The Beginning of Labor Movement in Thailand (1900-1930)

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The objective of this article is to investigate an early stage of labor movement in Thailand during 1900-1930. It is an attempt to mark the beginning point of workers' collective actions to redress their grievances. It is also an examination of the essential conditions and predominant features of these early agitations as well as an attempt to specify the contributory factors for the development of these initiatives into the movement.

The results of study can be briefly summarized.

1. The early manifestations of labor discontent by isolated groups of workers through the use of strike weapons occurred only a few years after the turn of this century. But the earliest labor unrest which had the elements of a modern industrial dispute was the strike of the tramway workers which just took place in 1922-1923. This manifestation of discontent can be marked as the beginning point of labor movement in Thailand.

2. The structural conditions of workers' unrest were the emergence of factory system since the 1850s, the new economic relationship, the lack of impersonal guarantee of labor subsistence and the urban life.

3. An important feature of workers' agitation was the response to the new nature and character of work they were engaged in, that is to say, a reluctance on the part of the workers to adjust to the new industrial disciplines.

4. The workers' loosely-organized industrial action unrest developed into a labor movement through the decisive contribution of intellectuals.

Before going into details of how the initial attempts of labor move-
ment emerged, it may be helpful to specify briefly the historical and socio-economic context of Thai society during the turn of this century.

**Historical and Socio-economic Context**

Since the early Bangkok period, the labor movement has been through significant changes and growth, as has Thai society. Long before that, slavery and corvée labor were the sources of labor forces. But since the end of 18th century wage labor gradually assumed another source of labor power to meet with the shortage of native labor which was due to the following causes: 1) the continuous wars with Burma which resulted in a great loss of labor power as well as the deterioration of the corvée system; 2) the reconstruction of Bangkok in place of Thonburi and Ayudhya required a great amount of labor; 3) the development of export trade and money economy which created new work in connection with the growth of building, transportation, agricultural commercialisation (i.e. sugar industry, pepper farming, etc.) which stimulated the need of labor.

In order to cope with these political and economic conditions, the use of wage labor developed. Chinese immigrants has been encouraged by the government to supplement the shortage of native labor since the early nineteenth century. They were at first exempt from corvée and later subject to a lower head tax than indigenous Thais. Immigrant fees were also minimal. As the use of wage labor in public work projects had proven efficient, a modification of the traditional corvée labor was introduced. It began with a reduction of the period of services. The next step in emancipation was promoted by King Mongkut who issued two decrees as follows: 1) the Bangkok populace had no longer to gratuitously perform work which might be done by paid laborers; 2) the Bangkok populace were allowed to be employed by the Westerners.¹ The legal abolition of corvée system and slavery was completed

¹Rama IV, King, *The Collection of The Royal Decrees of King Rama IV, 1851 – 1861*. (Bangkok: Kurusapha).
in 1899 and 1905 respectively by King Chulalongkorn. Since then the Thai
phrai and slaves had become free.

Nevertheless, there was some reluctance among the natives in taking a
new chance of entering the labor market. One cause was the promising price
situation of rice in the world market. Therefore, the Chinese were still
dominant among wage labor in ports, rice- and saw-mills, mining,
engineering workshops, and in manufacturing industries such as distilleries,
tanneries, ice-factories, cigarette, match and textile manufacture. Others
were Malays, Javanese, Burmese, Ceylonese, Bombay Indians, Bengalis
and Tamils. The limited number of indigenous Thais were found among
governmental employees such as those in the Royal State Railways, the
Opium Department, The Municipality etc. Some were employed as clerical
workers in western firms and pawn-shops or as skilled and unskilled labor
in certain firms where the government held shares namely the Siam Electricity
Co. and the cement factory. Some urban Thais became piece-work laborers
in manufacturing companies such as in cigarette and match manufacture.
Most of them were women and children. After the world economic slump in
1927 the number of Thai wage laborers began to increase. This was due to
two factors. First, the drastic fall in the world rice price which resulted in a
flux of rural migrants looking for better opportunities in the urban centres.
Secondly, the nationalistic policy of the new administration after 1932 led
to an attempt to restrict Chinese immigration and to encourage the supple-
mentation of Thais for immigrant labor in several business. However,
such an attempt was not fully successful; the Chinese still constituted the
main part of wage labor until the end of World War II.

Apart from the abolition of the traditional form of compulsory labor,
the government’s role in labor affairs was quite limited. The laissez-faire
policy was applied to the development of industries and the employment
situation. Around 1925 the government was recommended by the interna-
tional labor conference to enact labor law and create a labor office. But

2The government took serious concerns and actions only on the labor problems in the tin industry
in the South because they related closely to the country’s foreign policy. But this is out of the
scope of this paper.
these proposals were found unnecessary because the labor situation was considered satisfactory.\textsuperscript{3} Government interference was mainly confined to specific emergencies and immediate labor disputes. Whenever any official actions were taken, they were directed not towards the workers' welfare, but rather towards the protection of social order and public security.

One of the first official steps to control workers was the promulgation of a police decree in 1901 which required the registration of domestic labor. This was an effort to suspend the thievery of servants which was frequent complaint by foreign employers. Another step was an attempt to control the rickshaw traffic through compulsory registration. No particular law against strikes was enacted but it was regarded as a criminal offense by the Criminal Code of 1908. Section 268 made it illegal for any violence or threat compelling any person to do or suffer any act. Section 104, which concentrated on the state of treason or rebellion, made it illegal to hold a strike or a lock-out. These provisions were exercised for the first time in 1934 when the railway workers launched a strike.

**The Tramway Workers' Strike, 31 Dec. 1922 - 21 Jan. 1923**

Actually this was not the first strike by wage laborers in Thailand. Due to the lack of adequate information, it is not possible to precisely determine when the first strike occurred. But series of work stoppages by groups of workers had already been reported in the years before 1922. For example, in August 1905 the Chinese dock laborers went on strike by refusing to load all American goods for a few days. In July 1910 the Chinese rice-and saw-mill coolies stopped working to join a strike of all the Chinese businesses in Bangkok. Both strikes were not motivated by economic discontent, they were rather politically oriented. The first incident was in retaliation against the American government who refused to treat the Chinese in the United States with favoritism. The latter was a protest against the Thai government policy of increasing the Chinese head tax.\textsuperscript{4} In

\textsuperscript{3}National Archives, Phanit R.VII No. 13/2, 13/4; N.A. Kasetrathikan R.VII No. 13/179; N.A. Tangprathet R.VII No. 12/4.

\textsuperscript{4}N.A. Nakhonbhan, R.V No. 8.7/29, 8.7/31.
February 1917 a strike was held by the Chinese workmen of Makasan Railway Workshop because one of their colleagues was badly treated and unfairly dismissed by a western foreman.\(^5\) In February 1922, seventy-nine Chinese coolies refused to work overtime on Saturday and went on protest by wholly leaving the job.\(^6\) Although these stoppages greatly reflected the labor discontent, the earliest labor disputes which had the element of a modern industrial dispute were the strikes of the tramway workers which took place for a short time in 1921 and for a longer time and on a broader scale from December 1922 to January 1923.\(^7\)

There is no evidence to show how the first strike was organized or who led it. It might have been a spontaneous and loosely organized action such as often occurred in the early history of the Thai labor movement. We only know that in February 1921, sixty-four tram drivers of the Red Line stopped their work and held a public meeting in Saket Temple. According to the police attestation, they complained about the hard working conditions and asked for the help of the police. In material terms, this strike failed completely. The strikers returned to work on the same day after the Chief of the Police Department had promised to tell the company to improve the rules and working conditions.\(^8\) No evident organization appeared to have been created as a result of this strike. But the experience seemed to have been assimilated while the grievances did not decrease but continued.

The events leading up to the second strike are mostly unknown. The style of starting the protest was quite similar to the former. But the whole process of strike action took a longer time, and had a much militant character and more participants. In the early morning of 31 December 1922, the Bangkholam and the Samsen routes which were the most important and

\(^5\)N.A. Khamanakhom, R.VI No. 5/7 vol.1.
\(^6\)Siam Rassadon March 1-7, 1922.
\(^7\)The details of both incidents originate from the results of my research using the following official documents and contemporary newspapers: N.A. Nakhonbhan R.VI No. 13/4, Bangkok Kanmuang, Nak Kanmuang, The Kammakon, Phikhat Torpedo, Siam Bureau, Siam China Daily, Siam Sakkhi, Sino—Siamese Daily between Dec. 1922 and March 1923.
\(^8\)N.A. Nakhonbhan, R. VI No. 13/4.
long ones (5.63 and 5.37 miles respectively), among a total of seven routes, were prevented from running. 122 tram drivers and conductors went together to the Police Department and lodged a formal letter of complaint and six demands for: 1) an improvement in the mode of payment, concerning wage and bonus; 2) the creation of formal and written regulations, especially those concerning punishment and fines; 3) a dismissal of the "Three Cruels" namely Mr. T.A. Ericson, the manager, Nai Hui and Nai Pin, the general inspectors, who were considered to be the causes of their misery. The strikers asked the Chief of the Police Department to be their representative in negotiating with the manager. The day long negotiations ended with failure because of the last demand. The strike went on until the next day. The workers tried to approach another higher nobleman, Chao Phraya Yommarat – Minister of the Interior Ministry. Due to his mediation a temporary compromise was reached. The strikers agreed to return to work while the company promised to reconsider the former and the six later demands and to write up new regulations under the inspection of Chao Phraya Yommarat.

The new regulations were issued on 11 January but were not accepted by the workers who asserted that they were fussy and too severe. The main dissatisfaction lay in the insistence on the part of the company in not dismissing the "Three Cruels". This resulted, on January 13, in 305 drivers, conductors and tramboys of all the seven routes deciding to continue striking; they also made an ultimatum to quit if their demands were not fully realized. This brought the company immediately into trouble because according to the contract with the government the company had to keep the trams of each route running all the time, otherwise the concession might be held back. Still, the company uncompromisingly responded to the workers’ threats by hiring new recruits from newspaperboys, the unemployed, the non-striking inspectors and mechanics and they managed to overcome the crisis, though with great confusion. During the strike the negotiation went on but both

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10 The Kammakon Jan. 27, 1923:5.
parties stuck to their positions. The strikers were determined not to give in; therefore, the company decided to expel all of them on January 21.

In material terms, the early attempts by the tramway workers to stand up for their rights completely failed. This was due to their lack of experience, leadership and financial support. The plentiful supply of labor was a main threat to the strikers. The manager's pressure in terms of dismissal and recruiting a new work force effectively broke up their embryonic solidarity and led to violence among the militants, the submissive and the new recruits. The fact that the company was foreign with joint investment with the government and the nature of its strategic business provided the company with far better bargaining power which caused the mediator, the Ministor of the Interior Ministry, to take sides with the company.

In spite of its failure the strike by the tramway workers was significant in the following ways.

First of all, it was the earliest labor dispute which had all the elements of a modern industrial dispute. This strike provided active participation in the act of expressing dissatisfaction. During the course of strike the reasons and demands of the strikers were concretely and openly presented. This confirmed that they were conscious of the causes of their hardships and that they decided to face them rather than submissively or despairingly withdrawing. Moreover, their actions were organized in a collective manner, albeit loosely. This joint action allowed them, for the first time, to use their bargaining power to speak out and to negotiate on behalf of their own people.

Secondly, the tramway workers' determination to stand up for their rights can be marked as the beginning point of the labor movement in Thailand. It marked the beginning of industrial action and an attempt to organize workers into a formal association with a definite direction and long-term aims.

Although the strike failed, the tramway workers gained a great deal of publicity. Their act was positively justified by most newspapers. Some advocated it as a legitimate means of protecting workers' interests. In the following years after this agitation, the form of industrial action became a recurring act among different groups of urban workers. Strikes occurred repeatedly especially after the world economic slump during the end of 1920s.
For example, in 1927 and in February 1929 textile workers stopped working to demand higher wages.\textsuperscript{11} In June 1928 the Chinese dock workers came out on strike over Japan.\textsuperscript{12} In the same year there was also a strike by the tramway workers of the construction unit over changes in transport welfare.\textsuperscript{13} In October 1929 the saw-mill workers went on strike but the cause was unknown.\textsuperscript{14} In January 1930 the Makasan railway workers protested and threatened to strike over the termination of transport welfare.\textsuperscript{15} In September 1931 the white-collar workers of the Siam Electricity Co. launched a work stoppage over an unfair salary reduction between the Thai and the foreign employees.\textsuperscript{16}

The tramway workers' willingness to defy their employers and to resort to strike action motivated some philanthropic intellectuals to aid the workers in developing their struggle to protect their interests. Shortly after the end of the tramway strike a new solidarity of trade unionism was advocated as a method of obtaining improved economic conditions for the workers.\textsuperscript{17} The tramway workers were urged to be the first to organize. As soon as the political climate became favorable after the Democratic Revolution of June 1932, the first labor association, The Tramway Worker Association of Siam, was founded in October of the same year. Its objectives were to teach thrift, help the aged and the crippled, and to promote harmony among the Siamese.\textsuperscript{18} The tramway association became the spearhead of the labor movement until the beginning of World War II.

Thirdly, the strike of the tramway workers and the spread of labor unrest thereafter reflected the fact that the beginning of capitalist relations of production had gave rise to a new social conflict between labor and capital.

\textsuperscript{11}N.A., Mahatthai R.VII No. 26.5/19, B. "Chinese".
\textsuperscript{12}Sri Krung July 5; 11, 1928.
\textsuperscript{13}N.A., Mahatthai R.VII No. 26.5/79.
\textsuperscript{14}N.A., Mahatthai R.VII No. 26.5/61, C. "lawsuit".
\textsuperscript{15}Daily Mail Jan. 3, 1930: 1; Jan. 5, 1930: 4; Bangkok Kanmuang Jan. 6, 1930: 16.
\textsuperscript{16}Issara Sept. 27, 1931: 16.
\textsuperscript{17}This point is discussed in the last part of this article.
\textsuperscript{18}Security Police, Subdivision 4, Division 3 "Society" No. 108.
According to the complaints of the strikers, they and their families had to live mainly on money wages. Most of them had to work sixteen hours a day without even a definite break for meals. Moreover, they were subjected to punishment such as fines and dismissal without explicit grounds and were often victims of assault by the Chinese inspectors and the western manager. The hardships of the tramway workers revealed that the enslavement of labor by capital had already occurred in Thai society since the very early stages of industrial development.

Another significant aspect of the 1922-1923 tramway strike was that it was not a simple economic manifestation, but rather a symbolic one which rendered a specific meaning to the legitimation of social norms and value systems. According to one of the Thai moral premises, the workers who possessed the inferior status of servant were expected to pay respect and be obedient to their masters as well as to unquestioningly comply to any order of the authorities. As the protest of the tramway workers opposed this rule, it led to the hostile attitude of the officials whose roles were to protect the rule of hierarchical social relations. The strikers’ objection against the Minister of Interior Ministry’s decision to give in was, therefore, criticized by him as the “selfish act of the headstrongs who cannot distinguish what is good and bad.” King Rama VI himself treated the whole strike process as “unreasonable.”

Indeed the real meaning of the tramway strike was quite different from these pejorative labels. It actually expressed a doubt on the official categories of what was considered good/correct and what was bad/wrong. The workers’ militant behavior contained the symbolic element of questioning the prevailing definition of role and duty of an inferior. Moreover, their attempt to express their demands before the general public was the starting point in the attempt to build up a new challenging definition that even an inferior had the “right” to openly declare what he himself considered as his interest.


In this regard, the tramway strike contained questions with regard to the validity of the dominant rules of hierarchical social relations. It was indeed a cultural manifestation of refusal of certain principles which were believed to guarantee the social order.21

**Structural Conditions of the Labor Unrest**

The occurrence of sporadic strikes among different groups of urban workers since the 1920s was a new phenomenon for Thai society. The basic questions to be considered are what was the grass-root of this unrest and what were its predominant features.

When the tramway workers began their agitation the urban wage laborers had to face four oppressive conditions.

First they had to confront the new industrial situation, namely the factory system and the novel industrial relationship. The deep integration of Thai economy to the world capitalist system since the early 19th century gave rise to the implantation of factory system on the traditional base of agrarian patterns of work and life. The novel industrial system of production expanded rapidly after the first modern factory, the American Steam Rice-Mill Co., was established in Bangkok in 1858. The urban wage laborers were the first group who had to face the collective process of production, with its restrictive rules and regulations, and insistence on punctuality and steady output and with work and rest determined not by task but by the clock. These working circumstances were in sharp contrast to the decentralized system of agricultural production and the pattern of peasant time.

The factory system also changed the sense of time of the urban populace. Time became money.22 For the employers time was converted into a means

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21It is noteworthy to add here that these rudimentary doubts and refusals did not end with the failure of the tramway strike. On the contrary, they developed simultaneously with the growth of the labor movement into a more systematic form of challenging certain dominant social definitions which had been mostly defined by the ruling elites.

22See, for example, a reflection of the feeling towards the emergence of this concept in *The Poetry of “Khru Thep”* (Chao Phrya Thammasakmontri) 1 (1972).
of labor exploitation. The demarcation between “work” and “life” became apparent and rigid. Adaptation to such circumstances was not easy and smooth for those who were accustomed to the agricultural pattern of work and life. The tramway workers were cited as being already turned into commodities and they were among the first who felt alienated as a result of finding themselves in this new situation. Their reaction expressed a reluctance against the adaptation to the control of industrial work and time.

Along with the emergence of the modern factory, a novel economic relationship between employer and employee was created. This relationship was completely different from the agricultural one in that it was indirect, impersonal, though interdependent through the exchange of wage and labor. The growth of factories, even small ones, resulted in the separation of the operative from the ownership of the means of production. This, in turn, considerably increased the power of the master and reduced that of subordinated workers. The factory system was based on the assumption of the freedom of contract between man and man. But such a contractual relationship was impersonal and thereby required no obligation of kindness nor loyalty between the two parties. The first generation of modern wage laborers in Thailand was forced to encounter a relationship which seemed to lack the harmony that had hitherto existed between the interest of the master and workmen. Unofficial surveys on labor problems by some newspapers pointed out that the masters took advantage of their superiority and so a lot of confusion and suffering was caused. For example, several employees were forced by their poverty to sign a contract in which all the conditions of work and wage-rates were solely determined by the employers. Some employers cheated their workmen by paying less than the agreed amount, or by making deductions from their wages claiming that the latter had done something wrong. Such behavior by employers was indicated as one of the main (among others) causes of the enslavement of workers.

The inhuman working conditions, low wage-rates, harsh discipline

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23 Bangkok Kanmuang Dec. 18, 1922.
and punishment together with the impersonal relations by the employers, posed a threat to the workers. Evidence indicated that through these oppressive conditions the workers were “turned to be only objects of the rich” and “their flesh and blood is so deeply exploited that only their rotten bones are left.”

Secondly, the workers' grievances were magnified by the lack of legislative protection. There was neither labor office nor specific labor law. The development of industries had occurred in a haphazard way without government restrictions or controls. This laissez-faire policy was applied to the urban workers in respect of wages, working hours and conditions of work. No minimum wage-rate was enforced. Rates and modes of pay depended on the determination of employers alone. Since April 1928 there had been an initiative to enact a factory code. But this was aborted when the country felt the economic slump from 1930 to 1932. As a result, security and hygiene systems were not found at the workplace. The explosion of boilers occurred often while no accident compensation nor sick leave were offered. It was the newspapers, instead of the authorities, which cared for the workers' health conditions and demanded more responsibility from the employers as well as the enactment of a factory code. During the economic slump period, workers of private firms and government offices were strongly affected. In 1930 reports on dismissal and the reduction of work-hours of skilled and unskilled workers and salary reductions of clerical workers were repeatedly publicized. The government was strongly criticized as neglecting the employment problem. A demand for labor office was additionally made.

27 See, for example, Sri Krung Oct. 29, 1928; Daily Mail Dec. 1, 1930: 1; Bangkok Kanmuang Dec. 29, 1930: 16; Chareon Krung Jan. 30, 1931: 2.
In the absence of any legislative protection, the degree of labor exploitation increased without limit. Being unrepresented either in the legislature or by any trade union, the first generation of modern wage laborers was left at the mercy of their employers' whims and the economic laws of supply and demand.

Thirdly, the urban way of life in which money played a crucial role was another oppressive condition for workers. Unlike in the village, life in town offered less social guarantees and material security to its members. The urban workers were left alone to manage the high cost of living in Bangkok. With the growth of urban employment, worker housing became a necessity, but neither the government nor the employers regarded it as their concern. Though in some rice-mills accommodation was provided for laborers, it was neither enough nor often. The inhuman accommodation conditions of the Chinese coolies was confirmed by the study of Prince Dilok.29

Most of the workers had to rent rooms for themselves and their families. In case the rooms were far from the workplace, their wage had to be spent for transportation quite apart from food and housing. No complete data on rents in Bangkok is available. But it was claimed that rents were so high that some workers had to pay 10 baht per month for a tenement in a non commercial location.30 Even the Phimthai, the conservative, government-sponsored daily newspaper, accepted that rents had increased rapidly especially after the economic slump.31 In 1932 the minimum daily expense of one laborer with a wife and two children was revealed to be about 49 satangs, out of which the tenement cost reached an average of nearly 40%. While a daily-paid unskilled laborer and a head worker, who were permanent employees of the state railways, earned 50 and 80 satangs respectively for a day work of 9 hours.32

29 Dilok von Siam, Landwirtschaft in Siam (Hamburg).
30 The Kammakon March 10, 1923: 82 – 85; The Pakka Thai Nov. 4, 1926.
31 Phimthai July 22, 1930: 11.
The unfamiliarity of the industrial routine and working conditions accompanied by the lack of legal protection and the competitive urban life caused both physical and mental insecurity among workers. In order to sustain life, the human needs included not only the basic requirements of food, housing, clothes but also a certain kind of insurance in times of crisis, namely in case of sickness, accident, unemployment and death. Traditionally, the patron-client relationship functioned as an effective mechanism guaranteeing for such needs. In general the patron was expected to use his resources to provide benefits for his client, i.e. to give loans in time of the client’s economic distress, to give advice, information as well as connections with the institutional order. But the legal abolishment of corvée system which resulted in the collapse of the formal patron-client bondage deprived wage-laborers of such an effective vehicle of personal guarantee. The workers were left to enter the contractual relationship without any information on the labor market; they had to adapt to the unfamiliar industrial clock-watching punctuality, to the complex wage structure and to its pattern of discipline by themselves. The absence of alternative impersonal agency of protection accompanied by the immediate hardships prompted the dissatisfied workers to come together and resort to the direct action of strike as a means of expressing their demands.

However, these oppressive structural conditions alone did not drive the workers to develop their sporadic strikes into a higher level. The labor organization, as well as the solidarity among those who shared the same situation, were inspired by another force.

How did the labor movement arise?

The collaboration with intellectuals was the key impetus for the development of labor unrest into a movement. Evidence shows that the tramway workers did not feel conscious of forming a group with definite aims by themselves. The essentiality of labor organization as a method of obtaining improved economic conditions was introduced to the workers by the intellectuals. It was the latter who stimulated group consciousness among the workers by asserting it as an indispensable means to advance their common interests. It is not difficult to imagine why the workers were
not able to develop into a unionized group by themselves. One reason was that they possessed no history of collective action. The lack of education also deprived them of an ability to put forward their demands independently as well as limiting them from understanding the origins of their sufferings and foreseeing ways to redress them. These factors caused the workers to lean mostly on outside support.

The tramway workers were among the first labor groups who looked for patronage among journalists. Before their strike took place in 31 December 1922, contact between them and a journalist of the Bangkok Kanmuang had already set up. Due to incomplete information, it is not possible to precisely tell about the form and content of this contact nor whether this was the first communication between them or not. But the main point was that through this contact the hard working conditions of the tramway workers were publicized for the first time in a form of a long critical article entitled "The Tramway Workers." This article, published shortly before the occurrence of the strike, explicitly referred to the foreign workers' strategy of protecting their interests through a labor union. It ended with a warning signal that:

If the workers collectively act together either in running or stopping the work, it would effectively remind the employer of a fact that: once all his employers resign, it causes a lot of disadvantages for his business.34

The tramway workers' consideration of the journalist as a neutral party who could relieve their sufferings was obviously manifested in the letter of complaint which 167 strikers sent to the Nak Kanmuang journal.35 The letter stated that: "we, tram drivers and conductors, having read the first issue of your journal that you are willing to listen to and give relief to anybody in distress and trouble, decided to reach for your help." The strikers

asked the editor to "do anything to make the company improve the new strict regulations."36

The hope of the tramway strikers to find an alternative agency of protection was fulfilled when they approached Thawat Ritthidet of the Siam Sakkhi newspaper. From him the workers could get not only support for their strike but also technical advice for handling the negotiation process. After Thawat set up the Khana Kammakon (The Labor Group) at the end of January 1923, the workers obtained full leadership from him.

Before going into details of the role of Thawat and Khana Kammakon, let us consider, briefly, the general factors which promoted the patron-like relationship between the journalists and the workers. The principal factor was the persistence of marked inequalities of the two parties. Due to the nature of work, the journalists possessed certain strategic resources which could render benefits for the workers. The background of good education combined with special knowledge on foreign affairs, and new information on different issues, let them occupy a higher status as modern intellectuals. They could give technical advice to the workers as well as bargain on their behalf. Additionally, their control of their own publication let them control a powerful means of interpreting and distributing "truth." Through their writings, the journalists could agitate public opinion without difficulty. Another factor which accounted for the labor clientele was the humanistic standpoint of the journalists. Since the emergence of newspapers in the first half of the 19th century it held a tradition of being a channel of ventilation for the distressed and underprivileged citizen. Those who did not dare to pass their complaints through the strict official way could send them to the newspapers. Especially after the 1910s, the newspapers played a more important role in presenting critical ideas on controversial issues. While most of them spoke for constitutional and administrational reforms, some attempted to campaign for the interest of the poor, disadvantaged people. It was this concern for social welfare that inspired the workers to come to take the journalists as their protectors.

36 Nak Kanmuang, No.II. 1923: 31.
Thawat and Khana Kammakon (The Labor Group):
The Mobilizer of the Labor Movement

Thawat Ritthidet (1894-1950) was the first intellectual who determined to work on behalf of workers. He became the first labor leader after the tramway strike in 1922-3 until before World War II. Thawat came from a rich up-country middle-class family and possessed quite a privileged status under the patronage of a powerful nobleman. But he loved justice and was very concerned about the divergence that existed between the elite and the rest of the population. His strong desire to help the less fortunate stemmed from the impression left on him by Buddhist philosophy. This made him relatively different from other liberal-minded intellectuals of the same generation such as Tienwan, KSR.Kulab, the leaders of the 1911 abortive coup d'état and Pridi Bhanomyong whose progressive ideas on political and social reform were, more or less, influenced by western education and direct experience. Thawat had never been in foreign countries, he had been cultivated by Buddhist tradition since childhood and while he was in the monkhood at Samphanthawong Temple. Being enlightened by the Buddha's philosophy of life and inspired by his struggle for social equality among different castes, Thawat was prepared through the use of critical thinking to defy the accepted opinions of the society. His first revolt occurred in the Samphanthawong Temple. It was a break with the institutional ranking system among monks of different status. As a result, he was pressed to leave the monkhood and accused of "disturbing the religious order." After that Thawat entered the Thai bureaucracy through the sponsorship of his informal patron. The life as a civil servant let him witness the administration system from the inside. After four years he found himself unmatched with the favoritism and conservatism of the bureaucracy. He decided to resign and began a more independent career as a journalist at the Siam Sakkhi newspaper.

37This short biography of Thawat is a result of intensive interviews with Thawat's close relatives – his second wife, Mrs.Choi, his son, Mr.Sawit, and his daughter, Mrs.Amphai – on Jan.8; Dec. 29, 1983. See the full biography in Sungsidh Piriyarangsan, The History of the Labor Struggle in Thailand. (in Thai) (1983).
As a journalist he spoke consistently for the interests of the underprivileged especially the urban poor and criticized from time to time the ineffective administration. As his office was close to the tramway head office, he got into contact with some workers and was convinced of their hardships. His sympathetic attitude drove him to express in the *Siam Sakkhi* full moral support for the strikers as soon as the strike exploded. When the situation of the strikers got worse, he began to feel that they needed actual guidance and patronage from more fortunate people, such as himself. Therefore he resigned from the *Siam Sakkhi* and started to help the workers in their struggle for a better life by launching a special journal for labor called "The Kammakon" (The Laborer) and setting up a group of labor sympathizers under the name of "Khana Kammakon" (The Labor Group) at the end of January 1923.

Indeed, *The Kammakon* was the first concrete example of cooperation between intellectuals and workers. Thawat declared that "learning such grievances of our friends, we, the workers, collected a small sum of money left from the employers’ immoral exploitation and set up a journal called *The Kammakon*." The purposes of this journal were stated as follows:

1. To destroy the state of slavery which still prevails among all workers and employers as well as to bring them freedom, and to promote the rights of workers;

2. To be the voice and the eyes of all people and the Siamese workers;

3. To serve the interests of the Nation, the Religion and the King, especially to push *chat-thai* (the Thai Nation) up to the state of civilization.

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38 *The Kammakon* Jan. 27, 1923: 3.
39 Ibid.
40 *The Kammakon* Feb. 17, 1923: 35.
41 *The Kammakon* Dec. 1, 1923: 626.
42 *The Kammakon* July 28, 1923: 360.
43 *The Kammakon* April 5, 1924: 915.
In the campaign on behalf of workers Thawat was helped by other justice-loving intellectuals, among them were Wat Sunthonjamon, Thawan Chat-asa, and Sun Kitchamnong. All of them were stimulated by The Kammakon and came to join Thawat's initiative as active members of the Khana Kammakon. Different qualifications of each colleague are as follows: Wat — a former police Sublieutenant and a specialist in law and legal affairs, Thawan — English speaking and with a knowledge of World History and international affairs, Soon — a veteran of the World War I battle field in Europe and an eye-witness of the trade union movement in France, Thawat was able to introduce to the workers, his experiences of foreign labor movements and to advocate them a new form of labor organization and an idea of solidarity. In short Khana Kammakon was in a position of being able to give the workers some measure of confidence in the possibility of economic improvement through their own strength.

The Role of Khana Kammakon

Khana Kammakon provided the basic nutrients for the development of labor movement in three ways. It agitated public interest on the labor problem, supplied the workers with the basic insurance of subsistence and educated them about the need for organization and solidarity. I will deal with the first two briefly and the last at some length.

1) The agitation of public interest on workers' problems

According to Khana Kammakon's opinion, the social situation under absolute monarchy was quite unfavorable to the common people who made up the majority of the society. Among these people the harsh situation of the urban laboring poor (or the workers) were considered as being mostly unrecognized by both the authorities and the public. Khana Kammakon said that "the oppression of employers toward employees is prevailing but there seems to be no one who intends to help them." To rally the public

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44The limitations of space here do not allow short biographies of them. Their life and work have already been researched by Sungsidh, see Sungsidh Piriyarangsan, The History of Labor Struggle in Thailand (1983).
45The Kammakon Jan. 27, 1923: 3.
concern *Khana Kammakon* decided to assume the role of mediator among workers, the public and the authorities. Accounts of hardships faced by the urban workers were carried through *Khana Kammakon*'s publications, first *The Kammakon* and later *The Pakka Thai* (The Thai Pen),\(^{46}\) in order to enlist public sympathy. The non-traditional phenomenon of strikes was also intensively justified in order to win widespread approval and support. The workers were encouraged to write directly to *Khana Kammakon* to expose their problems, opinions or discontents. It was hoped that the workers' complaints would attract the attention of the authorities. Actually this produced a relatively positive result. For example, in case of the pawn-shop clerks who petitioned about the continual work of seven days a week without any holidays.\(^{47}\) The Chief of the Police Department took up the case by calling for a general meeting of all pawn-shop owners and was successful in insisting that some of them offer one weekly rest day and on every official holiday.\(^{48}\) Another example was the case of the temporal laborers of the Public Health Department who claimed that they had been unfairly treated by their official supervisor. One official was sent to see the editor of *The Kammakon* to clear up this affair.\(^{49}\) Both cases were openly published. By this way the voice of the workers was heard.

2) *The supply of the basic insurance of subsistence for workers*

*Khana Kammakon* was among the first who cared for social welfare and tried to work it out in a formal practice. It was clear to Thawat that one main problem of the workers was financial. He attempted to reduce it first by rendering his personal support. An idea of setting up a formal organ to insure life of the disadvantaged came up later. In early 1926 ""*Sathan Thaen Tuai Rat""* (The House of Public Service) was established with the objectives

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\(^{46}\)Due to the strong criticism from some officials, *The Kammakon* was forced to close down after one year of publication. In response *Khana Kammakon* launched another newspaper called *The Pakka Thai* in March 1926 and pursued *The Kammakon*’s former strategies of mobilizing workers and agitating for more public interest on labor issues until 1927.


\(^{48}\) *The Kammakon* March 24, 1923: 121-122.

\(^{49}\) *The Kammakon* April 19, 1924: 948-952.
to "eliminate troubles and distress as well as to care for basic happiness of the people." According to its regulation the House offered relief both to its members and non-members in times of sickness, death, legal business and affairs, unemployment as well as recreation service. The membership was not restricted only to workers, rather it was open to anyone who was able to contribute towards the different rates of membership fee. All services were free of charge for members and for those who had serious financial problems. The principles of the House were the Buddhist philosophy of Life and mutual help or samakkhi dham (unity). The information on the number of membership is not available but according to Thawat's family the activity of the House was very popular among the poor. One effective service, among others, was the takeover of a judicial dispute between two commoners who were low civil servants and a high-ranking official of a noble family.

As a matter of fact the business of the House was mainly based on an economic sponsorship of Thawat and his friends. To subsidize the House Thawat had from time to time sell his own property until he himself went into financial difficulties. In this regard Thawat and Khana Kammakon assumed perfectly an ideal role of traditional patron who attempted to provide a minimal guarantee for material security to their would-be clients. The House, as a forerunner of a welfare society, was the means by which Khana Kammakon offered support in a vertical way for the people who were not kinsmen.

3) The advocation of a labor organization and solidarity among those who shared a common situation

Khana Kammakon laid great stress on educating the workers. This was run through the direct communication and the publications.

According to Thawat's family, a small group of workers from different workplaces came to consult with Thawat almost everyday. A long talk and

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50 Pakka Thai Jan. 9, 1926: 8.
51 Ibid.
52 See details in Pakka Thai, Aug.-Sept. 1926.
discussion on everyday and particular problems was held. This face-to-face relationship was a two-way communication. The workers’ anxieties, lived experiences, immediate problems and interests were interchanged with Thawat’s consolation and the provision of new information, new interpretations and technical advice on the practical options for action to rectify the bad situation.

*The Kammakon* and *The Pakka Thai* were used as a channel of indirect communication with the workers. They were significant means of expressing moral support to workers and distributing *Khana Kammakon’s* analysis of the labor issues. The content of this analysis was as follows:

It was concerned, first, with the causes of workers’ occupational grievances. These were pointed out as derived from two fundamental roots. One of them was “*kwam kot khi*” (oppression) and “*kan khut luat nua*” (exploitation) of the “wicked employers.” The oppression and exploitation arose from the employers’ superiority in determining the whole conditions of work as well as rates of pay. Moreover such superiority was abused in that some employers pursued different tricks to exploit the workers to a greater degree. Another root lay on the workers’ nature of poverty. The state of not owning the means of production and qualified knowledge for other jobs, caused the workers to submit to the employers’ pressure, although some were conscious of the unfair exchange of interest between them and the employers.

The lack of proper education and solidarity among the workers were pointed out as attributive causes of their hardships. *Khana Kammakon* stated that “the workers are ignorant; the only thing they know is how to sell their labor power even with few pay, they only think of how to get their stomach and those of their families full day by day;” they even don’t know

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56 *The Kammakon* July 28, 1923: 360.
Moreover what made the workers incapable of escaping from oppression and exploitation was that "we workers do not join together; the result of not forming up a union keeps us under the pressure of employers’ immorality." Khana Kammakon laid great stress on the lack of unity as well as labor leader which caused the workers to have less bargaining power and be incapable of protecting their basic interests especially in times of sickness or being unfairly dismissed.

Another point in Khana Kammakon's educating process was the introduction of practical options for the workers. It supported the ideas to the workers that they possessed certain potentialities to improve their unfavorable conditions. The strike was intensively advocated as an essential way of obtaining a better life. Khana Kammakon began with justifying the strike act of the tramway workers. A long argument against the hostile attitude of the company and the government officials towards this industrial action was expressed in several issues of The Kammakon. Khana Kammakon told that:

What we workers have done is correct and reasonable. As we are not capable to obey the rules of the employer anymore, it's natural to stop working for him. That's all! Since our country now attains the stage of Civilization, which means we had already woken up, there is no need to pay homage to the foreigners so much that they abuse their power to oppress us.

Khana Kammakon tried to legitimate the strike act by defining it as a "civilized practice." At that time "civilization" was taken as a popular frame of reference especially when the development of the country was concerned. But Khana Kammakon's interpretation differed from the others'. The civilized practice was elaborated as the state of being conscious of one's own "right" to protest, to present one's overt demand and dissatisfaction and to let oneself free of oppression. Such consciousness was

57 The Kammakon Dec. 1, 1923: 626.
58 The Kammakon Dec. 15, 1923: 661.
confirmed as an intrinsic element of the contemporary period. *Khana Kammakon* induced that the ultimate goal of the strike was not the demands proposed to the employers, rather it was "freedom",

Let's be conscious: what do we stage a strike for? For obtaining freedom for us all, don't we?... Let's be conscious that we are workers, in other words, employees. We have to be employed because of our poverty. But to be short of money is not important because we can find something to eat finally. What is more important is that we should not let our freedom limited... If we let ourselves deprived of both money and freedom, we will not be able to hold up our head. And thereby the employers will oppress us.  

*Khana Kammakon* concluded that to hold a strike was the only way to obtain freedom.

Let us workers realize that freedom depends upon no one, except all of us. If only we act in a correct way! What we should do is: when we are not satisfied with any rule or oppression of the employer with whom we do not make a contract, let us all unitedly stage a strike!  

Solidarity was explained as a prerequisite and decisive condition for the protection and advancement of workers' interests. *Khana Kammakon* pointed out that:

Currently all of us are still of high individuality. We still love to pursue life separately from each other. This does not match the basic principle of Civilization, so long as we, all Siamese workers, individually think of ourselves, don't even expect to escape from the immorality which the wicked employers use in oppressing us. Don't you ever think of the saying: "in union is there strength?" The union can generate our power which others

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will have to respect and fear. Nobody can dare to treat us as a stupid laboring buffalo anymore.\textsuperscript{62}

Personal conflict among the workers was suggested to be avoided as it would destroy the solidarity. Once there was a clash between two Chinese worker groups who were members of opposed secret societies, Thawat offered them a mediation and could finally calm them down (stopping near violence) by illucidating that all of them shared the same life situation and the same interests.

Besides, a concrete method forming an organization was explained to the workers.

First we laborers and workers should come and join together to build up a union according to each different vocation, such as tramway workers, motorcar workers, horse-cart workers, loading coolies. After that we should elect a person who is intelligent enough to be our leader. By this way, in times of crisis, we could help each other far better than before...To have a leader would bring us a lot of advantages. For example, we can make good contact with our fellow workers in a more convenient way. Furthermore when there is a dispute between us and the employers, our leader can be our representative in negotiating with the employer...\textsuperscript{63}

The process of mobilizing the workers as being described above was very novel. Actually it was an introduction of a new World View which was composed of both normative and cognitive elements. \textit{Khana Kammakon}'s identification of workers' hardships as resulting from a concrete human act of exploitation and oppression was in sharp contrast to the popular belief of the abstract rule of "Karma." It was a realistic perspective which told the workers that their misfortune and troubles were not the results of actions of the past life against which there was no redress. To stress that resistance against the surrounding conditions was possible and was to be done offered an active

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{The Kammakon} March 22, 1924: 883.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{The Kammakon} March 22, 1924: 885.
way of thinking. It encouraged the workers to be potential subject. The stress on the "rights" of workers to speak out, lay demands and advance their interests opposed directly the prevailing norms which stated only the submissive "duty" of an inferior.

In this regard, Khana Kammakon's activities of mobilizing and educating the workers possessed two ideological functions. First, they challenged and expressed a doubt on the legitimation of unequal social relations and the dominant moral premises governing certain patterns of social interaction. Secondly, they constituted a determinance of the labor activities. The proposed novel kinds of practices, namely the collective acts of striking and organizing a labor union, were demonstrated as a blueprint of the construction of workers' strength and bargaining power. The proposal of Khana Kammakon actually functioned as an information source which gave shape and direction to the ongoing flow of the workers' activities.

To sum up, what Khana Kammakon contributed to the workers was the building up of an infrastructure for the labor movement. Their mobilizing process was an organizational preparation, namely leader training. Simultaneously their activities were in the form of ideological preparation. They built up a moral public base for labor. Additionally they proposed new ideological formulations and categories of classifying and justifying what was a fact, what was good, what was relevant and what was possible. These new patterns of meanings constituted an ideology which functioned as one significant factor in the rise of the labor movement after 1932.

The Origin of Khana Kammakon's Interpretation and Its Limitation

Although Khana Kammakon made several critics and challenged the validity of certain dominant norms and value system, it took the traditional model of social relations between Master and Servant as a frame of reference for their interpretation. In considering the problems of workers and criticizing the exploitative and oppressive relations between employers and employees Khana Kammakon did not apply any western economic theory of production, rather the Buddhist principle of Master and Servant relations was mainly made use of.
In the *Tripitaka* the ethical doctrines of a good master and a good servant are specified below.

A master should render his servant five favors, namely:
1) to assign a suitable work according to the servant’s strength;
2) to provide him enough food and reward for his service;
3) to take care of him when he gets ill;
4) to share food with him in times of scarce food or beverage;
5) to allow him freetime during festivals.

A servant is obliged in return to work for his master in these ways:
1) to get up to work before the master;
2) to stop working after the master;
3) to take only what the master allows;
4) to improve the way of working;
5) to honor the master’s kindness.

This rule of behavior is based on the core idea of mutual help between the two parties of different social roles and positions and requires the mutual obligation of kindness and loyalty. Through centuries and generations this rule has been institutionalized as a social norm by different forms of oral teaching and written social and religious documents. Even though capitalism became much more apparent in the commercial, service and production sectors since the turn of the 19th century, the normative rule of Master and Servant was still prevailing. It seems to have been an attempt of the ruling elites to apply this rule to the new economic relations between employer and employee as one can easily find reference to such norms in most of the text-books, either on ethics or economics, which were newly written for the modern education system introduced during the first half of the 20th century.

Evidence suggests that although this rule did not have the force of law, it strongly endured in the values and attitudes of *Khana Kammakon*. For example, in answering a letter of complaint from a reader *Khana Kammakon* stated that:

A good worker should realize that he is obliged to exchange his labor for money with the employer, even though he has thereby to sweat by the extreme strain and effort or even though he might
lose his life or body in order to protect the employer’s interest.
A good worker should regard that what the employer assigns him to do, is his own work.\textsuperscript{64}

Another explicit example was the answer to the complaints of the wage laborers of the Public and Health Department. They expressed an objection against their supervisor who often assigned them extra jobs for his own benefit without paying. \textit{Khana Kammakon} disagreed with this complaint and stated that they saw the case as:

...a normal and common tradition of Master and Servant relations. We do not see any unusual point. An association of mutual help between Master and Servant can occur any time and in any form. It is the duty of the Servant to yield to the desire of the Master when he needs the assistance of his labor. Especially when such service does not overtax his strength, it’s natural for the Servant to offer his help.\textsuperscript{65}

However, \textit{Khana Kammakon} saw that the interaction between employer and employee could be taken for granted as a balanced one, namely unexploited and legitimate, so long as the latter was “willing” to render his labor.\textsuperscript{66} If the worker’s consent was disregarded, in other words, if he was forced to any degree and by any way to work, the relations between him and the employer would automatically lose its balance. Additionally, they elaborated that in case the employer failed to attend to his obligation of kindness, the worker, in return, gained a “right” to ignore his conscience of obedience and loyalty and to retaliate by “striking.”

What \textit{Khana Kammakon} added to the traditional interpretation of Master and Servant relations was the novel concept of “the basic rights of Man”.\textsuperscript{67} They borrowed this western concept to attack the divergence among individuals of different social origins by arguing that each individual was

\textsuperscript{64}The \textit{Kammakon} Nov. 10, 1923: 579.
\textsuperscript{65}The \textit{Kammakon} April 19, 1924: 951.
\textsuperscript{66}The \textit{Kammakon} Nov. 10, 1923: 579-580; March 22, 1924: 885; April 19, 1924: 951.
\textsuperscript{67}The \textit{Kammakon} Feb. 10, 1923: 23-24.
socially equal because "each possesses certain basic rights, namely right of the body, the property... The basic rights of Man will never decline, rather will endure as long as one is alive." Furthermore they related this concept to the relations between employer and employee by stating that fundamentally both possessed similar basic rights but

The master and employer can gain certain rights more than the servant or employee because the latter grants his own rights to the first. The reason for this lays in their belief in the virtue, kindness and morality of their master or employer. In general the servant expects that his master would bring him peace and happiness in return.

But in case this expectation was not fulfilled, Khana Kammakon asserted, an act of retaliation was possible and legitimate.

But when the master does not provide the servant happiness but rather takes advantage from the granted rights of the latter in oppressing and suppressing him, then, the worker can hold back his basic rights whenever he wants.

Normally the superior is honored and respected by the inferior. The latter never dares to cut off the rights of the first, unless the superior exercises his immoral power to deprive the inferior of his rights and freedom.

Actually Khana Kammakon's justification of the worker's right of striking is a discovery of "hidden possibilities" inherent in the transmitted model of Master and Servant relations alone. Here proves the ability of Khana Kammakon to graft the new wording and concept of "basic rights of Man" on to the old model of social relations. That is, the traditional material was transformed to fit a new situation in the course of developing a new pattern of action.

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 The Kammakon Feb. 10, 1923: 22.
Nevertheless, the selection of the traditional model of Master and Servant as the frame of reinterpreting has its own limitation. As a matter of fact this model explains the social relations of members of the same family; it provides the definitions of the exact role of individuals when interacting with each other in a direct and personal manner. But Khana Kammakon overlooked this point and attempted to apply it to the economic relations of capitalism which intrinsically did not grow out of the presupposition of mutual help. The contractual relationship between employer and employee which Khana Kammakon tried to explain functions according to the impersonal law of supply/demand and profit/loss does require different obligation, one in which morality and kindness play no roles. The normative rule of Master and Servant does not offer any tool for analyzing the structural contradiction between capital and labor. Exploitation was, therefore, misinterpreted as personal behavior. Being limited by its own frame of reference, Khana Kammakon could not make the workers understand their actual roles as producers and as the essential element of the means of production. Besides, the actual causes of their problems, which were inherent in the economic development and the government’s role, were not pointed out. Because of this partial analysis Khana Kammakon could not produce a comprehensive ideology with the explicit and long-term aims of advancing the workers’ interests.