as well as a ‘complex and dense network of alternative organizing vehicles’

(Brown and Sakdina 2012, p. 8)⁴⁵. Although the TLSC has no formal legal status as either a trade union or NGO, affiliates hoped to be able use it as an independent vehicle through which they could voice their concerns about industrial as well as broader social and political matters. Over the past 15 years the TLSC has become a central organizational site through which political differences between its member groups have played out. While TLSC has relied on the hierarchical networks of the labor movement, its members especially the independent labor unions were more reluctant to engage with the state agencies. The literature on the Thai labor movement tends to focus on the analyses of larger political polarization (i.e. conflicts between Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt movements), rather than the internal dynamics within the movement that appeared to find expression in the polarized political conflicts. Thailand labor scholars tend to focus on how the labor movement became entangled in wider political conflicts between red and yellow, but have not paid enough attention to the internal conflict dynamics within the labor movement. As I demonstrate through my analyses of class composition below, these internal dynamics are crucial to explain why different labor groups supported different sides of the political divide. To better understand these internal dynamics we need to focus on issues of class composition.

In principle, an expansion of wage labor should increase labor's power, as the growing number of waged workers increases their structural significance on the Thai economy. However, as the statistics on the Thai labor force suggest, the existence of a dual economy (i.e. between formal and informal sectors) has engendered at least a two-tier strata within the working class. On the one hand the Thai workforce is composed of a

⁴⁵ See Brown and Sakdina (2012) for detailed discussion of TLSC.

large informal sector with a majority of, often skilled, non-organized workers. On the other, the institutionalization of labor rights through a series of labor laws allows for the formation of labor unions in medium and larger enterprises where better skilled employees can, theoretically at least, exercise their collective bargaining rights. Accordingly, on the upper tier, skilled labor and those working in medium and large enterprises, associated with Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), have been able to use their unions to achieve better wages and conditions within the workplace⁴⁶. On the lower tier, those who labor in small family-owned business and the informal sector—especially home-based, domestic workers, and migrant workers — have had to rely heavily on minimum wage mechanism, controlled by national and provincial wage committees, to improve their wages. Within this latter group, moreover, there are four to five million migrant workers who do not have the right to establish trade unions. Between 2013-2015, amidst political debates around the national, single minimum wage rate revealed some of the tensions that exist between these two major components of the working class: workers who enjoyed formal legal coverage and had access to workplace collective bargaining rights and those informal, flexible and disenfranchised workers who enjoyed no such advantages.

In the next section, I illustrate the nature of tensions between formal and informal workers over the minimum wage rates by discussing how political processes within the periods of two administrations: Thaksin Shinawatra (2000-2006) and Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014) accommodate demands from formal and informal sector

⁴⁶ Since the end of 1970s, labor relations mechanisms including labor courts and tripartite bodies have emerged and proliferated, as a response to increasing labor dispute cases (see Napaporn 2002, p. 138-140).

workers. Before doing so, I define the two important concepts of class composition: technical and political class composition, as proposed by Italian Autonomous Marxism.

4.3.1 *Class composition and recomposition*

Class composition generally consists of technical composition and political composition of the class—“two interrelated processes of decomposition and recomposition (Bowman 2012).” Similar to other concepts of the Autonomous Marxism, they are not explicitly defined, but rather “taken, by analogy, from a heretical reading of Marx’s *Capital* (ibid.)”. Paul Bowman (2012) explains the two concepts as follows:

“The analogy the Operaisti took from [Marx’s *Capital*] is the distinction between the objective composition of the work class – i.e. on a macro scale, how many people work in agriculture, manufacturing, public sector, housework, etc.; on the scale of an individual enterprise, how many people work on particular production lines, ... etc. This represents the technical composition of the class, which changes according to changes in production methods, increases in productivity, etc, along with changes in the differing amount and types of goods produced and circulated within a given society.

In contrast to the technical composition, the political composition of the class consisted of the “subjective” element—i.e. *people’s awareness of being part of a wide social group, their identification as workers, or people subjected to work, their identification with or antagonism to their immediate bosses, and groups of bosses or representatives of the state in a wider social context. As well as purely subjective elements of beliefs, cultures, values and habits and practices of either collective or individual resistance or compliance, there are also elements of organizations—the creation of both formal and informal organizations to pursue distinct class goals whether of self-defense or attack (my emphasis, Bowman 2012)”*

In short, the class composition comprises two main elements: objective/ technical composition, and subjective/ political composition. In this chapter, the distinction

between the two compositions is key to understand the shifts in objective labor force composition and the resulting political recomposition and differences within the Thai labor movements.

As previously mentioned in the Chapter Three, labor as non-capital is internal, rather than external, to capital. Accordingly, the workers' power to attack and struggle are integral to the production process. Cleaver (2017) explains that, based on such the labor's counter-power, labor struggle not only causes capital to adjust its strategies, the struggle also recomposes the internal divisions of the working class, and hence the balance of power vis-à-vis the capital. In the processes, the organizational forms change, and so the characters and demands of the working class (p. 58).

4.3.2 Economic restructuring and class recomposition

Following the 1997 financial crisis, economic restructuring led to an intensification of manufacturing activities and a geographical relocation of production from the Bangkok Metropolitan Region to the Eastern and Central Regions (Glassman 2007). As a consequence, there was an explosive growth in investment and hence employment in these regions (ibid). In the Eastern Seaboard, these shifts increased the concentration of workers, many of whom came to rely on workplace collective bargaining to lift their wages rather than relying on nationally determined minimum wage rate mechanisms.

In the early 2000s, Thaksin's government further influenced the recomposition of the working class by pursuing broadly neoliberal strategies (Brown and Hewison 2005; Hewison 2005). According to Brown and Hewison (2005), Thaksin's administration (2001-2006) used two main strategies with regards to labor: facilitating the creation of

flexible and skilled labor in the market, and mobilizing broad working-class bases electoral support through a ‘new social contract’. This new social contract supposedly replaced a previous one, which had been marked by three main elements: a system of minimum wage fixation, partial benefits from a workplace compensation scheme, and promises that workers lives would improve through the trickle-down effect (Hewison 2003, cited by Brown and Sakdina 2012). Drawing on Portes (1997), Hewison (2005) called this a ‘developmental social contract’, whereby the Thai working class—workers and peasants —contributed to economic growth but without a say in the economy which remained the preserve of state (military and civilian governments) and capital (domestic and foreign).

By contrast, the new social contract established by Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) government offered welfare provisions via various schemes that especially targeted the rural poor (Hewison 2005). These schemes included, for example, a basic universal health care program called *thirty-bath cure all*, and a cheap-loans program made available to villagers across the nation through local administrations funding system. Effectively, Thaksin was trying to establish an accommodation where workers and the rural poor would benefit through increased growth but where they would also receive better protection from ‘market failure’. In return, they would work hard, be entrepreneurial, as well as support him at the ballot box. In this sense, the roles of the working class were to vote for the TRT and enjoy the expansion of the domestic market. Interestingly, it is argued that such strategies also sidelined domestic capital, and accordingly pushed the local business to seize the state power in the following decades (ibid).

Initially organized labor movement was lured into supporting Thaksin's TRT through false promises given prior to the 2001 elections. According to Brown and Hewison (2005), the TRT party invited labor representatives to discuss their concerns and drafted a 'Policy for Developing Human Resources and Social Welfare Structure', which promised to meet a list of labor's long-held demands (p. 363). State enterprise unions, in particular, supported TRT because it promised to scrap privatizations plans initiated by the incumbent Democrat-led government. After TRT won the 2001 election and formed a single-party government, the labor movement's concerns were only superficially included into its policies (ibid). TRT failed promises alienated leaders of the Thai Labor Solidarity Center (TLSC) as well as leaders of the State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC). Subsequently both these groups became supporters of the anti-Thaksin movement. For many, the tipping point was the policy u-turn of the TRT-led government that launched its own privatization plan, which provoked significant hostility from state enterprise workers unions⁴⁷. During the 2006 anti-Thaksin campaign, a broad social and political movement joined forces with People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—urban elites and middle class-led alliance—to oust Thaksin, leading finally to a military coup d'état in 2006 (see Brown and Sakdina 2012; Pye and Schaffer 2008). PAD later transformed into the Yellow Shirt (YS) movement, among which the leadership rank were Somsak Kosaisuk and Sawit Kaewwarn—both men coming from leadership within the State Railway Workers Union (SEWU) and its umbrella organization, the SERC.

4.3.3 Political polarization and fragmentation of the labor movement

⁴⁷ TRT announced anti-privatization stance during election campaigns, but later reserved its stance when it was in government. For detailed discussion see Brown and Sakdina (2012).

Somsak and Sawit assumed highly influential roles in the Thai organized labor movement during this period. was known publicly as one of the leading forces in the past mass anti-privatization campaigns, while Sawit Kaewwan wore many hats in powerful organizations: he was a leader of Confederation of Thai Appliances, Electronics, Automobile and Metal Workers (TEAM), and very active in both TLSC⁴⁸ and automotive-based union movement in the Eastern Seaboard. Actually, Napaporn (2002) is right to notice a transition in the characteristics of organized labor, especially among those workers on the upper tier—from the more socially and politically vested positions to the narrower self-interests. Nevertheless, her social movement unionism (SMU) framework is insufficient⁴⁹ to explain an increasingly contradictory nature of the leading organizations such as the State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC), which actively participated in the conservative politics but firmly maintained the rhetoric of the traditional left.

As Brown and Sakdina (2012) note, the decision of the TLSC and SERC leadership to support the PAD and Yellow Shirt movements have at least two implications. First, despite its liberal rhetoric⁵⁰, during 2006-2011 the leadership of TLSC⁵¹ had been in alliance with factions of elite and the conservative right (p. 113).

⁴⁸ Sawit has later been elected the president of TLSC in 2017, which makes TLSC male-dominated because all the main leading positions (the president, vice president and secretary) have now occupied by men.

⁴⁹ According to Park (2007), social movement unionism (SMU) theory is inherently deficient in three major ways. First, SMU theory falls short of explanation regarding SMU type union's desired social change: whether it is a change *of or in* the capitalist system (Park 2007, p. 316). Second, SMU theory is ambiguous about what autonomy means, especially SMU type union's relationships with political parties. Third, SMU advocates tend to romanticize militant unionism (ibid).

⁵⁰ On Labor Day 2011, Sawit announced that SERC 'is defecting from the PAD'. See Unions, PAD and 'undemocratic' royalist elite. <https://thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/tag/sawit-kaewwan/> (accessed 24 Oct, 2017).

⁵¹ It is important to note that some labor leaders, not all, did support the Yellow shirts, at least initially, while some leaders who opposed Thaksin did not support the Yellow shirts. Likewise, other leaders who supported the Red shirts may not necessarily become Thaksin's supporters. Andrew Brown notes that there was significant debate within the TLSC both among its leadership as well among its members groups as to what to do or what not to do (personal communication).

Second, this alliance placed such labor activists and organizations in opposition with a large section of the working class that became mass supporters of Thaksin under the banner of the Red Shirt Movement (ibid). Without examining decision-making processes within the TLSC; however, scholars tend to confuse political choices made by the leaders with decisions of organized labor as a whole. It was the leadership of the TLSC and SERC, especially Somsak, Sawit and others, who forged an alliance with the conservative movement, despite oppositions from other members within the TLSC. I want to argue further that, as a result of the hierarchy, non-democratic and patriarchal domination within the labor movement, their involvement led to a labor movement's shift towards conservative politics.

During the last decade of political upheaval, fissures within the independently organized labor, particularly between the national coordinating body Thai Labor Solidarity Committee (TLSC) and pro-democratic and radical labor groups have widened. For example, in May 2007, independent labor groups calling themselves *Labor Assembly 1550*⁵² held a separate May Day event from the independent labor movement, led by the TLSC and SERC. Since 2003, the TLSC and SERC⁵³ had organized alternative May Day events so as to separate themselves from some labor councils that enjoyed close ties to state and capital. In 2007, *Labor Assembly 1550* organized a third alternative. Led by radical political activists and unionists who had organized independent unions in the

⁵²The group explicitly demanded for restoration of democracy through electoral politics. Its members include Labor Congress Center for Labor Unions of Thailand, Textile and Garment Workers Federation of Thailand (TWFT), Paper and Printing Workers Federation of Thailand (PPFT), Bangkok Iron Workers Union, Union of Democratic Labor Alliance (chaired by Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, a political prisoner and main supporter of Thaksin, charged with Lese Majeste law), People Coalition Party (headed by Giles Ungpakorn, a dissident in exile). See "Labor divided to organize 3 May Day marches: walking separately on parallel" (in Thai). <https://prachatai.com/journal/2007/05/12565> (accessed 25 Oct 2017).

⁵³ On May Day 2008, TLSC and SERC were reportedly dressed in orange. This choice seemed appropriate, given that the state-funded labor groups were dressed in yellow, while some supporters of Labor Assembly 1550 were in red.

light industrial hubs of the Bangkok's periphery in late 1980s and early 1990s, the *Labor Assembly 1550* had been vocal in opposing military regimes and supporting democratic political processes. Rangsit and Nearby Area Unions Group (RNAUG), who would normally have joined the TLSC and SERC, withdrew from the celebrations at the last minute in protest as their representatives had been denied the right by TLSC and SERC organizers to criticize the military junta openly on the May Day stage. It was reported that, subsequently, some of the workers from the RNAUG appeared on the stage of the Labor Assembly 1550⁵⁴.

4.3.4 National organized labor versus the working class

The politics of accommodation during Yingluck's administration had further deepened the internal division within the formal labor movement. In the national arena, the history repeated itself again when the leadership of the Thai Labor Solidarity Committee (TLSC) and State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation (SERC) mobilized some affiliated labor organizations to support the anti-government movement that led to the military coup in May 2014. This time led to further fragmentation in the union movement.

From 2010 to 2013, the TLSC and SERC led the labor movement in attempts to reform the social security system by proposing the introduction of a new Social Security Act. The labor movement's draft sought to restructure the Social Security Fund in a number of ways, especially by subjecting fund committee members to election, as well as increasing the proportion of labor and experts representatives on the committee. It was so-called 'people's draft' was signed by over 14,000 citizens. The process of drafting

⁵⁴ See 'Labor Divided', *ibid.*

this act involved a wide range of independent labor groups, including informal sector workers such as home-based and agricultural workers. The campaign was primarily mobilized around achieving independence and transparency of the social security fund, increased labor participation in decision-making, and inclusion of informal workers⁵⁵. It is worth noting that this was the first draft of a law proposed by citizens after the 1997 constitution opened up a channel for bottom-up (i.e. non-parliamentary) law-making processes. Given the democratic and inclusive drafting process, and the widespread support for the draft, the TLSC and SERC had high hopes that the law would be enacted by the parliament.

In 2010, the TLSC had begun lobbying relevant Ministers and politicians from the then Democrat Party government to pass the law. However, the process was so protracted that when TLSC and SERC finally submitted the draft to the legislature, the Pheu Thai Party (formerly Thai Rak Thai) had replaced the Democrat Party. When the draft was turned down by the legislature under the Pheu Thai government, labor groups who had participated in the process were infuriated. In April 2013, the TLSC organized a protest where workers dressed in black and staged a mourning ceremony for democracy. In the ceremony, workers burned coffins with photos of the four politicians— one of whom was the then Minister of Labor from the Pheu Thai Party⁵⁶.

As Sawit Kaew-warn, one of the TLSC and SERC leaders, was the Secretary of the Confederation of Thai Appliances, Electronics, Automobile and Metal Workers (TEAM), which has a strong membership bases in the Eastern Seaboard. Both TLSC and

⁵⁵ Wilaiwan Sae Tia, explaining the needs for pushing forward the new social security act draft in the parliament <https://prachatai.com/journal/2012/03/39797> (accessed 16 Oct, 2017).

⁵⁶ Labor protesting the parliament's play-acting, scamming labor in 3 years of 'participation' that was dismissed overnight <https://ilaw.or.th/node/2719>

SERC relied on mass mobilization from the Eastern Labor Unions Group (ELUG) to support PAD and the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) rallies in Bangkok. However, since 2010 a group of unions inside the ELUG that had strong ties with the farmers' movement in the Northeast region (i.e. Assembly of the Poor) had opposed supporting first PAD and subsequently PDRC. They claimed that unionists should instead be free to express their political opinions on an individual basis, rather than being constrained by the leading unions and larger federations. That initial opposition eventually caused an internal rift and saw the ELUG split into two: the ELUG and the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG). The ELRG formed out of an umbrella of labor unions that identified themselves more with the pro-democratic side of the Red Shirt movement.

In November 2013, again the TLSC and SERC leadership officially joined the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), the anti-government movement—an offshoot of PAD—to protest against the Yingluck Shinawatra's government⁵⁷. Similarly to 2006, this move was caused by the disappointment and anger fueled by the blatant disregard of Yingluck's administration for the demands of the labor movement.

4.3.5 Not only the big P-political differences, but also the small p

In January 2013, based on campaign promises made during the 2012 electoral campaigns, Yingluck Shinawatra's government increased the minimum wage to a uniform rate of 300 baht across the country. This raise increased the wages on average by 35-39.5 percent. Apart from the substantial increase, it was historic for many reasons.

⁵⁷ The overall mobilizing cause was the opposition to the passing of an amnesty bill. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/11/thailand-protests-amnesty-bill>

First, it was the first time, since the establishment of the minimum wage fixation system in the 1970s, that a political party, during an electoral campaign, played a role in unilaterally setting the wage rate. Second, it was also the first time that the minimum wage rate in the whole country was set at a single rate. In 2010, Thailand had officially 32 geographical minimum wage rates, ranging from 5.48USD - 7.62 USD/day. Scholars argued that the state has used this spatial differentiation to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into some zones targeted for promotion (Mabry 1979; Glassman 2004). Despite similar costs of living across Thailand, it was difficult to alter the system of wage fixing because of inertia within the hierarchical and bureaucratic system where minimum wages were determined. Technically, wages rates were first proposed by each of the 76 provincial sub-committees and, then, ultimately approved by the central committee⁵⁸.

Between 2013 and 2016⁵⁹, the 300 baht minimum wage had practical implications for the composition of the working class in a number of important respects. For example, the raise radically changed the way in which migrant and guest workers viewed relationships between their status and the political system. After the raise, migrant workers who were legally allowed to work in certain sectors discovered ways to negotiate for a higher minimum wage. For instance, studies (Lathapipat and Pogy 2016) have found that migrant workers and Thai workers in small business and agriculture gained

⁵⁸ The provincial sub-committees were introduced in 1997 after the Thai government requested the International Labor Organization (ILO) to review the minimum wage fixation system. In fact, the ILO recommended that Thailand should have a 'two-tier' system which comprises (an existing) central national wage committee and industrial-based committee, both determining 'base wage' and 'industrial base wage', respectively (Peetz 1996). In principle, the base wage represents a fair wage that serves as a poverty safety net, while an industrial base wage can act as 'fair wage' that allocates a fairer share of economic development to workers, according to wealth in each industry. Not only did the Thai government refuse to acknowledge the ILO's initiative of creating a base wage and fair wage (i.e., mixture of safety net and fairness), it put into practice the additional provincial sub-committees instead. The insertion of provincial sub-committee adds another layer of bureaucratic unit, which basically diffuses the entry point in which workers advocate for higher minimum wages.

⁵⁹ After the Coup D'état in 2006, the military-backed Government ended the uniform wage rate regime by endorsing the increases of minimum wage rates by groups of provinces, similar to pre-2013 practices.

greater benefit from the wage rise, than did waged workers in medium and large enterprises who generally relied on from workplace collective bargaining for pay rises.

The campaign to raise the minimum wage sparked heated public debates about living costs of the working class and appropriate wage levels. Against the backdrop of these debates, tensions surfaced between independent labor groups, especially between the radical and progressive labor groups. For instance, in 2015, an independent labor group led by the Textile and Garment Workers Federation of Thailand (TWFT) proposed a minimum wage rate of 421 baht (\$14), higher than 360 baht (\$12) proposed by the TLSC and SERC. Moreover, Rangsit and Nearby Area Unions Group (RNAUG) strongly questioned the minimum wage rate proposed by the leader of TLSC, arguing that the rate was actually the product of a compromise deal made between the TLSC and the military-backed government⁶⁰. This dispute underscored growing differences between the trade union movement located in the heavy industries, represented by SERC and TEAM which relied largely on workplace collective bargaining, and those unions in the light industries (such as the RNAUG) and informal sectors, which gained more from the national tripartite system.

Focusing inwardly on its their political leverage at workplace level, labor unions in the state enterprises and heavy industries including automotive, chemical and metal viewed the minimum wage rate campaign as a distraction to workers. It is worth noting that, despite their political differences, the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG) was more aligned with unions in state enterprises and heavy industries rather than with their counterparts in the light industrial and informal sectors.

⁶⁰ Apparently, the divergence first appeared on political scene during the peak of political polarization. On May Day 2007, the independent labor group 'Labor Assembly 1550' was reported to announce a different rate of desired minimum wage rate from TLSC and SERC, which was considered as representative of the Thai labor movement (Prachatai 2007).

The fragmentation and divisions of the organized labor is a result of both the labor politics and the politics of wages (small p politics). Such understanding demystifies the conventional idea that the Thai organized labor is a singular social movement, united under the same banner of progressive demands (i.e. the universal provisions of state welfare and high minimum wages), or simply divided into progressive and conservative fractions. The ELRG exemplified an outlier, which could be seen as radical and pro-democratic but simultaneously attached to the state-sanctioned tripartite system. While the political economy studies alone fails to explain the diversity and complexity within the labor movement, the class composition analysis, which focuses on the technical and hierarchal divisions within the working class, proves to be a complement to the structural analysis. Both approaches together explain *how* and *why* different segments of labour adopted different political stances during the period under review. In the section I turn to a closer inspection of positions adopted by the Eastern Labor Relations Group.

4.4 Brief history of the Eastern Labor Unions Group

Due to the timing of economic development, labor activism in the Eastern Seaboard is distinctive in its history and characteristics. In 1975, the Eastern Labor Unions Group (ELUG) was established by a group of labor unions led by oil refinery workers⁶¹. The workers in the oil refinery were motivated to organize by the treatment they received after the previously Taiwanese-owned plant was bought and restructured by an American oil company. The new owner imposed much stricter workplace regulations (Peeraphong 2016). Although ELUG was not geographically located in the BMR, its

⁶¹ Workers at Esso and Thai Oil, and a variety of workplaces including a golf course, matches production, sugar plant, and hotel.

strategic industrial enhanced its organizational power. During the 1970s, several ELUG representatives held important positions in the Labor Confederation of Thailand (LCT) which played a leading role in the broader pro-democratic movement (Napaporn 2002).

During the 1990s, as development in the Eastern Seaboard region accelerated, the numbers of labor unions, as well as labor disputes, increased significantly. In response, the ELUG divided its structure into five geographical areas: Laem Chabang, Bowin, Chacheungsao, Amata, and Rayong. Beginning in the late 1990s, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILs) sent two organizers to survey the area, and became involved in educating, training and organizing workers employed in the newly established industrial estates (Voicelabor 2017).⁶² As mentioned earlier, as a result of broader political conflicts approximately 30 labor unions broke away from the Eastern Labor Unions Group (ELUG) in 2010 and established a new labor council, the Thailand Congress of Trade Unions (TCTU). This group of unions was specifically affiliated with the Bowin area labor group, formerly a subgroup under ELUG, which was led by one of ACIL's organizers who worked with a local activist to establish the Organizing Labor Union Center (OLUC).

Drawing on the organizing model of the ELUG and Bowin group, within the first two years, some TCTU activists established the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG), which was an informal and voluntary-based group that acted as a worker organizing center long the borders of Chonburi and Rayong industrial area. While the TCTU was a formal organization, legally registered with the state and thus regulated by the formal

⁶² An account of a veteran organizer, Seminar on the History of the Eastern Labor Groups, organized by the Thai Labor Museum. See summary of the seminar at <http://voicelabour.org/%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B8%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A3%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%B2-%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%B1%E0%B8%95%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%A8%E0%B8%B2/>

labor-relations framework, ELRG operated in a similar fashion to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Because ELRG was an independent group working that aimed to promote educational and social activities for union members in the Eastern Seaboard, it received funding from civil society organizations through its network of social and political activism. In this next section, I shift my focus to the organizational structure and practices of the Eastern Labor Relations Group itself.

4.5 Introducing the Eastern Labor Relations Group

Since late 2010, the ELRG has supported activists organizing new labor unions as well as workers experiencing hardship, whether they were affiliated with labor unions or not. It has also offered organizational support for affiliated union members involved in legal disputes with employers. In the following sections, I use two cases of labor struggle one in an American and the other in a Japanese company to illustrate the way in which labor unions became an important vehicle for workplace resistance in the Eastern Seaboard area. By connecting labor struggle in the workplace with networks of labor activism, I intend to raise two fundamental question concerning the nature of the relationship between the formal labor relations framework and labor activism; and the choice and agency that workers and the ELRG activists have. In the next chapter, I attempt to answer these two questions through a closer examination of the organizing practices of the ELRG activists, and their relationships with rank-and-file workers.

UM Workers Union: resistance for non-working time

A placard with the word ‘Headquarter’ written by hand hangs between two poles. On one pole was the national Thai flag, while a union flag in red was on the other. The sign informed striking workers where to contact the union staffers. To highlight the purpose of the gathering, the bottom of the placard read, ‘*against slavery contract*’. Underneath this sign, a larger banner in blazing red stated ‘The Universal Motors Thailand Workers Union’⁶³.

UM is one of the major American carmakers, beginning their operations in Thailand in the early 1990s. In early 2000s, the company expanded production into one of the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates. With Thailand serving as its main production base for the Southeast Asia market, UM began building its own powertrains plant in the mid 2000s. In February 2013,⁶⁴ around 2,000 workers walked off the factory floor. According to a Detroit-based newspaper, despite the massive walkout, 3,000 workers stayed on duty. The 3-day strike was reported to have cost one American supplier \$15 million. The UM protest represents one of many cases of labor activism that has occurred in the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates.

Deconstructing Labor Radicalism and Militancy

The UM struggle described briefly here (and more in depth in the following chapter) exemplifies workplace activism characteristic of the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates (ESIEs). As an emphasis on collective bargaining agreements in workplaces is generally seen as a dominant trait of economic unionism, UM is representative of the economic unions in the Eastern Seaboard. One eminent Thai labor scholar, Napaporn

⁶³ A pseudonym

⁶⁴ The protest and most of the incidents that followed had happened before the field research. However, based on the photos and documentation by workers, interviews with activists, as well as news reports, I constructed the incidents based on the workers’ narratives.

Ativanichayapong, (2002) has argued that since the 1990s, economic/business unionism has come to dominate the Thai labor movement, replacing the social/political movement orientated unionism of an earlier period. Although this view has been influential among scholars of Thai labor, it deserves re-examination for at least two main reasons. First, clearly delineating between social movement/ political unionism⁶⁵ and economic/business unionism is problematic. Second, I would argue, such views tend to stem from a focus on the activities of formal labor organizations, ignoring the individual and broader collective agency of the working class. I elaborate on these two points below.

First, American industrial relations scholars have called into question the clear division between social/political unionism and economic/business unionism, suggesting the differences are overstated (Gerstle 1989; Cohen 1990; Fraser 1991; Fantasia 1997). Such a division is essentially based on deeper assumptions that draw a contrast between radicalism and conservatism, whereby the former is revealing of the existence of certain forms of class-consciousness, which scholars can assess by studying the behaviors of workers or analyzing the agendas of labor organizations (Wellman 1995).

According to Wellman (1995), scholars of American labor militancy of the 1930s employed diverse terminologies and interpretations. Despite this divergence, they seemed to agree on one issue—the interruption and short-livedness of radicalism⁶⁶. In short,

⁶⁵ I intentionally use social movement unionism and political unionism interchangeably.

⁶⁶ Wellman (1994) argues that there are two main sets of explanation for this interruption: radical labor was either defeated or driven underground. Under the first category, what Wellman calls *the defeat theory*, there are three major themes: *industrial unionism and labor peace*; *institutionalization of capitalist power in the workplace through labor bureaucracy*; and *change in the work process*. Firstly, industrial unions have successfully gained legal recognition from employers, but traded political power with economic power. A widely held belief by many scholars and activists is that “class collaboration replaced class conflict because the contractual agreement conceded workplace control to management (Wellman 1994, 20).” Stanley Aronowitz’s work is exemplary of this view. According to Aronowitz (1973; 1976), the preemptive class struggle, hence the labor peace allows for economic growth and shared prosperity between the capital and labor. Secondly, similar to the first theme but with emphasis on a different process, the explanation is that labor struggle over workplace governance has been replaced by bureaucratic control (see Edward 1979). Thirdly, due to scientific and technological advancement, workers have habituated with repetitive work process

Wellman (1995) argues that three particular components essentially underlie the premise behind the construction of such views:

- (1) radical politics are equated with socialism
- (2) the distinction made between “political” versus “business” unions, and “typical” unionism in America is constructed as business unionism whereas political unionism is “exceptional”
- (3) the operating rules of class relations are located in formal agreements, national political agendas, and institutional arrangements (p. 26).”

Debates around the militancy of contemporary American labor movements help shed further light on assumptions about union militancy and class consciousness within an established industrial relations system. Contemporary studies of the Thai labor movement also exhibit similar assumptions. Examining the historical development of the labor movement in Thailand’s changing political economy, Napaporn (2002) argues that during the 1960s to mid-1970s, social movement unionism dominated the Thai labor movement because of the moment’s emphasis on (1) defense of the common interests of workers, (2) class collective action, and (3) pursuit of broad social goals. This broad orientation changed between 1977 and 1990 as national labor centers and state enterprise labor unions shifted their focus and energy to workplace activism and playing a diminishing role in ‘protecting the benefits of the working class’ as a whole (Napaporn 2002, chapter 4). Although Napaporn (2002) traces changes in the Thai trade union movement in the context of wider political and economic shifts, her analysis overstates labor organizations as the central political actors, and confuses organizational goals with class-consciousness. Implicitly, Napaporn (2002) assumes that workers express only express their class-consciousness through involvement in open and very public ways, such as national or international campaigns, and through international

and become ‘machines’. Hence, labor has been ‘deskilled (see Braverman 1974).’ Despite distinctive emphases, these three strands of theories prompt scholars to reach the same conclusion: the radical American labor movement has died.

political campaigns. In other words, there is also a simplified but equally problematic assumption that social movement unionism equates to class collective action. This logic also implies that workers who are engaged with workplace activism alone do not possess class consciousness, an implicit assumption with which I disagree. In the following chapters, I explicitly explore such approach.

To avoid these problems, it is clarify some of the assumptions that will inform my further. Firstly, when I refer to radicalism, I do not simply mean socialism. Rather, radicalism is used to refer to beliefs and ideas that express a desire to fundamentally change ways of doing and being, through both personal and collective means. Secondly, I reject the idea that there is a clear distinction between the political and economic arenas. As feminist scholarship has pointed out, the personal is political: workplace relations and conditions are as much economic and personal as political and collective. As Linda Briskin (2007a) explains, “[labor] militancies are understood as part of the continuum of activities which seeks to transform societies in the interests of equity, inclusivity and justice (p. 99)”. Thirdly, class relationships are not located only in structural basis, or national scale, but are relational, interpersonal, and embedded in capital and labor relations.

My second point is concerned with methodology. While analyses of the Thai labor movement have helped shed light on how episodic struggles for state power on the part of Thai elites have constantly constrained labor’s political space⁶⁷, the various ways in which workers and activists have responded and resisted such constraints has been insufficiently documented, particularly in ethnographic studies. Consequently, in the

⁶⁷ For the analysis of elite’s domination in the making of Thai constitution 1991, see Hewison and Brown (2005).

following sections, I draw on my ethnographic research—concrete practices and discourses of workers located in particular places, to explain how the workers develop, acquire as well as exercise their agency.

Finally I draw on Brown (2007; 2016) and others (see Hewison *et al.* 1993 and Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007) who view the state as a changing set of relationships of power, rather than just a group of actors or functions⁶⁸. Within this framework, I offer an analysis of the building and exercise of workers' collective power and the degree of freedom achieved and negotiated through changing sets of power relations via several forms of organizing vehicles. By using the ELRG as a case study, I take as a task—albeit a daunting one—to elucidate the complexity of labor activism within the organized labor movement by focusing on the way in which activists negotiated legal constraints, received traditions, and repressive strategies. My second point is concerned with methodology. While analyses of Thai labor movement shed light on how episodic struggles for powers on the part of Thai elites have constantly shaped the political spaces in which labor find themselves organizing⁶⁹, the genuine way in which workers and activists respond and resist to such an arrangement is rarely documented, particularly in ethnographic studies. Consequently, in the following sections, my analyses are based on ethnographic research, especially briefs evocative of speeches from activists and workers on the ground. Here I follow Andrew Brown (2007; 2016) who posits the state as a changing set of relationships of power, rather than a group of actors or functions⁷⁰ (see also Hewison *et al.* 1993 and Rodan and Jayasuriya 2007). Within this framework, I offer

⁶⁸ According to Brown (2007; 2016), the state is an expression of economic, social, political, and ideological relations of power, while regime means a particular type of organization of the state apparatus.

⁶⁹ For the analysis of elite's domination in the making of Thai constitution 1991, see Hewison and Brown (2005).

⁷⁰ According to Brown (2006; 2010), the state is an expression of economic, social, political, and ideological relations of power, while regime means a particular type of organization of the state apparatus.

an analysis of workers' collective power and degree of freedom achieved and negotiated through changing sets of power relations via several forms of organizing vehicles. By using the ELRG as a case study, I take as a task—albeit a daunting one—to elucidate the complexity of labor activism within the organized labor movement by focusing on the way in which activists negotiate constrictions of laws, traditions and repressive strategies.

Conclusion

The complex composition of Thai organized labor highlights the conflicts and contestation associated with organizing workers—organized labor is a site of conflict between contending social forces and interests—within which there are significant political divisions. This chapter borrows insights from the class composition approach to explain such divisions and conflicts. The contribution of the approach is two-fold. First, the class composition analysis sheds light the internal dynamics, which are crucial to explain why different labor groups supported different sides of the political divide. Second, it offers an insight into the entanglement of the Eastern Seaboard labor groups in national labor politics, the resulting rift and hence establishment of the local labor group, Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG). This chapter offers a conceptual tool for further discussion on workers' struggles and power to resist in the following chapters.

Chapter 5. A View from Below: Workplace Activism and Militancy in Thailand's Detroit

This chapter explores the way in which workplace activism becomes a springboard for collective struggle and resistance. The first sections discuss the struggle of two unions concerning the intensification of work and for union recognition. These struggles that took place in American and Japanese carmakers raise questions about the effectiveness of workplace activism and the extent to which activists are constrained by the legal framework of the industrial relations regime. In short, the case studies touches on central questions of labor's collective agency. In the second half of the chapter, I tackle discuss how agency was both constrained and enabled by the legal framework. By showing the creative way in which Thai workers breathed new meanings into workplace activism, I stress the opportunities created by the labor relations framework and how activists made the best out of these opportunities. That said, through the case studies of two labor unions in the process of formation, I also illustrate the challenges faced by activists and workers, from technical and political class composition perspectives.

5.1 Workers' Struggle Against Capital

Based on a dialectical meaning of labor, as non-capital, a creation of value, or a process of producing capital, is simultaneously “the moment of the workers’ struggle against capital (Tronti and Murphy 2010 [1971], p. 344).”

As Tronti argues:

“In the factory, within production, when workers function for the capitalist like machines do for capital, with the additional possibility of choosing *not* to function; when labor is within capital and against it at the same time, then the collective boss is tremendously

weakened, because for a moment he has left in the hands of his enemies the weapons with which to combat him, the productive forces of labor social- ized and objectified in the working class.”

Accordingly, likewise “the total social labor” becomes “the class of organized workers—social labor-power as a class (p. 98).” This approach enables an analysis which views working class as internal to the capitalist production process and possessing the power to attack via its refusal to participate in the process.

Building on Autonomist Marxism, Cleaver (2017) reformulates Marx’s labor theory of value as *a theory of the value of labor to capital*. By adapting Marx’s definition of use value, Cleaver (2017) posits, “The primary *social use-value* of labor to capital is its role in organizing capitalist society and maintaining control over it” (p.65). In other words, the capitalists as a class are endowed with the “means of organizing and controlling society” (p. 66). Within this framework, Cleaver interprets a class struggle as “struggles against work and for the liberation of time and energy for activities of individual and collective self-valorization... (p. 67).” In this framework, working class is redefined as both factory and non-factory workers, including the women, youth and elderly. Cleaver (2000 [1979]) notes that an imposition of work must not be confused with the imposition of money wage. Surplus value is understood broadly to include the unwaged and unpaid forms of labor power done outside the workplace. As Cleaver rightly put “the working class includes those who work for capital in various ways in exchange for a portion of the total social wealth they produce” (84).

The concept of self-valorization is central to the conceptualization of resistance, since it is an inversion of Marx’s analysis of ‘valorization’ from the capital vantage point to the working class’s political project (Cleaver 1992). As Cleaver explains, Marx’s

analysis of the valorization process “captures the essentially undifferentiated sameness of the production activities” and “emphasizes the enormous transformation capital achieves by reducing the diversity of human production activity to a unified mechanism of social control” (116). Cleaver argues that Marx’s valorization is an antipode for the concept of alienation but that the latter fails to show the process of such reductionism involved. By contrast, the idea of ‘self-valorization’⁷¹ represents the positive moments of working-class autonomy, where the constitution of new practices emerges from the process of class recomposition (Cleaver 1992, 129).

5.2 UM Workers Union: struggle against work intensification

As briefly mentioned above, in 2013 a labor dispute between Universal Motors (UM) management and its labor union led to a walkout strike by workers⁷². After several rounds of negotiation over a month, neither side could agree over the terms of a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Specifically, the dispute centered on the proposed addition of Saturday as a working day, a change UM management had been trying to introduce since 2011. The union had continually resisted the proposal. However, management stated that that they would not negotiate a new CBA unless the union was open to discuss the change to the working week. Negotiation reached an impasse, and the union executive committee members responded by calling a strike. Although media reports claimed that the strike only lasted for three days, the repercussions were far more

⁷¹ It was actually attributed to Antonioni Negri who built on the work of Italian Autonomous Marxists including particularly Panzieri and Mario Tronti

⁷² Similar to industrial relations system in developed countries (such as Canada), strikes are only allowed during negotiation of a contract, not in mid-agreement period. During the term of agreement, workers and employers resort instead to grievances procedure, what is generally known as right disputes. As noted by Briskin (2007a) in the Canadian context, such ‘peace obligation’ and right disputes discourage labor militancy.

researching as the return to work did not mark the end of workers' resistance. As a matter of fact, the strike represented the beginning of a protracted struggle that involved hundreds of activists.

On the first day of the protest, as the striking workers walked off the job, union staffers organized a sit-in and set up large, temporary tents to accommodate the strikers and other participants. As a sign of their unity, both union staffers and the workers wore red headbands and scarfs—the union flag's main color. Inside the large white tents, participants sat on reed mats that had been prepared in advanced along with other necessities such as electric fans and camping gear. In fact, the union activists had prepared for two days beforehand.

At the end of the day, the sit-down turned into an occupation as fifty workers stayed overnight in the tents. For security purposes, union staffers slept in small tents positioned around the occupation so as to guard union members while they were sleeping. On the second night workers were subject to significant intimidation. Around two o'clock in the morning, without any advance warning, security guards together with a group of thirty men dressed in black visited the occupied area. They cut off the power, but left spotlights on that were aimed only at union leaders. The strikers nevertheless hung tight and passed the night together. To their surprise, the attempted intimidation prompted more workers to join the sleep-in over following nights. However, union staffers became increasingly concerned about their own safety, as union activists had been known to have been kidnapped and 'disappeared' in the past. Chet, an activist whose father was a trainer at the Thai naval academy, was familiar with such tactics. Chet called his father, who put

Chet in touch with a group of his ex-students from the academy. According to Chet, the tactics used by the 'men in black' had the stamp of the military.

One of them carried a gun, a pity that the photo we took didn't work out. But as soon as the men in black met with my father's guys, they stopped the whole operation altogether. They just recognized their own kind when they saw the guys.

Subsequently, the company used space that caused the activists to respond in spatial terms. Initially the company contained protesters within a defined perimeter on factory grounds by wrapping a green net around the tents. Ironically, the workers saw an advantage to this action by interpreting it as the company giving them permission to stay where they were. Later in court they used this argument to contest their eviction by the company. The first court decision ruled in favor of the UM protesters, and allowed them to occupy the premise for the first two weeks. The company then requested a temporary injunction from the court on the basis of protecting their property. The court then banned union executive committees from entering the plant's premises. In response, the union committee members retreated a few meters from the lawn onto the pavement, which was considered property of the industrial estate (hence common property not private). In response UM management asked the court to issue a warrant for the arrest of union executive committee members who had violated the court injunction. However, the court refused stating that the union leadership had all moved to stay outside company property. Union activists also used vehicles such as pickup trucks to protect the workers from another possible raid. In order to move the vehicles closer to the protesters, the activists had to manipulate physical space by welding sheets of metal together and place it as a passage for cars crossing the trench-like part of the cement ground. Activists even searched all the members to prevent alcohol and weapons being brought into the

occupied area, denying management any pretext that could be used against workers later in court.

To ease tensions during the first two weeks of the occupation, union staffers organized various social activities to keep members occupied. For example, taking advantage of Valentine's Day, union activists organized a soiree in which union members with partners shared stories about their relationships. According to a UM union executive committee, the event was very successful.

Some couples had been together for years, but never told they loved each other before. So they were tearful.

Moreover, as a show of solidarity, the union invited activists and workers from nearby factories to express words of encouragement and support. Many members from ELRG visited the UM strikers. Apart from donations, the presence of guests and visitors gave striking workers an enormous sense of support and solidarity. These kinds of activities demonstrated to rank-and-file members that unionism was not simply a matter of isolated struggle within single workplaces⁷³. Through such experiences, members learned that the scope of unionism was not limited to the factory's physical boundary. Support was mutual and reciprocal. When other unions also needed support, UM workers collected funds and sent representatives to show solidarity. Mutual support and reciprocity were crucial values that ELRG activists hoped rank-and-file members would experience so as to combat the fear and doubt that strikers always carry with them. However, such values cannot be simply taught. They can only be learnt through the experience of involvement in industrial disputation.

⁷³ Interview with a UM executive committee member.

After two weeks of occupation, the UM management successfully evicted the striking workers from the company's premises. The management requested an eviction order from a second court, located in the neighboring province of Chonburi.⁷⁴ The court ordered the occupiers to leave the premise immediately, threatening those who did not with a six-month imprisonment sentence. The UM union was subsequently able to move activities to a local park outside the industrial estate. Owned by the local administration, the park was a public space where fairs and festive activities were held. Although it had the advantage of easy access, the park was isolated and located at a considerable distance from the industrial estates. As a result, the workers received dwindling media coverage as well as support from other unions. The workers eventually relocated to the national parliament building, and then to the Ministry of Labor in Bangkok. Occupying a public space, at the heart of the country's capital, the striking workers followed traditional demonstrations practiced by Thai labor and social movements which made their struggle visible in national politics. One of the most interesting activities held during the public demonstrations occurred when a majority of union committee members, including one woman, shaved their heads—a radical and symbolic action commonly used in the Korean labor movement (Koo 2001).

As labor geographers (i.e., Harvey 2006; Mitchell 2012) argue, the landscape is constantly contested by workers, industrialists, and state agencies over its 'built environment' to make it commensurate with their needs. Harvey (2006) suggests that the 'built environment' (e.g., factory, office building, etc.) is constructed mainly to facilitate the accumulation and circulation process of capital within a capitalist landscape. In that

⁷⁴ An ELRG activist believed that a labor judge in this court had a personal connection with business in the Eastern Seaboard.

sense, labor activism within the industrial estates—the struggle by UM workers, not only for wages but for their rights—through contestation over the usage (i.e. *use values*) of the built environment—articulate the workers’ agency in both geographical and collective terms. Despite the backlash, UM activists believed that their resistance to the introduction of the Saturday working day was the right thing to do. According to Chet, one of the activists, if they let the UM normalize the Saturday working day, all the small plants, upstream suppliers, in the ESIEs would have to start working six days a week.

5.3 Mitzuki Workers Union: struggle for organizing space

In mid-December 2013, Samart —a manager for a Japanese car manufacturer in one of the ESIEs – went to work as he did everyday. Samart had been with the company since it began operations, and he was proud of it. Samart was born and raised in Chonburi. He had a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering. Like all workers, every alternate fortnight, Samart was scheduled to work a night shift. Yet, unlike other days, Samart sensed something different was happening – an air of tension and anxiety was palpable. Within ten days, workers would be leaving for their New Year holiday break; most of them planned to return to their hometowns in the Northeast. For this reason, Samart’s colleagues were anxiously awaiting news about the annual bonuses about to be announced by management. Even though Samart was not from the Northeastern or Isan region, and had no children, he knew that most of his colleagues planned to spend the end-of-year bonus on presents for their children and their parents at home.

That evening the workplace welfare committee delivered the news regarding annual bonuses. Management had announced that workers would receive a bonus

equivalent to six-months salary, plus a specific amount of cash. Samart knew, this amount was only one third of the bonuses that other big carmakers had paid that year. Unlike some other carmakers in the ESIEs that had already announced the end-of-year benefits, workers at Mitzuki knew that the company had performed pretty well, especially in the sale of its eco-car models. They certainly knew they had worked hard during the whole year.

During a break, Chai, who worked as Samart's assistant in the welding department, talked to Samart about the workers' feelings of disappointment. Chai told Samart that the workers in welding section were angry, and some were even furious about management's announcement. Looking over toward the space between workstations, Samart saw groups of workers huddled together and engaged in an intense conversation. This scene contrasted with what usually occurred during breaks as workers usually stayed in their own spots and quietly rested. Samart recalled previous conversations he had had with colleague, including Chai, Non, and a few others from the assembly department, about forming a union. The conversation had reached a dead-end due to different ideas as to who should be on the union executive board.

Other workers in the assembly department were also angry and had actually stopped working altogether. When the night shift ended, some workers lingered to inform friends and colleagues, who had arrived to work on the day shift, about the disappointing news. The work stoppage crept into the day shift, but the withdrawal of labor ended around noon. Samart and fifteen other colleagues neither participated in the stop work protest, nor had they returned home after the end of their shift. Rather, they met at the office of Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG) with their minds collectively set on one

immediate task –to issue a collective bargaining demand to management supported by a majority of Mitzuki workers. Within two days, their demand for changed working conditions, signed by nearly 900 workers, had been presented to management,⁷⁵. In the meantime, Samart and colleagues began the process of registering a labor union with the local labor office. Although the union had not yet been legally registered, the workers led by Samart and Chai managed to negotiate with representatives of the company and on 25 December, the last working day before scheduled holidays, reached an agreement over new contract terms. On the same day, the Department of Labor Protection had also issued the registration for the new Mitzuki Workers Union. This surprised and angered management. They responded by dismissing nine employees, including Samart and Chai, whose names appeared as founding members of the union.

5.4 Connecting labor struggles with multi-scalar labor activism

Worker unrest at both the UM and Mitzuki factories were not unrelated. First, both UM and Mitzuki unions were members of the same umbrella organizations — the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG) and the Thailand Confederation of Trade Unions (TCTU). Second, both UM and Mitzuki factories were located in the ESIEs and their management belonged to the same employees’ association, known as the HR Club. As discussed in Chapter Two, the HR Club not only organized regular meetings and training for administrative and managerial professionals but served as a hub for information about industrial relations cases received from local government officers. It was very likely that what happened earlier in 2013 at the UM factory became a case study for the other

⁷⁵ Thai labor law allows workers without a union to propose collective demand, as long as there are signatures of more than fifteen percent of workers forming a bargaining unit.

managers, including that at Mitzuki. Most importantly, both UM and Mitzuki managers responded to worker recalcitrance in similar ways. For example, charges were pressed against union activists on the claim that they had violated several criminal laws. One common tactic was the use of a series of lawsuits against some unionists while co-opting other union members through financial incentives.

ELRG and international network of activism

The dismissal of nine Mitzuki union activists set in motion a chain of events that touched the lives of many other people, both inside and outside the Mitzuki plant. The struggle was to drag on for years, during which time one of the nine sacked workers could not tolerate the pressure and committed suicide.⁷⁶ With the support of activists from the Eastern Labor Relations Group, the sacked workers pursued their case through many courts, including local and national labor courts, and also filed a petition with the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Almost two years after the events of 2013, I found myself sitting across a table from Samart and Chai. We were in a small Thai restaurant on the Eastern Seaboard. Sitting next to me was Yumiko (pseudonym), a tiny Japanese woman in her sixties. With her soft-spoken manner, Yumiko-san gave the impression of a retired schoolteacher rather than the radical labor activist she is who has spent most of her life working for international solidarity. In Japan she ran a small organization out of her own house which was located in a port city where a global tire corporation had its headquarters. This was her first time in Thailand's Eastern Seaboard.

⁷⁶ During the UM protest, activists searched and found weapons on the premises, some of which were passed over to Mitzuki activists. Regrettably, an activist committed suicide with one of these weapons.

Apart from Yumiko, Samart and Chai and myself, we were also joined by Yingyong. Yingyong was a leading figure in the ELRG and had known Yumiko for years through an Asian labor network. Yumiko was actually in Thailand for a biannual meeting of the network, this time to be held in Bangkok. Participants from labor organizations, mostly NGOs, from across Asia had just finished a one-day field trip to the ESIEs after three days of meetings. Yingyong had been asking Yumiko to help to bring pressure on Mitzuki headquarter in Japan to reinstate the sacked workers. Yumiko understood the importance of this solidarity work, since she had facilitated similar campaigns supporting foreign workers working in Japanese companies in other Southeast Asian countries.⁷⁷

Yingyong usually communicated with Yumiko via email and Skype. With Yingyong's basic Japanese⁷⁸ and English skills, communication with Yumiko could sometime be tricky without translation support. Since Yumiko had wanted to know more about the Mitzuki case, she had taken the opportunity of this field trip to conduct her 'fact-finding mission'. Having met with Yumiko at the network's conference in Bangkok, I volunteered to act as her translator for the trip. For the meeting, Yingyong chose a restaurant that served a variety of Thai and fusion dishes influenced by Japanese cuisine. It was actually in this meeting that I realized how workers in Japanese plants like Yingyong and Chai had become accustomed to Japanese culture. I learnt that their

⁷⁷ A year after this meeting, I saw a video clip from one of her campaigns in Japan. In the video, Yumiko and a couple of senior activists were dressed as Japanese famous video game characters. They spoke in front of a local branch of a sportswear company, a main sponsor of the Olympics in Japan, educating the public about the brand's violation of labor rights in another Southeast Asian country. This action took place shortly after the Japanese prime minister himself appeared as the video game character at the closing ceremony of the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

⁷⁸ He was once sent by his workplace to intern in a Japanese branch for several months.

workplaces had sent them to learn about Japanese working and wider culture, and to my surprise, some workers including Chai had acquired a good command of Japanese.⁷⁹

During the meeting, Yumiko asked Samart and Chai about the incident that happened two years ago on the night of the work stoppage. Yumiko was very meticulous and patient in her questioning. Having already read and translated all documents into English, I realized how detail-oriented she was. Basically, she asked both Samart and Chai to reconstruct the incident, and wanted to know each and every action taken by the workers, as the company had used the work stoppage as the key reason for dismissing them. It is worth noting that over the past two years, Samart and Chai, along with the other sacked workers, had been able to find new jobs. Some others workers had given up trying altogether and had become self-employed. Confident in his skills, Samart applied for a job in the ESIEs several times. One time, he was told at the end of an interview that he got the job, but the company later had a change of mind when they found out that Samart was involved with an on-going dispute with Mitzuki. According to many activists, the sacked workers had officially been blacklisted from the job market in the Eastern Seaboard, as all the automotive companies belonged to the same HR Club.

After their dismissal in December 2013, ELRG helped the nine workers file a petition to the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC). In April 2014, the NLRC ordered the company to reinstate all the workers. The company then appealed the order at the Central Labor Court, and in May 2014 ruled in favor of the NLRC's decision.

However, the company did not reinstate the workers and appealed again, this time to the

⁷⁹ With their professional and language skills, it should not have been hard for Chai and Samart to find a new job. However, they told me they could not find any job because they were already on the 'blacklist' made by the HR Club.

Supreme Court.⁸⁰ For the ELRG, the Mitzuki case (and many other cases) demonstrated how the domestic legal system was biased and totally ineffective in terms of enforcing the laws where multinational companies were involved. The labor court's failure to enforce its decision on the Mitzuki was a case in point. For these reasons, Yingyong had sought support from international networks, including Japanese activists, who encouraged the ELRG to seek justice through international mechanisms such as the ILO and OECD. At the time, ELRG had already filed complaints with the ILO, supported by a network of Thai and international NGO activists. Through OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises,⁸¹ Yumiko herself had brought several cases involving foreign workers to the Japanese National Contact Point, including cases of Filipino unions working for a Japanese multinational carmaker, as well as a case involving Indonesian unions producing for a Japanese sportswear company.

During our meeting, Yingyong expressed skepticism as to the effectiveness of international mechanisms such as the OECD. When asked why, he simply responded that he had no faith in international legal frameworks. "*Then why did you submit a petition with ILO?*" Yumiko asked.⁸² Her question went to the heart of ELRG practices where much emphasis was placed on conducting legal battles within formal industrial relations framework. *What choices did labor activists have in pursuing their battles? How did they*

⁸⁰ There are only two steps in the Thai labor court.

⁸¹ According to the OECD guidelines, foreign workers in multinational companies could file grievances to the headquarters of the company through the relevant National Contact Point, which comprises representatives from the relevant ministries such as the ministry of trade, industry and foreign affairs.

⁸² Yingyong worked for a Japanese company providing a Japanese carmaker with hot-forged parts such as transmission and chassis. To my surprise, he expressed his skepticism about the support from Japanese activists and organizations. He seemed to believe that Japanese people were very nationalist, and for them, nationalist interests trumped international labor solidarity.

choose the strategies and tactics? Were they simply forced into this legal approach by the overpowering corporations? What were the benefits and costs of such tactics?

The chapter has so far discussed the UM and Mitzuki Workers Unions together and treated them as if they were organizationally identical. In actuality, the two cases have distinctive backgrounds. First, although both labor unions were in the ESIEs, the UM was an American carmaker whereas the Mitzuki was Japanese. It is actually argued that American carmakers in Thailand tend to encourage labor unionism within the workplace (Wad 2017). Second, and most importantly, the UM union was established for many years, while the Mitzuki union was only embryotic in its activism. Compared with the Mitzuki union, the UM Workers Union had many stories of past struggle, in which union activists took pride. During my field research, for instance, a former UM secretary often told the stories of the union's past achievements and the benefits that the union had contributed to improving its members' working conditions.

However, it is impossible to generalize that American carmakers in the Eastern Seaboard were more tolerant of labor activism than Japanese counterparts. In fact, following the dismissal of nine executive committee members, Mitzuki management had tried to convert the registered union into a yellow union by applying more covert and subtle ways to control its activities. Moreover, as the two cases of labor activism in two Japanese companies in the next chapter will attest, the way in which managements respond to labor unions is contingent, depending on their experiences with labor unions in the past, as well as activists' strategies.

Notwithstanding their differences, the stories of Mitzuki and the UM Workers Unions are revealing of the general situations in the Eastern Seaboard regarding workers'

limited rights. When companies expressed acute hostility against labor unions, with only slight concerns, if not total indifference to the rule of law, it begs a question of how effective laws and regulations are and to what degree the state apparatus is willing to enforce the rule of law. Moreover, during the lawsuits, multinational companies such as UM and Mitzuki could afford to hire a team of lawyers to represent them, while a small union could hardly pay one lawyer with the meager amount collected from membership dues. As the UM and Mitzuki cases testify, the struggle had continued for more than four years (and still went on while I was writing this dissertation), disrupting workers' lives as well as workplace activism. In short, for workers, the legal framework appeared to be ineffective in protecting their formal rights.

Nevertheless, the legalistic approach pursued by the UM and the Mitzuki Workers Unions (illustrated in the next section) is characteristic of local union movement led by the ELRG. It is important to note that through the National Board of Labor Relations mechanism, the ELRG helped many individual workers to recuperate severance and compensation otherwise lost. In other words, despite its limitations, using lawyers and labor law as means to pursue justice in the legal framework did bring about some remedies. In the next section, thus I focus on the contradictory nature of workplace activism within this labor-relations framework.

5.5 The Nature and Limits of Militancy in Workplace Activism

The following sections offer detailed accounts of two labor unions in the process of formation. By doing so, I demonstrate the way in which activists made use of the industrial relations framework and gave meaning to workplace activism during

organizing activities. For the first union, I highlight narratives of the ELRG and union activists and how they framed legal battles to the rank-and-file members in their speeches. In the second case, I highlight two issues through a series of events over a longer period. First, structural constraints (i.e., laws and business strategies) played key roles in shaping the legal approach of activism in the ESIEs. Second, as a result, in practice the ELRG's activism embodied both opportunities and challenges pertaining to the legal approach for organizing workers. As will be shown, despite its limitations, such a framework opened a space for contestation otherwise impossible for industrial workers.

Practices and Meanings of Workplace Activism

During the year of my research, ELRG played a role in organizing a couple of new labor unions in the area. Since the ELRG reached a point where they could no longer organize new unions in the areas, the organizers had begun to reach out to unorganized workers within recently founded industrial estates, including two private industrial estates called 304 and Pin Thong Industrial Estates. The first company, Siam Perfect (a pseudonym), is located at the 304 Industrial Estate, whereas the second, Takiya, is at the Pin Thong Industrial Estate.

Driving from Bangkok to the Eastern Seaboard area, a passerby would spot a big billboard advertising for the 304 Industrial Estate in Kabinburi district, Chacheungsao province, inviting potential investors to relocate to 'a green zone.' Green has double meanings here. It suggests an agricultural background and the density of plants in the surrounding area or alternatively that the workforce in this industrial estate is still unorganized.

5.5.1 Cases Study: Organizing Siam Perfect Workers Union

As requested by a good friend, Yingyong helped organize and register a labor union for the Siam Perfect (SP) workers who were producing seat covers and airbags. In one of the first meetings, I accompanied Yingyong and Chet to a gathering of SP workers. After a ride of two and a half hours in Yingyong's pickup, I was surprised to find myself at a local temple. We arrived a bit early, but there was already a group of men sitting under the shade of tree. There was also a bottle of Thai whisky next to them. Our arrival signaled to the men that they should start preparing for the event. Along with a set of loudspeakers, stacks of red plastic chairs were brought to a clearing—an open space next to a small storage building—and the men arranged them in rows. There were many chairs, far more than I ever saw in any meeting before that. From my estimation, there were around three hundred and fifty seats.⁸³ This was not usual for a newly formed labor union meeting. After an hour, a stream of uniformed workers, most of whom were women, filled the empty chairs, despite pouring rain. Later in the evening, steamed Chinese buns were handed out to these female workers who participated in the gathering.

Before the event started, a man came to Yingyong and Chet. “Everyone wants to fight,” he reassured Yingyong, who had endured a hundred-mile ride after work. In past years, Yingyong's health had been fragile, and he could not drive a long distance by himself any more. Since Chet had been outside the factory, owing to the UM struggle, he was the designated driver. Ekachai, the man who led this gathering, had the air of a small business owner, speaking with confidence and authority.

⁸³ Later, I found out that this factory employed over a thousand workers.

It was shortly after we arrived that a man explained about the ongoing struggle in the workplace – the very reason we were all there. Speaking on the stage through the microphone, he said

I have something to tell y'all, so we are on the same page, about how the capitalists (nay tuun), or the Japanese (puak yii pun), treated us. We have the committee, which is now negotiating with them about our proposed demand. One thing that they asked puank pii (collective noun that signifies seniority of the speakers): 'why are you doing this? You don't have to do it, because you are not gaining anything from it'. We responded that we do this for all the Siam Perfect folks.

This last sentence was well received by loud applause. Then he proceeded,

We are not asking for a lot, but what they should not have done is proposing their counter-demand in return. There are two main issues. First, for us to start working at 7.45 am and finish at 4.45 pm.

Between the pause, a brisk male voice interrupted, “[we are] not taking it (*mai ao*).” It solicited a burst of laughter from the female workers. Then the speaker on the stage went on,

Second, this is serious. Despite the fact that our initial proposed demand does not yet include a bonus, the employer proposes that the bonus payment be postponed to the next February.

This time, workers gave a collective sneer, followed again by “*mai ao*” shouted by a man. The speaker then asked, “*yom mai?* (Do we give in?)”, that provoked an even louder collective answer: “*mai ao.*”

Same here, I did not accept it, so the legal process of bargaining begins. Even though I told their lawyer that these terms are not negotiable, they still propose the second proposal with a slight change. The bonus will be paid twice a year. The first (normal) round in December, and the second in April.

Without a pause, this was followed immediately by a more feminine hiss, “*hoi!*,” telling of a surprising contempt. The speaker continued, “*I reply no, we do not accept any of...*” The workers’ applause and cheers muted the last word. Then the speaker joked that “*I thought you guys might boo me, because you wanted pocket money for Songkran,*” referring to the Thai traditional New Year during the second week of April, a major holiday in Thailand.

So I am asking y’all for one thing. As this fight is for all of us, for the SP folks, for the Thai working in SP. We fight with consciousness (sati), wisdom (panya), and peace (santi). Our fight is peaceful and lawful. Unity is also important. Therefore, we need mutual aids and care. We will not let anybody go, not even one, including Pii (brother) Eakachai. We have to bring him back.

He referred to the first man who came to reassure Yingyong. Leaving a pause for clapping, he ended by saying,

with almost a hundred percent of manual workers present today, I believe that we will survive this monsoon.

The first speaker then invited Yingyong to go next, introducing Yingyong as someone from the same hometown as himself. He ended half-jokingly, ‘*therefore, I believe Yingyong will not abandon us.*’ Yingyong took the cue and started with a nationalist tone, emphasizing that he helped many workers, even foreigners (*khon tang chat*), who were dismissed by their own people.

*Therefore, as we are all Thai, we have to help each other. Right?
Yes!*

Then he continued,

A labor union is an organization of laborers, founded by laborers, and according to the law, aimed to pursue and protect our benefits with regard to working conditions, as well as to create good relations between employer and employee, and among the

employees. To pursue and protect our benefits concerned with the working conditions: what does it mean? From what I've heard so far, your employer is trying to take away the existing working conditions that we have already attained, including the two free uniforms per year, or the annual holidays. Therefore, we may need to sue the employer, and have a lawsuit.

In the past, we have sacrificed for the company. But today, we are stepping up to protect our rights, but several of our friends are being harassed. I heard that some of our female friends are getting moved to the maintenance section. Some people like our Ekachai, our human resource, who is trying to protect our rights, is being harassed, and sees no justice. Art 31 of the Labor Relation Act protects us during which we propose a new CBA. Do they (the employer) play dumb? Or are they simply shameless?

The blunt critique excited the workers, who probably had never heard such a public statement against an employer before. Yingyong received an even louder shout when he raised the question of strike and protest.

Prom mai krab (are you ready)? Suu mai suu (are you fighting or not)?
“*Suu Suu (fight, fight), Suu Suu,*” replied the workers in a loud and clear chant, repeated a few times.

Yingyong went on to say that,

Next week, we meet in front of the factory. We will not occupy the street, causing any trouble, but we will seize the factory. As the executive is lame, we will manage it by ourselves. Can we do it?

The idea seemed to stir workers to chatter among themselves.

We are in thousands, and no need to be afraid of a few. Right?
Yes!

Yingyong then compared the fringe benefits between workers in one ESIE with SP workers in the 304 Industrial Estate, such as the night shift payments of baht 200 and 50, respectively. He raised an important issue that the better benefits of the counterparts in ESIEs did not “fall from the sky” but were a result of self-organizing and laborious negotiation.

After Yingyong's speech, workers had a chance to listen to women, most of them female supervisors. One female supervisor summarized the need for a labor union as the need for job security,

We need a labor union because this group of capitalists exploit us. They exploit Thai people. First, they took away our free working pants. Second, they increased the air conditioning to 28 degree Celsius without consulting with us, especially for the Air Bag department, that they have more profit, but we have fewer bonuses. Third, they changed the way they calculated the base salary, from the percentage. I have worked here for eighteen years, and like everybody else, I am not smashing my own rice pot. But we need job security, and that's why we need a union.

She continued,

I am not afraid of being dismissed. If I am dismissed, I could go back home to grow rice. But growing rice, I would get tanned skin from the sunburn (laugh). I'd better fight. But fighting for staying, not for leaving.

Her speech was forceful and humorous. Moreover, as most workers were female, her allusion to skin color spoke directly to them, who not only understood the class connotation of dark skin in Thai society, but had also probably internalized it. Like other migrant workers in my research, the speaker raised an issue of going back home, by choice. It was a narrative they all told themselves, or perhaps were told by their families back home, as a sort of consolation: they could go back home and do whatever their folks had done for all their lives – working the fields. All in all, as the supervisor pointed out, they had the right to be here and to have a union. That right needs to be asserted.

After two female supervisors gave speeches, a male supervisor provided an interesting way of framing the struggle. He asked everyone if they wanted to participate in the decision-making regarding what they wanted or demanded. His plea for justice was clear,

We would not ask for something unrealistic, so that the company has to shut down or something like that. But so far we have not demanded anything yet, but they already react in the punitive way. This is not right.

When the Human Resource Manager, Eakachai or Eak, finally came up to address the workers, he began,

what the supervisors (hua-na-ngan) do, we do it for everyone.. We have to fight! yes, indeed

Again, a male voice answered the call; then Eakachai added,

If the employees unite, I believe that we can achieve anything. Thus the victory will be ours.

The crowd clapped and cheered. While listening, I wondered how the rank-and-file workers perceived the meaning and the scope of the word ‘victory’ and whether it was different from the meanings perceived by supervisors. Addressing the listeners collectively as younger kin, Eakachai referred to himself as *pii*, which meant older brother/sister. He continued,

*I am so glad that all of you gather here too. I am speechless seeing that we still love and help each other. There may be some people who do not agree with us; that is normal. There is no consensus, but with a majority, there is a way to win. Today, I have to thank all of us, *pii pii* (the seniors, referred to supervisors) *nong nong* (the juniors, referred to workers in general). I’m myself trying to fight, fight with all my strength. There is now an order to transfer me to another branch, but I have refused to sign it. I am still here.*

Interrupted again by applause, or perhaps the pause was intentional, he resumed,

We will fight within the legal framework. I want all of us to collaborate with the team. We will fight lawfully and peacefully. I believe that everyone must unite and we will win. Finally I have to thank everyone. The victory is not out of reach. I plead that we keep fighting. Thank you.

The mood was suddenly celebratory, particularly for the supervisors present at that gathering; it felt as if the labor union was already formed and had won a big case against the employer. Personally, I was expecting that a decision would be made together, be it large or small, particularly affirming the need for a trade union was. Unfortunately, on that evening, the very question of whether they needed a labor union was not explicitly asked but already assumed. Given that most workers came with extremely little knowledge about the gathering's purposes, I was troubled by this omission. For the supervisors, at least the evening ended with a positive note. Workers' morale was lifted, and organizers were reassured about 'the victory' they would have over management.

For the ELRG organizers such as Yingyong, to meet with young and unorganized workers was a great opportunity to educate them and raise their awareness of the unjust system. Most importantly, to show them that it was possible to criticize employers in the way he did was a crucial empowering aspect. For example, by calling out the employers who deliberately violated the law, Yingyong not only sought to please the workers but also gave them an example of what could be done within the industrial relations framework. It should be noted that as an awareness-raising tactic, the ELRG organizers often used provocation to rouse workers. Take, for example, the talk of the factory takeover. At the end of his speech, Yingyong corrected himself that workers could strike at their will. They too needed to follow labor laws because the laws are one of the only means of resistance they have. He explained to workers that Thai laws allow a strike only after a labor dispute takes place, meaning that an agreement cannot be reached between the two parties. Nevertheless, he was shrewd to provoke workers about the factory seizure. Yingyong's statement that workers were greater in number than the factory

executive was not provocative, but rather enlightening. What he did planted seeds for critical thinking in workers' minds. It explicitly addressed the issues of power differentials between classes and between capital and labor embedded in employment relations.

Moreover, as an area-based group, the ELRG also served as an equalizer of wages and benefits by sharing information about these to all union members in several ways. For example, when Yingyong compared the night shift fees in the SP with other workers in the ESIEs, he was indirectly contributing to lowering the gap among workers in different factories. In fact, the ELRG activists always tried to find an opportunity to educate and raise worker awareness, and this aspect of activism will be made clear through many activities discussed in the following case.

5.5.2 Power and hierarchy in the workplace activism

It is worth pointing out that it is not common for a human resource manager to be part of a labor union. However, as showed in Chapter Three (section 3.3), labor unionism in the Eastern Seaboard was gradually being assimilated into human resource framework. For many practitioners, the line between labor union and human resources is thus confused. A speaker from one of the biggest unions remarked, "*sometimes I cannot distinguish between the human resources department and the labor union*".⁸⁴

When managerial ranks mobilize workers as leverage against the employer, workplace hierarchy and seniority—rather than participation from membership base—becomes the source of organizing power. In the SP case, as all the *hua-na-ngan* alluded

⁸⁴ This statement was recorded by a worker in a seminar on labor relations in the Eastern Seaboard organized jointly by the local labor office and a few big labor unions.

to, they organized and mobilized the rank-and-file working under them to show support and gratitude for Ekachai. Notwithstanding supervisors' intentions, a major organizational issue arose: the union in question was accordingly top-down and undemocratic.

Further, the power differential between managers and operational workers is notably more pronounced because of gender hierarchies between male supervisors and female operational workers. In the case of SP, which produced car seats and airbags, the workforce was highly feminized because such production required sewing, a skill considered specific to women in Thailand. The gender hierarchy in this group of workers, where supervising positions were male dominated and operational workers were mostly female, is thus similar to gender dynamics within the feminized production of light industries such as garments, textiles, and electronics (see Theobald 1997). In this context, the domination of leadership within a labor union could be very visible.

As I was writing this chapter— only fifteen months after the SP's formation – the union had already been disbanded. After that first meeting, the leadership went on to form a supervisors' union. Later, the employer requested an inspection of registered members, which led to nullification of its registration, as Thai Labor Relations Act prohibits supervisors and operational workers from joining the same labor union. The manual workers then registered another labor union and faced difficulties in transferring the union dues they paid to the previous supervisor union.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ As an anecdote, several months after the SP union was disorganized, an activist said that Board of Investment of Thailand and Japanese investors discussed with the Ministry of Labor that unions should not be allowed in this industrial estate. He added that as a solution, the National Board of Labor Relations even suggested that employers start labor union by themselves and hire private organizations to be consultants for workers.

The other new labor union that formed shortly after the SP was the Takiya Workers Union. This group of workers produced electronic drills for a Japanese company in the nearby Pin Thong Industrial Estate. Since Pin Thong is not far from the ESIEs, the ELRG activists encouraged workers to visit the office as frequently as they could, especially during the union's formation. By doing that, novice organizers in the process of forming a new labor union would meet more seasoned activists who regularly came to socialize at the office. During the first six months of my research, by closely following the activities of the Takiya workers union, the process of organizing a new union unfolded before me.⁸⁶

5.5.3 Organizing Takiya Workers Union

To complement vignettes from the SP Workers Union (SPWU)'s single event, I now turn to a series of organizing activities observed within the Takiya Workers Union (TWU). The first time I saw the Takiya workers, I was at the ELRG office and overheard two workers repeating the phrase, "*we have nothing to lose. We are quitting anyway, let's go all out.*" As I soon realized, this group of young workers, five men and four women, wanted to form a labor union because the factory was 'returning' subcontract workers to the dispatch company. One subcontract worker was there, with his wife, a permanent worker at the supervisor level.

To register a union, Takiya workers sought expertise from the ELRG activists. Upon the introduction of a friend, they came to discuss problems and prospects of registering a union. After the ELRG organizers decided to help them, the workers would

⁸⁶ Apart from participant observation, I also accompanied the union president to register their union with the local labor department and facilitated a workshop session with Takiya founding workers.

regularly attend meetings with ‘the consultants’ to discuss organizing strategies until the union was successfully registered and the first negotiation was over. As I had actively participated in several meetings and activities related to the process of its formation, I highlight here the notes from important meetings to illustrate details of interaction and a longer process of worker socialization and inherent challenges.

Meeting no. 2

In the second meeting, Chet gave a brief introduction of the ELRG (henceforth called the Group) and explained differences between the Group and the labor congress to which the Group belonged. As a trained lawyer and unionist, Yingyong talked about principles and practices of labor unions. The main objective of this meeting was to evaluate the readiness of the workers and potential members in the workplace. The ELRG activists, led by Chet and Yingyong, planned organizing strategies according to details shared by the workers – about all production lines and the number of workers in each section, including the subcontract and office (i.e. administrative and managerial) workers. This meeting showed me that workers generally did not have knowledge of the size of their workplace, nor the number of subcontract workers, until they figured out the answers in order to respond to the Group activists.

While Chet emphasized that the workers had to take only one day to get signatures from members in order to form a collective bargaining unit or a union, the workers were trying to explain that the factory was very large and that they had not yet utilized all the space. At this point, the workers started to brainstorm about the locations of the CCTVs in the plant, but Chet repeated, “One day was the best way.”

An interesting issue is the workers’ misunderstanding of the subcontract workers. From the meeting, workers appeared to think that subcontract workers were better off than permanent workers since they received a higher bonus. This was an opportunity for Chet to explain the plant’s strategy, to undermine formation of a union as well as to accommodate fluctuating demands of labor. Then Chet asked them to evaluate the number of subcontract workers who would join the union. Here there was an interesting conversation, when a male worker said that if all the male subcontract workers joined,

they could put the factory to a halt. He seemed confident that many subcontract workers, who were men, would likely be interested in any militant action. Nevertheless, another worker commented that the workers would be afraid to participate in any action, particularly a work stoppage. As a response, Chet replied that the goal of a union should neither be necessarily disruptive, nor about financial gains, but to improve working conditions, safety, and quality of life. He added, *“Everyone is afraid, the permanent workers are afraid too, especially when you start with actions.”*

Registration

Beforehand, Yingyong and Cha, two of the main consultants, organized a session to help Takiya workers prepare paperwork for the union registration. The meeting could not easily start because the Takiya workers were very late. Moreover, only two out of four women attended this session. Yingyong spent most of the time explaining how to answer personal and organizational questions on registration forms. As he pointed out, any mistake could delay the process since officers at the labor protection and welfare office were very busy, and they would not hesitate to send the workers back to redo the paperwork. In fact, as Pong was going to register a union at the provincial labor office, a mistake with spelling on the union’s seal would delay the registration process. I was surprised that in order to facilitate the registration, ELRG activists did a good chunk of work in place of labor officers. Eventually, TWU was registered, but not without the Group’s pressure on local labor officers. From my research, individual workers often felt unattended or ignored when they had to deal with local officers alone. From such experiences, every time a labor union or a worker needed a document from local labor offices, the Group would call in advance to speak with an officer. By doing that, the Group activists made sure that the officers were aware of the Group’s involvement.

Group building workshop

A one-day workshop was organized on Sunday to support Takiya organizing workers. Two main activities were designed to allow workers to discuss individual expectations, share personal information with one another, and learn about

communication skills and informational flow within a group. The workers had difficulty with a scheduled time set by the Group organizers because apparently some women workers needed support for transportation. The workshop could not begin until an hour and a half later than the scheduled time.

Day of recruitment

The Takiya organizing committee scheduled a meeting to discuss the recruitment problems at the Group office in the evening, after having scheduled that day as a recruitment day. Again, the meeting started an hour and a half later than scheduled because some workers were very late. The partners of two workers came along and waited inside. While waiting for the meeting to begin, Yingyong asked Takiya workers who were there to observe a meeting he was having with Virachai and other workers, who were there to consult with Yingyong about the annual workplace negotiation. As a seasoned unionist, Virachai,⁸⁷ commented that unionists must be punctual. As a response, Pong said that some committee members lived far away from the ELRG and those who were close were not willing to be on a committee.

Submission of the first demand

Takiya Workers Union (TWU) officially submitted their first collective bargaining demand to the management. It was not off to a good start. According to Pong, a Japanese executive was shocked to the point that his nose bled and he had to see a doctor. The workers were concerned that the demand would not legally be recognized since the executive refused to accept the document in the first place. However, Thai laws obligate employers to begin the negotiation process within three days of receiving a demand.⁸⁸ A few days later, the negotiation began.

⁸⁷ Virachai was the person who originally introduced the ELRG activists to Pong, the first president of Takiya Workers Union.

⁸⁸ According to article 16, Thai Labor Relations Act, 1975

First negotiation

Six TWU executive committee members attended a meeting with the Group, preparing for the first collective bargaining negotiation with the employer. The Group activists now played the role of negotiation consultants, as they coached TWU about how to present and defend each demand on the proposed agreement. This was a very informational step because discussion allowed a union executive committee to explain why each demand mattered to union members as a whole. It revealed a great deal about the existing problems in the workplace. For example, one issue was transportation and the problems caused by the company's merging of bus lines. One of the women criticized the employer, who remarked that if a worker spends less than 5 hours in the commute, it was still acceptable. The women executive committee members believed that the merging of bus lines saved the company's money but resulted in women workers' inconvenience and insecurity; for instance, they needed to get off the bus and walk on their own, which made them feel unsafe. Therefore, the union addressed the issue by asking the company to reverse the change.

Normally Chet, Yingyong and Cha, the Group activists who had consultant licenses, would observe negotiation between managements and unions. However, the management was generally very strict as to who would be inside the negotiation room. Therefore, it was out of the question that outsiders or researchers like me could observe the negotiation. Even so, I could deduce that the negotiation room was a slippery slope for workers. The management was normally much better equipped and prepared for negotiation. Most importantly, they would also try to turn a negotiation into a sort of data contest. For example, the management would usually ask union executive members to present socio-economic data including the inflation rate, costs of living, and general wages in the area, as supporting information. This was a daunting task for labor unions, which mostly did not have full time personnel, not to mention for a new union such as TWU.⁸⁹

Apart from the art and science of negotiation that TWU needed to master, during the negotiation period another challenge arose. As TWU activists never fully

⁸⁹ That said, I found it rather remarkable that most unions were well informed of the company's performance, especially annual sales and profits.

communicated with members about what they wanted from the union, it was difficult for the members to develop a sense of ownership – over both the union and the collective demand. Not unlike other unions, TWU activists soon realized that they also had to convince their own members that the support would finally translate into betterment of working conditions for them rather than for the union executive committee alone.

5.6 Labor relations as the rules of the game

The 1975 Labor Relations Act of Thailand permits a group of at least ten workers who are hired by the same employer to register a workplace union or who are in the same industry to register an industrial union. The Thai labor relations framework has thus set a low bar for workers who want to register a workplace union.⁹⁰ It is also important to note that a union is not necessarily the same as a bargaining unit. In other words, a union can be registered without functioning as a bargaining unit. According to Thai laws, on the other hand, any group of workers – more than fifteen percent of the total employees– can act as a bargaining unit and propose a collective bargaining agreement without a union banner.⁹¹

During the period of formation, as the cases show, labor unions in the process of registration such as the Mitzuki, SPWU, and TWU could be vulnerable and easily disbanded unless they have a solid membership base. Experienced unionists among the Eastern Labor Relations Group activists were well aware of this fact. In the past, organizers in the Eastern Seaboard helped workers form unions first and propose a

⁹⁰ In the American context, by contrast, it is much harder to form a union that is legally recognized by employers. First, signatures of more than thirty percent of workers are needed to form a bargaining unit in order for the National Labor Relations Board to organize an election in the workplace. The bargaining unit then needs a simple majority – more than fifty percent of the total employees –to oblige the employer to recognize the union. Compared to the American counterpart, a Thai labor union is much easier to register.

⁹¹ As a minimum number of 10 workers is required, firms that hire less than 10 employees are not covered by the LRA. As noted by Brown (2016), small businesses accounted for almost 75% of registered firms in 2012. Moreover, as the LRA allows workers in the same enterprise to register multiple labor unions, it facilitates fragmentation rather than solidification of labor unions (Solidarity Center 2007; Brown 2016).

collective bargaining demand later. Followed not only by the ELRG, such practice had become a tradition within the larger scope of the Eastern Region. However, aggressive responses from employers during formation convinced organizers and activists to change their strategies. Instead, as seen in the Mitzuki, SPWU, and TWU cases, activists had encouraged workers to propose new collective bargaining before registering the union.

According to Chet and Yingyong, by registering a labor union as quickly as possible, workers generally minimized the risk of being dismissed. To begin, Thai law prohibits employers from dismissing any union executive committee members on the grounds of forming a union. As an additional protection, activists also told union executive members to recruit more than half the total workers. By doing so, the union executive board would be entitled to appoint the whole union executive board as a workplace committee. If all union executive members become the workplace committee, it is hard, if not impossible, for employers to dismiss any of them. Article 52 of the Labor Relations Act stipulates that the employer could only do so with the permission of the labor court.

Despite the laws, employers often dismissed workers in the process of labor union registration by using other justifications. For the Mitzuki Workers Union, although the union was legally recognized, the executive committee members had not yet had time to mobilize members in appointing the workplace committee. The newly registered union did not even have a solid membership base. The workers who joined in the bargaining unit by giving their signatures to the new collective bargaining demand were all mobilized only around short-term and specific goals of new working conditions. Without much difficulty, management was able to dismiss the nine executive committee members

by claiming that they violated both company regulations, especially by instigating the workers to strike, and criminal laws.⁹² By comparison, in the case of the UM Workers Union, management could not easily dismiss union executive members as the union was well established and they were all on the workplace committee. However, the UM used criminal law, particularly physical infringement, as a pretext. Additionally, in spotting a legal loophole, the company indefinitely locked out unionized workers, forcing the union executive committee to give in to the company's own terms. As a result of these charges, workers were frequently forced to prove, either through the National Board of Labor Relations or the labor court, that employers dismissed them on the basis of union formation, which is not easy.

Carving Out Activist Spaces in the Labor Relations System

With the introduction of Saturday as an additional working day, management's effort to impose more work is conspicuous in the UM struggle, while the imposition is rather marginal in the SP case, in the form of starting work earlier and finishing later, mixed with the reduction of other benefits.⁹³ In the case of the SP Workers Union (SPWU), management responded by proposing a counter-proposal and became confrontational with the union, while in the Takiya Workers Union (TWU), management was more consensual than confrontational. Since the 1980s, Japanese plants in other industrial areas, such as the Rangsit area in Pathumthai province, have intensively used

⁹²The company claimed that the workers stole documents from a manager. In fact, the documents in question were the company's forms on which workers were asked to sign, in order to withdraw from the union's collective demand. As some workers who withdrew from the demand later changed their minds, they requested the union executive committee to retrieve the forms from the management.

⁹³ In fact, during my research, the Mitzuki workers already mentioned the company's plan to replace some workers with automaton. All of these efforts are reminiscent of Marx's study of working days in volume one of *Capital* and E.P. Thompson's studies of industrial time (see also Cleaver 2017).

counter-proposals and lockouts as destabilizing tactics (Napaporn 2002).⁹⁴ This strategy has actually been very common in the Eastern Seaboard and promoted by local Labor Protection and Welfare offices. Nevertheless, as these two cases suggested, despite unions' uncertain prospect, labor activism allowed activists to potentially raise workers' awareness and cultivate social values based on collectivity and solidarity.

A space of activism, as seen in both the SPWU and Takiya cases, was normally rare for unorganized workers. Without an official site for a labor union, workers did not usually have a private and safe space in which they collectively share their frustration and anger, let alone the criticism against employers. Normally, when workers came to the ELRG office, they could be confident about privacy and safety in speaking out.

Organizers were totally independent in that physical space because their office was located in a tight-knit community in which activists knew all the neighbors. Within the ESIEs, accordingly, availability of safe and public space such as the temple used by the SP workers is rather an exception.

Conclusions

This chapter illustrates the way in which workers strategically responded to the workplace challenges within legal framework of Thailand's industrial relations. By understanding its limitations and potentials, we begin to understand the nature and limitations of workplace activism and militancy. This understanding sheds light on the

⁹⁴ Interestingly, Napaporn (2002) spots a similar pattern of industrial relation strategy in the Rangsit area, where workers mostly worked in multinational companies and gained better wages and working conditions than in other areas (p. 136). According to Napaporn (2002), the management of Japanese firms proposed a 'joint consultation committee' by convincing labor unions to avoid confrontations, including strikes or lockouts, and to try to reach compromise in the process.

constrained agency of both activists and workers, otherwise interpreted as reactionary and conservative by labor scholars and commentators.

Moreover, it shows that despite its limitation, the labor relations framework can open a space in which activists empower workers to learn about what they were capable of. A space of empowerment is crucial because it transforms workers and makes them ‘dangerous’ especially from management’s viewpoint. This transformation is a fundamental reason why companies spend so much energy and resources in pursuing legal battles with dismissed workers.

In the context of the Eastern Seaboard, in which workers were regional migrants without political representation and social network of communities were stretched across regions, workplace activism, albeit limited, was significant in creating social and political spaces. Despite such potential and limitations, as all the case studies testified, there was still a big gap between the commitments of union executive committee members and of union members. In the Mitzuki case, the latter faced an immediate urge created by needs and expectations of financial benefits. As a matter of fact, many workers were drawn to the ESIEs because of its reputation for higher pay and bonuses, benefits unheard of in light industry and small business.⁹⁵ According to many union activists, this collective anticipation undermined unity within unions by giving companies an opportunity to co-opt workers. For example, the Mitzuki management opted out workers who supported the collective bargaining agreement by offering immediate, but discounted, bonus payment in exchange for their withdrawal from collective bargaining. According to the company,

⁹⁵ Following Western norms, most companies issued bonuses before the end of the year holidays. For this reason, workers gradually adopted new habits and home visits during New Year holidays, rather than the Thai New Year. While most workers still visited home in April, they preferred to bring pocket money to their parents and children during the Western holiday season.

those who refused would go home empty-handed during the holidays since the bonus payment would be put on hold indefinitely. In past years, companies in ESIEs, including the Siam Perfect (SP), used such tactics extensively in negotiating with unions, resulting in mass withdrawal of workers' support from the unions.

Such disconnects between activists and members fundamentally point to two unexplored relationships: internal dynamics within unions and the linkage between the sphere of production and consumption. As such dynamics are relational to the broader social relations, the next chapter turns to a relational analysis of formations of class and ethnic identity before explicitly addressing gender relations in the following chapters.

Chapter 6. An Intersectional View: Resistance from Ethno-regional and Class Perspectives

This chapter delves into the gap between individuals and the collective by looking into workers' subjectivity at the intersection of class and ethnicity. Having explored the challenges of workplace activism and the broader labor struggle in Thailand in previous chapters, this chapter investigates relationships between shared dissents along ethno-regional and class lines and how they related to fragmentation or division within unions movement. This chapter also highlights the process of empowerment, or personal transformation generated by collective struggle, which is central in the theorization of labor agency.

Studying the history of Thai workers since the early-20th century, Andrew Brown (2010) recognizes Thai workers' incessant efforts and historical significance in building organizations as a vehicle to increase their power in class politics. As Brown (2010) wittingly points out, "it is clear that the vast majority of workers who have been incorporated into capitalist class relations and processes have not sought the revolutionary overthrow of the entire capitalist system or even a radical response to their relationship with employers" (p. 132). Additionally, Brown proposes,

"Without an appreciation of this history of a daily, often private, search for justice, dignity and equity, it is impossible to understand the impulses that have driven workers to try to publicly organize their struggles even in the face of often hostile, economic and political circumstances" (ibid.).

Elsewhere, in citing Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995), Brown elaborates that it is “in relationships of exploitation, conflict and struggle, which provide the *impulses* to processes of class formation” that working-class power should be located (2002, p. 178: my emphasis). I agree with this relational view of class, which suits the dialectic, relational, and class-based definition of labor set out by labor geographers in chapter 1. Therefore, I heed Brown’s guidance by turning to analyses of workers’ impulses. A central argument of this chapter is that, while workers’ impulses find their expressions in apparent workplace activism, such impulses are driven by motives beyond the factory fences and narrow focus of industrial relations framework.

6.1 Getting Involved in Labor Activism

Almost no union executive committee members I talked to had prior knowledge of labor unions before getting involved. Several female workers shared the same story of becoming involved in impromptu ways, such as being asked to put their names on the executive committee at the last minutes before the union registration, without knowing what labor union was and what they would be doing in that position. Such an unexpected start was not uncommon for most male and female workers involved in the unions. As numerous stories in the preceding chapters unfolded, the emergence of labor unions in many workplaces was typically spontaneous and impulsive. Notwithstanding the reactionary nature of workplace activism, workers’ senses of righteousness and urgency to find collective voices cannot be dismissed. In this chapter, I examine the roots of such strong personal and collective discontents that workers shared.

I want to start with a female worker's voice that embodies ambivalent and conflicted feelings that most unionists had vis-a-vis management, coworkers and family members. *Na* (pseudonym) was a female worker in a Japanese auto-parts factory and a union treasurer. During the first years of her getting involvement, *Na* constantly argued with her boyfriend, working in another auto-parts company, who did not support or understand her reasons for getting involved with the union. In short, her activism was fraught with tensions and conflicts, with other executive committee members not so active as she expected whereas workers in general were passive and not supportive of the union. *Na* was more easygoing than other female workers, and she did not mind hanging out with male activists. For this reason, she told me, her boyfriend was even more jealous and against her involvement. When asked why she was still involved in the union activism, her reply was, "*if we are not doing anything, we would be targeted. Because we've already formed the union, if it fails, the company would easily fire us.*" Like other unionists I talked to, she felt torn and caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, she understood that workers were ambivalent about activism for many reasons, including 'they were not ready, scared, or they wanted private life with friends and family.' On the other hand, she wished that the company was more understanding and appreciative of her hard work; the union would otherwise not be needed.

During our conversation, *Na* reminisced about her first employer, that she thought treated employees well and had workers happy. "*I really want to use that company as a case study for my boss, and show them why the workers do not form a union there; why the workers get a lot of bonus payment.*" Apparently, it was not a unique workplace; *Na* felt the second factory at which she worked also treated workers well and there was no

union there either. However, she quit the first factory for personal reasons, and the second time because they did not promote her from subcontract to permanent worker after three years. When I asked her about the most serious problem in her current workplace, she gave an answer that revealed the latent meanings behind the demand for bonus payment (see below).

Everything is part of the problem: hua na ngan (the supervisor), how they decide the raise, bonus, you name it. We work all the time, and we produce all the time. There were not many problems (before the union), but the company decided to give us that formula (for calculating the bonus). So we thought it was not fair to us. They reap profits that come from our work. They have a lot of income. But why did they share such a tiny bonus with us. Where has all the rest of money gone? The workers deserve more bonus than this. Plus, this is not a big factory. It's just a small factory with 300 something workers. ... We don't want much. Well how much profit the company received, they don't know. They do not want to make the company broke, with nothing left. No, not like that.

Dilemma of the Workplace Activism: Personal vs. Group Interests

According to Na, workers' real desire was a fair share from their labor. While this demand reflected what scholars call politics of redistribution (Fraser and Honneth 1995), rooted in a claim over economic justice, there was also an element of recognition.

But the company and the Thai employer, especially hua na ngan believe that the formation of a union means the declining of the company. They were the ones who tell on us [to the Japanese boss]. Actually, the Japanese boss is not difficult to talk to at all. It is the Thai management. I don't understand why they are doing this. Why are they jeopardizing our success? We have a hard time organizing because of our Thai people (kon thai duay gan)—HR, and managers. They said that the workers made faulty products. I wanted to ask them if they had good planning, would the workers who only followed their order produce any defective goods? It is their skills that should be in question. The workers cannot decide for themselves about how to work. They cannot set the values for the machine by themselves, or on their own will. They really cannot. But these days they blame the workers for letting the damaged products out.

In the past few years, Na had suffered from chronic back pain, as her work entailed regular bending and lifting a heavy load of metal bearings. After she tried to

make management aware of the harsh working conditions, the response was not positive. Moreover, our conversation demonstrated that she was aware and critical of her colleagues, who tried to abuse their positions with the union, but at the same time, understood the significance of having labor organizations. Despite her unintended involvement in the beginning, she tried her best and hoped that the union would gain more support.

One main reason I'd like the union to continue is that I want to see changes in many things. Yet, as folks are not easily organized, it's difficult to do anything.

Here, Na stressed the discrepancy between the instrumentality of trade unions and reality. The prospects did not get better, with two other female executive members, two close friends being disciplined by getting transferred to do manual work. The union finally came to a standstill, much like other unions that could not overcome both the challenges and particularly the gap of commitments between the executive committee and rank-and-file members (see Chapter Five). Eventually, Na was ready to let go of the union. According to her, if she ever quit her job, she would go home to sell vegetables with her mom. Unlike most workers, Na was local. Almost a year after I left the field site, Na contacted me with the aim of selling an insurance package to me. She finally quit the job.

Na's account brings to the fore a central issue. It is beyond doubt that those workers involved and active in workplace activism were largely driven by indignation—pent-up feelings about unfair treatments, harsh working conditions, and undeservedly low pay. When I asked worker-activists about their primary reasons for interest in labor unions, the common response was that they could not stand by and witness injustice (in

Thai words, *kwam mai phen tham*) happening to either coworkers or themselves. Orn's statement could offer a comprehensive summary of other workers' opinions:

[I was] in contact with the work of labor unions for the first time here, with this group of people. [Before that] I didn't know anything about the background at all...only knew that it was the union that helped workers, for labor issues, just that. Therefore, I admire the union. I think if we don't have passion or time, we wouldn't sacrifice so much for other people. It has to be people with *jai suu* (literal: combative heart; courage), who *rak* (love) *kwam yutitham* (justice), who don't want to see anyone being harassed. Or, someone who wants to fight for the working people. This is how I genuinely feel. But again, sometimes, I feel that if other people never understand our importance, or only expect our support, why do we need to help them? Why do we work so hard? This is how I feel sometimes. It is both these feelings.

This evidence corresponds with research conducted on industrial relations from mobilization theory (e.g., Gouldner 1954; McAdam 1988; Gamson 1995; Kelly 1998). Most importantly, John Kelly (1998) argues that workers' sense of injustice—injustice or grievances caused by employers and felt by employees—is often the motive that leads to workers' collective action, in either union or non-union forms. Drawing on Charles Tilly's (1978) theory of collective action,⁹⁶ Kelly (1998) explains that workers' sense of injustice does not always engender successful labor organizations. As he elaborates, collective action can take various forms “according to the balance between interests, organization, mobilization and opportunity” (p. 26). Making sense of the absence of formal industrial relations actions in the Global North, Kelly points to a potential disjuncture between the group's degree of interest and the resulting collective organization (ibid., p. 26). This disjunction is apparent among Thai unionized workers, as I highlighted in Chapters Five.

⁹⁶Tilly's (1978) mobilization theory comprises five elements: interests, organization, mobilization, opportunity, and forms of action. Organization refers to the group's structure and aspects impacting its capacity to act, and opportunity is the balance of power, the costs of repression, and opportunities available for the group to respond (Tilly 1978).

6.2 Empowerment: Personal Agency and Collective Action

Mobilization theory is very useful to explain the discrepancy between workers' grievances and the resulting collective action (or lack thereof). Several authors in this vein highlight two crucial elements: conviction or strong feelings of injustice (Klandermans 1992; Gamson 1995) and feelings of entitlement to one's demands and a belief in collective agency (McAdam 1988; Gamson 1992; Kelly 1998). In short, the sense of injustice is often the point of departure, but it does not suffice to make the workers act collectively, unless they are empowered to see possibilities of future change brought about by collective action. This insight is very important because the entitlement, hope and optimistic feelings—which together I call 'being empowered'—are central but largely underexplored in the studies of labor agency. Similarly, McAdam (1988) highlights the cognitive aspect of workers' liberation, which points to disillusionment from the status quo. In this chapter, I want to stress the process of disillusionment, or personal transformation generated by collective struggle. Doing so requires a framework attentive to power and agency, with a particular sensitivity to subjectivity and collectivism. Therefore, I turn to the social ontology proposed by Feminist Historical Materialism.

In *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, Stephen Gills proposes a Feminist Historical Materialist ontology constructed on a set of central arguments (2003). Among them, I want to highlight the concept that innovatively weaves together labor agency, subjectivity, and social reproduction. This approach is in accord with my theoretical choice to go against the binary of culture and structure (McDowell 2000; 2008; 2013). In this framework, work is defined in a broader sense as part of an

ontological conception of the social world, rooted in education, culture, and institutions of social development (cf Gramsci 1971). Thus, human labor is defined both within the social relations of capital. In other words, labor agency could be negative (i.e., reproducing the capital-labor relations) and creative (i.e., purposeful and liberating) forces, which work to sustain or resist the penetration of capitalist forces in social relations and institutions. For this reason, political struggle should be broadly defined in economic, political, and cultural spheres, and include the struggle for better organizations and relations of social reproduction. Second, as waged labor is forced to sell labor power in the market, it is subject to the social and power relations of capital. However, such expansion of forms of social control provokes resistance from the protecting movement and community (cf Polanyi 1957).

To put flesh on the bone of this framework, I follow Kelly (1998), who rightly observes that the manifestation of two elements above—what I call henceforth the sense of injustice and empowerment—begs critical questions about the sources of social beliefs (p. 29). In the next section, after situating the notion of social justice in theoretical debate, I explore Thai workers' sources of social and cultural beliefs in equality and fairness by visiting the meaning of *kwam phen tham* (justice) in Thai society, before focusing on the structure of Isan workers' feelings, in particular. In doing so, I highlight communitarian notion of equality as an alternative to its liberal version in order to understand the workers' idea of justice.

6.2.1 Meanings of justice as experienced by workers

Despite prior unfamiliarity with unionism or labor laws, Thai workers often had the strong conviction that employers did not treat them well or that the working

conditions were not right. They expressed a similar normative claim for *kwam phen tham*. In vernacular Thai, the word ‘tham’ has two overlapping meanings. First, it is shorthand for *yuti-tham*, which is translated as *justice*. According to the Thai dictionary, its literal meaning is associated with the concepts of *equity and legitimacy*. Its usage is also associated with the legal and judicial system, thus presupposing laws and enforcement. It must be noted that justice in this sense is different from fairness, which is more akin to second meaning of *tham*. Alternatively, the second meaning of *tham* overlaps with the term *dharma*, as they share the same pronunciation in colloquial Thai. In fact, *dharma* is one of the most complex words, with its roots in *Pali*; it entails several meanings and interpretation. Pataraporn Sirikanchana, a Thai scholar on Buddhism, categorized *dharma* into two main meanings: external or ontological and internal or spiritual/epistemological (1985). To put it simply, *dharma* is understood by Thais, ontologically and independently of individual selves, as the laws of nature or ways things are. Second, epistemologically or internally, it means righteousness, duty, norms, or truth. In this sense, it is close to the idea of fairness. When workers such as Na or Orn said that they became involved in labor unions because they saw *kwam mai pen tham* happening with their colleagues or themselves, they meant that they could not stand by and witness something that is not right, which is related to the second meaning.

6.2.2 Erasure of Social Memory and Injustice

In the ELRG office, the visual display of workers’ moral discontent and sense of justice were apparent from the first day of my arrival. Here is a description taken from my fieldnotes:

The office of the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG) was a one-story building that used to be a snooker parlor. During my field research, it was mainly equipped with two long, foldable tables, office chairs, a used office desk and cabinets, and a few bookshelves, without air-conditioning. The wall was painted in light blue, now stained and faded, looking almost white. The most outstanding feature was a set of four separate banners in a long rectangular shape that hung on the wall. On top of each satin banner was the seal of the group, within which a map of Thailand is surrounded by a circle in the shape of a rice plant, on the upper half, and a gear on the lower half. The rice plant and the gear represent agriculture and industry that co-exist to support the country. The four banners must be read altogether, otherwise they do not make sense. The first banner read ‘bureaucrats = human beings (*kha ratchakarn = khon*)’, while the second and third ‘employees = human beings (*nai cang = khon*)’ and ‘workers = human beings (*khon ngan = khon*)’, respectively. The last piece, in my view not necessary, made the full circle by stating *khon = khon*. When read together, these banners stressed the intrinsic value of equality embedded within the persons that incarnate these three classes and socio-economic roles: bureaucrats, capitalists and workers. Such messages were also emphasized by the faded posters that hung around them, one of which read “free trade = capital reigns the world” while the other a picture of Che Guevara hung on the far left.⁹⁷

To make sense of such an equation, it is crucial to understand the roots of Thai labor activism. According to eminent Thai labor historian Andrew Brown, the 1923 tramway strike symbolized the emergence of Thai labor activism (2004). To show the sentiments of striking workers and activists of the time, Brown (2004) quoted at length an article of the Laborer Group (*khana kammakon*), a group of labor activists inspired by the tramway strike. The article’s author publicly rebuked the unjust nature of waged contracts between employers and employees, while going on to equate wage-labor relations to modern slavery. Not only were such messages markedly similar to the ones used by ELRG workers (recall the denouncement of slavery on the UM’s placard), but also tramway striking-workers and the Laborer Group were involved in the same conflicts of patronage-relations and the search for freedom and dignity. As the authority failed to address workers’ grievances, the latter went on to seek redress from the Minister

⁹⁷ For particular reasons, images of Thai royalty were also present.

of Interior.⁹⁸ As the Minister of Interior was proven loyal to the company and indifferent to the striking tramway men, activists called for all workers to act in unison by striking and taking matters into their own hands. For the sake of comparison, I would like to show a part of an article published by the Laborer Group in 1923 here.

...Workers! Remember! Freedom does not lie with others, it lies within our own group. We should follow the correct method, that is, when we are dissatisfied with the regulations, or oppression of the employers, we should all stop work. *Having ceased working, we should all vote one of our members, who we think capable of discussing the issue with the employer, to be our leader. We should work out an agreement with the employer to the satisfaction of all concerned....our leader should make the contract by which we accept to work. The contract should be made so that both sides have a solid and stable base.* (Kammakon 27 January 1923, cited in Brown 2004, p. 29:emphasis added)

This passage, taken from the article published in the early-twentieth century, bears an unmistakable resemblance to present rhetoric and actions of ELRG activists in the Eastern Seaboard. To begin, such a semblance could indicate Thai workers' unchanging situations of in the waged labor system emerging during the time. As the legal and institutional arrangement of the contemporary industrial relations was not established until the post-WWII period, the mention of 'the contract' referred to a social contract, rather than a collective bargaining agreement. However, I should note that the general organizing and negotiating approach of the ELRG members was still in accord with 'the correct method' described in the article: distraught workers participated in wildcat strikes, then delegated their decisions to leaders, who worked out a win-win contract with the employer via negotiation. Similarly, an unstated assumption is, as seen in previous chapters, that the leaders would know what was best for the workers, which is

⁹⁸ Thailand was still ruled by absolute monarchy, and the ministry of labor did not yet exist.

not always the case. In other words, democratic practices within collectivism were assumed, rather than worked out or structured.

In terms of Thai legal and political systems, at least in workers' structure of feelings, they have always felt that laws and state agencies operated to employers' advantage. This sentiment was firmly imprinted on the social consciousness of past workers and still conspicuous among present-day workers. Despite the seeming continuity, Brown noted an aspect of discontinuity caused by the Thai state, which attempted to erase the memory of labor radicalism by obliterating the term 'kammakorn' through law reform. As Brown comments,

This renewed endeavor to establish and embed a clear distinction between 'economic' and 'political' issues is reflected in the language of the law itself. By the late 1950s, the term *kammakorn*, in use since the days of the absolute monarchy, had acquired subversive and dangerous semantic connotations that evoked images of the masculine manual laborer as a member of a potential revolutionary proletariat. There was no place for such a term in the new legislation that only spoke of *raengngan* (worker) or *lukcang* (employee). Everyone from factory workers right through to the Prime Minister could and would be described as *raengngan*." (Brown 2004, p. 67: original emphasis)

I should note my disagreement with Brown's comment that the current use of *raengngan* stands as a universal description for everyone, especially for white-collar labor upward to a Prime Minister, as *kammakorn* is currently replaced by *raengngan*, which has acquired connotations of manual and menial labor. Nevertheless, Brown is right to point out the censorship by deletion of *kammakorn* in official usage. Despite the state's effort, labor groups and unions, especially independent and political groups such as the ELRG, often self-identified with the term *kammakorn* to stress the hardship and alienation they faced. The term was still heard particularly through speeches of labor

leaders and songs that carried on the tradition of labor radicalism via the use of *kammakorn* in the lyrics. One such song, *Saksi-kammakorn* (dignity of laborer), was considerably idolized by workers. Another song sung by union representatives that evoked a great sense of strength and unity in a gathering I attended went as follows:

Let's fight! Don't retreat. The Masses are rooting for us. Come together and destroy the enemies. We fight for justice. Let's walk side by side, march in with the determining heart. They'll strike us, but we'll have no fear. We will fight til the death. Let's fight! Do not flee, for the great freedom. Come together, we the Thai people. Fight tooth and nail, we are *kammakorn*.

Dating back to the days of the 1970s student movement, this song was frequently used by organized labor and, more recently, by the anti-government movement as well. Since the word *kammakorn* captured a revolutionary fervor of the communist past, the song itself was crafted in March style. During the anti-government rallies in the past decade, ironically, it was popularized by the leaders of Yellow-shirts movement. The mismatch between the movement's urban, upper-middle class crowd and the working-class rhetoric of revolution often raised eyebrows of many leftist and pro-democracy activists. This appropriation of working class rhetoric is an attempt to recapture workers' symbolism and energy related to dissidence and opposition to the government.⁹⁹

For *raengngan* Thai (Thai workers) and *sahaphab-raengngan* (labor unions), despite the term's official erasure, they continue to identify themselves with *kammakorn* and such the essential meanings of the term. Most activists I knew preferred to call May Day, *Wan Kammakorn* (Laborer Day), as opposed to *Wan Raengngan* used by the

⁹⁹ Ironically, the elite-led Yellow-shirts movement could use such tactics to generate so much energy that they put a halt to the Thai economy, as epitomized by the shutdown of the capital and the siege of parliament and the main airport in 2014. See for example, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/bangkok-shutdown-thai-anti-government-protesters-continue-demonstrations-9057966.html>

government. As unionism has only been limited, solidaristic values of Thai workers in general reflects rootedness in the larger historical context of Thai society, in which the working class has ceaselessly negotiated for its place with the Thai state and its dominant urban elites.

In this sense, the idea of *tham* or *justice*, as used by ELRG activists, captures the discrepancy between the ideal notion of equality as innate and natural, on the one hand, and justice as struggled and perceived by society's lower rank, on the other. Therefore, when workers talked about *kwam mai pen tham*, it should be understood in the context of both fairness and equity. Moreover, it should be noted that this meaning of justice does not necessarily presuppose the judicial system's existence and effectiveness. For instance, Chat, a veteran unionist and activist, questioned the Thai justice system and criticized judges in labor court as siding with employers and capitalists:

If anything happens, and we decide to strike or protest, who would be on our side? It is very difficult these days. The industrial estate would sue us too. We are not only fighting with the employers. If we fight with the employers only...they beat us, we beat them; it is fair. If the industrial estate joins the fight, the employers, and HR club too...then the law makers, and the state, they are all on one side. As if we are besieged, who do we turn to?

Noting the implicit idea of fairness, the local activist pointed to equal power relations between employers and employees, which in turn imply a law enforcer in the market economy. In other words, workers' notion of justice presupposes the state as a guarantor of a fair system. Informed by their lived experiences as waged and migrant labor, workers viewed the system as unfair and criticized the collusion between the state offices and capitalists or employers. This is fundamental disillusionment that began the process of empowerment. Such shared experience and realization are foundational to

their collective identity, akin to what Raymond Williams calls ‘structures of feeling’ (1977). Williams (1977) proposed the concept ‘a structure of feeling’ to capture the active and ongoing processes of the subjective, as opposed to the formal (i.e., explicit and known forms such as relationships and institutions).¹⁰⁰ He defined *structure* as a set of “characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically *affective elements of consciousness and relationships* (p. 132, emphasis added), whereas the use of ‘feeling’ is in contrast with the formal concept of ideology. It is a broad term encompassing a wide range: meaning and values as actually lived and felt, formally held systematic beliefs and its practical, nuanced, and variable forms, and the acted and justified experiences (ibid). By changes in *the structures of feeling*, therefore, he meant changes in social relations, as they were lived at the present time and still emerging. Building on Williams’ structures of feeling, I take the cue from Chari and Gidwani (2005), who argue that “[G]eographical ethnographies of work must be attentive not only dominant structures, power relations and practices, but also to the fleeting nascent, and marginal, and to the forms of working-class yearning” (273). The next section discusses, first, concepts of social justice in geographical theories and, then, a concept attentive to Thai workers’ yearning.

6.3 Social Justice in Geographical Theories

A relevant debate in geography concerns with the theorization of social justice in spatial terms. As David Harvey (2009) argues, in a liberal perspective, justice is often understood as a set of principles that operate to resolve conflicts. The principles are

¹⁰⁰ Whereas the dominant tendency in theories is to reduce the social as habitual (i.e., fixed, finished and known products of the past relationships and institutions), Williams stressed theories that apprehend the *active*—the moving, forming, and momentary processes of lived experience, consciousness and feelings.

related to social and institutional arrangements, concerned primarily with ‘just distribution’ of benefits and burdens arising in the process of production (p. 97). In short, the liberal principle of social justice is summarized as ‘a just distribution justly arrived at’ (p. 98). In other words, the principle of justice is based on the acceptance of *rules of the game*. This is equivalent to John Rawls’s initial position in four mechanisms: allocation (market competition), stabilization (full employment), transfer (redistribution), and distribution (public goods). However, as critical theorists point out, “distributive justice is necessary, but not sufficient, conditions” (Young 1990; Mitchell 2003). Iris Marion Young (1990) argues that the framework for social justice that exposes injustice demands theories that incorporate both the universality—the liberal assumption behind just distribution that society is homogenous – and the particularity of social context that allows us to recognize social differences and criticize structures of oppression and domination (see Mitchell 2003, 30-31). Building on Young, Mitchell (2003) connects the radical framework proposed by Young (1990) with theories of spaces by highlighting the role of the rights framework in supporting collective control over the means of distribution. In the context of Thai political economy, where the *scales* of justice in both judicial and geographical meanings are multiple and, thus, subject to what Nancy Fraser calls the problem of *incommensurability* (2009)—how do we know which balance (or scale) to use in a given case?

Here the collective work of both Young (1990; 1997; 1998) and Fraser (1997; 2008; 2009) offer great insights into the struggle of subordinated or marginalized groups (McDowell 2000). When read together, Young’s approach is complementary to what Fraser leaves underdeveloped, which consists of the political process, collectivism, and

definitions of oppression and domination. To begin, I want to highlight McDowell's (2008) remark that to collapse the binary of structure and culture, "we need to answer, questions such as what sorts of inequality matters most, in what circumstances and how do we decide?" (p. 494).

According to Fraser, justice means parity of participation, or participatory parity. Fraser's work offers clarity for conceptualizing the complexity and multiplicity of injustice, in terms of economic, political, and cultural inequalities. Fraser (2009) argues that in western thinking, questions of justice are normally concerned with *the right*, which belongs to a terrain of morality, while questions of self-realization are concerned with *the good*, a terrain of ethics (27). However, she proposes that recognition, or the questions of self-realization, is also an issue of justice. In comparison, Young's concept of justice is very helpful for understanding enablement and constraints and especially the focus on procedural aspects of participation within the social group itself. For example, drawing on the ideas of communicative ethics and deliberative democracy, developed by Jergen Habermas and Agnes Heller, Young highlights the roles of deliberation and decision-making and hence the consensual voices of the marginalized group. I also find Young's approach more concrete than Fraser's, in the way it reconciles internal conflicts among analytical categories.

This framework of social justice, a concept that should encapsulate redistribution, recognition, and representation (what Fraser calls three-dimensional social differentiation), offers insight to help us understand workers' struggle for dignity. According to Sayer (2011), dignity is a complex concept, since it embodies dual concepts. From a relational perspective, dignity is fulfilled by respect and recognition. It

is something to be attained, not existent by itself. In the ideal situation, when a subject is autonomous, dignity could be intrinsic. Otherwise, it would be attained through negotiation or struggle, as in workers' situations. When a subject is vulnerable, dignity begins to be dependent on others. For Sayer, it has to do with the capacities we have (the real) and the capacities we exercise (the actual). It entails two kinds of recognition: conditional and unconditional. In a workplace context, Sayer also highlights the dignity that comes from respect and trust, from management to workers, in decision-making and freedom. Citing Ehrenreich's (2001) report on low-waged workers, for instance, Sayer points out that forms of workers' surveillance and restrictions strip workers of self-respect and dignity (201).

It is important to note two caveats here. First, my reference to *kammakorn* is intended to stress the contradiction between the indispensable roles of the Thai working class in national development and the lack of social recognition. Unlike the South Korean state, the Thai state does not fairly compensate for Thai working class's contribution, or publicly praise them as "warriors" in the making of its economy (see Koo 2001). On the contrary, the Thai government has always alienated the working class, while at the same time blaming them for low productivity. Second, to say that workers' norms of righteousness are rooted in the historical consciousness of the Thai working class is not to deny the significance of trade unions and socialist ideology. Despite the limitations of formal unionism, I argue that workers benefited to a certain degree from what Rick Fantasia (1988) calls a 'culture of solidarity,' through the process of forming unions and organizing labor-related activities that restructure their relations and agency (p. 11). However, such consciousness-in-association is not the only basis for workers'

collectivism. As regional migrants with a strong sense of identity, they were able to draw on cultural resources to contest repressive state-capital collusion. By broadening my analysis to include culture, I heed Chakrabarty (1989), who forewarns us that “a logic of a particular culture cannot be explained by the methods of political economy, that often fail to distinguish between ‘function’ and ‘reason’” (xii). In the next section, I make a case by drawing on the literature in social anthropology and history of the Thai northeasterners to understand their cultural meanings of justice and class struggle.

6.4 Historical labor consciousness and geography of ethno-class struggle

By pointing out the historical continuity of radical activism within the Thai working class, I do not intend to suggest an evenness of labor activism across geographies in Thailand. By contrast, the unevenness of labor activism cannot be overstated. As Brown (2006) points out, radical activism of the early-twentieth century was concentrated in urban and commercial centers such as Bangkok, the diffusion of labor activism to other parts of the country such as the Eastern Seaboard gradually but inevitably followed the patterns of movement in foreign capital and production across spaces.

6.4.1 Regions, Traditions and Class Struggle

As Jane Wills reminded us, “in focusing on uneven patterns of trade unionism, geographers have tended to neglect the importance of historical discontinuities and conflicts in the social and political practices deployed in particular places” (1998, p. 130). Accordingly, despite the history, I intend to show that the changing geography of activism and workers’ demography in the Eastern Seaboard necessarily combine to create

distinctive practices, experiences, and sets of challenges. Discussing the spatiality of trade unionism traditions, Wills went on to warn labor geographers of “the dangers of freezing social processes and losing sight of their dynamic development over both time and space” (ibid.). To avoid such dangers, in theorizing workers’ collective agency, I refrain from drawing a boundary around the Eastern Seaboard as a delimited region. Instead, I consider the constant flows and exchanges of ideas and people across places, including migration from the Northeast to the Eastern Thailand, as well as the circulation of thoughts and practices from the urban center to the industrial periphery.

The economic migration of Northeastern workers is not a new phenomenon. According to Charles Keyes (2014; 1967), the migration of Northeasterners, or *Isan* people, to Bangkok started after World War II, when the stream of Chinese immigrants was curtailed by the Thai state for security and political reasons. For over four decades, anthropologist Charles Keyes has studied Northeastern villages and *Isan*—the collective designation of the Lao-speaking people in Thailand’s Northeastern region. According to Keyes, the formation of Isan identity¹⁰¹ is deeply rooted in the historical moment of the national politics.

6.4.2 *Being Northeastern Workers*

I want to highlight the significance of applying labor-geography perspective beyond unionism (Herod 1997) to the working class in the Global South, “where the exercise of ‘agency’ takes on significantly different form and meaning” (Tufts and Savage 2009: 946). To shift from labor as an analytical category to class, I start with

¹⁰¹ Keyes’s view has become a standard, academic version. Recognizing the political nature of Isan identity, nevertheless, McCargo and Krisadawan (2004) explicitly challenge the singular, fixed and insufficiently nuanced Isan identity. They argue that Isan identity is fluid and plural with ongoing negotiation with Thai and Lao identities.

Katznelson's (1992) framework of class formation in terms of space, language, and everyday lives. According to Katznelson (1992), there are four levels of class formation. The first is the well-known Marxist class analysis, namely class within the structure of capitalist development. Katznelson notes that this is "the model of empty places within the mode of production" (1992, p. 208). The second level is class as social relations and ways of life, or the organization of lives inside and outside workplaces, whereas the third layer is cognitive and linguistic dispositions, or "the ways people represent lived experiences and constitute a normative guide to action." These dispositions "grounded in language and symbols constitute significant cultural resources which structure the repertoire of working classes at the fourth level of class, that of *collective action*" (ibid., p. 208-209). In the next two sub-sections, my analysis attempts to capture the linkage between the second, third, and fourth level of class.

Far from being an idiosyncrasy, tensions between Thai management and local workers, such as those raised by Na in the beginning of this chapter, were commonplace and repeatedly mentioned by workers across the Eastern Seaboard. On the surface, such a rift appeared as a technical and hierarchical division between white and blue collars. However, as accounts of workers' interactions in Chapter 5 illustrated, the hierarchy overlaps with social class, with urban, well-educated professionals on one side and the provincial working poor on the other. The class dividing lines also intersect with ethno-regional differences whereby almost all blue-collar workers were from the Northeast region and the managerial position holders were from Bangkok and central provinces. Although not all workers were northeaster or *khon Isan*, its large numbers made the *Isan* characteristics hegemonic among workers. As I discuss later, intersections of ethno-

regional and class identities placed activist-workers in certain social positions which shaped how they experienced and thus understood both the abusive employer-employee relations and the capitalist-state collusion.

Regarding the ELRG, it is important to distinguish between various forms of collectivism. In their interview-based research in the UK, Healy *et al.* (2004) found that workers from different backgrounds took varying routes to gaining consciousness and hence distinctive forms of collectivism. For example, while middle-class and educated respondents learned about feminism and activism in the forms of socialist ideologies via the social movement in which they participated, ethnic minority and communities experienced collectivism through the racial injustice they faced growing up. As ELRG activists and workers were mostly regional migrants from the Northeast, despite different contexts, my finding concurs with Healy *et al.*'s (2004) argument that workers often gained collective consciousness through the lived experiences of ethnic and group injustice. As Healy *et al.* insightfully argue, "Injustice/justice is perhaps the key concept, which arises from this experience of ethnic community activism. This can become an absolutely crucial motivator both for voluntary work in the communities and for trade union activism" (p. 458).

6.4.3 Isan as Disadvantaged Group and People of Dissidence

Over the past century, the relationships between northeasterners and the Thai state, mediated by bureaucrats, have been cloaked by a theme of tense relations (Keyes 2014, 175). Comparing the Isan's millenarian uprising in 1902 with the Red Shirts movement in recent Thai politics, Keyes (2014) points to continuing tensions and violent conflicts brought on northeasterners by the Thai authority and its urban and middle

classes supporters. From April to May 2010, in one of the most tragic episodes in Thai contemporary politics, the Red Shirts participants, most of whom came from Northeastern and Northern Thailand, were subject to a violent crackdown by the military force in the heart of Bangkok's financial district. *Human Right Watch* reported that at least 90 were killed and more than 2,000 injured and that the government "seriously infringed on fundamental human rights" of protesters during and after the protests (HRW 2011). Among key issues of the protests, the report noted "widespread economic disparities" and "a deep rural-urban divide" as the main impetuses (ibid.). On May 19, in response to the crackdown in Bangkok, supporters in several Northeastern provinces rioted and set local government buildings on fire, leading to the killing of three protestors and prosecution of almost a hundred people (Prachatai 2014). The Thai media noted a highly disproportionate punishment for Northeastern incendiaries, who in one case received lifetime imprisonment sentence (Prachatai 2015).

It is natural for Thai political commentators to draw a parallel between the northeasterners and the Red Shirts. As Keyes and many observers identify, the depiction of protesters as water buffalo¹⁰² walking on the Bangkok streets was immediately recognized, as the same pejorative used to label Isan people (see Chapter Eight in Keyes 2014). In addition, the political discourse of the Red Shirt movement that they were 'prai,' a variant of historical serfdom, is strikingly similar to the way that Isan people were associated with *prai* through their association with Lao people (Streckfuss 2012; Keyes 2014).

¹⁰² In Thai culture, the water buffalo is always seen by city-dwellers as stupid and simple-minded (hence become a slang for stupid), while people from the upcountry, especially Isan, feel obliged to explain whenever changes arise that the water buffalo is much smarter than conventionally understood in society.

The self-identification by the Red Shirts as slaves, and the political discourse of ending slavery, finds resonance with Thai organized labor that equated waged labor relations with modern slavery, as mentioned in Chapter Five. The generations of labor activists seemed to draw on the same political discourse to rouse the idea of class warfare against the elite class whose power derived from their economic and political resources. A low-budget documentary made by a veteran Thai labor activist titled ‘*Lerk That* (Ending Slavery)’ pieced together familiar stories of four labor unions being busted by multinational companies. In a story of a women-led union that was a member of the ELRG, the filmmaker highlighted management tactics in a well-known Japanese electronic corporation of opting out union members and dismissing the union committee. In the same vein, a ELRG coordinator went further to remark in an article published by an independent media that factory workers’ lives are “worse than machines or even cattle.” As he went on to say, “at least cows or water buffaloes get some sleep at night, and machines take some rest during the maintenance, [workers] have no time left for nothing but the self-sustenance.” In a different piece, the author made a clearer link between being *kammakorn* and migrants from Isan in the process of transitioning to factory, as the state’s agenda of development has never improved, but only worsened the conditions of their lives.

Since the Thai state has developed and promoted industrialization until now...the resultant policies exist to support and benefit the capitalists or the capital to accumulate surplus value until they are increasingly strong. After that, the excuse of promoting [foreign] investment is to change the laws and regulations for the privileges of the capital. With the support from some corrupted politicians and bureaucrats [to the capital], *kammakorn* are oppressed to the lowest class of the society. At the same time, the labor laws supposed to protect workers’ right are not kept up to speed with industrial advancement, technology and changing society. More importantly, many law enforcers have ignored [these laws], causing the Thai *kammakorn* to be taken advantage of and

oppressed. And the problems of *kammakorn* on the farms are not paid attention to, until they have to become *kammakorn* in the factories, in hoping that the quality of lives would get better.¹⁰³

6.4.4 Isan as Political Culture

Contrary to all negative stereotypes, David Streckfuss (2012) points out that the radical movements in Thailand—from the Red Shirts movement, the Isan-led *Assembly of the Poor*, the Communist Party of Thailand, to the WWII anti-Japanese movement—mostly drew inspiration from minority groups, especially northeasterners, rather than urban student movements. Questioning the idea of Thai-ness and oppression¹⁰⁴ of ethnic minorities in Thailand, Streckfuss (2012) states that

There is something telling in the observation that if the people of the North East were acknowledged as part of a distinct ethnic group, then we would understand Thai history in a very different way from how we do today. In that case, it would not simply seem to be the case that the central Thai were oppressing other ethnic groups, but the very sense of legitimacy conferred to the exercise of political power would be called into question. It is one thing to say that the state is highly centralized, thus causing a level of neglect of regions away from the centre, but quite another thing to argue that one ethnic group is using some mechanism to shield the outright use of political power to oppress many others. Legitimacy would evaporate on the spot (322).

Based on the long history of oppression, the *khon Isan* (Isan people) are regarded as highly politicized, whereas Isan as a region is portrayed as radicalized. For instance, a commentator from international media, such as *Time Magazine*, recently raised the issue of Isan being a separatist movement (see Time 2014). Studying the formation of Isan identity in relation to the creation of the Thai state itself, Keyes (2008; 2014), offers insight into the way in which northeasterners view social justice through cultural and

¹⁰³ The articles were compiled and published by an independent publisher in 2014.

¹⁰⁴ I use the meaning of Young's oppression "the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanism – in short, the normal practices of everyday life" (41).

religious values. For instance, Keyes argues, northeasterners' actions are constrained by the socio-economic world in which they live, as well as by the moral universe of Buddhist values. In other words, while northeasterners still draw their moral principles from Buddhist principles, they have gradually embraced a capitalist view of consumerism and the discourse of development. Interestingly, in his early analysis of sufficiency-based villages, Keyes (1983) pointed out the seemingly 'false consciousness' of villagers who accepted inequalities as natural and regarded hard work and wealth accumulation in view of their function for collective merit-making. In a sense, it was similar to Protestantism (Keyes 1983; 1990). Such a work ethic was articulated by the foregoing of immediate gratification, which it seems, contrasted sharply with the life principle of some male workers, a theme I will discuss in Chapter Seven. Nevertheless, Keyes (2008) argues that the northeastern village economy has recently drawn closer to the global economy. In such a global era, the northeasterners take more risk such as by migrating—temporarily or permanently—to other areas, including abroad. Keyes (2014) believes that northeasterners “continue to maintain the value of belonging to a moral community” (172) through the identification of themselves as *khon Isan* or *khon ban nork* (upcountry people), wherever they find themselves. Since northeasterners migrated to a higher degree than other groups to work in foreign countries, Keyes (2012) considers them more cosmopolitan or even globe-trotting.

Isan is actually the most populous ethnic group in Thailand, accounting for approximately a third of the whole population, but ironically it is the least wealthy. With the least economically developed places of origin, the experiences of migration and

awareness of always being an outsider strengthen a sense of community among Isan workers outside the Northeast. As McCargo and Krisdawan (2004) sum up, the “combination of economic deprivation, ethnic minority status, and seasonal residence patterns serves to enhance the self-image of Isan people as a marginalized and disadvantaged group which has missed out on the benefits of Thailand’s remarkable economic growth since the 1960s. This sense of marginality is somewhat offset by a strong sense of ethno-regional pride” (p. 221).

6.5 Practical Consciousness, Concrete Labor and Class Struggle

In *The German Ideology*, Marx suggests that language is both a primary and advanced form of consciousness. On consciousness, David McNally elaborates that Marx puts both language and labor at the center of social mediation (1995; 2001; 2004). In other words, through language and labor, individuals realize their social roles and become self-conscious agents. Two seemingly distinct processes—language as creation of meanings and labor as production of materials—are inherently connected in the sphere of life (McNally 2004, p. 202). In addition, the embodiment of language and labor in concrete space and time testifies that capital cannot turn concrete labor completely into abstract labor; hence the embodiment of language and labor is a form of resistance to capital in its own right (ibid).

In regular sessions of after-work meetings, I found myself listening to activists and workers discuss and vent their frustration about bosses and working conditions in the regional dialect or *Isan*—the language that workers often referred to as *phasa Lao* (Lao language). On one trip in which I accompanied a female worker, Orn, to her home village

in Nakornratchasima,¹⁰⁵ she pointed out that her spoken language was a variation of Isan dialects. Her ancestors had moved from the Thai-Cambodia border to Nakornratchasima, locally known as Korat, making her family speak a hybrid version of Khmer and Thai Khorat dialects. She then added that Korat Isan was curt and not nice to the ear, even among Lao-speaking Isan people.¹⁰⁶ Such self-awareness allowed me to pursue extensive conversations about the accents of the workers we knew. It is worth noting that, apart from food (and perhaps alcohol), language appeared to be a major cultural tool that facilitated workers' socialization on the day-to-day basis.

As an outsider, though, I could not really tell the difference among its varieties, and Isan as a regional language put me apart from all the rest who shared the same code. The shared vernacular facilitated socialization on daily basis and provided speakers with a satisfying grammar of criticism. As McNally (1995) writes, it is “a capacity to share and exchange ideas in order to coordinate social labor” (p. 2). In many meetings, I could feel the change of atmosphere as if the heat in the room was rising, when the workers shifted from the central Thai to the Isan dialect while debating grievances. Specifically, when male activists such as Yingyong and Yos only used Isan dialect in a public speaking to mobilize workers, known as Hi-Park, (see Chapter Seven), it felt as if the grammar of dissidence was immediately recognized and responded by the crowd.

¹⁰⁵ To facilitate my access to female workers, I often asked my wife to tag along on our trip. Her presence definitely allowed me to gain trust and access to women workers' lives. However, the fact that my wife is a foreigner, albeit with her (central) Thai fluency, her company highlights rather than mitigates my differences from workers. These differences include my non-Isan and middle-class background.

¹⁰⁶ According to Keyes (2014), although it is hard to determine, around 85 to 90 percent of the Northeastern population is Tai-speaking people, among which various group speak a variety of domestic dialects. For example, a group of the Northeasterner inhabiting closer to the central plains speak Thai Khorat, a dialect more similar to the central Thai than the Lao dialects. The other two major linguistic groups are those who speak Phu Thai, and Khmer or Khmer related languages. The latter group accounts for, as a minimum, 9 percent of the regional population living around the Thai-Cambodia border area (Keyes 2014, 16).

The militant connotation associated with dialect plays a certain role in reproducing stereotypes of Isan workers as aggressive and more violent than workers from other regions. For example, when I asked non-Isan counterparts about their perception of Northeastern workers, the typical answer was that they are *suu khon* (combative), or *mai yom khon* (non-compliant), which meant that Isan people always fight back when challenged. This kind of received idea about Isan workers, accompanied by the prejudice that they were uneducated and stupid, led to deep-seated discrimination by management and government officials. On the one hand, the urbanite management and government officials pre-judged workers as troublemakers who tended to incite others in the workplace. This attitude was apparent in the verdicts of the labor dispute court cases including the Mitzuki struggle. On the other, owing to the ignorance and resulting fear, company management and government officers always treated workers with contempt and mistrust. In response, workers felt that foreign executives misunderstood them, and saw them through the discriminating eye of Thai management. When these workers turned to local officers to redress the grievances, the officers' prejudice toward the companies added to workers' anger and frustration. For these reasons, the ELRG activists and workers felt strongly about inequality among government officers, capitalists, and workers.

Conclusion

This chapter is an exploration of injustice and consciousness at the intersection of class and regional ethnicity. In a sense, it uncovers the messy and contested identities of the Isan working class, which straddles the scale of work, activism and migration. First,

the historical analysis helps us understand the sense of injustice embedded within the political economy of Thai uneven development. Workers' impulses for self-organization started within the workplace, but the forces at play went beyond the struggle over economic issues. In this respect, the meanings and scope of collectivism exceed the boundary of labor organizations. Moreover, the underlying tensions of the labor dispute were based on economic, social, and cultural differences—the hierarchy created by the technical composition of class—between the management and labor. Therefore, I argue further that both the technical and socio-cultural aspects of class composition form the basis of the consciousness and political organization of class struggle. Similar to Fraser's three-dimensional social differences, the concept of social justice as experienced by Isan workers captures the aspects of redistribution, recognition, and representation.

However, such insight does not explain all internal challenges faced by the activists, particularly the issue of representation, as illustrated Chapter Seven. As Katznelson proposes, the concrete level of class analysis entails social relations and organization within and beyond the workplace. For the purposes of representation, I address the issues of gender and gender dynamics within the labor organization and households in the next two chapters. Now, I turn toward internal and gender dynamics within the ELRG and its union members, proposing a feminist analysis that deepens our analyses of labor activism and its challenges.

Chapter 7. A Feminist View: Unions, Gender and Everyday Life

After having submitted their collective bargaining demand, the Takiya Workers Union and the employer could not reach an agreement about the terms of a new contract. Before the union executive committee members were to have the second mediation meeting at the local labor office, five executive committee members were meeting with two main consultants, Chet and Cha, to prepare for the meeting. During the preparatory meeting, the consultants and the committee members decided together about which workers would defend individual demands to the employer's representative in the negotiation. When the issue of birth control came up (i.e. a requested subsidy for workers' birth control such as a sterilization fee), the Takiya unionists were suggesting that Ya—a female member of the executive committee—be in charge. According to them, traditionally in a relationship, women would have a tubal ligation after the second or third labor, whereas men tend to have a vasectomy later on in relationship.¹⁰⁷ Although Ya explained that she hesitated to talk about this issue because she had no experience, Chet agreed with the rest that Ya should be in charge because the issue was generally seen as a women's issue.

After the meeting, I overheard Ya's conversation on the phone, in which she told the other end of the line to have dinner without her. It was her four-year-old son who told her, 'daddy made dinner ready for us'. Feeling surprised, I asked her whether this was a normal routine. She said no, it was not normal. Then she added that she wanted to bring her little boy to our English class that I had offered for workers on the weekend, free of charge, but she was afraid that he would be a trouble to the class. Later on that evening, Ya's husband picked her up from the ELRG. Instead of waiting in the ELRG, he waited in the car, like most of the activists' partners. When I asked why her husband did not come and wait in the ELRG, she simply said that he was not interested in any of the union activities.

On that evening, apart from the Takiya union committee, Sorn was also there working with Chet to update the labor confederation membership database. Earlier that morning, Chet posted on the group's social media that he needed a volunteer, who could help revise the registration. As I had already been familiar with the group, I realized that there were a few activists who would come to support the collective work in the evenings. Sorn was one of them. During my field research, there was a sort of ritual in the evening whereby male activists including Yingyong, Chet, Sorn, Yos and Oat would gather at the ELRG, either working on the group or their union paperwork. As part of the ritual, they would finish the evening with sharing or discussion over a few cans or bottles of beer.

¹⁰⁷ Due to misconceptions about vasectomy and a lack of sexual drive, Thai men still resist vasectomy until late in their sexual lives.

This chapter focuses on the gender dynamics of Thai labor activists inside and outside the labor unions. It is divided into four parts. The first part introduces the way in which labor activists, mostly men, socialized and planned their organizing activities. Then, my analyses shift from the inter-personal to the organizational level, addressing the connection between gender dynamics and structures of representation. Based on my empirical research and analytical tools from the feminist and social constructionist approach, I address the masculine culture of activism in which organizational practices and norms co-produce gender (i.e., masculinity and femininity) that in turn cultivates a certain notion of leadership.

The third section focuses on distinctive gendered consciousness of activists and points to broader, social challenges associated with cultural norms. This feminist perspective sheds light on the need to understand activism in its totality of production and social reproduction—the focus of the final chapter. I discuss the distinctive ways in which male and female activists perceived the time and space of everyday life. The different ways in which male and female activists cope with work-related struggle are embedded in personal historiography and gender construction of life's work. By broadening the concept of work and labor to include both productive and reproductive work, I offer an encompassing analysis of workers' participation in activism that is attuned to their gendered, temporal, and spatial experiences. This analysis is crucial to the theorization of agency and labor activism in totality of work and life in Chapter Eight.

7.1 Women and labor unions

The empirical material in this chapter addresses two interrelated debates concerned with labor organizing within globalized capitalist production and gendered geographies of labor activism. The first debate centers on the obstacles faced by women within male-dominated unionism and thus the importance of democratic labor unions. The second debate is on the Global South workers' accommodation and their relationships with place-based specificities.

Labor scholars have long recognized patterns of gender hierarchy and women's exclusion in mainstream male-dominated unionism (see Franzway 1997; 2001; Pocock 1997; ICFTU 2003). In Asian trade union movements, women fare even worse than their Western counterparts (Broadbent and Ford 2008). For example, local norms derived from religion and other belief systems, such as Confucianism, help reinforce patriarchal power relations within already-existing male-led unions in East Asian economies (Broadbent 2003; Moon and Broadbent 2008). In view of this, scholars argue that women-only, autonomous or separate organizing is not only necessary but also a positive step toward women's liberation (Dalla Costa 1971; Briskin 2007b; Kong 2009; Federici 2017). In short, autonomous organizing is instrumental in overcoming women's exclusion and marginalization. Depending on the local context, autonomous organizing could take either a form of non-union organizing (see Rowbotham and Mitter 1994 for an international context; Ford 2002 for Indonesia; Tshoedi 2002 for South Africa) or separate or self-organizing within unions (see, e.g. Briskin and McDermott 1993; Briskin 1999; Colgan and Ledwith 2000).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸Separate organizing has distinctive meanings across places. As Linda Briskin (2008) points out, separate organizing is contextual and historical but never accepted *a priori* as an appropriate strategy. In North America, for example, separate organizing has been a response to not only gender (male) domination but also race (white) supremacy and other discrimination (e.g., homophobia and ableism).

For research within the labor and industrial relations discipline, scholars in developed economies such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the U.S. discuss issues of women's leadership, diversity, and equality within unions against the backdrop of economic restructuring, neo-liberalization, and union renewal (see Briskin 2011b; Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Ledwith 2006; 2012). With recognition of changing labor demography and hence the need to reinvent solidarity (Briskin 2008), the discussion is often situated in theoretical debates about intersectionality and culture (see McBride *et al.* 2015; Ledwith and Hansen 2013).

By contrast, debates around Global South industrialization are concerned with women workers outside formal organizational vehicles (e.g., non-union and informal groups). Scholars writing in the late 1980s often depicted workers as passive and docile, highlighting disciplinary structures including economic restructuring, political repression, and cultural norms (e.g., Deyo 1989). However, scholars working under feminist and post-structural intellectual traditions contend that female workers—especially those organizing in some of the most disciplinary places such as Special Economic Zones or Free Trade Zones—were just as militant as their male counterparts in the Global North (e.g., Rosa 1994; Koo 2001; McKay 2005). More recently, the debate has shifted to focus on multiple scales of political economy (Kelly 2001, 2009), workers' geographical agency and scalar strategies (Kelly 2002; McKay 2011), community-based organizations and social movement unionism (Rock 2001), and place-based gendered norms (Silvey 2003). In short, the emphasis is thus on specificities of local conditions that promote or prohibit labor activism.

The literature on women workers in the Third World already attests to the ways in which men appropriate women's surplus value via domestic labor done at home, subordinating women further through the exploitation of feminized work (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Beneria and Roldan 1987). As Maria Mies (1994 [1986]) argues, the New International Division of Labor drew on a pool of women in the Third World because women were the optimal labor force. They were optimal because they had been universally defined as housewives, intrinsically isolated, atomized, and hence politically weak (p. 116). Historically, "housewifization" was a capitalist strategy used in Europe and the U.S. and a precondition for proletarianization (Mies 1994 [1986]). Its logic is to reduce labor costs in the production process (p. 119). As capital intensifies its process on a global scale, such 'housewifization' has further expanded to include men in the creation of flexible labor (Mies 1994 [1986]). It has dis-embedded both men and women from formal labor relations: the protection of laws, trade unions, and the welfare state. Nevertheless, the gendered division of labor within workers' households and its relations to women within the context of labor activism are rarely scrutinized. This research contributes to the literature by investigating the way in which a sexual division inside households affects the participation of male and female workers in labor activism.

In Thailand, given domination and hierarchy in the mainstream and male-dominated labor movement, women workers, especially in feminized sectors, succeed to carve out political spaces for activism through autonomous and non-union organizing vehicles (Mills 2005; Brown and Chaytawee 2008). These initiatives include women workers' formation of labor-affiliated NGOs and participation in a broader movement. However, as Chapters Two and Three illustrate, as a result of economic crisis and

restructuring in the late 1990s, the feminization of the workforce in light industries was disrupted and further weakened by the decline of these feminized industries. This chapter enriches the debate on women's participations in unions by examining an increasingly masculinized workforce within the new geography of automobile production – an emergent export-led industry replacing Thailand's so-called sunset industries (i.e., textile, garment, and electronics). Rather than focusing on abstract space of labor politics on a national scale, it emphasizes the ways in which masculine culture and gender dynamics within decision-making processes play out in the everyday, material spaces of organizing.

Good morning, brothers and sister!

In a meeting of several dozens union representatives, a guest from a global union organization greeted participants during the opening ceremony by saying, 'Good morning, brothers and sisters!' Looking around the room, he immediately corrected himself and said 'brothers and sister', as there was only one woman in the conference hall full of men. As the representative of the meeting's sponsoring organization, he proudly noted that one of the international events to be held by his organization would be on 'gender issues.' Then he finished his opening speech by encouraging the local network to increase women's participation and expressing his hope to see more women in the next meeting.

This snippet, taken from my notes in a meeting of tire-producing unions, is not unique but rather representative of the social relations I observed during a year of research with a group of labor unions related to automobile industries, the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG). One may argue that the lack of women in a meeting could be a result of mismanagement. However, it was also a product of organizational practices and

social processes. Moreover, the marginalization of women entailed more than low numbers of women. It is primarily concerned with the exclusion of women from the group's decision-making processes, as well as subtler forms of cultural domination over women (Briskin and McDermott 1993). Such domination is normally rooted in already-existing prejudices in society. For example, in Thailand, as in other countries, women in labor unions were generally criticized by men for 'talking too much,' 'gossiping,' or 'being too consumerist.' Seeing women through this lens, male activists often dismissed female counterparts as unfit for the serious business of labor activism. In the next section, by using a soccer league organized by the ELRG as an example, I show how the exclusive socialization of male activists alienated women counterparts and created conflicts within the group.

7.2 ELRG and Gendered Structure of Leadership

The ELRG is an independent group working to promote educational and social activities for union members of the Thailand Confederation of Trade Unions (TCTU). Faced with low levels of organizing activities, in 2015 ELRG organizers promoted a soccer league to encourage more social interaction among members and cultivate a culture of solidarity. In a planning committee's meeting, when asked about how women could participate, the all-male committee responded that "women will be cheerleaders, and we have prizes for the winning cheerleading teams." As it turned out, there was no coordinating effort to facilitate cheerleading activities. Therefore, women were on the sidelines during the whole period of soccer league.

In retrospect, for many reasons the soccer league was not successful in promoting socialization or solidarity among workers. To begin, most union teams were too competitive and literally goal-oriented. There were also incidents of quarrels, sometimes caused by the use of alcohol during matches, thereby defeating the purpose of cultivating solidarity. Most importantly, women were not incorporated as active members of either planning or activities. Accordingly, after the league, a conflict broke out within the ELRG, when a female activist strongly criticized the organization of a retreat celebrating the league's end. This woman member raised the issue of a conflict of interest, when male activists organized the exclusive soccer league, and spent the ELRG's scant budget to celebrate their so-called 'hard work' at the retreat. Unfortunately, the soccer's inclusiveness was never openly debated, and her criticism was unfairly dismissed by the quip that she should have raised this issue in the planning meeting.

In fact, hers was the sole female voice in the ELRG. ELRG meetings were usually held late in the evening, and women could not fully participate in them. Over time, women's voices were excluded from meetings and decision-making processes. This is similar to what Susane Franzway (2002) calls the 'men's movement,' or perhaps more precisely, Sue Ledwith (2012)'s 'culture of exclusionary masculinity.' Given women's exclusion from the planning meeting, the ELRG's dismissal of her concerns only aggravated the problems of women's underrepresentation in the organization.

7.2.1 Male-dominated Unions and Culture of Exclusion

Feminist scholars have identified male domination in leadership structure, which includes a quantitative aspect (i.e., a gender deficit in leadership), as a major obstacle for women members in labor unions around the world (Colgan and Ledwith 2002; Ledwith

2008; Ledwith and Hansen 2013). This is applied even when the decision-making is made while drinking, often in smoke-filled places. The ELRG's soccer league exemplifies masculine practices created by a male-dominated structure of decision-making. Since women's voices were not included in the decision-making process, the type of activity decided by the ELRG organizers was shaped mainly by male preferences.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the ELRG soccer matches were usually organized on Saturdays and occasionally Sundays. Since the weekend was usually leisure time,¹¹⁰ over the course of the league, participation in the events tapered off. Eventually, the original goal of promoting socialization and cultivating solidarity was not achieved because the activity had become an exclusive men's club. In this context, it might have been different if the male organizers planned for the socialization of workers from an inclusive, rather than a limited, male perspective, but as Joan Acker (1982) wittily points out, gender equality does not exist as long as a majority of people, especially women who are affected by decisions, are not involved in its process (*p. i*).

In her study of a Latino/Latina union in Canada, Cynthia Cranford (2007) asserts that women staffers played a crucial role in challenging gender inequality within a union through recruitment of more women members, as well as development of leadership programs appropriate to increasing women's leadership. Further, women's expression of feminist values and the significance of women's representation were keys to success of union strengthening or renewal. Within the male-dominated ELRG, the feminist value raised by the sole woman member was inclusiveness. Inclusiveness means that different

¹⁰⁹ Soccer is one of Thailand's most famous sports, appreciated by both men and women. However, only men actively participate in the game.

¹¹⁰ I use leisure loosely here as a general term. In my further analysis of social reproduction, I challenge this anti-feminist notion of leisure.

needs and demands are reflected in the ways organization grow and move. However, one voice was not enough to be heard. This example points to another issue: labor movements and groups often struggle to create more inclusive and gender-equal structures, when underrepresentation exists within individual unions.¹¹¹ For the ELRG union members, men accounted for a majority in most executive committees, with a few women typically assigned token positions such as treasurer.

For the ELRG, the additional reason for organizing the soccer league was to attract workers to training sessions on social security law held after each soccer match. By so doing, the ELRG was able to secure funding allocated by the National Social Security Office (NSSO), according to the number of attendees in the training. This fund had been a main source of income for the TCTU, as it was for other labor confederations in Thailand. Such reliance on public funding had been the target of strong criticism, though, as some activists in the labor movement viewed labor confederations as compromised labor organizations within the state-controlled tripartite system. By contrast, independent labor groups, mostly women-led labor movement in the light industries, preferred funding from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Through its formal labor congress and informal entities, the ELRG relied on both state-funded sources such as the social security fund and grants from NGOs sources.

In fact, labor union congresses in other Southeast Asian countries, which represented labor in the state-controlled tripartite system, faced similar criticism. For instance, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines was labeled a ‘yellow union’ by other labor organizations (Rosa 1994, p. 90) while the Malaysian Trade Union Congress

¹¹¹ Nevertheless, women’s presence does not guarantee gender equality (Dickens 1998; Ledwith 2012), without organized constituency and accountability (Briskin 2011).

was condemned for its lack of women's participation, 'lack of democracy, bureaucracy, ...and even corruption' (Grace 1990, p. 46 cited by Rosa 1994, p. 89). However, against such contexts, Rosa pointed to a major advantage for women within workplace unions. Within a similar context of hostility against labor unions in Free Trade Zones, Rosa indicated that women were more likely to participate directly and actively in in-house unions, because of the unions' small size. However, this was not the case for women workers in the ELRG, except for a few unions that were women-dominated.

7.2.2 Sexual Politics and Sexualized Relations

In the union led by Sorn, all fifteen executive committee members were men but one. For this labor union, it had become a tradition for the employer to fund an annual retreat for union members. At the annual retreat I attended, the main event was a dance party, in which participants could dine and dance on a floating raft towed by a boat in the middle of the canal. This was the second year that the union executive committee organized a leisure retreat at this fishing resort with an advertised highlight being female professional nightclub dancers, hired by the union to please male members. Such extreme sexism was explicitly displayed on the event's banner, with images of female dancers under the official union's seal.

The union executive committee's decision to invite female dancers was primarily shaped by two main reasons. First, since all but one member of the executive committee were men, the decisions were based on heterosexual and male preferences. To mask the male-biased activity, the union executive committee simply put gold necklaces as the biggest prize on a lucky draw, as an incentive for women members. Indeed, the choice of gold necklaces also says something about how the executive committee viewed women

members. Second, as the employer used the number of members as the prime indicator for the retreat's success, the union was pressured to maximize member participation in the retreat. In truth, the union president desperately wanted to show the employer that the union was still relevant and that most members still attended the retreat.

Focusing on Australian labor movement, Franzway (2002) notes that women workers are not subject only to the *male's movement* but also to covert sexual politics such as heterosexuality and homophobia (and sexual harassment), since 'heterosexual masculine dominance' is prevalent in managerial and everyday practices (p. 282).¹¹²At the retreat, I was surprised that women, especially older women workers, were indifferent to the union's decision to hiring professional dancers, as well as the male workers' explicit sexist behaviors. To fully understand this women's tacit consent, the next section explores women's participation in the making of masculine labor activism.

7.2.3 Masculinity and militant leadership

Western scholars have long discussed the relationship between masculinity, manual work, and blue-collar unions (Aronowitz 1973; Terkel 1974; Atkin 1991; Donaldson 1991). Particularly, the concept of hegemonic masculinities is used to explain the construction of gender (i.e., masculinity and femininity) in organizations (Cockburn 1983; 1991), or among Mexican working-class community (Gutmann 1996). I use masculinity in a broad normative sense, akin to the notion of hegemonic masculinities (see Connell 1995; 1998), which suggests an embodiment of the "most honored ways of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 832). As Connell and Messerschmidt

¹¹² Franzway (2011) defines sexual politics as 'understood to incorporate the sexual and the political, and are always contested' (p.27). She notes that the use of sexual politics of gender relations highlights relational aspects of men and women and the need to go beyond gender inclusivity, which refers only to women.

(2005) put it,

“Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (p. 836).

In contrast, the concept of ‘emphasized femininity’ highlights women’s central roles as sexual partners, wives, and houseworkers in the process of constructing masculinities. Of course, it is worth pointing out that the construction of gender takes place everywhere in society: in school, family, and through media.¹¹³ In this sense, gender construction is embedded in larger social processes, where a gendered division of labor in the household also plays a role in the process of construction at workplace and activism. In our context of activism, I focus on social and gender relations that produce and reinforce ideas about certain types of masculinity as desirable for labor activists and unions.

In the Eastern Seaboard, operational workers often associated certain aspects of masculinity with leaders’ most honored qualities. For example, based on my interviews, Thai workers often suggested that the desired characteristics of leaders included an ability to speak in public; boldness; and pugnacity – qualities often associated with men. This is based on the fact that workers frequently needed their representatives to be able to speak with the superior when something wrong happened at work. When I asked the women executive committees why they were selected, many speculated that perhaps their colleagues saw their boldness in talking back to supervisors. As such qualities were

¹¹³For example, Joan Acker (1992) proposes a comprehensive model of four interacting sets of processes: construction of gender divisions among men and women within organizational hierarchy; construction of symbols and images that produce, reproduce or oppose those divisions; interactions among and between men and women; and the gendered components of identity and presentation of self (p. 251-252; cited by Ledwith 2012, p. 191).

associated with men, they were perceived to be better than women for leadership positions such as the president and secretary. Nevertheless, when certain women embodied such desired characteristics, they were considered good labor unionists, and hence accepted by men as deserving for leadership. Such a perception of leadership has its drawbacks.

Advance Workers Union (a pseudonym) is an excellent case in point. At the time of my research, most executive committee members were women, except for two leading positions: the president and secretary.¹¹⁴ The Advance workers produced airbags and car seats, and the company hired more women than men because the work required sewing skills viewed as specific to women. These workers were generally older women with lots of experiences in the textile and garment industry.

Cha, the current secretary of the Advance Workers Union (AWU), was a self-trained legal consultant who took a distance college course in law during his free time. His legal expertise was indispensable for both the union and the ELRG activities. By contrast, the president was elected because he was a bold, self-confident man who presented himself as a fighter. Executive committee members believed that these two complementary qualities were the perfect combination for the leadership. Yet, the main problem was that the president was always absent from the Advance monthly meetings. The women committee members' accounts concurred that he did not like to attend the meetings, because, as he often complained, the women 'only gossip and talk nonsense.' Some committee members also suggested that the president was not responsible because he liked to gamble.

¹¹⁴ The gender proportion within this union was rather unique in my field site, although the gender dynamics were commonplace.

The AWU president's attitudes were typical of many male workers, who held stereotypes of women workers as disinterested and passive. These stereotypes were mentioned by Briskin and McDormott (1993), who summarized that apart from male-dominated practices and union structures, women's barriers to activism in the labor unions also include (1) the gender-bias inherent in unions, especially the notion that women identify themselves solely with the family, rather than work; and (2) the stereotype that women are disinterested and passive, particularly when it comes to unionism. These two factors were seen among Thai unions and the women-led unions such as AWU. Ironically, its president frequently attended many different general meetings of other unions.¹¹⁵ Speaking at other unions' meetings was more appealing to the AWU president than 'listening to women's gossip' (recall the celebratory atmosphere of the Siam Perfect gathering in Chapter Five).

For a political environment in which workers' rights of association are hard won and highly contested, it is understandable that workers seek outspoken and unrelenting leaders. Through conversations with rank-and-file workers, they often explained that they chose their executive committee based on the fact that particular workers showed signs of speaking well (*phud keng*) and/or were brave enough to speak in front of a big gathering of workers. In practice, even workers who were not interested in activism were coaxed or coerced into labor unions. This practice has led to many unintended consequences. First,

¹¹⁵ For Thai unions, a general meeting is normally an annual gathering of union members, where the new executive committee is elected and the union's yearly budget is reviewed. As Thai laws require that labor unions invite outside observers during the general meetings, to guarantee transparency and accountability, unions within the ELRG have cultivated the tradition of solidarity and mutual support at the general meetings of union members. For the host union, member's participation in a general meeting is a good barometer of current members' support. On the other hand, for members themselves, attendance of high-profile guests and outside observers shows the extent of the union's social network. In a sense, the general meeting is a strategic site, where not only union members and activists could learn about mutual support and broader significance of the organization, human resources officers from companies also attended to monitor the union's activities. Moreover, union executive committee anticipated local government officers, who could be asked by the company to be there and ensure the procedure's legality, since the Thai Labor Relations Act requires that at least half the members be present for the general meeting to be lawful.

it led to a high degree of homogenization among labor unionists, and hence lack of diversity—a dynamic that undermines labor activism’s long-term sustainability. Specifically, those masculine qualities tended to promote certain types of leaders, including those who dominated meetings. They were often prioritized at the expense of other more important qualities, such as ability to listen or sensitivity to inter-personal relations. Second, that many workers were persuaded or pressured into labor unions resulted in what I call ‘involuntary volunteerism.’ In effect, involuntary volunteerism in the ELRG was commonplace. As a result, many unions were in such an inactive state that unionists felt stagnated and discouraged, leading them to be pessimistic about activism as a whole. For instance, many unionists tended to generalize the problems by blaming inactive unionists for being selfish and greedy.

7.2.4 Demonstration Culture and Gender-Biased Empowerment

The fact that the Advance Workers Union needed to have male leadership, while most executive committee members and members were women, signals gender- biased perception of leadership among workers. Apart from gender relations and sexual politics, such a perception had also been conditioned by what I call a ‘demonstration culture.’ As the Chapters Five and Six show, demonstration culture is a product of laws, labor relations regime, and organizing practices, which are mediated by social relations within activism.

The member unions of the ELRG were accustomed to a tradition of public demonstration called ‘Hi Park’ – a Thai appropriation of the English ‘Hyde Park,’ a place in London historically known for free speech. Hi Park refers to a semi-public demonstration during which activists and unionists speak openly to mobilize rank-and-

file members, mostly during the collective bargaining negotiation. It is ‘semi-public’ because usually the gathering takes place in front of the factory—a gray area between private and public space.¹¹⁶

For ELRG activists, Hi Park was a real test of leadership. A veteran activist, who prided himself for his militant activism against a giant American car manufacturer in the Eastern Seaboard, once revealed to me that he used to be so scared of Hi Park—public speaking in front of workers—that he often pretended to be on his mobile phone to avoid being called. For activists, Hi Park was nerve-racking because speakers were generally expected to ‘lead the crowd (*num mob*)’ – a well-regarded skill to which many union executive committee members and rank-and-file members repeatedly referred. Moreover, as examples of worker mobilization in Chapter Five revealed, Hi Park could be both challenging and rewarding. Finally, it is empowering to be able to communicate with and be answered by a crowd of rousing workers. Hi Park was a chance to educate rank-and-file workers about the general labor situation or specific topics such as casualization of work.

In principle, to master public speaking, activists needed a great deal of practice and support. However, this kind of support was generally absent for young activists, especially women. In fact, the core ELRG organizers who were mostly male had regularly benefited from indirect trainings by attending public seminars and conferences organized by governments, NGOs, and a wider network of labor organizations. These events provided activists with the space to learn about broader economic and political issues. They also gained confidence in how to carry themselves and present their

¹¹⁶ The idea of the public-private divide in industrial estates is somewhat problematic because ‘public’ space is still privately owned. As the areas outside the factory belong to the industrial estates, these spaces are subject to official’s close surveillance techniques, such as photographing as well as incrimination.

organizations. Such spaces were extremely empowering because union activists gained experience of situating themselves in the larger network and presenting and framing their own grievances to others. In the international context, unions used such ‘extramural’ activities to educate and prepare young activists while also building ties with outside networks. For example, Turner’s (1995) study of two Japanese unions facing bankruptcy crises in the 1980s documents how radical unions empowered the rank-and-file by organizing internal study groups and regularly sending members to external activities. In the Thai context, Mary Beth Mills’s (2005) work shows how such a radical space became the breeding ground on which women activists around Bangkok formed their subjectivities and identities through oppositional politics. It is important to acknowledge that the network of NGOs working on labor rights in the Bangkok metropolitan area was generally absent in the Eastern Seaboard. Given the limited space of what Mills calls oppositional politics, the ELRG itself was thus a rare empowering ground in which unions prepared activists for activism.

However, the empowering spaces were contested. For the ELRG union activists who held positions as executive committee members in workplace unions, it was necessary to get employers’ permission to participate in outside opportunities. Management often used this permission as leverage in the factory to negotiate with union activists. During my research, there were just a few unions that had creatively inserted the right to education and training outside the workplace in their collective bargaining agreement (CBA). For example, these unions concretely specified minimum days of paid absences per week in the CBA. Yet, in practice workers still needed to negotiate with management on an occasional basis, for instance, in a factory management required a

certain days of advanced notice to allow sufficient time for management flexibility. However, as the TCTU was a legally recognized entity, its committee members generally faced less resistance when making requests to attend external seminars and trainings. Since most TCTU and the ELRG core activists were male workers, it meant that women activists had fewer opportunities for political education. Such a lack of opportunities was compounded by women's primary roles in household labor, an issue I explicitly explore this issue in the next chapter. Despite this opportunity gap, ironically, male unionists still blamed women for being disinterested and passive in learning.

7.2.5 Gender mobility and Empowerment

From women's perspective, such criticism of their lack of interest in self-education was unfair. From my interviews, female union activists appreciated the chances to attend outside trainings and seminars, just as much as men did, but they disproportionately faced barriers: structural, organizational, and gendered. In addition, as I have mentioned in the case of Takiya Workers Union, women unionists were far less mobile than men. Most women workers did not own a car, as men did; some married women workers had never learned how to drive a car. Women's mobility is a main factor limiting their ability to join such trainings and conferences.

In the Eastern Seaboard, most workers relied on transportation provided by their companies. Depending on routes and workers on each route, the vehicle they rode could be a van or a bus. In such an area of highly concentrated workers where at least four main industrial estates are located, without public transport, traffic during rush hours could be really congested. Therefore, activist workers preferred to use their own vehicles. For

instance, Sorn frequently rode his own motorbike, especially when he wanted to visit the ELRG office in the evening. In comparison, Naam owned a compact car, which she shared with her partner on the weekend. Another female activist, Orn, had a motorbike, but much preferred to have a car to pick up her daughter and go on vacation during the holidays. Despite its convenience, an implication of activists and workers using their own vehicles was that workers had to bear the costs themselves. In a context where activist roles were volunteer work, without pay, from the familial perspective it was done at the expense of household's budget and time.

Second, women workers disclosed that they could not travel long distances by themselves, particularly if they did not own a car or did not drive. Most women workers actually did not drive a car. A woman activist explained once that there were generally fewer women organizers and union committee members in the Thailand's Eastern Seaboard because "women cannot drive [a car], and that their husbands would not like it if they were to drive." Among four women executive committee members participating in the focus group, only one woman owned a car, while the others rode motorbikes.

Most women knew how to ride a motorbike, a typical transport for women workers in the Eastern Seaboard. For instance, Nan, Chet's wife, could travel freely with a motorbike. After the company locked her out, along with her husband and other unionized workers, she spent years applying for a factory job. Being sure about her lack of a chance, she tried selling food at the local market. However, her mobility was much restrained, as she then had to rely mainly on her husband to transport her materials in a pick-up truck to the market.

In another focus group interview with six women workers and one male worker, I asked participants to draw a mental map of their everyday lives. From the exercise, it was clear that male union activists had a much broader scope of geographic mobility and thus more geographical knowledge than women activists. While male activists frequented local government offices and conference halls in neighboring provinces, women were more accustomed to local markets, supermarkets, and supply stores. In fact, the differential degree of mobility between men and women was significant, and largely overlooked by male organizers. As Mills (1999a) argues, “Mobility in space is perceived as a natural and valued characteristic for [Thai] men, while women’s bodies and their movement are subject to far greater restrictions” (p. 94). Women workers have rather distinctive experiences regarding the way they navigate space and time, leading to distinct preferences about the preferred time and place of labor activism.

7.3 Place-based activism and gendered norms

Rachel Silvey (2003) suggests that geographical research must pay particular attention to women’s active roles and negotiations in the production of gender relations and spaces of activism, as well as community-scale specificity such as local religious beliefs on gender norms. My analyses have so far covered only the spaces of activism within a limited scope—the framework of labor organizations, treating labor and work in simply one dimension. That one dimension is waged labor in the process of commodity production, leaving out workers’ reproductive work (i.e., housework and sexual reproduction). Without taking a holistic approach that accounts for both gender dynamics in activism and place-based gendered division of labor in the household, we cannot fully

grasp the complexity of the processes leading to women's marginalization. Consequently, here, I turn to issues of social reproduction and union activists in Thailand's Eastern Seaboard.

7.3.1 Labor Activism and Gender Consciousness

I would like to offer an intimate look into workers' everyday life, by starting with the way two worker-activists began a normal working day. For comparative purposes, stories of two union executive committee members – one male and one female – are provided. Sorn was a male president of a labor union in a plant of Japanese manufacturer producing car brakes in an Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate, whereas Naam was a female executive committee member of Advance Workers Union, a union producing car seats in the same industrial estate.

For a morning shift, Sorn would wake up around 6:15 a.m. to get on a company van, which would arrive at the workplace around 7 to 7:10 a.m. At 7:45 all workers were scheduled to exercise, so he had approximately thirty minutes for breakfast and preparation for work. As he worked in the supply and inventory department, his role was to monitor daily parts delivery, which started at 8.30 a.m. After the first fleet was ready for delivery, he then switched to updating parts stock inventory affected by the previous day's delivery. From 10-11a.m. he tended to reception of coils delivery for the production and then switched back to monitor another parts delivery. The last delivery was around 4 p.m., after which he dealt with the daily paperwork. If he could not finish paperwork by 5pm, he would inform his supervisor and the work afterwards be counted as 'over time.' His overtime was thus mostly paperwork, during which he could also work on the union and/or ELRG paperwork. After work, Sorn usually came to the ELRG office.

By contrast, Naam would wake up at 5.30 am. Although the company bus picked her up around 6.30 a.m., she needed an hour for a shower, feeding her pet hamster, and cooking for herself and her partner. Her bus arrived at the plant around 7:30 am, and she also had half an hour for breakfast and personal cares. During our conversation, Naam expressed her feeling that life was always a race with the ticking clock. She explained, *Since I wake up, I time everything I do. Because we [the union committees] are in the spotlight, we are being watched. Therefore, we have to excel beyond ordinary workers. We have to be on time and what not. If we make a mistake, [we] lose everything.*

It appeared that companies in the Eastern Seaboard tolerated labor unions more than in other areas. However, workers knew that as labor activists they were subject to reprisal and unfair dismissals that frequently happened when the unions pressed too hard for better working conditions or when union executive committee members made a mistake at work. For Naam, she was very conscious about her own role in the union because the union had only been established for a few years and because she was a woman. In fact, Sorn was also conscious of his role as a union president, in which he took a great pride. Our conversations, often led by him, were about how he constantly challenged the controlling human resources personnel in workplace meetings. During my field research, Sorn was perhaps one of the most rebellious workers who explicitly challenged workplace regulations. One form of his open resistance was absenteeism, which I sometimes found worrisome as he and I developed a friendship. There were times when he could not go to work on a Monday morning, because he drank too much.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ A year after I left my field site, Sorn was fired. Other activists told me that he was involved in a systematic abuse of the company-funded medical care.

At times, such as in the group and union retreats, Sorn drank to the point that he lost self-control. When I expressed my concerns for his health, he often said, “brother, be happy today, let tomorrow be.” During the first few months of my research, it seemed to me that many male activists I had befriended showed such patterns, and I had difficulty making sense of them. Later, once I got to know them better, I came to some sort of realization that it was a coping strategy, which could be understood in isolation from gender roles and struggles at work. Focusing on fun in the present moment was not just Sorn’s personality but also a tactic for many male activists to deal with alienation and uncertainties. Indeed, all union activists, men and women alike, were well aware of the precariousness associated with waged work and labor activism. For instance, when asked about her future plans, Orn, a female executive committee member at Advance Workers Union, told me, “for workers like myself it was hard to make a future plan.” Due to a lack of job security, workers and activists lived one day at a time. In short, labor activists lived with the uncertainty of dismissal on a daily basis.

It is of great interest that male and female activists — which Sorn and Naam were exemplars of — exerted different sets of coping strategies. Naam took precautionary measures. As she said, ‘it’s not easy to be a union activist, you are always watched [by management], and you know that you have to do better than the other workers.’ On the contrary, Sorn chose fun and alcohol to keep him from thinking or worrying about the uncertainty. Nevertheless, alcohol abuse had taken its long-term toll on his body and health. But so did the work he toiled away on everyday. Then, why not let tomorrow be, and be happy today instead?

7.3.2 Women's Life Work and the Construction of Masculine Workers

The different ways in which male and female activists coped with workplace discipline and alienation are deeply related to gender constructions and how their labor is valued accordingly, across the spatial and temporal division of work and non-work. Based on our conversations, I learned that Sorn grew up with a single mom who worked hard as a seamstress. He recalled seeing his mom work until 1-2 am in the morning every day. According to him, he would always have the particularly fond memory of the sewing machine's noise imprinted on his mind. Despite being a single breadwinner, his mom provided him with whatever he needed. Sorn believed that his mom did her best and ended up spoiling him.

Sorn graduated junior high school in 1998-1999. His mom wanted him to pursue a college education, but he did not want to. He went to work at a duty-free store in the major international airport in Bangkok, where his mom's sibling also worked. Sorn admitted that he benefited greatly from personal connections, especially the protection he got from friends of his boss in the Customs Department. This patronage allowed him to maintain a sideline job, in which he helped tourists navigate procedures and evade custom duties. He said that he learned about people from this time period. Unfortunately, when the SARS epidemic broke out, he was laid off and went to work in the airport's cargo department. It was here that he learned about shipping and cargo procedures. After that, he worked for a Thai company producing auto parts, and then at the warehouse of a Japanese electronic company in Laem Chabang Port, where he learned to drive a forklift car. The skills he learned from these previous jobs were formative for his career in auto-parts inventory and the supply chain industry.

While I was in the Eastern Seaboard in 2015 - 2016, Sorn was president of a big workplace union. In retrospect, with his apparently mischievous character especially while intoxicated, I was very critical of Sorn. Nevertheless, over the longer period, he had shown unmatched determination and great listening ability. He made two disclosures that changed how I viewed him, and helped me make sense of his philosophy of happiness here and now. First, he avowed that he used to be both a night owl and heavy drinker. Around four or five years before I met him, Sorn would go out every night after work, and in his words, on average 26-27 days per month, he stayed out drinking until midnight or sometimes 3-4 am. Second, he lost his child, who was born with a dysfunctional heart, when the baby was eight months old. After being in and out of the hospital for a certain period, he learned the nitty gritty of the childcare system. Based on his experience, he once said, "I have lived enough."

7.4 Women and the Question of 'Overtime'

As the preceding section addressed, it was much more difficult for women activists, especially those in relationships, to participate fully in labor activism. First, women workers found it hard to attend ELRG or union meetings, particularly in the evenings and on weekends. The main reason was that women were still the main caretakers in the households, despite the fact that men and women equally played the role of breadwinner. As workers in Thailand's Eastern Seaboard were mostly internal migrants from Northeast Thailand, they generally sent their little children back to their parents or relatives, thus relieving themselves of reproductive work such as childrearing on a daily basis. The women were still, however, the main providers of care labor such as

communication with their children in long-distance relationships, through smartphones. Interestingly, the role of care providers was reinforced as communication technology such as smartphone was culturally more associated with women than men. For these reasons, women activists had to work hard both outside and inside their households. In addition, as mentioned earlier, male activists had the privilege of attending meetings and seminars, which were the only forms of self-education and empowerment. Moreover, married women, especially those whose husbands were not involved in activism, felt uncomfortable attending ELRG activities when the main organizers, who were all men, socialized by drinking alcohol in the evening.

How workers experience time actually depends on gender, and it is crucial to acknowledge the traditional gender-biased concept of time in social theories (Mies 1994 [1986]). As Maria Mies (1994 [1986]) contends, a feminist concept of labor needs a re-thinking of the concept of time. According to Mies (1994 [1986]), the traditional concept of labor is falsely based on divisions of time into *work and leisure*, where workers enjoy themselves during their leisure time outside work. However, according to a gendered division in the household, men and women do not equally enjoy such a division of time. More than that, this feminist understanding of time, together with Naam's account of her subjectivity as both woman and activist, reveal the conflicted consciousness that women activists faced. This is similar to what Dorothy Smith calls 'bifurcated consciousness'. According to Smith (1987), when women move from the personal and private sphere of home to public and professional spaces of work, they always deal with a shift of consciousness "involving a different organization of memory, attention, relevance and objectives and indeed different presences" (p. 7). This shift is concerned with

discrepancies and tensions between the space of *the general* at work and *the particular* at home, institutionalized in gendered division of labor. In fact, Smith conceptualized the concept from her own experiences working in a male-dominated Sociological Department (1987). In a similar sense, a trade union as an organization or labor activism as a set of social practices and spaces is a world of men. With regards to ELRG, similarly, I noticed that when male activists moved from the workplace to spaces of activism, they maintained their professional behaviors and consciousness. However, when women moved away from workplace, either to spaces of activism or reproductive work, they dealt with a shift in consciousness and expectation, toward inter-personal and casual modes. It is worth noting that the shift in consciousness for women workers goes beyond location and standpoint. It is rather an outcome of gendered processes that produce and reproduce meaning and gendered roles related to activism and housework.

Further, more time spent by men on commuting means less time left for activism and self-care. As women were the ones who performed immaterial and caring labor in the households, accordingly, women partners worked harder when men activists were less attentive to their bodies. When I was doing my field research, Naam was co-habiting with her partner, Wit. Wit was previously the president of a union, in a multinational company that filed for bankruptcy a few years ago. After the company was out of business, he was hired as a coordinator of the labor congress for a certain period, until the budget ran out. Then he started driving a container truck for a refrigerator company, which required several trips between a port and the company per shift. Naam explained how Wit's night shifts disrupted her organization of work and leisure time as follows:

It is a routine. Sometimes I slept very little, about two or three hours, because [Wit] came back at 2 a.m. Even when I finished from work at 8 p.m., due to traffic I would arrive

around 8.45-8.50 p.m. After all the walking, showering, cleaning up my hamster's cage, it wasn't until 10 p.m. that I ate and almost 11 p.m. that I went to bed. Then he came back, so I woke up. It's like this. How long I actually sleep depends. So when workers say that they are "ork-o (choose not to work overtime)", it doesn't mean that they have much rest time. For those who choose to not work overtime, it means they have chores like laundry and childcare. Folks who have children, they have plenty of chores. They go to bed as late as 10 or 11 p.m. Sometimes, people ask what you do when you are not working overtime, it's not true that work is only in the factory or that you get out of work, and you rest. Men, when they get out, their wives cook for them. They can rest, just like that.

Naam was referring to male activists who frequently criticized workers who neither worked overtime nor participated in labor activism. Specifically, she was raising an issue of women's time that does not have a clear boundary neatly drawn while crossing the spatial confines of work and household sites. Additionally, Naam was indirectly replying to the accusation of male activists that workers were more interested in financial gains than in betterment of their own working conditions. While some male activists deliberately chose to opt out of the overtime system, criticizing it as opium, they dismissed those who relied on overtime work. In fact, not only did they believe that workers need no overtime but that workers could spend that 'extra time' on activism. In contrast to this idea, as a single mom, Orn was a union executive committee and worked overtime whenever chances arose. She even took up other odd jobs such as piece-rate sewing at home. As she was juggling three kinds of work, her colleagues sometimes criticized Orn when her working schedule conflicted with the union meeting. In fact, her supervisor encouraged her to become a union executive committee member because Orn was very outspoken about working conditions and often targeted by a manager. With her status as a single mother, the supervisor knew that she could not afford to risk a job. As Orn could not change who she was (i.e., being both a single mom and an outspoken

person), from the supervisor's perspective, at least being on the union executive committee could protect her from being easily dismissed. Despite marginalization in the unions, women workers such as Orn still persevered because they felt that they were 'doing the right thing.'

On the surface, the spaces of production and reproduction appear to be separated. However, in reality and thus in theory, they are integral to the process of capital accumulation (Bhattacharya 2017). As a British socialist feminist scholar, Sheila Rowbotham, pointed out, "the contradiction which appears clearly in capitalism between family and industry, private and public, personal and impersonal, is the fissure in women's consciousness in which revolts erupt" (1973, p. 29).¹¹⁸ Now I turn my attention to workers' reproductive network and its roles in private organization as well as the collective organization of labor power. By posing the space of labor activism as a bridge between spaces of production and of reproduction, this chapter exposes a tension between such private and collective organization of labor power. It throws into relief the way in which gender dynamics interact with labor politics and class struggle, as a goal of this research is to understand factors that undermine and enable workers' strength and resilience.

Based on my synthesis from the previous chapter, as well as interdisciplinary approaches, drawing especially from feminist and Marxist-Feminist traditions, I propose the concept of *the third shift*, which will help reveal the tensions between men and women workers whose priorities were different.

¹¹⁸ The page number used here is based on an Electronic book version.

7.5 The Third Shift: Women in Men's world of labor activism

At work, women and men workers are subject to different sets of standards, based on both the local, gendered perception of labor and practices of a gendered division of labor (Silvey 2003; 2006). Male workers are expected to do manual work, which requires an exercise of bodily strength. Women workers, on the other hand, are seen as better at delicate crafts such as sewing, that requires dexterous and nimble fingers (see also Theobald 2002). Moreover, women workers are expected to be more discreet, diplomatic and better at following rules than men. Outside work, women are the main caretakers, and their partners also judge women's reproductive work in the households.

Further, as explained earlier, the distinctive strategies men and women workers choose to cope with precariousness, disciplining, and alienation also point to different ways in which male and female workers/activists take care of their bodies. In their discussion of sexual politics, activism, and everyday life, Franzway and Fonow (2011) suggest that, as part of the second shift (Hochschild and Machung 1989),¹¹⁹ women take up the responsibility of caring for others, including men, at the expense of their own bodies. For women activists, an opportunity to engage with public roles, including political activism, depends on their ability to negotiate the second shift. According to Franzway and Fonow (2011), women activists often put aside self-care, especially exercise, and prioritize the reproductive work of their partners' labor. Thai women activists such as Naam then had three work shifts: the first shift at work, second shift at home, and the third shift in the union. While male counterparts easily found more time

¹¹⁹ Hochschild and Machung (2012[1989]) argue, "women who do a first shift at work and all of a second shift at home can't compete on male terms" (p. 26, ebook version). Franzway and Fonow (2011) note that the notion of second shift, which is grounded in the lived experiences of women in the Global North (i.e., heterosexual, and Western, nuclear family), cannot adequately address experiences of women in non-heterosexual (i.e., queer activist) and other family structures and cultures (p. 32).

within their leisure slot to participate in activism, as their second shift, women activists busily squeezed the second and third shifts within their non-work opening.

7.5.1 Male executive committee members and their wives

To tell a story of the way in which men and women workers shared responsibility on domestic work, I start with my experience with two male labor activists and their wives. On a normal working day's evening, I was invited to dine with two male union activists—Yos and Oat—along with their wives, at Oat's house. It was the second time I had come to his house, but this time it was different because his wife, Kai, did not work on the night shift like the first time, and Yos's wife, Bo, also joined us. I had hung out with Yos many times but never had a chance to spend time with Bo. This was thus a normal working day, but a rare and special occasion for me.

During the meal, Yos and Oat were passionately engaged in a conversation about their union's internal conflicts. At the time, they both worried about polarization within the executive committee, with Oat and Yos on one side and the rest on the other. They had a long discussion about how other executive committee members ignored Yos's initiatives, despite his role as president. Trying to engage their wives, who were only listening into the conversation, I joked that Kai and Bo were bored to death already. To my surprise, Kai looked at Oat and said that “we don't mind this kind of talk. They can manage the union, but they need to manage the household too.” Bo echoed Kai's statement, while Yos suddenly added that he had recently been a good househusband, who ironed Bo's clothes and cleaned up everything in the household. Bo finally responded that he was guilted into doing it.

During this time, Yos was not allowed to enter the workplace. Around three months before that, the company had requested the labor court's permission to discharge Yos on the grounds of his low performance. In the official complaint,¹²⁰ the company claimed that Yos took too many leave days during the year and most importantly, that during the CBA negotiation, he led the 'slowdown strike' that caused the company a large amount of underproduction and thus a huge delay of car deliveries. According to the company, the estimated damage caused by Yos's foot-dragging was over \$6 million worth of production. In fact, the only evidence provided by the company to the court for such a serious accusation was the record of daily targeted and real production during the CBA negotiation. The court of first instance agreed with Yos, who claimed that he strictly followed workplace regulations and his leave was legal and thus acceptable. However, the court found it hard to contest the performance evaluation results, known by the workers as the 'grading' system. With Yos's lowest evaluation result (i.e., E grade) from his supervisor for two successive years, the company claimed that Yos was *hua khaeng* (a verbatim translation is hard head; obstinate and indocile) who was impossible to work with.

Like many male activists, including Yingyong and Sorn, Yos took personal leave when the company did not give them permission for taking day(s) off as concerned with the union or group affairs. Otherwise, they were exhausted or ill from activist work during the weekend, so they had to take sick leave on Monday. In general, while the company still tolerated the absenteeism, activists like Yos or Oat spent most of that time outside their households, away from their wives' sight. Therefore, after the company

¹²⁰ While I was writing this chapter, the court of the first instance had already made a ruling.

started to get the court's permission, Yos was paid without going to work and could spend more time at home. An unintended consequence was that the company now appeared to subsidize the domestic labor for Bo and Yos's household. During the day, Yos was allocating time for housework such as cooking, washing clothes, and ironing, while still maintaining his activism in the evenings. With Yos's 'paid vacation', Oat had worked harder to represent the radical voice in the union, perhaps at the expense of his wife, Kai, who in turn had to work harder at home. At one point, Pat drove three hours each way two days in a row to attend a training and seminar, organized separately, in Bangkok. In their union where a majority of union executive committee members were men, other male activists stepped up to fill the gap when male leaders were dismissed. Therefore, whether a union sustains harassment by the employer depends on mutual support both within the union and between male activists and their partners in the households.

7.5.2 Women executive committee members and the partners

The group's meetings usually took place in the evening after work and would last two to three hours. Unlike their counterparts, women workers who were married or lived with a partner did not have privileges to regularly attend meetings at these hours. Although both male and female workers were breadwinners, Thai women workers were still expected to take up more responsibility for household chores such as cooking for all familial members. Women activists from a female-dominated union argued that married

women had more responsibility than men because “men can sit still once at home, they leave everything to the housewife”.¹²¹

Some women activists in this union seemed to have understanding and supporting partners. For example, Thip was an executive committee member whose husband, I was told by other women committees, drove her to the local government office or even the Ministry of Labor office in Bangkok. Another women committee member, Orn, said that the partners of women activists had to be open-minded and understanding, to let the wives do what they were doing like this. Orn added that she was lucky that she was now a single mom; her husband would be a burden to her activism if they were still together. Orn and her husband had separated, but she still took care of both her daughters. In fact, her mother-in-law raised both her daughters, even after their separation. After the older daughter finished middle school, she had come to stay with Orn and went to a vocational college in the Eastern Seaboard area.

It is rare to see couples that are both union activists because activism is time-consuming and there is always a risk of being dismissed by the company. Naam and Wit were one of the couples that came closest because Wit used to be an activist. When I met Wit in 2015, along with many dozens of workers, Wit was anticipating wages and compensation from the debt consolidation process with a multinational company that had filed bankruptcy during the financial crisis in the late 2000s. At the time, Wit drove a truck that transported containers between the nearest port and factories, while Naam was an executive committee of a union in the Hemaraj Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate.

¹²¹ It is also normal to find women activists bringing their children, to the ELRG office, or the union’s general meeting—practices I had never seen carried out by men—perhaps except for when the men were either unemployed or not allowed to enter the workplace. In Thailand, such gender norms do not only apply to working class households; middle-class women are also subject to similar societal expectation. However, the fact that middle-class households with greater income are able to purchase some domestic work through the market reduces the strains on middle-class women.

They moved in together to live in a dorm near the ELRG office because they wanted to dedicate more time to labor activism. When I visited the office on the weekend, some times I saw Wit often walking in the neighborhood, waiting for the laundry, or filling up water containers from a dispenser.

While I asked Naam about how Wit supported her, she responded,

He tries to be flexible about what to eat, and shares the responsibility when he can, though not equally. When he has time, for example, he helps with the laundry and prepares some food for me. We try to take turns. As we both work, we do not pressure ourselves with the idea of being housewife or househusband. He understands that it will be too hard if I take up all the responsibility. As a woman, I have to take it up anyway. Like today, after the meeting, I need to finish the ironing. [I] don't know when I'll finish, perhaps when he comes back around 1 am.

The shift-lapse between men and women workers who co-habited was quite normal, but this lifestyle added strain specifically to women. During an interview, a male worker had a great metaphor when he said that an amount of electric fans used in the household was a good indicator for the fact that he and his spouse regularly worked at alternative shifts. As their shifts alternated, they rotated the use of an electric fan almost 24 hours a day. For this reason, electric fans were constantly broken and regularly needed a replacement. Using such metaphor, women workers-caretakers worked 24/7 like an electric fan.

Owing to his activist background, Wit was very understanding of Naam's situations.¹²² In fact, it is not an exaggeration to state that Wit had personal stigma from the workplace struggle and unionism. In 2009, the company suddenly dismissed him out of the blue before filing for bankruptcy. As the workers had no workplace union, the sister company's union convinced Wit and other workers that joining the union would

¹²² On writing this chapter, Wit and Naam had recently had their first baby together. Through our long-distance communication via social media, they said they were raising the baby by themselves.

help them reclaim wages and compensation. He followed the union to all the protests, from the local to national government offices in Bangkok, before realizing that the union only needed their mass (around eighty-six workers) as a leverage to pressure the parent company. It turned out that the owner negotiated with the sister company's union but refused to talk to Wit and his dismissed colleagues, on the ground that without 15% of the workers' support, the bargaining unit was not legally recognized. For over three months, not only did he lose the job, he felt that he was fooled into supporting the sister company's union. Without job and salary, he could not afford rent, his car payment, and necessities for his one-year-old toddler. He was then forced to return home to the Northeast, along with his ex-wife and son. Subsequently, after his savings ran out, he broke up with his ex-wife, who took their one-year-old son away. Wit blamed the consultants of that sister company's union for all his loss. However, subsequently, Wit was able to find a job at a nearby industrial estate. He even started a labor union and became the president. According to Wit, after the first yearly CBA negotiation when the union could not deliver what members expected, the executive committee abandoned him and the union. As a result, he was singled out and disciplined by the employer, who banned him from overtime work. Abandoned by co-workers, he resigned and stayed away from activism. His voice expressed profound bitterness when he recounted the past,

When I was the leader, no one protected me. No one was my real friend. So I see no need to do anything for the others. When I was submitting the new CBA, I did not get a raise, everyone else did. I did not get a good grade, but everyone else did. When I went to the court, not a single friend came with me; not even a single question. The company harassed me with the charge that I missed the work... I rode a motorbike to Rayong court by myself, under the rain. When I came back, I told myself that I have had enough with all of these.

Wit was also critical of labor activism that focused mainly on demanding higher wages and bonuses. Nonetheless, not unlike other male activists such as Chet, he also believed that workers should not depend on income derived from overtime work and should otherwise try to spend more time on activism. As he learned firsthand, apart from being a mechanism for flexible working hours for management, the company also used overtime work as a disciplinary measure, in particular with union activists. Specifically, he strongly criticized workers who ‘were addicted’ to overtime work because they had too much debt. In other words, consumerism was the most serious problem that, according to him, seemed to plague the workers in general.¹²³

From the union perspective, Wit’s criticism is somewhat well justified. However, it unfairly dismisses the material needs, such as those felt by a single mother like Orn. Again, it should be noted that such a criticism of overtime (and a lack of time for activism) is still based on a non-feminist notion of time. Moreover, this viewpoint is implicitly rooted in a problematic perspective that waged work is the only value-creating or productive activity. Therefore, in the next chapter, I turn to a social reproduction framework, which will help us better understand the issues of overtime.

Conclusion

This chapter explores the relationships between militancy and masculinity in the Eastern Seaboard’s labor unions. In the local context, workers were obliged to constantly display shows of strength to leverage their collective bargaining power. This chapter

¹²³ On the issue of overtime, a male activist incidentally told me that male workers tend to work overtime because they gave all their salary to the wives. Therefore, what they earned from overtime belonged to the men, who usually could use the money to have “some fun after the hard work.”

illustrates that women's participation and internal dynamics between men and women in the unions are conditioned by organizational practices (i.e., gendered meaning of leadership), gender norms, as well as gendered divisions of labor in the households. Moreover, it shows the distinctive ways in which male and female activists shifted their consciousness across time and space, and differently coped with work-related precariousness. This chapter proposes the concept of the *third shift* to explain women's subjectivity and gendered barriers within the unions. Finally, it also reveals, despite workers' strong sense of injustice, gendered and sexual politics led to gender-biased structure and marginalization that weakened the labor organizations as a whole. Male activists can use insights from *the third shift* as a corrective to better support women and strengthen the union movements from the inside.

Chapter 8. Organizing from Hidden Abodes:

Centering Household Reproduction as Collective Consumption

The previous chapters show that the Eastern Labor Relations Group (ELRG)'s labor militancy was conditioned by Thai industrial relations system, local organizing practices, and the group's gendered dynamics. Despite the will and efforts of the ELRG activists, they were faced with several challenges, internal and external. Apparently, one of the main internal challenges came from a gap of commitments between the unionists and rank-and-file members; the gap itself was a result of conflicting demands between the families and the labor unions. In this chapter, I explore workers' roles as consumers and how consumption—as integral part of social reproduction—could potentially pose challenges to capital accumulation and simultaneously cause internal rift within labor activism.

This final chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I briefly review the relevant literature on social reproduction and debates around migration, gender, and labor activism. The first section provides the framework for discussing, in the next section, issues of spatially extended household reproduction of Thai workers across regions. The rich ethnographic research with Northeastern workers in the Eastern Seaboard points to connection, as well as conflicts, between workplace activism and social reproductive practices done by workers' family members across places. To wholly understand such tensions between workers' social-reproductive practices and capital accumulation process, in the third section, the social reproduction framework brings to the fore the often-neglected 'background conditions' (Fraser 2016) which connect

workplace struggle with the larger working-class struggle. In the last section, I place labor activists' struggle in the context of daily reproductive work, education, childcare and generational reproduction of the labor force across places, making a full circle of the migratory flow.

My main argument in this chapter is that while union executive committees focused on workers' collective demands (i.e., the wages and remuneration), these demands reflected not only the needs of workers alone but also the larger familial network of social reproductive process. To achieve such needs, as organized labor, workers caused disruption to the production process, leading to labor disputes with employers. Paradoxically, during labor struggles, unionized workers put more strains on familial network of support that in turn depended financially on workers' waged work. This chapter explores these conflicts and contradiction by incorporating labor activism and consumption into the same analytical framework.

According to Social Reproduction Marxism, social reproduction represents both workers' personal consumption, as a form of self-development, and collective consumption, as workers' household members participate in caring and reproductive work of labor power reproduction. From the social reproduction perspective, this chapter proposes that, workplace struggle articulates both self-development and collective demands. When these two objectives—personal and collective—align, workers' struggle becomes powerful forces against capital accumulation, reflecting what Autonomous Marxists calls workers' power to attack. Nevertheless, when interests of organized labor comes into conflicts with the larger working-class movement, the two objectives contradict and stand in the way of increasing the class's power.

8.1 Social Reproduction, Migration and Households

Feminist scholars have long disputed domestic work's place in the theorization of wage labor-capital relations in capitalism. As far as the domestic labor debate has progressed, scholars agree that social reproduction and production are interdependent and contradictory (Picchio 1992; Caffentzis 2002; Weeks 2007; Kelly 2009). For example, geographer Linda McDowell asserts that patriarchy and capitalism are whole; not only is the wage labor-capital relation contingent on gender relations within patriarchy, but the relationship between childbearing and the appropriation of surplus value for workers' social reproduction is central to women's oppression (1986). Here, social reproduction refers to "those activities that enable the maintenance of both workers' daily lives and the intergenerational re-creation of a labor force" (Picchio 1992: cited by Kelly 2009, 451).

Social reproduction feminism advances the notion of social reproduction with the concept of expanded modes of production, encompassing waged and unwaged (i.e., domestic) labor in both processes of commodity production and the production/reproduction of labor power (i.e., child-bearing, child-rearing, and housework) (Ferguson 2008). The political economy strand in social reproduction emphasizes the contradiction and correspondences between structures (e.g., state-led social welfare), social relations (i.e., class, gender, and race) and practices (Strauss and Meehan 2015, p.8). The studies of international political economy also recognize the existence of both formal and informal economies, especially the roles of unpaid workers (i.e., women and the elderly) in the latter as subsidizing the male-dominated economy (Bakker and Gill 2003).

Moreover, feminist scholarship on gender and migration foregrounds the significance of households as units of decision-making in which gendered hierarchies of power shape migration patterns (see Lawson 1998; Chant 1992). Feminist geographers have further contributed to deepening understanding of households as a socially constructed scale (e.g., Silvey 2006). As Rachel Silvey summarizes, feminist geographers are quick to highlight place-specific meaning of households ‘through the social practices defining domesticity, tensions around the boundaries separating the public and the private, meanings of kinship relations, norms of sexuality, and the relationship between various work and caring spaces’ (Bondi and Rose, 2003; Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2003) (Silvey 2006, p. 68). In this chapter, I explore the way in which dual meanings of labor (i.e., abstract and living labor) offer an understanding of dynamics and conflicts between needs from personal and collective perspectives. The empirical material extends geographical knowledge of the way in which households become mediating spaces between conflicting demands of short-term labor activism and long-term household reproduction. This insight contributes to enrich studies of labor activism and deepens theories of labor agency.

Anthropologist Mary Beth Mills has laid the foundation for studies of workers’ identities and cultural struggle through her in-depth ethnographic research of rural female migrants. Set against the early stage of Thai economic development from the late 1980s to 1990s, Mills (1997, 1999a, 1999b) explores experiences of young Thai women who migrated from rural villages to become industrial workers in urban industrial zones around Bangkok. In her studies of migratory experiences, Mills (1997, 1999a) shows how Thai women negotiated their personal desires with household obligations and socially

constructed images of modern women through consumption. Focusing on women's contested identities as avid consumers and labor activists, Mills's (2003, 2005) account of structural obstacles facing workers' class-based identities and collective action in Thai society are of great value. Mills (2003, 2005) argues that despite apparent obstacles and images of compliant workers, Thai labor activists and women workers regularly negotiated class and gender conflicts by using symbolic and gendered discourses to construct workers' self-image and class-consciousness. In short, through rural-urban migration, Thai women workers took *progress* (khvam thansamai) as a social goal of workers' cultural struggle (Mills 1997).

In her more recent work, Mills (2008) examines the spatial practices of female labor activists who navigated different spaces of activism. Mills (2008) makes the case for politics of recognition by concluding, "[by] entering into spaces of authority and privilege, workers assert demands for recognition in both concrete and deeply satisfying ways. By transgressing social hierarchies and traversing spaces of power and exclusivity, labor activists make important spatial claims to inclusion within the national society as full, modern citizens" (p. 122). Similarly, Piya Pangsapa compares two groups of Thai women workers who expressed different forms of accommodation, one with militancy and the other with compliance. Piya Pangsapa adds that the reasons why and how certain groups of Thai workers successfully mobilize are usually contextual and place specific. According to Pangsapa (2007), labor activism cannot be understood without the context of 'the structure of the work environment, [workers]' particular experiences within the workplace, and their personal and social relations both inside and outside the factory"

(14). For these reasons, this research focuses on workers' experiences across spatially extended household reproduction.

8.2 Spatially extended household reproduction: 'outsourcing' caring labor

In contrast to the personal histories of arrival upon the Eastern Seaboard in Chapter Three, this section addresses temporary return of migrant workers' children to the Isan region. When workers in the Eastern Seaboard, including Orn or Chet (and his partner), had babies, they normally sent the children back to their hometowns, shifting childbearing duties to the grandparents. Depending on the familial situation, childrearing and childcare could be performed by parents-in-law, siblings, or even the parents' siblings.¹²⁴ By doing so, workers made sure that their children grew up in the same places where they learned the same language and culture. Most importantly, workers were able to lower a part of the reproductive costs including childrearing and education expenses. As family members who received remittances from workers lived in the places where the living expenses were generally lower, this phenomenon is similar to the practices of outsourcing.

In fact, in the Northeast region, the commodity basket was cheaper than in the Eastern Seaboard because food and basic necessities partially stemmed from self-sustainable and small-scale farming. On the national scale, this strategy could be seen as being promoted by state policies that had long contributed to geographically uneven development. On the micro scale, however, as it appeared, workers and their families

¹²⁴ There was an exception, though, which was usually a case whereby workers had the privilege of having relatives with them.

intentionally chose the migration and temporary return of children as survival strategies—an expression of labor’s agency to an over-powering economic and political structure (i.e., export-led industrialization policy, flexible employment, uneven development etc).

In the following section, I offer ethnographic notes from participant observation with families of three activists, Orn, Chet, and Yos, whose children were raised by their relatives in the Northeastern provinces. This first story was observed when I accompanied Orn to visit her youngest daughter on Mother’s Day. Although these snapshots do not wholly tell the stories of daily reproductive work, they were moments in which tense relationships within the familial configuration revealed themselves.

8.2.1 Long-distance Mom and Mother’s Day

Orn was a single mom; she was separated from her husband and had two daughters—Duan and Dao. During my research, Duan, the older one, was eighteen and Dao, the youngest, four years old. Despite the separation, Orn left both daughters with grandparents—for her case, parents-in-law—perhaps because Orn’s parents already passed away. After Duan finished middle school, she moved to a vocational school in the Eastern Seaboard and shared a small space in a studio room with Orn. While I visited them, the older daughter had already finished the vocational degree and entered the local workforce in the Eastern Seaboard. Following her oldest sister’s footsteps, Dao—the younger daughter—stayed with the grandparent. Dao saw her mom only during holidays and long weekends. Accordingly, Orn performed most long-distance caring work through communication on smart phones.

In 2015, Mother's Day was on Friday. Therefore, like everyone else, Orn took advantage of the long weekend by going to see her younger daughter in Sa Kaeo province, a small town on the Thailand-Cambodia border approximately a hundred miles from the Eastern seaboard. Orn made a plan to pick her daughter up from Sa Kaeo and then to go to Nakornratchasima (or Korat), her hometown, another one hundred and seventy miles away. Because Orn did not have enough money to purchase a car, she would normally travel to these places by bus, but for this year, I volunteered to drive a car for them, in order to visit Sa Kaeo and Korat.

Mother's Day bore some significance to Orn and her daughter, who had a long-distance relationship and met only on holidays. When Orn arrived at her in-law's house, Dao was waiting with her small backpack—with a towel, a comb, and a few changes of clothes prepared by the grandparents. Rejoiced by the sight of her mom, Dao's single braid swung from one side to the other while she ran toward Orn. After they had a hug, Dao quickly took out a handmade card, with a big red paper-heart on it, and held it in front of Orn. "Look, look what I made for you mae Orn (*mae* means mom in Thai). Teacher helped me make this." To my wonder, her daughter also used the same pronoun 'mae' with her grandmother. During the trip, sometimes Dao did not feel comfortable with the long car ride and wanted to 'go home.' For many times when she felt like that, she would cry and ask to see her other mom. Orn would calm her, by letting Dao watch cartoon from Youtube on her phone. Orn told me that she preferred turning on the Buddhist praying chants for her daughter, which made Dao fall sleep. At times, Dao would say that she wanted to live with mae Orn on the daily basis. During the trip, Dao seemed to be conflicted with the emotional pull and push, from one mom to another.

In Korat, Orn stayed with an older sister, who was herself the grandmother of two small children: one boy and one girl, similar in age to Dao. They were happy to see Dao. Orn's niece—the daughter of her sister and the mother of two kids—worked in a local food factory. I was curious how she felt about her situation, as opposed to being a migrant in the other areas such as the Eastern Seaboard. She replied that being able to be with and take care of her children was the most important thing.

8.2.2 The Come-and-Go of Working Parents

On another occasion I accompanied two couples, Bo and Yos and Chet and Nan, on a trip to Yasothon province, Yos's hometown. It was a survey trip before the ELRG would come to organize the annual community service at the local village school. Since Chet was locked out of his factory (see UM struggle in Chapter Four),¹²⁵ he was a main coordinator for the community service. In fact, Chet's wife, Nan, was from Sisaket—a small Northeastern province bordering Cambodia, sixty-five miles from Yasothon—and Chet and Nan's only son was taken care of by Nan's stepmom in Sisaket. Coming along on the survey trip, Chet would represent the ELRG in the meeting with community leaders. Moreover, Chet and Nan planned to visit and pick his son up on the way to Yasothon, so that they could spend a few days together, before dropping him off on the way back to the Eastern Seaboard. In this trip, I had an opportunity to observe three other long-distance parents with their children: Chet and Nan with their son Way; Yos and Bo with Ton, and Yos with his senior parents.

¹²⁵ Three years earlier, Chet was secretary of the workers union in an American car-maker, while Ta worked for the sister company that produced car engines. Both were involved in the protest that led to the indefinite period of lock-out and the dismissal of unionized workers.

Like Orn's older sister and parents in law who took care of the children, Yos's parents were the main caretakers of their grandson, Ton, a seven-year old boy. During our trip to Yasothon, Ton was independent because he was familiar with the neighborhood in which he attended the village school. He would freely go out and play with local kids. It is worth pointing out that the village was a tight-knit community and safe, as most neighbors were related to Yos.

When we visited the school, which would be the site for the ELRG's community service, Ton was very helpful in showing us around. As for Way, Chet and Nan's two year-old boy, he was rather attached to Chet, who normally communicated on a daily basis with him via the smartphone. There was a moment when Chet and Nan were away, and Bo was babysitting Way, who was sleeping in their place. The moment he was awake, he asked "*phor pai sai*" (Where is dad going? in northeastern dialect). Bo's first reaction was simply to say, "he is buying some things nearby." Then, Bo realized the situation and added that "he is working too". For the children, it is not only normal but also necessary that their parents work and stay in different places. To refer to work is to normalize Chet's absence and comfort Way at the same time. Workers such as Chet or Orn would try to see their children whenever they could. Nevertheless, such unpredictability and lack of consistency seemed at times to confuse their children. Having noticed the children's reactions to their parents' unannounced coming-and-going over a period of time, I often came to think of Sorn's strategies of momentary happiness. Eventually, it makes much sense to seize the moment while it lasts.

8.2.3 Reproductive and Caring Work: Reproducing the class and gendered subjectivity

It is understandable that these workers tried to compensate for their absence by indulging their children with toys and complacency. Thanks to our mutual affinity, I spent a great deal of time with Chet, Nan, Bo, and Yos, which allowed me to observe their relationships with the children, as both parents and individual workers. For this reason, I was aware of the different styles in their childrearing, which appeared to be shaped by gender norms. To begin, Nan said that Chet liked to spoil their son whereas Way was more heedful of Chet than of her. Similarly, Bo had the same comment that Ton was more obedient to Yos than to her. According to Bo, while her parents were taking care of Ton, when he was very little, her dad was also very sweet and lenient. She suggested that Ton never grew up with a strict male figure, except with Yos. From my experience, Yos's dad was one of the sweetest men I had met. Both Bo and Nan seemed to agree that their kids were heedful to the male counterparts more than to themselves. I suspected that such a tendency was also related to the fact that the male activists were the dominant ones in their relationships.

Actually, there were similarities between Chet and Yos, who had similar background, particularly as unruly teenagers. While their two boys spent some time in the Eastern Seaboard, during pre-school for Way and school break for Ton, as activists both Chet and Yos brought them to the ELRG office and other places. For instance, as Ton was capable of being by himself, Yos could bring him to the protests, at which he took pride that Ton was not shy while participating in the 'hi-park.' This kind of socialization allowed Ton to see how other workers related to Yos professionally as union president. Likewise, as a son of a naval officer and trainer, Chet was a highly masculine man. At the ELRG office, Chet would go about freely without shirt and frequently attend meetings

shirtless, which he proudly exhibited a tattoo of the union seal on his chest. Chet's son, however, had at one time been the subject of anecdote among male activists, as Chet found himself complaining in front of other activists that his son picked up feminine mannerisms after starting kindergarten. Since then, as a joke, many friends, including Sorn, teased Chet for having a daughter, instead of a boy, which embarrassed Chet a great deal.

In fact, the original story was concerned with a video of Way that Chet received from Nan's stepmom—Chet's mother in law—who was the main caretaker. In this context, the smart phone became an indispensable means of communication and a tool for caring and affective labor across places. With the aid of his mother-in-law, Chet and Nan were able to carry out caring work via the Internet call. In the same way, Chet was able to communicate with his dad and siblings, who lived in the Western region and the Bangkok Metropolitan area, respectively. While I was with Chet at the ELRG office or Chet's house, the video call with Way was a daily routine for him—a routine that seemed to regenerate their energy and strength on a day-to-day basis. The most interesting aspect of the regular video chat between Way and his parents was that Way took to calling his dad *Pii Chet* (*pii* means older brother), as it was the way Nan referred to him with her stepmom. Just as the network of social reproduction was able to adapt to the configuration of household reproduction, workers' children were also adaptive and resilient. Similar to the way in which Dao learned to accommodate the distances between two mothers, Way was malleable in accepting Chet as an older brother and dad at the same time. To what extent stretching social reproduction across places had affected the semantics of hierarchies and kin relationships remains to be answered in the long term.

On a trip to Yasothon, we visited Nan's stepmom, who had a small grocery in the town of Sisaket. She was a middle-aged woman who took care of the store and six children coming from four families: two of her own, one of Chet and Nan's, and the others from neighbors. The children's ages ranged from two to eleven years old, with four in the same age cohort: 6, 6, 7, and 8. For a brief period when I was there, she complained that there were too many children for her to take care of. Yet, it was obvious that she had much affection for the children, especially Way. On the way to Sisaket, Chet and Nan explained half-jokingly that they did not give Nan's stepmom a head's up that they would pick Way up because they were afraid that she would refuse. Apparently, the relocation and outsourcing of social reproductive work had not neatly re-allocated material needs and affective labor within the familial network. In such re-configurations, workers were also obliged to carefully calibrate the complex emotional entanglements involved.

As a result of the locational shifting of reproductive work, workers were able to keep their household structure as simple as possible, such as the nuclear family without children on the site. In this configuration, the inter-generational recreation and reproduction of labor force were still going on, but where, how, and by whom were reworked through the process of relocation and reorganization—just like outsourcing. Nevertheless, such reworking of the household structure and relocation of social-reproductive work were not without repercussions for inter-personal relations and affects.

As social reproduction theorists (e.g., Fraser 2016) point out, the capitalist system benefits from free-riding on the seemingly non-economic work of provisioning and caregiving that produce and sustain life and community. As social reproduction is

indispensable, as a precondition for socially reproducing wage labor, made free by the capitalist system, Nancy Fraser (2016) calls it the ‘background condition’ for the economic production of commodities. Similarly, Dalla Costa and James (1972) argued that by instituting a nuclear family structure, capital frees men from reproductive work, and allocates reproductive work to women, hence subjecting both men and women to capitalist, exploitative waged relations. The family’s roles are crucial in both producing generational labor power and reproducing labor power on a daily basis, especially in time of economic crises. In this sense, family is thus ‘the very pillar of the capitalist organization of work (1972, p. 19)’. This chapter borrows such insight to understand how capital indirectly uses workers’ family and social reproductive network to discipline workers while directly increasing work intensification in the workplace.

8.3 Consumption, Migration, and Counter-Production Activism

In waged labor relations, workers are conditioned to rely on waged work, and the interests of capital (i.e. profits and accumulation) become the driving forces in their lives. Workers’ collective action, such as the UM workers’ denial to the introduction of Saturday as a working day, is exemplary of resistance to the lengthening of workdays. Further, through my research, activists and unionized workers showed in various forms of actions and speeches that they could not let productive forces take control of their lives—lives that stretched across spaces of production and social reproduction. For instance, male workers such as Chet and Wit resisted the normalization of overtime work and criticized the rank-and-file’s reliance on it. Such a refusal should be seen as a declaration that workers’ lives were not to be dictated by capital. In other words, workers were

saying that they were not abstract labor but living labor that makes things (i.e. use value) for their pleasure. Likewise, some workers such as Sorn and Yos, who enjoyed leisure such as fishing and drinking, stressed the importance of life in the present and the irreducibility of concrete space-time. While they prioritized the use of their time and energy in social and organizing activities, from capital's perspective, their acts were irrational because it was a waste of productive labor power. Hence, management responded harshly to workers' denials, or the waste of productive energy. Specifically, the motive for struggles was based on conflicts between interests of production and accumulation, on the one hand, and the goals of consumption and social reproduction, on the other.

In this final chapter, by building on the insights of Mary Beth Mills and Piya Pangsapa, I look at workers' demands for higher wages and bonus payments as ways to fulfill the needs of consumption for both workers and their families. However, based on the social reproduction framework, I view such consumption differently from Mills, who theorizes consumption as a cultural tactic in expressing and forming identity. By comparison, in my analysis, consumption directly counterposes social reproduction with production through workplace activism because consumption is the principle way that workers reproduce labor power on the daily basis, and households in the long term. Moreover, consumption plays a dual role in the theory of value of labor power. As outlined earlier, Bhattacharya (2017) argues that individual consumption is a part of the circuit of capital because labor power, the product of consumption, is simultaneously the means of reproducing capital (see Chapter 1).

$M-A_c-P-L_p-M$

(p. 81)

According to Bhattacharya, the consumption of workers in the circuit is purposeful, in the sense that workers consume commodities as use-value (e.g., food, clothing, housing, education), for self-development, or even self-transformation, not for capital. Such purposes in the reproduction process contradict the capitalist's goal of capital accumulation in the first circuit ($M-C (M_p, L_p) -P-C'-M'$). Bhattacharya (2017) applies her "method of social reproduction of labor theory" to the question of workplace struggle, pointing out the differences between what Marx calls "capital in general" and "many capitals" (p. 83). While the former (i.e., capital in general) appears as the sum of the latter (i.e., many capitals), according to her, because of ontological and strategic reasons, it is impossible for labor unions to confront capital as a whole. Ontologically, labor and capital are relational and cannot exist without each other. Workers as abstract labor cease to exist if only the capital-labor relations end. By contrast, workers as living labor could confront an individual boss or group of bosses, through the process of surplus value realization. Strategically, it is feasible for labor unions to confront many capitals, a group of capitalists, as forms of surplus value realization are concrete and experiential, from workers' viewpoint. These forms include the extension of working hours, wage cuts, or production acceleration. In short, workers will always attempt to "pull in the opposite direction to increase time, wages and benefits... for self-development" (83). In this purview, labor activism is such workers' attempt to pull in the opposite direction for self-development and social reproduction.

From the viewpoint of capital, self-development, which is closely linked to personal empowerment, is similar to what Cleaver (1992) calls 'dis-valorization.'

According to Cleaver, “valorization designates the complex process through which capital is able only to put people to work, but to do so in such a way that the process can be repeated on an ever greater scale” (8). Therefore, it is the process of subjecting workers to labor power extraction and value creation—an inverted concept of ‘alienation’ from capital’s perspective—through social control, in order to reproduce capitalist social relations. While dis-valorization signifies labor’s refusal to such subjectivity and de-skilling, it is the process that can be understood at the most aggregated and abstract level of analysis.

As labor is both commodity and living being, and the value of labor power is determined by the value of necessities required to maintain and reproduce labor power (i.e., means of subsistence), labor is unique—in the sense that unlike other commodities, labor adjusts its needs according to changes in its own prices. In other words, when the prices of wage goods increase, workers reduce their needs accordingly. Nevertheless, labor’s unique nature as both commodity and living being allows capitalists to benefit from the *intrinsically* reduced value of labor power—always sold at its face value in a labor market. In this regard, Bhattacharya (2017) argues that labor’s struggle for higher wages is connected with the struggle of the working class to improve standards of living in the realm of social reproduction.

8.3.1 *Symbolic Consumption*

Automobiles, especially passenger cars, occupy a unique social location in rapidly changing Thai society. Explaining how consumerism constructs gender identity among middle-class Thais, James Ockey argues that “in advertisements, women worry about

clean houses and clothes, about looking more beautiful; men impress beautiful women by buying expensive imported whisky and fancy cars” (2004, p. 163). It is true that Ockey’s statement, aimed toward explaining the psyche of the Thai middle class, is primarily concerned with representation and caricature. However, it contains some grains of truth about gendered roles in consumption that seem to transcend class in Thailand. The strong connection between masculinity and cars in Thailand is manifested by the public display of female bodies to attract male clientele in events such as motor shows in Thailand (see Andrew et al 2003, p. 261).¹²⁶ As Connell and Messerschmid (2005) argue, there is geography of masculinities that can be analyzed on local, regional, and global levels. On a national scale, the motor shows and car commercials exemplify discursive and cultural constructs of masculinity through representation and sexist practices in Thailand. By contrast, the local construct is concerned with the “face-to-face interaction of families, organizations and immediate communities” (p. 849).

Within the Eastern Seaboard, some men workers belonged to racing clubs, whose members decorated pick-up trucks with a hi-fi stereo and accessories. With limited living space, many male workers, including Yos, were always seen sitting in the back of pick-up trucks and drinking together in the evening. This was a common image that I saw during field research while observing their social lives. In her recent work, Fortunati (2011) argues that automobile and car culture strengthen the enclosing and private sphere within the domestic sphere even more (see also Williams 1974; Urry 2003). It appears, for instance, that SUVs and family-based vehicles have become a mobile unit of family, within which familial activities and the sexual divisions of labor continue to operate. As

¹²⁶ For studies of motorcar consumption and construction of the male working class in other contexts, see for example, Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007) and Lumsden (2010).

both producer and consumer of automobile in Thailand, ELRG activism plays a specific and unique role in this process of economic and symbolic production.

8.3.2 *Social Reproduction as Collective Consumption and Counter-Production*

During my two trips to Yasothon, I stayed at the house of Yos's parents. Because Yos proposed the community service project to the ELRG,¹²⁷ his family was the official host. Furnished with modern roof-tiles, the house itself stood out from all other houses in the village. It was a concrete house, as opposed to tin roofs on wooden structure, like others. The house's inside was even more impressive, with marble tiles. Although the ground floor was basically without any furniture, except for the television set, the house looked new from the shining effect of the marble floor. The other signs of modernity were the shower and modern toilet. By contrast, the second floor remained wooden—the previous condition that only showed from the inside. Simple plywood walls separated the two small rooms on the floor. In the room in which I stayed, there were photos and several signs of past memories. A picture of his grandparents—a painting based on an old photo—hung on the wall outside. Inside one room, there were photos of Yos in military uniform—he posed alone with a hand salute on one photo, the other with two friends. Yos confided to me once that he used to be a real troublemaker before entering the army, and the discipline changed him. Despite his good performance in schools, he lost interest in pursuing a high-school education because of drugs. On the first trip to Yasothon, when we had a meeting with community leaders about the project, two teachers who used to teach Yos came to greet us. As they reminisced about Yos's time in the school, the teachers complimented him endlessly, saying that his performance was actually good. I

¹²⁷ On the official trip of the community service, I could also join most workers who stayed at the school. However, as Yos's parents considered me 'a guest', they kindly invited me to stay at the house again. I was touched and grateful for such hospitality.

could not help but think about his ongoing lawsuit with the Mitzuki that accused him of misconduct, poor performance, and foot-dragging. Such a contrast was so stark.

His parents' modern lifestyle was the fruit of labor from Yos and especially his younger sister, an accountant at one of Thailand's biggest agro-business companies. In a sense, her access to white-collar job market was based on the college degree—hers was the first in the family, supported in part by her brother's remittances. Yos told me that he worked hard to send money to his sister, while she was in college. After she graduated, she managed to get a secure desk job. With Yos's ongoing lawsuit with Mitzuki, she had become the family's main breadwinner. When we visited his family, Yos was already banned from entering the factory. His sister began to suggest that Yos should drop the battle and come home. She also suggested, with her support to provide him with the products at cost, he could become a local middleman and leave activism behind him.

As remarked by Charles Keyes (2014), over the past three decades, the numbers of modern houses in Northeastern villages have multiplied (p. 154). A main reason is that Northeastern villagers have greatly benefited from remittances sent by out-migrants, both domestic and abroad. For Keyes (2014), migration is a way in which Northeasterners turn the national development agenda into their personal goal. Geographers Rigg and Salamaca have also argued that Thailand's uneven geographical development and the cross-regional migration of the Northeastern workforce have resulted in the reconfiguration of Northeastern households, confirming the absence of the middle generation and the local cross-generational co-habitation composed of mainly grandparents and grandchildren (Rigg and Salamanca 2011). In short, the stretching of household reproduction is a form of collective resilience. Similar to Katz's web of care,

workers' family members in the network of stretched household reproduction provide caring and reproductive labor, in exchange for remittances.

Compared to his sister's, the manual work Yos had in the Eastern Seaboard was tedious and precarious. However, Yos prided himself on coming from where he used to be to becoming a trade union president in a global Japanese car-maker. After Mitzuki requested a court to dismiss Yos, a series of official letters sent to his home had considerably troubled his parents. This had especially disturbed his mom, who had long suffered from a chronic ulcer. For most Thai villagers, the court order is a sign of serious nuisance.

8.3.3 The Rural as Social Factory

The community service project lasted two days during one weekend. On the first day, the local community hosted a welcome ceremony at the school, where schoolteachers and staff organized student performances and prepared food and drink for workers in the evening. As a way to show that the community was well placed in the network of national support, the school invited the deputy director of the local education office to speak at the ceremony. Seeing the symbol of the labor group on the flag decorating the stage, the deputy director stated in his opening speech that he was surprised to see a display of the sickle and hammer these days. According to him, this reminded him of the time in which he grew up. During that period of social 'upheaval' in the 1970s, college students went out to rural areas 'educating' rural villagers with community development as the premise. Then he went on to praise the workers' initiative and made the case for the workers' revival of past ideology. As a result of the lack of government funding, he added, local government was now under a new

development scheme, where a public-private collaboration was the driving force of local schools' development. In this purview, he deplored the community's underdevelopment as the country's 'childcare and senior centers' and denounced the reluctance of the private sector. Finally, he acknowledged organized labor's roles in filling the gap left wide open by the public-private collaboration scheme.

Having listened to such a speech, which alluded to crucial issues including uneven development and the local community's subsidy of capitalist accumulation, I appreciated the acknowledgment of the local officer. Most importantly, his reference to 'childcare and senior centers' seemed to crack open a small space where villagers started the hitherto-silenced conversation about the way in which the Thai economy has long exploited the Isan region by drawing generations of migrant workers into urban areas and forcing them to rely in part on the subsistence economy of their families through wage repression. Following the local officer's speech, a local community leader also referred to the community as 'a factory producing the national workforce.' As the leader of the workers, Yingyong responded that it was the ELRG's directive to educate society about labor exploitation. According to Yingyong, to raise the awareness of future generations of workers, the school curriculum should include the issues of labor laws and labor relations. Notwithstanding the educational opportunity, it pained me to see the irony that the workers had now taken another aspect of social reproduction (i.e., education) into their hands, given the unfair and discriminatory situations they were in.

8.3.4 Plan Bs and Reconciliation

Central to this research is the effort to make sense of the way in which workers reconciled the conflicts between a personal sense of righteousness and the bundle of

responsibilities wrapped inside the aspiration for a better life. Most importantly, some male workers articulated such reconciliation in the form of finding a sustainable way of livelihood.

For instance, during the last six months of field research, Chet and Sorn had invested in a crayfish¹²⁸ breeding business, which was very trendy in Thailand. In the process, they were preoccupied with educating themselves and others about the exotic animal. As Sorn still had a full-time job, Chet ran the business while Sorn took care of online marketing via social media. In the beginning, they only acted as middlemen who bought a small batch of crayfish to sell to local customers. Often, customers were workers or neighbors who lived in the same compound. For example, Chet was able to convince and convert two adjacent neighbors to become crayfish enthusiasts. One was the immediate neighbor who shared the same wall with Chet and Nan and had a stall selling homemade *a la carte* dishes on rice in the neighborhood. The cook was a middle-aged and full-time housewife, who sometimes took our food order from the other side of the wall. The other neighbor had the bigger house across from Chet and also came from the same province as Chet. One time during which I joined the workers in the evening, drinking, Chet was running around in and out helping this neighbor construct a home-made pond built mainly from PP Flute board, synthetic turf mat, and fishing line. Further, Chet was determined to use his knowledge about crayfish breeding as a platform to teach workers about subsistence farming. For instance, when ELRG activists provided labor

¹²⁸ Also known as crawfish, they are freshwater crustaceans, to which workers often referred as ‘lobster.’ In 2016-2017, crayfish breeding became so famous, not only in Thailand but Southeast Asia, that its how-to books became the best sellers in local bookstores. In early 2017, crayfish were reportedly one of the most expensive aquatic pets, when an owner of Isan food restaurant bought a single crayfish for over USD31,000 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/1190776/the-million-baht-crayfish>). One indicator was the exposure of a large pyramid scheme fraud associated with crayfish that entailed a USD570,000 investment (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/08/c_136350638.htm).

unions with a legal training on Social Security law, the National Board of Social Security required that the ELRG educate workers about a self-sufficiency economy. Seeing an opportunity, Chet introduced the crayfish farm as an income-generating activity for workers. I was compelled by his argument that “whatever products you sell, there is nothing better than those that you can unilaterally determine the prices. And crayfish is one of those.” Notwithstanding the ongoing fad and resulting price bubble in the crayfish market, such an argument resonated with workers, themselves children of Thai farmers who had long been faced with food price repression. It is worth noting that Chet had a plot of land back home that he was always dreaming of returning to cultivate when the struggle was over.

Before he was teaching other workers about crayfish, Chet was experimenting with crayfish by breeding and raising them in his own homemade pond, built in the garage space in front of the house. As crayfish was not native in tropical climate, Chet gained the know-how about breeding and hatching mostly from an online forum and trial-and-error. That also meant that any casualty became a loss in investment. As a result, Chet and Sorn invested a great deal of time in nurturing and tending to the crayfish. By volunteering to build a pond for the neighbors and demonstrating how to raise crayfish with his own investment, Chet was able to turn his experiment into a group learning process.

In August 2016, when both Chet and Sorn had more confidence from small transactions, they stepped up the venture and planned to order a large batch to breed and sell baby crayfish. According to Sorn, this large investment, if successful, would render profits large enough for Chet to pay off his debts. A month later, a male executive

committee member of a union came to the ELRG office, despite his long absence, with the real purpose of buying the crayfish to sell to his co-workers. While Chet was replying to the union fellow who complained that Chet did not leave any profit margins for his sales, Yingyong teased Chet and Sorn that with their crayfish business, he had a hard time keeping up with the increasing labor cases. Since Chet and Sorn were busy, Yingyong was overwhelmed by the increasing cases of workers dismissal. Yingyong was referring particularly to the dismissal of two union executive members. Chet simply replied that “these folks did not pay attention to anything; no surprise they were dismissed.” He went on to tell a story that one worker asked him, “are you not going to work today?” As Chet had become active in the group after he was locked out, he thought that if workers paid attention at all about his situation, they would not have asked such a question to him.

Since I had known them, the contrast between Yingyong, the idealist, and Chet, the pragmatic man and perhaps pessimist, always intrigued me. Since 2009, Yingyong had been providing distraught workers with free legal advices and support, despite his full-time job. Based on his dedication to labor activism, in 2014 he received an award from a well-known national human right organization. According to Yingyong, notwithstanding the workers’ situations, the ELRG’s role was to lend them a helping hand. For instance, one of the most recent members was Pat, who had never heard of the labor union before coming to file grievances at the ELRG. After a machine at work slit off a part of his index finger, Yingyong helped Pat retain both compensation and better treatment from the employer. Following the incident, not only did the employer not apologize or inform him of his rights to work-related compensation, but the employer

also treated him as if the accident was his fault. Because of the ELRG's support, Pat would later receive a sum of money from his workplace as compensation, which Chet said that Pat would also invest in building a small crayfish farm at home in the Northern Thailand.

On the contrary, Chet was involved with workplace activism first, and then in the ELRG following the UM protest that led to his indefinite lockout. As a result of the protracted protest that ended with the dramatic demonstration at the national parliament, Chet came back to the Eastern Seaboard and took up several odd jobs, including riding a motorcycle taxi and selling Siamese fighting fish to local kids. I did not realize that during a certain time, he lived with his wife's mom in the Northeast until our conversation about Pat later brought up this memory. On one evening, replying to my question about Pat's whereabouts, Chet was telling me that Pat was taking his pregnant wife back to her home in Isan, as she had some complications. I recalled Pat sharing his plan with me that he would wait until his wife went into labor, and they would go back to his hometown in Chiang Rai together. He wanted to start a crayfish farm. According to Chet, the mother-in-law wanted Pat to quit his job and take full-time care of his wife. In short, she asked Pat to choose between his job and wife. In response to this, Yingyong and Chet seemed to have the similar, strong opinions on the matter. Both insisted that the mother-in-law could not say such a thing because she was not a breadwinner. "Being with mother-in-law while unemployed, you only devalue yourself," commented Chet. He added that one morning while he was staying with his mother-in-law and helping care for her hens, without a job and money, his mother-in-law asked him, "will you not look for

any job and only tend to your child?” For him, it is difficult for a man to live with the mother-in-law while he is without job or income.

Before the UM lockout, Chet always sent remittances to his home so that his dad could invest in farming. He planned to work on the farm when he ever returned home. Yet, the plan came to an abrupt halt when Chet and his wife—who was working at the UM’s sister company—were together locked out by the companies. For the past five years, he had been living on the hope that he would finally receive the deserved sum of compensation and severance if the struggle were over.

During the same period, his wife—Bo—was struggling to find a form of livelihood as well. For a few months, after several attempts to get factory jobs, she experimented with the selling noodle salad—a kind of snack food, catered by a local franchised brand. After considering pros and cons of being self-employed, she seemed to like the autonomy of having no boss. Having a chance to talk to customers—mostly workers in the area—she also seemed to benefit from the conversations with them and learned about how the situations went inside and outside factories. Despite some support from friends, unfortunately, the business did not go as planned because of the lack of customers and perhaps the high price. Bo finally stopped the business. After I left the field site, I later found out that she finally went back to work in a factory.

Even though most workers eventually lost their battle with the workplace, they continued to search for an alternative way of organizing their labor. After the court gave its permission to dismiss Yingyong and Sorn, they joined with Chet and Ya to start the organic farming project in which they managed to turn ELRG members’ collective energy and labor into a livelihood project. Owing to the laws, one consequence of losing

their factory jobs is that these activists could not continue to be union executive committee members or members. However, as labor consultants, they continued to pursue social justice through their support for workers with grievances.

8.4 Struggle for Self-development and its conflicts with Household Reproduction

For me, at first I thought we fought for the bonus only; now I believe we fight for the better life. It's not about the bonus any more, but about security in life. - Yos

As seen in this research, workers such as Yos, Chet, Sorn and Na did not simply talk about working conditions. They were also concerned about inter-personal relationships at work and in the unions, as well as living conditions that reflected fairly shared economic gains. Security mentioned by Yos also meant a longed-for quality of life that reflected the desire to have non-working time for self-development. Here, I borrow the idea of self-development from Lebowitz (2003 [1992]), who argues that Marx himself insisted on a central contradiction between capital's alienating nature of production and the resulting growth of workers' needs. To put it simply, waged workers are impoverished by their increasing dependence on a waged labor system, which simultaneously augments the growth of their needs (p. 204). On the one hand, consumption has become the mechanism in which capital sells its commodities. On the other, it is the principal way in which workers achieve daily reproduction and social status. For these reasons, social reproduction—as collective consumption of the households of workers—is contradictory as it pushes workers to self-organize and form a workers' association. Workers finally become empowered in the process. In the Eastern

Seaboard, empowered workers were no longer employable and hence dispensable. Again, owing to gender inequality and sexual politics among organized workers, male workers benefited more from the formal organization and empowerment than did their female counterparts. As women were viewed as non-militant, women-led unions managed to operate in the less visible environment. By contrast, as male workers assumed the main breadwinner role, they took up responsibility (and pressure) of fulfilling familial needs. Such responsibility thus reflected the larger sets of conflicting or competing short-term and long-term aspirations.

In this purview, the aspiration for a better life encapsulates a bundle of needs, often conflicting. These needs include, first, workers' personal desires; second, the needs of caregivers and household members, who provided the social reproductive work that supports the intergenerational reproduction of the labor force. In other words, workers, including Yos, recognized the need to have enough resources and capacity to support his son in his education, as well as for his parents to live a comfortable senior life, even though these needs could come into conflict with his engagement in activism. Moreover, with regards to the gap of commitment, it also goes without saying that union activists' aspiration could conflict with aspiration and needs of rank-and-file workers, who were driven mostly by the needs for their symbolic and collective consumption.

Notwithstanding such complexity, workers' experiences with unions and the ELRG allowed them to learn about mutual aid and solidaristic collectivism. I could argue that activism was a first-rate political education that rewarded them with a systematic way of critical thinking, courage, and pride. It is important here to note the partial and contradictory nature of working-class resistance, what McNally refers to as "partial and

contradictory anticapitalist dynamic within the lived experiences of actual social groups” (2004, p. 206). This may be interpreted as internal limits on the collective worker, in the sense that the group of workers still represented the *collective power of capital* (Lebowitz 2003 [1992]). But, as Michael Lebowitz points out, we need to move away from political economy of capital toward the political economy of the working class. As Lebowitz explains,

In contrast to the political economy of capital, the political economy of the working class encompasses more than just the labor mediated by capital—just as the workday for workers is longer than the capitalist workday. This political economy includes the labor where the mediator among workers is the state (which provides ‘that which is needed for the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc’), and it includes the labor ‘absolute necessary in order to consume things’—that is, that labor unproductive for capital that Marx included under the costs of consumption. (p. 201).

Drawing on the early work of Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, Lebowitz (2003 [1992]) foregrounds the social relations of workers and their recognition of the unity within family and community. The inclusion of family and community as mediators of workers’ social relations allows us to understand the discrepancy of life projects envisioned by activist-workers vis-à-vis those of their family and community members. By adopting such a perspective, we understand the power at play in the conflicting interests and goals among struggling workers such as Na, Samart, and Chet. Despite the disruption of her union activities, for instance, Na admitted that she had learned a great deal from her role as a union executive committee member and activist in the ELRG. Similarly, through their long struggle, Yingyong, Chet, and Yos were empowered and went on to connect with other political movements, particularly the

national pro-democracy movement and the international solidarity movement, that monitored an investment of multinational capital in Thailand and Southeast Asia.

When the ELRG organized the community development trip in Yasothon, Samart,¹²⁹ who played a major role in designing and building the school's new toilet building, was surprised that the community leaders preferred money donations over donations in kind. According to Samart, the community leaders did not seem to care about the duration over which the toilet building would be built. They wanted to manage the funds to construct the building according to their will. From the workers' perspective, the construction of the toilet building by workers themselves (i.e., use value) is a great way to show their solidarity and support to the community. Therefore, for Samart, it seemed unappreciative of the leaders to demand money instead (i.e., exchange value). Samart suggested to me that money had become central to people's inter-relations.

During the community service trip, I was also surprised to hear complaints from workers, such as Na, who lamented that they did not receive proper treatment from the community. She was particularly frustrated that the school did not prepare adequate sleeping materials such as floor mats and that the food was self-service. While I saw this minor inconvenience as issues of mismanagement and expectation, rather than disrespect or ingratitude, the gap between the standards of livings cannot be ignored. Compared with the conditions of the rural school, the workers' ways of life in the Eastern Seaboard were relatively comfortable. I could see how some workers who were not themselves from Isan might feel offended by the simple ways of living into which they were put. In addition, workers appeared to view themselves as guests, rather than volunteers. Hence, it

¹²⁹ Samart was previously a manager in Mitzuki who was unfairly dismissed along with the other union executive committee members, see Chapter 4.

is worth noting that despite their material and subjective experiences, the workers did not always assume the working-class identity, especially when the consumerist identity was hegemonic.

Conclusion: Empowerment, Labor Collectivism and Class Power

The impacts of struggle on personal empowerment and collective transformation cannot be overstated. To begin, personal empowerment is the process in which individuals discover the agency of the self, understood at the concrete level of experiences. It is the process of personal transformation that results in a different consciousness. Through and through, the stories of strong-headed unionized workers from the Northeast region showed us exactly the way in which the concrete level of experiences transformed their social and political consciousness.

This process of empowerment is relational, in the sense that it also presupposes interaction with the others. For instance, through the negotiation and labor disputes that led to achievement of their rights to association, workers attained a sense of self-esteem and dignity. This attainment implies an element of recognition of own rights by oneself and by others. Perhaps this is the reason the ELRG workers insisted on calling each other ‘than’ (a venerable you), which suggests that everyone deserves respect no matter what.

Moreover, the process of empowerment is dialectical because dignity moves along the spectrum of autonomy and vulnerability (Sayer 2011). With the original conditions of vulnerability, workers were exposed to discrimination and potential threats. Starting from their vulnerable position, they were thus spurred by the sense of injustice to pursue respect and dignity. In the process, they became conscious and understood their

relationships with others. But solidarity in practice was fraught with power and domination, such as the gender bias and male domination experienced by women unionists. In addition, when we consider material concerns and solidarity, conflicts could arise. For example, activists could not easily demand solidarity from union members, when the latter focused on the end-of-year bonus while the former aimed for recognition from the employer. Likewise, conflicts could take place between activists and family members such as female partners or parents, when the search for personal dignity clashed with the self-development of the working-class community.

In my research, workers were empowered by their personal struggle and collective experiences, which made them realize the potential of personal and collective agency. From the company's perspective, though, they appeared to become 'more demanding,' 'disobedient,' and hence labeled as 'unable to work with' by the company. For instance, according to court documents, the Mitzuki management repeatedly argued that the company could not reinstate workers such as Samart and Yos, who organized the Mitzuki workers union, because they were unable to work with them. Hence they were not reinstated. The company called many male activists including Yos 'hua kaeng' (literally meaning strong head or stubborn). Such an idea of stubbornness finds resonance with the image of water buffalo walking the street of Bangkok, as portrayed by the urbanite and business elite Yellow Shirts movement. Based on such the portrayal of Isan workers as hotheaded troublemakers, many activists including Samart and Yos believed that they were so blacklisted by the local business association as a whole. They could not find any job in the Eastern Seaboard. From the household's perspective, finally, individual consumption as workers' self-development came into conflict with collective

goals. Although activists collectively developed political consciousness through activism, their empowerment could not potentially lead to ‘dis-valorization’—the disruption and reversal of the capitalist social reproduction—as organized labor cannot resolve the conflicts between personal and collective consumption through its organizational and political vehicles.

Chapter 9. Conclusion:

Capturing dynamics of labor agency on constantly shifting ground

For the sake of conclusion and evaluation, I will reiterate the three main research questions and the respective research findings briefly. The first research question is about the ways in which strategies of the state, capital, and organized labor shape labor geography and worker agency in Thailand's Eastern seaboard. The second question concerns the way in which labor and gender politics within spaces of activism shape the organization of labor for household reproduction. Third, I ask, how did the intersections of class, gender and regional ethnic identities inform labor activists' political and class consciousness?

My research shows that strategies of the Thai state and foreign capital were the predominant forces that contributed to transforming the local landscape, patterns of labor migration, and composition of the workforce. Accordingly, the strategies of the state and capital posed challenges to workers, shaping in turn organized labor's militancy and masculinity. As Chapter Seven illustrates, workers were obliged to constantly display shows of strength to leverage their collective bargaining power. As a result, labor's organizing practices have become masculinized because of several factors including and gender inequality within the unions as well as workers' gendered divisions of labor.

Historically, Thailand's Eastern Seaboard, or the "Detroit of Thailand," was a unique product of American liberalism, Japanese production process, and Thai uneven development. While both American and Japanese capital needed a disciplined workforce, they appeared to have different approaches in producing desirable individuals. For example, as modeled by Henry Ford, American investors preferred to create a disciplined

workforce in the mold of avid consumers. By comparison, Japanese carmakers disciplined workers at the scale of the workplace through a localized human resource regime and particular work ethics. The Thai state facilitated the global production process by encoding capitalist-labor relations in the Thai industrial relations framework, the contradictory labor regime in which foreign capital and organized labor contested the control of labor on the local scale.

Despite such influences of the state and capital, my ethnographic research reveals that Northeastern migrant workers were far passive subjects of the capitalist process. When multinational carmakers and industrial developers radically transformed the physical landscape and livelihoods in the Eastern Seaboard, migrant workers from the Northeast showed resilience and creativity through their migration and social reproduction strategies, particularly outsourcing of childrearing and reproduction of generational labor forces.

While the cultural politics of ethno-class inequality provided workers with solidaristic impulses, sexual politics and gender norms created tensions and conflicts within the social group.¹³⁰ A recently masculinized labor force had profound impacts on gender relations within labor activism, shaping the way labor activists socialized, strategized, and understood collective notions of leadership. In such masculinized activism, male activists promoted sexist practices and reproduced gender prejudices, further marginalizing minority voices that raised feminist values of inclusiveness. Although masculinized activism sometimes appeared as militant, women workers'

¹³⁰ I also use Young (1990)'s definition as 'a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, and ways of life' (43).

underrepresentation undermined organizational resilience, leading to internal weaknesses in the long run.

Conceptually, paying closer attention to how decision-making was usually made in the union hall takes us away from tired debates about labor unions' militancy. Most importantly, the more inclusive and democratic the processes are, the more effective the strategies. Such effectiveness means solid membership bases and long-term development of the labor organization itself. This internal strength is critical to organizational resilience, a decisive quality conducive to the long-term struggle against capital.

Despite its limitations, the labor relations framework opens a small window in which activists find the way to collectively organize and empower themselves – to learn what they were capable of. A space of empowerment is crucial because it transforms workers and makes them 'dangerous,' from management's viewpoint. This transformation is a fundamental reason why companies spent so much energy and resources in pursuing legal battles with dismissed workers. In the context of the Eastern Seaboard in which workers were regional migrants without political representation, workplace activism, albeit limited in scope, was significant in creating social and political spaces for empowerment.

Worker empowerment is the process through which individual workers who experienced injustice understood their roles in the larger collectivism and realized the possibility of change. For example, after long years of labor struggle with the companies, Universal Motors and Mitzuki union activists such as Yos were transformed and would never be the same again. They had been disillusioned with the companies and with waged work. They had even developed a sober understanding of the capital and state collusion.

Notwithstanding the possibilities, organized labor fell short of the transformative potentials owing to two main hindrances. First, organizational weaknesses (i.e., gender and group dynamics) posed internal challenges to the group. Second, it failed to address the conflicts inherent to the oppositions between group building on the one hand and individual-based self-development and household reproduction, on the other.

Contributions and Future Directions

My research contributes to the theory of labor agency by shifting the scope of study beyond the sphere of production to account for the underlying connection between production and reproduction. Moreover, it enriches the concept of labor agency in three main ways. First, the research affirms the dialectical relations between collective and individual agency. Far from being simply individualist, workers' agency is both constrained and enabled by the collectives to which they belong. Thus, this research points to empirical needs to broaden the confine of labor collectives beyond trade unions to include labor organizations, households, and hometown communities. Not only did these collectives play indispensable roles in the spatiality of workers' lives, they were mediators of workers' social relations. Moreover, collectivism such as trade unions and households can be spaces of contestation, struggle, and divisions.

Second, the research deepens the materialist analysis of labor geographies by foregrounding the intersectionality of ethnicity/nationality, gender, and class. The findings uncover the symbolic and material relationships between workers' organizational forms and ethno-regional practices. As the nation's most politicized ethnic minority, northeastern workers in general and men in particular were perceived as

dissenters and troublemakers. In the context of labor activism, workers used their ethnic culture (i.e., dialect, food, music, and belief systems) as symbolic sources of collective identity and solidarity, as well as the material medium through which workers socialized on a daily basis. In this sense, labor agency is embodied and simultaneously a bundle of multiple cultural and political identities.

The research also points to several contradictions, especially between organizational and individual levels. Both the workers' organizational power and social locations—and the larger community of the working-class to which they belong— together forged labor's collective agency. While various factors including the legal and political landscape, firm strategies, and local practices of labor organizing shaped the organizational forms, socio-cultural elements such as gender norms and ethnic identity played important parts in determining its strength and resilience. In short, workers' constrained agency is a result of these contradictory processes relating to the internal dynamics of organized labor, as well as of their socio-geographical and political positions in the larger political economy.

Third, apart from being culturally embedded and embodied, labor agency is spatially located in the webs of places to which workers keep ties. The empirical material from this research extends geographical knowledge of the way in which households and labor organizations become mediating spaces between conflicting demands of short-term surplus value creation and long-term household reproduction. The use of a social reproduction framework illuminates the often-neglected link between labor struggle at points of production, and its conditions embedded in the larger network of social and households' reproduction of the labor force. In normal circumstances, agriculture-based

households in the Northeast served as the organizing space for the family's caring work and reproduction of the labor force. Supported by remittances, left-behind household members (i.e., grandparents and grandchildren) organized everyday life around childbearing, education, and the long-term reproduction of the workforce. Nevertheless, as the families depended on remittances, such material reliance could become a source of pressures, psychological and social, for activists and especially those engaged in protracted labor disputes. This finding affirms the concept of labor agency as "constitutive of particular capitalist regimes" (Carswell and De Neve 2013). Therefore, the social reproduction framework sheds new light on labor activism, in the sense that the latter is no longer seen as purely political, ideological, and moral in nature. In other words, labor activism driven by consumption—whether private (needs and personal development) or collective (i.e. social reproduction)—is an expression of such contradiction between the private and collective, or the reproduction and disruption of social relations. In this sense, labor activism can be conceptualized as material and central to capitalist social relations.

Finally, the focus on workers' motivations and actions highlights the need to theorize labor agency in a nuanced manner. Such collective agency reflects divergences between the goals of individuals, plurality of politics (i.e. class, sexual and gender, ethno-regional politics) and potential tensions between short-term coping strategies and the long-term growth of labor organizations. Through the space-time created by labor activism, workers were conscious of their collective power and transformed by political education.

I would argue that a missing element in the debate about agency and resistance is

an examination of the ways acts of resistance impact personal empowerment and collective transformation. In other words, in relation to resistance, the sought-after concept of agency should be able to explain two crucial dynamics. First, while workers who participate in activism often gain awareness and critical tools in evaluating the status quo, our theories need to be able to explain the resulting personal and collective transformation. In other words, what are the dynamics and changes that happen following shifts in consciousness? Second, based on Cindi Katz's categorization of resilience, reworking, and resistance, most studies tend to ignore the links and dynamics between the three modes of resistance and treat them as static and isolated. In practice, resilient acts are fundamental to the sustenance and growth of communities, allowing workers to develop more powerful and radical strategies. Therefore, it remains unknown how workers build strategies moving from resilience to reworking. In the last chapter, I described how two concepts help conceptualize these dynamics: self-valorization (Cleaver 2002; Cumbers et al 2010) and self-development (Lebowitz 2004; Bhattacharya 2017).

The concept of empowerment captures the dynamics of personal transformation, a crucial but underexplored process in which workers go through internal shifts in social and political consciousness. With regards to the current debate on labor agency, the concept reconciles the central dilemma in which labor agency is framed as *either* purposeful *or* consequential. In other words, the concept of empowerment helps us understand that just because agents may not be able to act in a way that successfully changes the system—namely resistance, according to Katz's categories—does not mean that collective and political activism are in vain. It offers a sober but much-needed

realization that internal shifts in perceptions and worldview are important steps toward concrete social change. While activists and practitioners often experience the consequences of empowerment through personal experience, due to an overemphasis on observable actions, scholars may understate the significance of changes and hence workers' agency.

Recent empirical studies of labor agency tend to equate agency with actions based on a short-term decision making process. A moral economy approach could help explicate the complexity and internal struggles faced by workers who must negotiate short-term and individual interests, on the one hand, with long-term and collective goals, on the other. As Andrew Sayer (2011) suggests, a moral economy theory which foregrounds the oppressed's vulnerability, as well as their autonomy and dignity, can contribute to further thinking about the politics of recognition. This research agrees with Castree (1999) and Sayer (2011), who suggest that the analytical framework for labor agency must capture both the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition. In other words, studies of agency must apprehend the materiality, and the sense of justice and dignity, articulated by workers, particularly in times of struggle. Therefore, the concept of empowerment is a corrective to the static and false dichotomy between culture and economy.

This research is not devoid of limitations. There are at least three gaps to be addressed. First, as my research reveals, waged labor is simply one of many identities in workers' lives; furthermore, for many workers, waged labor is simply one stage among many others. This fact is even more pronounced in the context of Thailand and the Global South, where workers slide back and forth between the so-called formal and informal

economy. In my research, for instance, as a result of the lockout, Chet had been outside the formal economy for over four years. Despite the employment interruption, striking workers had not stopped their activism. This reality potentially complicates research on labor activism and agency, which theoretically presupposes that waged work is the main and predominant form of labor. Future research should address such discontinuation of waged work and make sense of the centrality of unwaged work and its relationship with waged work. It is clear that the definition of labor activism should extend to include organized efforts both inside and outside the workplace and formal labor organizations; nonetheless, a theory of activism that integrates unwaged work with analyses of labor movement remains a future task.

Secondly, given the rich analysis regarding household reproduction strategies, this research does not focus on the way in which decisions within households were actually made. Again, future research could dedicate equal weight to the work done in the realm of social reproduction, the so-called unwaged labor. While not within the scope of my research, future research could pay more attention to internal dynamics within households, the same way this research grappled with the internal dynamics within unions and labor groups.

Lastly, as this research attempts to show, we can deepen the theory of labor agency empirically by steering labor geography away from actions-based research, for example, toward projects that focus on life choices and long-term outcomes of class struggle. One potential research project is thus a study that can underscore market-based strategies such as consumption adaptation of both waged and unwaged labor and theorize them as integral part of political and class struggle. However, a challenge is the

constantly shifting ground upon which the working class operates, ground which is deeply intertwined with structural conditions that restrict and enable agency at the moment. In this research, for instance, the crucial backdrop was the booming Thai and global automobile industry, which induced carmakers to intensify the labor process. Toward the end of my field research, however, the prospects for the automobile industry changed drastically due to the global economy, as well as economic mismanagement of the military government that ruled the country for over three years. It is imperative that research on labor agency captures the dynamics of constantly shifting structures, an approach which may require the creative integration of archival research in labor history with ethnography.

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