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SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM AND ECONOMIC UNIONISM IN THAILAND

Napaporn Ativanichayapong

ABSTRACT

After the student uprising in 1973, Thai trade unions adopted social unionism. They allied with other forces, especially students, and promoted issues of benefit to other social classes. This phase ended with the coup of 1976. When union activity again became possible in the 1980s, the unions turned to economic unionism. They campaigned on issues of specific worker benefit (wages, social security), but allowed their alliances to decay, and forfeited broad support. In the 1990s, female workers again forged broad social alliances to fight campaigns on issues of specific female interest (maternity leave, occupational health). Because of its weakness, the trade union movement needs to cultivate social alliances. But worker issues will not have sustained support if trade unions allow others to lead campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s, social movements that played important roles in the political and social development in Thailand can be roughly categorized into four types: workers’ movements, peasant movements, student movements, and the non-governmental organization (NGO) movement. This article focuses on the workers’ movement, which has been driven by trade unions. The study emphasizes the role of the trade union movement as a social movement and its relations with other social movements from 1973 up to the present. Social movement unionism and economic unionism are the two models identified as polar opposites in the analysis of trade unions’ characteristics.

The trade union is one of the oldest forms of workers’ organization and still plays an important role in many parts of the world. In Thailand, trade unions and their members are now regarded as a numerically
limited force. Nonetheless, trade unions have been the most important voice of wage earners since they were established. We therefore cannot ignore the development and survival of these organizations in the future.

The history of the trade union movement in Thailand can be traced back to the early 1930s (Kanchada 1989). However, the early development of the Thai workers’ movement was interrupted by a military coup in 1958. Under authoritarian rule, labour organizations stagnated for more than a decade. After the political uprising on 14 October 1973, the workers’ movement revived and trade unions actively presented themselves as the representatives of the working class.

Social movement unionism developed as the dominant form of the trade union movement from October 1973 to October 1976, with three components: defence of the common interests of the working class, class collective action, and participation in the movements for broad social objectives. Economic unionism developed to replace social movement unionism in the post-1976 period. Trade unions turned to emphasize only the defence of the workers’ common interests and distanced themselves from movements for broad social objectives.

**SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM UNDER THE POST AUTHORITARIAN REGIME**

The three years between 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 were the best years for the development of social movements in Thailand. For the workers’ movement, labour organizations could be formed again after new labour protection laws had been promulgated in 1972. During this period, modern trade unions could develop and play an important role as a social movement. I use the definition of a social movement as a series of collective actions by people with common interests who have mass mobilization as their source of power in sustained interaction with elite, opponents, and authorities, and who are chiefly concerned with defending or changing society or changing their own position of social relations (Scott, 1990: 6). Thai trade unionism in 1973–1976 had reached the level of a social movement in terms of both its capability for mobilization and its social concerns.

**Trade unions and the defence of workers’ interests**

The student-led uprising on 14 October 1973 resulted in the end of the military dictatorship regime and the establishment of a parliamentary democratic system. The political situation from the uprising until the
coup of 6 October 1976 contributed to the growth of social movements including the trade union movement. According to Udehn, the critical mass of a social movement often comes from the middle class, who are typically people rich in resources, while the passive mass often consists of less resource-rich people from the lower class (Udehn, 1996: 236). However, the 1973 people’s uprising converted the working class from a passive mass to a critical mass which acted collectively to defend its common interests and to participate in the movements for broad social objectives.

The success of the 1973 people’s uprising in overthrowing the authoritarian regime, followed by the emerging democratic climate, brought about a great change in people’s attitude toward political participation. Many people shifted from a sense of powerlessness to a belief in their own power. For workers, the main instrument used to express their power and release the pressures that had been accumulating for over a decade was the labour strike.

Industrial growth under the import-substitution and export-promotion strategies since the 1960s had been associated with low wages and poor working conditions. As a result, when the political situation facilitated the workers to exercise their collective bargaining power, the demands made by workers during 1973–1975 were mostly related to wages, working conditions, labour law, welfare, and fringe benefit issues (Suwit, 1977: 16). In the state enterprises, strikes not only aimed for higher wages and working benefits, but also demanded improvements in management and the elimination of corruption (Napaporn, 2002: 71).

The labour organizations that led the strikes were industry-based employee associations. However, after the Labour Relations Act was promulgated in March 1975, the employee associations were transformed into company-based trade unions.

**From individual strikes to class collective action**

From late 1973 to mid-1976, many strikes and demonstrations were not actions staged by isolated groups at individual workplaces, but collective actions organized by labour centres that mobilized wide support from workers and trade unions across factory boundaries. These events became a workers’ class collective movement. When the workers undertook collective action as a class, they often confronted employers who also coordinated with other employers as a capitalist block to react against the workers’ demands. Many cases of disputes between employees and employers during 1975–1976 were class confrontations rather than collective bargaining of the two partners in individual
workplaces. In some cases the confrontation became a conflict between the workers and the state, as the workers’ demands evolved from work-related issues to political dimensions.

During this period, there were two important national labour centres—the Trade Union Group of Thailand (TUGT) and the Labour Coordination Centre of Thailand (LCCT)—that mobilized workers’ class collective action. The TUGT evolved from the coordination organization of sixteen industry-based employee associations. It had been recognized by the state as the formal labour centre of the trade unions. The Department of Labour promoted the TUGT in several ways, such as facilitating its meetings and giving financial support for holding May Day celebrations. In 1976, when it became more powerful, the TUGT changed its name to the Labour Congress of Thailand (LCT).

The LCCT was not an autonomous labour organization, but a labour and student-led organization. When it was formed in 1974, Therdphum Chaidee from the Labour Association of Hostels and Hotels was the first president, Prasit Chaiyo from the Labour Association of the Textile Industry in Samut Sakhon was the vice president, and Seksarn Prasertkul, an important student leader of the October 1973 uprising, was the general secretary. The LCCT survived as an important labour centre for around one year before it gradually declined in mid-1975 when its leaders were threatened by the state powers. Under the leadership of these two organizations, trade unions could mobilize support from workers across industries to support labour strikes. In addition, the LCCT and the TUGT gained support from students and socialist-oriented political parties. The two labour centres organized class collective action and mobilized wide support from non-labour groups to support several important strikes.

In the general strike of textile workers in June 1974, the workers’ demands began with concerns over immediate problems of layoff, but then expanded to include demands for increased minimum wages, revision of labour laws, and worker participation in the inspection of working conditions. Seven demands were presented to the director-general of the Department of Labour on 9 June 1974 (Sungsidh, 1989: 146–7). The strike was supported by the sixteen employee associations and by the National Student Centre of Thailand, People for Democracy Group, Federation of Independent Student of Thailand, and Socialist Party of Thailand (Chirakan, 1995: 121).

The students and the socialist political parties also supported the strike of the Dusit Thani Hotel workers and the strike of the female...
workers at the Standard Garment Company, which took place in May 1975. During these two strikes, violence occurred. The Dusit Thani management employed the "Red Gaur Group" to guard the hotel building against the strikers. The Standard Garment employer asked the police to protect the strike breakers, resulting in a clash with workers.

After violence occurred, the TUGT and the LCCT organized a four-day rally at Lumpini Park on 3–7 June 1975. The National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT) and three socialist parties supported the rally. The immediate economic demands of the workers were supplemented by a political dimension: government was pressed to dismiss the police colonel who ordered the use of violence against the strike, to guarantee a non-violent policy in the settlement of labour disputes, and to remove the Red Gaurs from the Dusit Thani Hotel (Samrej, 1987: 132).

In another strike at the Hara Blue Jeans Company from late 1975 to March 1976, the workers seized the factory to operate production by themselves. They were supported by the NSCT and the Socialist Party of Thailand. Student activists helped the workers sell their products at much lower prices than they had been sold in the market. In addition, students organized a "Workers' School" to teach political knowledge to those working at the Workers' Solidarity Factory. The workers operated the factory for almost three months before it was closed on 12 March 1976 by order of the Minister of Interior.

However, the workers' class collective action in this period did not imply that the trade union movement became a Marxist revolutionary movement. As Touraine points out, there is no organic link between class consciousness and revolution (Touraine, 1986: 153). The workers' class collective action was the product of industrial relations problems. It did not stem from revolutionary consciousness. Although some labour leaders were influenced by socialist ideology, the majority of the union actors learned to act as a class from their experience in industrial relations conflict under the leadership of national labour organizations. Consequently, the aims of the class collective action were limited to the defence of the workers' common interests within the existing social conditions rather than aiming at radical transformation of the foundations of the entire society.

**Political activism and broad social objectives of trade unions**

Another notable feature of the trade union movement in the three years after the October 1973 uprising was the involvement of workers in
movements for political purposes and broad social objectives. The political ideology and activism of the trade union actors during this period were influenced by two political forces: the students and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Since 1974, students had expressed their support for workers' and peasants' movements and had encouraged labour and peasant leaders to participate in political demonstrations. The CPT had not played such an important role in the workers' movement, but had some relations with labour activists.

In the 1950s, the CPT had played an important role in spreading socialist thought among Thai intellectuals. Up to 1973, the CPT had concentrated on armed operations in the rural areas under the strategy of "countryside surrounding city". However, after the October 1973 uprising, the CPT tried to infiltrate the student movement, and by 1975 was able to influence some groups of student leaders in both ideology and organization (Pornpirom, 1987: 14–8). Workers were also a target of the CPT. Some union activists, particularly those who were former students or had close connection with the student movement, were approached by the CPT's cadres to mobilize the students to support workers' strikes and organizations (Narong, 1992: 203). However, the CPT's efforts with the workers were unsuccessful because the students had no experience and most CPT-committed workers were dismissed during 1974–1975 (Kanya, 1995: 3–8).

Although the CPT-cadre students could not play much role in the labour movement, other groups of student activists made significant contributions to the development of workers' political consciousness. In mid-1975 the NSCT announced a formal cooperation of three social forces.

The "Tripartite Alliance" of students, workers, and peasants was formed on 2 May 1975 in order to demand social justice, starting with the peasants' issues (Kriangsak, 1998: 255). This type of political coalition, unprecedented in Thailand, was viewed by some state authorities as the basis for implementing a communist strategy of inciting urban riots supported by an organized peasants' uprising (Morell and Chai-anan, 1981: 160).

In fact, the coalition of workers, students, and peasants was a political tactic rather than an exact organizational strategy. The most significant impact of this coalition on the trade union movement was the cooperation between workers and students, which strengthened after the forming of the Tripartite Alliance. When the workers initiated a protest demonstration, rally, or strike, students participated. When the NSCT
launched political campaigns, such as the anti-US imperialist campaign and the campaign against the return of the former dictators, the LCCT and TUGT led its members to join.

Apart from political activism, the trade unions also presented themselves as the representatives of the people at large. This new role of trade unions as a social movement appeared in the general strike to protest the government policy on the increased prices of rice and sugar on 2–5 January 1976. The strike was led by the TUGT and involved seventy trade unions included all the major unions from both state and private enterprises (Bundit and Pairot, 1989: 50–1).

The TUGT demanded the government guarantee the price of paddy at over 2,500 baht per kwian (kwian = 2,000 litres) as approved previously, postpone any further increase in the prices of sugar and rice for one year, immediately implement a land reform programme, promote and establish agricultural cooperatives throughout the country, and improve the efficiency of the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (Arom, 1979: 189–90). This general strike was very important for at least two reasons.

First, it is the only general strike in which the workers’ demands did not directly relate to the common interests of the working class. Although the demand to cap prices of rice and sugar benefited the urban workers, this demand also affected all the urban poor, not the workers in particular. In addition, the other three demands did not relate to the workers’ interests but directly benefited the peasants, who were the majority of the country’s population.

Second, because only a small number of workers were organized and their bargaining power was weak, labour organizations had been seen as a limited force in Thai society. Since October 1973, workers were seen as only allies of the students in the political movement. It was only in this strike that the trade unions could lead the movement on non-labour issues and successfully use their collective bargaining power to achieve demands for broader social interests. This strike therefore changed the public attitude on unions. People began to recognize them as a powerful social force, which did not only fight for their own interests, but was also concerned with the interests of other classes.

The role of the trade unions, during 1973–1976—defending the common interests of the working class by organizing class collective action, and participating in movements for broad social objectives—was seen by a number of labour activists and academics as an ideal model of Thai trade unionism. During this period, organized workers were a
powerful social force and trade unions sought to represent the workers as a whole, and present themselves as a mass social movement rather than just as trade unions

FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM TO ECONOMIC UNIONISM

The development of social movement unionism was interrupted by the sudden change in the political situation after the violent coup on 6 October 1976. The trade unionism that developed thereafter can be defined as "economic unionism" in which trade unions play a very prominent role in the mobilization of workers for economic objectives but fail to produce class-oriented ideology and collective action for broad social objectives. During this period, the social movement unionism of the mid-1970s was replaced by the "economic unionism" in which the trade unions in the state enterprises and private enterprises separately defended the specific interests of their members and distanced themselves from other social movements.

Apart from the change in the political situation, rapid economic growth under export-led industrialization was another condition that facilitated the development of economic unionism in the 1980s. Non-government organizations (NGOs) played important roles in shaping the trade union movement, while the influence of students on the workers' movement declined.

New political and economic situation

The political system in the period 1977–1990 was characterized by three different phases: authoritarian rule in the one year after October 1976; "semi-democracy" over 1978–1987; and liberal democracy in 1988–1990. These phases created different political opportunities for the growth of the trade union movement and other social movements.

Although the authoritarian Thanin Kraivixien government that came to power after the coup on 6 October 1976 could last only one year, the impact of this government's extreme anti-communist policy on the social movements of the mid-1970s was very great. The violent suppression of the social activists who participated in the political demonstrations and protests during 1973–1976 resulted in the transformation of peaceful movements into guerrilla forces under the leadership of the CPT. A large numbers of student activists, labour and peasant leaders left their organizations to join the CPT in the jungle after the October 1976 coup. Subsequently, the NSCT, the LCCT, and the
PFT, which were the important national centres of the student, worker and peasant movements, all collapsed.

Political conditions changed after General Kriangsak Chomanand staged another coup to overthrow the Thanin government in November 1977. After a shift away from the conservative policies to a more liberal regime, student and labour organizations could revive again in the late 1970s, but the peasant organizations collapsed until the early 1990s. Trade unions once again began to organize under the new political circumstances of the 1980s.

The first half of the decade after the 1976 coup was a period of ideological struggle between the Thai state and the CPT. However, the ending of the communist threat at the beginning of Prem’s premiership in the early 1980s loosened up the state’s control over society. This development gave the people more political space to assert themselves. The amnesty programme initiated for defectors of the CPT under the policy directive No. 66/23 also assisted the development of the parliamentary democratic system. CPT defectors returned to the city and later became leaders in various sectors of society. Political movements led by armed or radical social organizations were superseded by relatively less radical, pro-democratic institutions such as political parties, NGOs, and other civil groups.

The Prem era (1980–1988) was the first time that parliamentary politics were relatively stable and democracy in Thailand was institutionalized. However, the period was characterized as “semi-democratic” because the military continued to play a strong political role and economic growth was given higher priority than the development of political rights and the deepening of democracy.

After the Prem regime ended in mid 1988, General Chatichai Choonhavan became the first prime minister since 1976 who was an elected MP. From August 1988 to February 1991, the Chatichai civilian government rigorously challenged the country’s conservative state by moving decision making away from bureaucrats and military into the hands of elected politicians. Non-bureaucratic forces such as businessmen, politicians, organized workers, and social activists grew rapidly in the late 1980s. The bureaucrats and military still played a significant role in politics, but were forced to negotiate with other powerful forces. The major political actors during 1988–1990, therefore, comprised both the military-bureaucratic alliance and the emerging forces of political parties, business groups, labour organizations, and NGOs (Surin, 1996: 153–7).
The shift of economic strategy from import substitution to export-oriented industrialization occurred simultaneously with political changes from military domination towards democracy with increased business influence. The Thai economy went through three phases: the recession of 1983–1984; the economic take-off of the mid-1980s; and the bubble economy of 1988–1991 (Pasuk and Baker, 1997: 27). The rapid growth of the industrial sector in the export-led economy brought about important changes in the structure of employment. There was a proportional expansion of the industrial labour force, with large numbers of female workers incorporated into export industries. In particular, women workers were concentrated in industrial lines that produced the country’s key exports: garments and footwear, textiles, leather goods, precious stones, and processed food. Consequently, trade unions in these industries had women as their important power base.

New alliances of trade unions: labour NGOs

The trade union movement after 1976 was no longer led by one or two strong national centres of trade unions as it was in the mid-1970s. The workers’ collective action was mobilized by organizations of three types: national labour congresses, trade union groups, and labour NGOs. National labour congresses were the formal centres of trade unions that had to register at the Department of Labour. However, the inefficiency of the national labour congresses in defending the common interests of the workers, as a result of the lack of unity among their leaders, gave rise to the development of trade union groups as a new organization for workers’ collective action.

In private enterprises, trade unions in the same industrial area or same industry formed trade union groups in three main industrial zones around Bangkok: i) Rangsit and Nawanakhon, in Pathumthani province, just north of Bangkok; ii) Phrapradaeng in Samut Prakan province to the southeast of Bangkok; iii) Omnoi-Omyai, in Samut Sakhon province, and Nakhon Pathom province to the southwest of Bangkok. In state enterprises, trade unions also formed the State Enterprise Labour Relations Group or State Enterprise Relations Confederation (SERC), which became the most important coordinating organization of state enterprise employees.

During 1988–1990, trade union groups forged cooperation across the industrial zones and set up a new labour coordination centre to replace the national labour congresses in leading the trade union movement. The increasing role of trade union groups in the trade union movement was
facilitated by labour NGOs, which actively supported the workers in campaigns during this period.

After a shift to a more liberal regime in late 1977, trade unions organized activities and began to create relations with the students again. However, alliances between trade unions and students were loosely formed. Student activists did not directly participate in labour strikes or involve themselves in workers' movement, but occasionally coordinated with the trade unions in campaigns where the demands of the two parties overlapped.

Coordination was begun in protests against rising oil prices in 1979–81 (Bundit and Pairot, 1989: 156–7), and in campaigns over bus-fares in 1982 (Chusak, 1993: 7–10). However, in the early 1980s, the student movement began to decline as the result of "ideological confusion" (Jang, 1981: 7–10). Since the late 1970s, a number of student activists who joined the CPT in the jungle after the 1976 coup, had some serious conflict with the leaders of the CPT and began to return to Bangkok. In addition, information about the suffering of people in the Indo-China countries which had become socialist in 1975–1976, spread to Thai society in the early 1980s. These two events were important factors for the decline of socialism as a dominant ideology among student leaders, resulting in a situation of "ideological confusion". Under these circumstances, the student became stagnant. The role of the students in social development was replaced by other social forces, especially the NGOs which became increasingly important in the mobilization of collective action in the 1980s.

While the student movement was viewed as a catalyst of the social transformation in Thailand in the 1970s (Prizzia, 1985: 3–85), the NGO movement became an important factor for political and social development from the early 1980s. Although the number of NGOs increased rapidly in the 1980s, only a small number of NGOs were interested in the labour field, especially on industrial-labour issues and trade unions. Among these organizations, there were only a few NGOs that played significant role in the development of the trade union movement in the 1980s. These NGOs were the Union of Civil Liberty (UCL), the Arom Pongpangan Foundation (APF), and the Friends of Women Foundation (FOW).

The APF is a labour NGO that deals directly with labour and union issues. The UCL is a human rights NGO that operated a Section of Promoting Labour Rights in 1984–1995. The FOW is a women’s NGO whose activities include the Project of Women Workers in Promotion
Industries. Both the FOW and UCL carried out their activities on labour in the Omnoi-Omyai industrial area. The labour NGOs covered in this article include these three NGOs and some others that played an important role in the trade union movement.

**The success and failure of economic unionism**

The growth of economic unionism was evident in the second half of the 1980s. During this period, the state of the country’s economy began to change from recession to economic boom. In addition, the political climate developed from the “semi-democratic system” of the Prem regime, towards more liberal democracy under the Chatichai government. These economic and political conditions facilitated the success of trade unions’ demands on wage increases and enactment of legislation to improve workers’ welfare.

Among private trade unions, economic unionism could develop although the trade unions were weak and there was no unity among the national labour congresses. The crucial factor that enabled this development was that the area-based trade union groups formed a new labour centre of the national trade union movement. In addition, the trade unions were strongly supported by labour NGOs.

In the 1980s, trade union groups in the private sector and labour NGOs were successful in campaigns to demand wage increases and to compel the government to pass important labour laws that improved the working conditions and welfare of workers in the private sector. The important workers’ demonstrations during this period were campaigns to increase the national minimum wage, protests against the proliferation of short-term employment contracts and subcontracting, and the campaign on the Social Security Act. Among state enterprise unions, workers could achieve their demands when SERC led workers to organize strong collective action on wage increases and opposition to privatization policy.

However, the trade unions failed to build any unity within the trade union movement. The national labour congresses lost their position as workers’ representatives, and became self-serving organizations of the union leaders. The self-serving character of the national labour congresses was also indicated by the high competition among the national labour congresses to increase their union affiliates and compete for prestigious seats on various tripartite bodies (Somsak, 2001: 272–88). This competition was encouraged by the methods of electing employee representatives for tripartite committees, which granted each union one
vote regardless of the size of its membership. Competition between national labour congresses reflected the changes in the characteristics of these organizations from national centres of the social movement unions in the mid-1970s towards self-serving interest organizations of some union leaders in the late 1980s.

For state enterprise unions, the SERC was strong enough to organize collective action independent from the national labour congresses and the NGOs. However, the development of the state enterprise union movement indicated both the success and failure of economic unionism in the 1980s. The unions could organize strong autonomous action to defend their members’ interests but failed to gain support from the public and from other social movements. The unions’ unity and strength thus could not save them from a crisis of legitimacy and unpopularity.

Unlike the trade unions in the private sector, the state enterprise unions were rich in terms of resources for mobilizing collective action. Their organizational strength resulted in two different impacts on the development of trade unions. On the one side, there was no way for social activists outside the trade unions to intervene in the determination of unions’ objectives. The state enterprise unions were thus little influenced by other social movements when they determined their aims and strategy. On the other side, the trade unions had no need to make alliances with other organizations because they could organize strong collective action by themselves. These conditions, however, led to the isolation of the state enterprise unions from other social movements. The cause of the unions’ strength were thus also the source of their isolation.

The strong bargaining power of trade unions without wide public support was not a sufficient factor to protect the unions from being destroyed. After a military group calling themselves the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) staged a coup to seize political power from the Chatichai government on 23 February 1991, the junta that came to power wasted no time in imposing severe restrictions on labour rights. The state enterprise employees could gain little sympathy from the media and the public when their union rights were abolished.

**NEW CAMPAIGNS AND COALITIONS**

The growth of economic unionism in the 1980s was interrupted by the coup in 1991 and the economic crisis in 1997. After the coup, the NPKC introduced some new labour laws to abrogate the state enterprise unions and strictly control the collective bargaining rights of trade
unions in the private sector. This labour control policy undermined the bargaining powers of organized workers and limited the ability of trade unions to defend their common interests. The workers’ demands, particularly on wages, were further constrained after 1997 as a result of the economic crisis.

Because trade unions in the 1990s are not as strong as they were in the past, the major demonstrations since 1991 have been organized through coalitions of trade unions and their allies. The successes of unions’ demands since 1991 have been thus dependent on the support of their alliances rather than the trade unions themselves. In addition, in response to new economic conditions, trade unions had to shift their collective demands away from the immediate economic issue of wage increases to issues that affected the workers’ quality of lives in the long term. These new characteristics were evident in two important labour campaigns: the 90-day maternity leave campaign and the occupational safety and health (OSH) campaign.

**The campaign for 90-day maternity leave**

Many studies of First World trade unionism have argued that the lack of participation by women in trade unions is due to certain structural features such as: male domination in unions; the fact that women are employed in industries which are difficult to organize; the double burden which means women do not have time for union activities; or the gender socialization that reinforces women’s roles as mother and wife. However, Chhachhi and Pittin (1999: 75) argue that feminist theorizing on women workers has been challenged by women’s actions in the Third World. Women in developing countries have responded to pressure created by changed economic conditions, and have initiated or joined in actions at various levels to support themselves and their families.

In Thailand, women workers were an important power base of the trade union movement since the mid-1970s, but did not carry out any campaign on issues of particular interest to women. The main issues of labour campaigns in the past were matters of common benefit for the working class such as wages, fair employment contracts, and social security systems. Men dominated the decision-making positions in trade unions at all levels, and showed little concern for issues of specific benefit to women workers. However, the situation changed from the early 1990s when gender issues were promoted by both international and domestic organizations.

The development that had significant implications for the status and
role of women in the trade union movement was the rapid incorporation of women into the industrial labour force. There was a significant increase in the number of women working in the export-oriented manufacturing sector. By the first half of the 1990s, more than 50 percent of the total labourers in this sector were women (see table 1). However, after 1996 when economic growth slowed, the proportion of women workers decreased to less than 50 percent. More women than men were dismissed during the economic crisis.

### Table 1: Number of Women Workers in Workplaces, 1992–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Labour</th>
<th>Women Workers</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4,413,780</td>
<td>2,770,090</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>4,911,787</td>
<td>2,550,043</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>5,920,350</td>
<td>3,126,879</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>5,920,350</td>
<td>3,589,422</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>7,249,952</td>
<td>3,317,869</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>7,608,227</td>
<td>3,486,824</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4,381,248</td>
<td>2,082,783</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>8,134,644</td>
<td>3,881,317</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8,062,338</td>
<td>3,829,770</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Labour Protection and Welfare, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare

Since the early 1990s, both international and domestic organizations promoted issues of women’s status and rights in the trade union movement. The unions’ priority demands, which traditionally were issues of common benefit to workers in general, began to include issues of specifically women’s interest.

The campaign to demand 90 days of maternity leave was the first labour campaign that related particularly to women workers’ benefits. The campaign started in 1991 during the authoritarian regime of the Anand Panyarachun government. An alliance was formed between trade unions and NGOs concerned with women, children, and labour issues. This alliance called for the Ministry of Interior to amend the law to entitle female employees a maternity leave of 90 days with full pay. However, on 19 November 1991, the Cabinet only approved the female government officials to have such right but refused to give the same rights to female employees in the private sector, on grounds that the resulting increase in production costs in private industries would affect employment and economic growth as a whole (Bundit, 1999: 130).

The government discrimination policy led to a lengthy campaign to
extend maternity leave entitlements to women workers in the private sector. The campaign was conducted by a coalition consisting of trade unions, and NGOs on labour, women, and child issues. Members of the government were lobbied and public rallies held. NGOs organized seminars to support the campaign including an international workers’ forum to celebrate the People’s Plan for the 21st century (PP21), which included the 90-days maternity leave demand (Jadet, 1993: 33).

On 27 April 1993, the Cabinet authorized the Interior Minister to amend the labour law so that female workers in the private sector would have the 90 days with full pay. According to the new law, the workers would be paid by their employees for the first 45 days and would have to claim their wages from the Social Security Fund for the remaining 45 days. In 1993, the Social Security Fund was effective only in establishments with at least ten employees. The new law thus benefited only women workers working in firms with at least ten employees, that registered with the Social Security Office.

In fact, the campaigning committee wanted the 90-day maternity leave with full pay to be enforced by the Labour Protection Laws, which would be effective for every women worker even if she worked in a workplace with only one worker. However the campaigners decided to stop their action because they were satisfied with what they had achieved (Jadet, 1993: 34).

The success of this campaign did not depend only upon the collective action of trade unions but also on the ability of trade unions to seek support from non-labour organizations, especially from the labour, children and women NGOs.

The OSH campaign and the new network

Following the successful campaign for maternity leave, another important labour campaign arose on the issue of occupational safety and health (OSH). This lengthy campaign was launched from 1993 up to the present. The OSH campaign indicated a new stage of the Thai labour movement in which workers and labour NGOs made alliance with peasant organizations and academics. The remarkable character of the OSH campaign is that it created a new network of social movement organizations consisting of trade unions, networks of the rural poor, NGOs, and academics.

The OSH campaign is an articulation of two labour agitations: first, the demand for improvement of occupational safety after the Kader fire tragedy; and second the demand for fair compensation for Bangkok
Textile Company workers suffering from occupational ailments. The former agitation was led by an ad hoc network of trade unions, NGOs and university academics, while the latter was carried out by a network of occupationally ill patients supported by the Assembly of the Poor.

Industrialization has generated problems of occupational safety and health for a long time. However, it has only been during the 1990s that problems of OSH have attracted increasing attention outside the workplace (Brown, 2001: 131). OSH was assigned a low priority by government in industrial development policies, and trade unions also gave less importance to OSH issues than to union rights, fair wages, and fair employment contract. Problems of OSH attracted increasing attention of trade unions and the general public in the early 1990s as a result of two important factors. First, there was a number of serious disasters caused by unsafe working conditions, and a worsening situation of industrial sickness caused by occupation-related health hazards. Second, OSH became a significant issue for international labour organizations and local labour NGOs, which strongly supported the unions in their demand for an improvement of OSH standards.

The labour campaign on occupational health and safety was first launched after a fire disaster at the Kader Factory of a toy-producing company on 10 May 1993. The Kader disaster was a tremendous tragedy in the history of Thai workers as 188 workers died and 481 were injured (Napaporn, 1998: 46). In the same year on 13 August, the collapse of the Royal Hotel in Nakhon Ratchasima killed 137 persons, including hotel customers and workers, and injured more than 360.

Occupational health hazards also became serious problems. In the early 1990s, lung diseases and lead poisoning were found to be common diseases among labourers working in textile and electronic factories. Some of the most well known cases were the mysterious deaths of twelve workers in the electronic factories at the Northern Region Industrial Estate, Lamphun province, and Byssinosis patients working in the Bangkok Textile Mill.

The campaign on OSH issues which started in 1993 indicated a significant change from the trade unions’ concentration on wage benefits. In addition, this campaign created a new organization for workers’ collective action in the form of a social network between workers and other classes. Immediately after the Kader fire accident, an ad hoc committee for assisting the Kader workers was set up by two union organizations, the Omnoi-Omyai Trade Union Group and the Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation of Thailand, in
cooperation with some NGOs.\footnote{9}

This ad hoc Committee for Monitoring the Assisting of the Kader Workers, carried out major tasks to help the Kader workers by dealing with three relating parties: the families of the workers, government agencies, and international organizations. It also launched a campaign to demand fair compensations for the deceased and injured. The campaign mobilized wide support from labour organizations at both the domestic and international level.

As a result of the campaign, the family of each deceased worker was paid 200,000 baht by the Kader Company. However, the more important consequence of the campaign was the development of the Thai trade union movement’s interest in the OSH issue. Trade unions began to have more concern over health and safety problems in the workplaces. Some NGO activists and academics, who worked closely with trade unions in the Kader campaign, decided to form an ad hoc committee on the OSH issue, the Campaign Committee for Workers’ Safety and Health (CWSH). In addition, the Council of Work and Environment Related Patients’ Network of Thailand (WEPT) was formed in February 1993. It is not a union-based organization but developed from the Byssinosis Patients Group of Bangkok Textile Mill, the first group of workers who acted collectively to demand fair compensation for a respiratory disorder contracted by inhaling cotton dust.

Since mid-1993, a network of workers who suffered from occupation-related disease began to spread to other companies in various industrial areas. In September 1993, a new organization of occupation-related patients was formed. With the help of the Women Workers’ Unity Group and the Friends of Women Foundation, WEPT played the key role in the struggle for fair compensation for occupation-related patients. WEPT’s members came from various industrial areas. All had taken ill because of toxic chemicals and unsafe conditions in workplaces located in Rangsit, Phrapadaeng, Omnoi-Omyai, as well as in Bangkok vicinity and Lamphun Industrial Estate.

CWSH and WEPT led the campaigns on OSH issues. CWSH comprises trade unions, NGOs, and academic and has union members as their base in the OSH campaign. WEPT is a non-union organization which joined the network of the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in 1996 because trade unions paid little attention to the rights of occupation-related patients.\footnote{9}

The emergence of AOP was one of the most important events in the development of social movements in Thailand in the 1990s. Government
policies to build infrastructure, to speed up industrialization, and to clear rural villagers out of forest zones for commercial reforestation caused the emergence of protests by various people groups, mostly peasants from northeastern and northern provinces, affected by these policies. The AOP is a network of various groups of people representing various problems. Although the core of the AOP are the peasant groups and its main agenda concerns problems over land, dams, and forests, the AOP drew in some fishermen, urban poor, and industrial workers as its allies. In late 1995, the leaders of the AOP decided to formally establish the AOP as a network of all types of organizations of the poor. They thus contacted a labour NGO, the Friends of Women Foundation, in order to include some groups of industrial workers who had also suffered from government development policies. Subsequently, the AOP was suggested to invite labour activists from two organizations, the CWSH and the WEPT, to attend the founding of the AOP on 10 December 1995 at Thammasat University. However, only WEPT was interested in the AOP’s activity and began to involve itself as a member of the AOP’s networks. The original AOP network comprised five groups: three groups of rural villagers whose livelihoods were affected by dam construction projects, by government policies on the utilization of land and forest, and by development projects such as the establishment of an industrial estate in Ubon Ratchathani province; the urban poor; and the WEPT (Praphat, 1998: 71). During the early years of the AOP in 1995–1996, most unions ignored the AOP (Nukun, 1996: 10–11).

NGOs rendered considerable assistance to the AOP. The majority of problem groups networked in the AOP are from areas where NGOs had operated for many years. Also the WEPT was supported by the Friends of Women Foundation to expand its work across factories and unions. However, the constituent groups of AOP had their own ability to organize and to articulate their demands while the NGO activists and a few academics assisted them as advisors, particularly on legal, procedural, and documentary matters (Prudhisan, 1998: 267).

From 1995, the OSH campaign demanded the establishment of an Institute of Occupational Safety, Health and Environmental Protection in the Workplace (IOSH). The main idea was to transfer the state power in the manipulation of the Social Security Offices’ Workmen Compensation Fund to the new independent institute, which was to be managed by five parties including government officials, employers, employees, specialists or academics, and occupation-related patients (Voravidh, 1998: 23). A draft bill to establish the IOSH was finalized in
June 1997 by representatives of the government, trade unions, WEPT, NGOs, academics and medical experts. After strong collective action for almost a decade, the IOSH bill was approved by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and is in the process of approval by the Cabinet.

Success of the OSH campaign and limitations of trade unions

The labour campaign on OSH issues since the early 1990s achieved some success. The campaign started with the immediate demand for fair compensation for the occupationally injured and diseased workers, and developed to the plan for establishing the IOSH, which will benefit workers at large and empower workers on OSH problems over the long term. The success of the OSH demands arises from two important reasons.

First, the OSH demands are not strongly opposed by employers or government. Unlike wage demands, OSH issues are seen as mutual benefit issues. Unlike trade union rights, collective bargaining, freedom of association, and other fundamental rights of workers, OSH is presented as an area of mutual interest between workers and employers, and is free from the confrontation politics of unions. Business, government, and trade unions commonly describe OSH as an investment which will lead to higher labour productivity and efficiency, with fewer causes of absenteeism due to illness, and a lower rate of labour turnover.

From the Marxist perspective, the reason for the introduction of OSH standards by the state, and the establishment of a state institute to manage OSH, is political. The state is concerned with the social reproduction of the labour force. Acting to preserve the long-term interests of capitalists and the capitalist system as a whole, the state intervenes to ensure that the proletariat is able to reproduce itself and that a pool of exploitable labour is always available. High accident rates, fatalities, and poor health conditions threaten to diminish this pool of labour, possibly leading to a labour shortage. Furthermore, in many countries, the state introduced official minimum standards and set up government agencies to manage OSH issues in response to the working class struggle against brutal exploitation. Strikes and protest movements stemming from workers’ deaths (which often involved powerful community-wide protests in industries like mining) required more effective means of managing this unrest, especially at the local political level (Greenfield, 1998: 4).

Another reason is that OSH demands gain wide support from many organizations apart from trade unions. The OSH campaign is a popular campaign led by various groups of people rather than workers’ collective
action led by trade unions. In terms of incentive to mobilize workers’ collective action, OSH issues are different from wage issues. They are not about immediate benefits that could easily attract the workers’ attentions. Only some groups of workers and trade unions, which realized the long-term benefits that would improve the quality of their lives, actively participated in the OSH campaign. However, this type of demand attracted the attention of social activists among NGOs, academics, and medical experts in a way that demands for the immediate benefit of some particular groups of workers could not. Consequently, a broad-based cross-class organization was formed to lead the campaign on OSH issues.

The formation of a broad-based coalition highlighted the limitations of the trade unions’ role in the OSH campaign. Trade unions in the 1990s are organizations of the relatively powerless. They cannot derive significant power from their members. They achieve success as campaigning organizations only when they cultivate alliances with other social movements whose aims overlap with the unions’ demands.

But a coalition movement may not be sustainable. When the campaign is over, or when interest slackens, there is no permanent organization to continue the aims of the movement. The NGO activists and academics are not directly affected by the success or failure of the campaign. The OSH campaign will not be sustainable without the active participation of workers and trade unions.

Table 2: Number of Registered Labour Organizations and Employer Organizations in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Number of Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Enterprise Labour Union</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Enterprise Labour Union</td>
<td>1,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Union Federation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Union Congress</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Association</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Association Federation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer Council</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Labour Studies of Planning Division, Department of Labour Protection and Welfare, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare

CONCLUSION

Trade unions in Thailand are not only economic interest organizations that defend the particular interests of their members, but also organize collective action for a wide spectrum of reasons. The Thai trade union
movement is not independent from other social movements, either when the trade unions limit their objectives to collective bargaining for their own interests or when they aim at more radical political purposes and broader social interests.

Other social movements that have influenced the determination of the unions' social objectives are the student movement, peasant movement, and NGO movement. In certain periods, trade unions organized collective action to support the aims of other social movements. In other periods, they needed to seek support from those social movements. Now that trade unions are not as powerful as in the past, the success and failure of labour campaigns are more dependent on the support of other social movements. This development requires the trade unions to redefine the interests they represent, and the membership they seek.

First, in order to develop coordination between trade unions and other social movements, trade unions had to broaden their demands and extend their collective action to include the interests of those social movements. Only when the unions' collective demands offer mutual benefits for trade unions and other social movements and when trade unions show their commitment to represent a wide range of interests, can the coalition of trade unions and other social movements develop (Hyman, 1994: 131).

Second, as a result of changes in the structure of employment, the possibility of trade unions continuing to be relevant for social development depends on their ability to open up membership beyond those who work in the formal factory system. As a consequence of the economic crisis, a large numbers of trade union members were laid off. Increasing numbers work in the informal industrial sector, such as home-based workers and casual workers. Trade unionism based on factory workers is hence in crisis. The future of the trade union movement depends on its ability to extend its agenda to cover the interests of workers in the informal sector in order to expand its power base.

According to Tarrow (1995: 145), movement organizations must cultivate ties with like-minded groups in order to compensate for any weakness of their constituency base. Given that trade unions are weak and relatively powerless, the formation of a coalition can strengthen the workers' bargaining power. However, collective action for workers' interests can be sustained only when trade unions play the key role in the coalition and have other parties as supportive elements in the campaigns for their own interests. If their allies play a more active role in the leadership of the campaigns, the continuing role of trade unions as representatives of the working class will be in doubt. Crouch (1990: 359) poses a challenging
question: unions may have a long-term future, but do union movements?

Notes

1 This article is part of the author’s dissertation, “Trade Unions and the Workers' Collective Action in Thailand, 1972-2002” (see Napaporn, 2002). The author would like to thank the Thailand Research Fund for providing financial support to this dissertation.

2 My attention was first attracted to the concept of “social movement unionism” by the works of Peter Waterman (1993; 1999). However, the meaning of social movement unionism in this study is defined in my own way.

3 By mid-1975, some anti-student movement groups were formed, the most important ones being the Ninth Power, the Red Guars, and the Village Scouts. It was pointed out that these organizations were devised by the powerful elite in order to counter student political power, and to destroy the emerging coalition of peasants, workers, and students (Morell and Chai-anan, 1981: 236).

4 These parties were the Socialist Party of Thailand, Socialist Front Party of Thailand, and New Force Party.

5 Apart from these three industrial zones, trade union groups were also formed in the south-east. For example, in Chonburi province, where a number of industrial factories were located, some trade unions also formed a union group, namely the Trade Union Group of the East. However, due to the distance from Bangkok, these unions rarely participated in unions’ campaigns, which mostly took place in Bangkok and nearby provinces.

6 This was shown by the absence of labour NGOs from the networks of NGOs working on urban social issues, established by a number of Bangkok based NGOs in 1990. These networks focused on issues of urban poor, human rights, primary health, children, women, and AIDS (Jaturong, 1992: 97–108).

7 The story of the twelve workers was publicized in the Bangkok Post newspaper in 1994. It was believed that those workers were killed by lead poisoning after working in the factories for many years. The Lamphun Industrial Estate was promulgated by the government as an export-processing zone and there was no trade union in the companies located in the Estate. The workers who were sick and died lost their legal rights to claim compensation from their employers because they lacked knowledge on labour laws and there was no union to help them (Sombat, 1994: 22–3).

8 These NGOs were Friends of Women Foundation, Project for Labour Information Service and Training, Arom Pongpangan Foundation, and Union for Civil Liberty.


10 Interview with Jadet Chaowilai, the co-ordinator of the Friends of Women
Interview with Sombun Srikhamdokkae, 2 November 2001.

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