

Migrant Workers as a Peripherality: Advocacy and Organizing Activities in Malaysia

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outline

1. introduction
2. Semiperipheral Malaysia
3. Migrant Workers in Malaysia
4. Troubles Facing Migrant Workers
5. Advocacy and Organizing
6. Challenges for the Labor Movement
7. Concluding Remarks

Introduction

- the ambivalence of migrant workers in developing countries
 - low-wage labor VS affluent symbol
- semiperiphery in the world-system
 - Rapid industrialized countries belong to the semiperipheral zone.
 - The semiperipheral zone has both characteristics of the core and the periphery.
- Malaysia belongs to the semiperipheral zone.
 - reviewing the situation of migrant workers
 - advocacy and organizing activities for migrant workers
 - the challenges in these activities
- migrant workers as one of peripheralities in Malaysia

Semiperipheral Malaysia

- Semiperiphery is the middle zone in the world-system.
 - features of both core and periphery in wages, technologies, skills of workers, and the nature of industrial relations
 - the prevalence of manufacturing ← the relocation of production by TNCs
- industrialization in Malaysia
 - in the 1960s postcolonial agrarian society
 - in the 1970s NEP and FTZs , EOI
 - in the 1980s heavy industrialization ex. national car

⇒ coreness

= higher wages, in-house union (benign industrial relations)

peripherality = low-wage migrant workers

▪ ambivalence of migrant workers

- peripherality = low-wage worker

- coreness = domestic workers in middle class family

However low-wage domestic work is also regarded as one of peripheralities.

Migrant workers in Malaysia

- historical background
 - colonial era: British colonial government introduced Indian or Tamil immigrants as plantation workers
 - Malaysian workers migrated to more industrialized countries such as Singapore in '60s and '70s.
 - since the 1970s many migrant workers were inflowed.
 - 21.1 million and around 25% of total labor forces
- features
 - origin: Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, etc.
 - Indonesians are the largest part of migrant workers. 44%

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- jobs: low-wage sector
 - ⇒ labor-intensive manufacturing, construction, plantation, service, domestic work, etc.
 - gender composition:
 - male ⇒ from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar
 - female ⇒ from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines
 - cases: workers in FTZs and domestic workers
 - Both are characteristic of low wages.

Troubles Facing Migrant Workers

- recruitment

- from rural areas in sending countries
- by the medium of brokers or agents
 - ⇒ no written contracts

untold working conditions and not earning expected incomes

paying expensive fees

- workplaces

- bad conditions, bad health problems
- strict supervision: marriage, not allowed to be pregnant ⇒ “human trafficking”
- verbal, physical, and sexual abuses
- paternalism

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- institutions: one of causes of “forced labor” and “human trafficking”
 - Migrant workers cannot change their employers.
 - withholding their passports
 - Migrant workers cannot join any trade unions.
 - Domestic workers are not approved to be workers in the immigration regime.
 - levies that employers should pay are deduced from workers’ wages.
- ⇒ the persistence of peripherality

Advocacy and Organizing

- trade unions: many restrictions
 - still authoritarian or despotic industrial relations
 - registration and recognition needed
 - Migrant workers are forbidden to join any trade unions.



- EIEU-WR and MTUC

Migrant Resource Center

right to redress campaign

association with NGOs

- labor NGOs

- Friends of Women

- established in 1984, 100 members (70% are Indians)
 - originally attempting to organize plantation workers
 - protecting female migrant workers in FTZs
 - supporting migrant workers working with subcontractors of TNCs in the garment industry
 - educating and training female workers → leadership development

- Tenaganita

- established in 1991
- many paid staff are Indians and Chinese.
- originally pursuing activities for estate workers and migrant workers in FTZs
- implementing educational classes and developing leadership
- anti-human trafficking
- protecting domestic workers from the Phillipines : “one day off every week” campaign
- transnational organizing
- right to redress campaign

Challenges for the Labor Movement

- subjects

Migrant workers are not so earnest in joining the labor movement. ← temporary worker

- organizations

lack of resources: small membership and fund shortage

the problems of leadership: not so active in organizing, many leaders are male.

- institutions

industrial relations system

immigration regime

Conclusion

- migrant workers as a peripherality in semiperipheral Malaysia
- advocacy and organizing activities for migrant workers
 - ⇒ attempts to eradicate such peripherality
- it is difficult to overcome this peripherality.
 - ← various constraints derived from subjects, organizations, and institutions

The end

Thank you!

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