



AMRC Occasional Paper

Constituting Political Collective Bargaining Power of Informal Workers

Case study of organizing informal workers in Southeast Asia countries

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Introduction

In exploring strategies to constitute political collective bargaining power of informal workers, conceptualizing informalization is necessitated as a political action. Conceptualizing (informalization) is a political act since it focuses attention on some dimensions and diverts interests from what some might consider the more significant (Miller 1987, 27-28 as cited by Peterson 2003). The conceptualization of informalization then becomes central to exploration of organizing strategy.

Political collective bargaining is not a new discourse in the social movement. Within the historical context, a wide variety of account has been produced to highlight the urgency of political struggle of working people to counter social power of capital. The prevailing fact of capital gaining its social power through circulation of money has been undisputed. Thus, here, informalization is elaborated in the context of capital as a process continuously assembled to expand the profit making and sustain the social power over society.

Conceptualizing informalization

At present, in Asia, informal workers roughly account for 80% of the workforce. The official statistic data is never reliable in showing the actual number of workforces participating in the labour market. This is because the general scale of informal employment figure in the official statistic often serves as the background of State policy making. Another account is informal employment remains elusive and shadowy due to high turnover and underground economy activities. Nevertheless, the rough estimation of percentage shown above serves an illustration on the unprecedented scale and growth of informal economy. Informalization poses fundamental questions regarding what counts as economic activity, what constitutes work and how activities are valued (Pettersen, 2003). Yet, we should not undermine the complexity it poses which goes beyond economic activities. Informalization encompasses aspects of global contoured of job division and mobility of workers.

The phenomenon of naturalized informalization evokes a question on workers' position. We live in an era where workers, through network of mobility, seek to anchor themselves to precarious jobs. Through the opening up of new production space, we also witness how society is being transformed without any consent of the population. In comprehending this matter, we need to look at the political aspect of informalization where individual is transformed into a market adaptable entity. Embedded in this process are reorganizing of production system and reconfiguring of space^[1] which is governed by the law of capital attracting and repulsing workers

Any forms of social solidarity and collective actions of the workers have historically been proven as the major cause of crisis of surplus accumulation. Capital, as a process, required the

annihilation of social solidarity and organization from where the collective power of the working people is emanated. The society is reshaped to serve the interest of capital. The everyday life activities are subordinated into capital circulation. The adaptability of an individual to market and release of labour ready to commoditize themselves to engage to waged work takes place through accumulation by dispossession[2]. Inherent in this is the destruction of social solidarity values within the society. Meanwhile, the social power of capital and its agents has precedence over juridical and (formal) political power. Thus, the formal political sphere here is represented by State, works under imperatives of capital. The so called “democracy” leaves the dispossession and exploitation untouched.

Thus, as an effort to conceptualize informalization toward political collective bargaining, we frame informalization by looking at how society is reshaped to serve the interest of capital, labour mobility, and power dynamic underpinning informalization. The niche of political collective bargaining lies in the process how social solidarity is being reinvented by grassroots groups and political power is constituted. Within the context of political bargaining power, the concept of democracy is understood not as formal democracy but substantially as political equality that can transform the society based on consent of the people.

In framing the informalization, this paper uses case studies elicited from series of workshops organized by Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) and partners in Indonesia, Cambodia and Philippine[3]. The workshops organized in those three countries are intended to capture local process in organizing informal workers and formulating strategy of political collective bargaining. The brief outlook of informalization in Asia is expected to be represented by case studies elicited from a regional workshop organized by AMRC involving partners from Indonesia, Cambodia, Korea, India, Philippine and Hong Kong.

Re-shaping society to serve the interest of capital

Informalization in rural area: dispossession of land and livelihood and transformation of the society without consent of the population

The following case studies show how the accumulation by dispossession takes place. They also show the process of entanglement of so called traditional economic activities to capital. The expansion of agro industry and privatization of the coastal area in Indonesia and Philippines serves an example of social economic transformation which takes place without the consent of peasant and fishermen community

Box I

In South East Asia countries, million of people become landless due to the expansion of agricultural industry, establishment of economic corridor and special economic zone. In Cambodia, 85 companies hold concession over 956.690 ha of land, while in Laos the National Land Management Authority in charge of giving more than 150 ha land concession has distributed land concessions to private companies. Indonesia, for instance, has been the world largest palm oil producer in the world. With total 7.3 million ha palm oil plantation—around 77% is concentrated in Sumatra island—absorbing around 2.5 million workforces, Indonesia's annual output is around 20 million tons. The government is planning to accelerate the growth in this industry by giving licenses to investors to open additionally two million hectares of plantations. The industry so far has absorbed around 4 million workforces. Most of workers are casual workers who have to provide themselves with working equipments. During harvesting season, the casual workers re-casualize the work to their families, unpaid family workers. The conversion of traditional agriculture land and rainforest into plantation has created around 630 land disputes in Indonesia leaving million families landless. The plantation absorbs all parts of community to forcefully contribute to its production system. Landless peasants whose land is grabbed are absorbed as casual workers. Their jobs mostly are picking the grass/cleaning land used to cultivate new trees, picking fresh fruit bunch and spraying pesticides. In doing the job, they must provide themselves with necessary working equipments. They are low paid that they often involve their family members to contribute extra labour. Other informal work “invented” is picking the middle bone/rib of palm oil leaves to be used as a material in producing broom. This informal work “helps” plantation in cleaning up falling leaves. Meanwhile, subsistent peasants have to compete with plantation industry in accessing adequate water from irrigation and fertilizer distribution since most of fertilizer companies/shops prefer to supply the huge industry rather than selling small quantity of fertilizer to subsistent peasants. Those, who are out of compensation, are forced either to sell their land or engage to contract farming business by converting their small piece of land into small-contract plantation.

(KPS-AMRC Workshops on Palm Oil Plantation, 2009)

Box II

In Philippines, seven out of ten farmers are landless. The other farmers own or lease an average of one-half to one hectare land. In Mindanao, for example, the land expropriation due to mining and agriculture industry is rampant. In Philippines, more than 75 percent of the labour force is employed in the agricultural sector. In Philippine, out of every one hundred peasants, twenty one are agricultural workers, twenty eights are unpaid family workers, twenty six are under some form of tenancy relation and only twenty five own small piece of land Seasonal work applies for sugarcane plantation where the plantation workers are hired for 6-8 months, usually from May to December which is planting and harvesting season. During the “dead seasons” where there is no available work in the plantation, the workers seek for alternative jobs such as masons, carpenters, tricycle drivers, peddlers and other informal jobs.

The plantation in Negros and Mindanao also apply production system called contract growing in which agriculture based companies outsource the production process to farmers. The company specifies the type of crop to grow and its quantity. The contract stipulates the rights of the company to determine the set up the price and apply the strict quality control on the products supplied by the growers.

(EILER-AMRC Workshop on Agriculture Workers, 2010)

Box III

The local fishing community in Kendal District, Central Java Province Indonesia, raises their concern on the local tax (retribution) at the fish auction that is 5% of the sale revenue. Beyond the retribution tax, the local fishing community is threatened to lose their livelihood as the government has stipulated law on coastal area privatization. The law gives concession to certain parties (individual, corporations etc) to obtain rights to utilize coastal area for specific purposes such as tourist and food processing industries. As we can foresee, the fishing community, in the end, will have no choice but working for food processing corporation as raw material supplier.

(KASBI-AMRC Workshop, 2010)

Here, we encounter a situation of “peasant labour process”. Through the “peasant labour process”, transnational capital coexists with various forms of family production, facilitated by State. (Crichlow, 2000). The expansion of plantation industry and privatization of the coastal area, obviously, are facilitated by State moratorium allowing the conversion of forest area into mining and plantation, legislation of spatial fixing and policy of land concession.

In practice, what is so called “peasant labour process” shows the social transformation in the rural area where peasants and fishermen are forcibly dragged to informal sector. Furthermore, the involvement of family members in informalization applies here. To meet the targeted weight of fresh fruit bunch harvested at palm oil plantations, the casual workers re-casualize the work to their wives and children. The informalization also goes further beyond the production process. There is a process where multi-layer of labour is created. The landless peasants, scraping for palm oil leaves, actually perform non-waged job for the plantation. Indeed, the plantation benefits from this non-waged job as part of externalization of the production cost. In a very subtle and coercive manner the society is transformed to serve the capital.

Informalization is also about generating control which is not confined to control mechanism in realm of industrial relation but over the workers’ lives. Putting pressure on workers, who are landless and having no other option, during harvesting season at the sugarcane plantations in Philippine, means generating effective workforce at the right time. **This is the moment when capital attracts workers.** Nevertheless, during the “dead” season, the sugarcane plantation repulses the workers. Meanwhile, other sector like construction attracts these casual sugarcane plantation workers to perform masonry job during plantation “dead” season. This is a general phenomenon in some Asian countries. In India, farm workers deprived from plantation/tea garden converted into real estate area, are absorbed into construction industry where they have to perform a lowest paid job such as stone crushing (AMRC Regional Workshop, 2010). The major question here is how come the society is being transformed without any consent of the population? We should go back to this question in exploring organizing strategies.

Informalization in urban area

Informalization in formal sector: flexibilization of labourforce and destruction of union

This part focuses on flexibilization of workforce in the formal sector, detachment of production process linking up formal and informal economy in urban area and dispossession of rights to land and livelihood in the city. Flexibilisation of labourforce should be seen in the context of historical trajectory of the commodification and weakening of full time workers intended to destroy the collective bargaining power of the union[4]. Thus, we are familiar with global restructuring entailing re-

organization of work. This includes production cost-cutting and adopting character of prevailing informal sector such as tax avoidance and the absence of workers' rights. Bear in mind, that in doing so capitalist keeps rejuvenating its social power as a class. We will go back to this point again after looking at few examples from case studies.

Box IV-Flexibilization of workforce

Externalizing production cost by employing vocational school student and migrant workers

In Indonesia, Carrefour employs On Job Training (OJT) workers as cheap labours. OJT workers only earn 500000 IDR/50 USD per month. Now there are 1000 OJT workers working at Carrefour outlets. Many OJT workers were dismissed after six-month working period. Carrefour argued that they did not pass the training. Yet, this is only employer's justification to recruit cheap labours. While 2000 permanent workers including managerial level earn minimum wages with several benefits and allowances. In Indonesia, roughly, the number of workforce in formal economy reaches to 33 million with only 9.5 million permanent workers and 23.5 million works on outsourced and contract basis. Most of contract workers work in just-in-time production system with excessive overtime. Like in garment sector, for instance, they have to reach the target of 1000 pcs/7hrs

What are the political impacts of flexibilization on workers? Similar with the explanation on informalization in the rural area, here the law of capital attracting and repulsing workers applies. We should look at flexibilisation in the context of how capitalist mode of production keeps adjusting labour system to procure more surplus value. If the pure factory system creates a space for workers to establish a strong social solidarity and union having potential of creating crisis to capital accumulation, then the production system must be restructured to pre-empt any collective struggle.

The next issue is to look at the phenomenon of informal economy located in the production chain ending up at the formal one. This is to denounce the notion that informal work is merely peripheral economic activities. Outsourcing of production process to home based industry and scrape collector supplying materials to be recycled in the manufacture sector are only few examples. Nevertheless, the interconnection between formal and informal economy, essentially, always prevails within the history of capitalist mode of production. It is not a new phenomenon. The core debate is the advancing historical transformation of capitalist system which working people cannot keep up with. This will be discussed further in analysing power relation underpinning informalization.

Informal workers in urban area: maintaining the city and society, potential source of reserve labour.

Urbanisation, seen in the context of labour mobility, continues to occur as a process where industry and economic growth in the city look as fireflies in the dark, a glimpse of hope. For villagers who are dispossessed from their means of production, the city seems to offer many opportunities to improve their lives. Why does the city depend on the surplus of labour? Family of contract workers living in an industrial zone need to buy affordable food, cutlery and children clothes after working

hours. Outside the factories, usually, workers easily find street hawkers selling all affordable goods. Most of these street hawkers come from villages as they lost their small piece of agriculture land or they used to stay in area which has been converted into industrial zone. The goods they sell outside the factory usually are “rejected” or low quality products of some factories inside the zone.

Middle class families in the city always need domestic workers to take care the household chores. The infrastructure projects in the city also rely on surplus of labour. The construction and maintenance work is highly casualized. Informal workers also perform jobs filling in the absence of public service. Waste collectors build makeshift shanties around landfill and they collect all recyclable junks to be supplied to small manufacture or home based industries. As the river is highly polluted and privatized state water company only offers limited service, the slum area dwellers rely on service provided by informal workers selling clean water. The lack of public transportation facilities are filled by taxi motor and tuk tuk drivers.

Does it mean that informal sector is a resilience sector acting as a safe haven for those unabsorbed in the formal sector? Let’s go back to the law of capital attracting and repulsing workers. In this context, informal workers are conditions for the well-functioning of the society within capitalist social relation. Already established is the network of the poor serving the poor which is not in the solidarity sense and even the poor subsidizing the rich. The public utilities companies like water company is privatized exclusively serving the haves because the poor can buy water from the other poor. Casual construction workers, for instance, do not mind moving from one construction site to another and living in shanties inside the site. Construction industry is not obliged to provide any benefits for these workers. The similar thing also occurs in the rural area where the casual plantation workers have to provide themselves with the working equipment.

The repulsion comes in when the existence of informal workers constitutes the barrier to the expansion of capital accumulation. In practice, it takes form of restructuring or reconfiguring the space for the interest of capital. As we are all familiar with, the advancement of proliferation of capital fosters land monetization. Meanwhile informal workers reside in the slum area occupying idle land or space. The plan of restructuring the urban area giving space for the rise of office complex or apartment is set out by demolition of slum area. Another form of repulsion is the emergence of commercial industry diminishing the prevailing informal work. The waste recycle industry and corporatization of parking lot service are few examples.

Box VI: Demolition of slum area in Central Java Province, Indonesia due to urban renewal planning

Central Java Province in Java Island with the population of 33 million people is one of the most populated provinces in Indonesia. “Semut Ireng” literally means “Black Ants” is a waste picker organization in Solo city, Central Java. It was founded in 2005 to build solidarity among waste pickers who often compete against each other for income earning territory. In December 2007, Bengawan Solo River in Solo, Central Java Province outflow caused flood inundating more than 6000 houses forcing thousands of families to flee from their houses. After the flood, Solo municipal government evicted slum area dwelling as part of post disaster city renewal. The government planned to restructure the city and establish public housing flat, unaffordable for the evicted. The waste pickers’ organization initiated community organizing to fight against relocation. Later in part of exploring strategy, we refer to case study of organizing waste pickers taking up livelihood and citizen rights issues.

Labour mobility

Those, who migrate to the big cities and are not absorbed into formal economy, reside in slum area and engage themselves to informal economy. Their economic activities are varied encompassing petty trade and service provider. The swollen urban poor community in Asian countries is not a new phenomenon. This is also induced by the opening up of production space in rural area.

Deruralization[5], as a concept, recognizes the changing of mode of production in rural area as peasants are forcefully converted into labour forces. What entails from this process is the uprooted community which are, again, forced to adapt themselves to the market demand. A family in a developing or least developed country in Asia has to deal with reality of the dispersal of family members. The daughter becomes migrant workers while the sons become factory contract workers in the city. The father works at plantation while the mother sells food outside the plantation.

Then later, the relatives follow this trajectory. The son who works at the factory will contact a workforce agent to recruit his cousin to work in the same factory. The daughter will help her cousins who want to follow her path. The father during harvesting season re-casualizes the work to his wife. The construction workers also often re-casualize the work to their relatives. So the network of mobility is collectively established as everyone must survive. **Of course, informalization is a great capitalist achievement that nowadays the effort to engage to precarious jobs comes from workers themselves.** In the daily practice, besides “collective mobility network”, the workers especially in the urban poor community must move from one work to another for their daily survival.

Said mobility is part of the spatial organization of production and highly profitable when articulated to segregation (ethnic or gender-wise), labour flexibility and deregulation; ethnic origin, fluctuating and periodical mobility and lack of paper allow for construction of segmented labour markets with differential labour production cost and asymmetric power relation (Narotzky, 2004: 124, 131)[6]. Below are few examples of labour mobility

BOX VI Mobility of workers: Case study of plantation workers

A casual worker at palm oil plantation in North Sumatra province, Indonesia, who has worked for twelve years, has to perform multiple jobs such as maintenance job that is cleaning up area around the trees and picking up fresh fruit bunch (FFB) of palm oil during harvesting season. During the harvesting season, the worker often involves his wife and children to assist him to meet the production target, based on the weight of FFB collected. Meanwhile, most of young women quickly leave the village once they graduate from high school, to seek for jobs in the neighbouring countries (Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei). The case studies above simply show the mobility of workers in or from rural area converted into cluster of palm oil plantation industry. Not only workers “intentionally” engage themselves into precarious jobs, but they also “subsidize” the plantation by providing themselves with working equipments. Meanwhile, many Indonesia migrant workers in those three mentioned countries remain undocumented. The undocumented migrant workers constitute the most vulnerable group in the segregated labour market which put them in the position of being exploited to the fullest.

Box VII Beer Promotion Workers (BPWs) in Cambodia: Labour mobility generating profit through gendered division of labour

Tourism is one of four industrial pillars in Cambodia. Beer promotion work, for instance, employs 4000 women. These women workers migrated to urban area due to various reasons such as dropping out of school (unaffordable education fee), poverty stricken families due to family business bankruptcy and land grabbing. These women mostly work as contract workers with low wages. They are also obliged to send remittance to their families in the rural area.

BPWs in Cambodia work on short- term contract basis. They are recruited through agency. Body appearance becomes the main requirement of the work. Serving and accompanying the customer, considered as a traditional work performed by women, are devalued. Age discrimination also constitutes a core issue. The restaurant or the bar refuses to continue employing BPWs who are over 25 years old despite their long working period. The gendered division of labour devalues kinds of work which is traditionally assigned to wives or mother. They are also required to perform non-waged additional job such as cleaning up the restaurant after working hours. The segregated labour market indeed takes advantage of the well-preserved social hierarchy. Feminine identity attached to women and their work is manipulated by capital to support its smooth functioning in the society.

(AMRC-CLC Workshop, 2010)

Box VIII-Construction Sector: Capital Fixity and Mobilization of Labour

In India, the power of the construction industry keep the illegal practice of employment, recruiting workers through network of mobility, relatives and acquaintance. Many are attracted to work in the construction sector as it offers daily wages which is illegal in India. In China, during the economic crisis, construction was considered as a labour intensive industry that could tackle unemployment issues. The construction workers in China are recruited by “facilitators”. These facilitators are individuals collecting commissions for referring workers to the construction projects. These facilitators work for companies registered as subcontractor companies. Construction workers are paid at the end of the year or at the end of the projects. Labour law does not apply to construction workers.

During the economic slowdown, construction sector was dubbed as a sector that could absorb employment. Infrastructure project then was launched in many countries like China, Vietnam, India, Sub Mekong region and Indonesia. Here, we need to see the relation of fixed capital facilitating further circulation of capital and surplus of labour. The infrastructure project is not invented per se for tackling unemployment issue during the crisis. It is more a visionary project reconfiguring production space. Capital fixity, embedded capital to land, is materialized through infrastructure project connecting one production space to another. China, for example, now emerges as the major investor of railroad construction intended to accelerate mobility of people and goods. Vietnamese government, determined to expand electronics manufacturing base and attract more foreign investment, set out infrastructure projects in the country. This project then attracts casual workers who are hired through agent and mobility network. In sub Mekong region, Cambodian, Laotian and Burmese migrant workers are hired in the construction sector.

(AMRC Regional Workshop on Informalization, 2010)

Power relation underpinning informalization

Power dynamic and manipulation of society

As mentioned earlier, informalization takes place through transformation of society without the consent of population. Informalization also manages to mobilize society into an endless source of labours supporting the process of profit accumulation. The most challenging question is how can the society be transformed without any consent of population? Of course, this process is accompanied by the curtailing of people political rights and annihilation of any forms of social solidarity and organization. Case studies above confirm the process of proletarianization, mobilizing unproletarianized elements of society and through dispossession of means of production, converting these elements into cohort of workers ready to marketize themselves for wages. This is underpinned by the annihilation of any forms of social solidarity.

Box IX: Destruction of collective solidarity in rural area

The expansion of plantation industry accompanied with land grabbing and conversion of peasantry into labourer triggered horizontal social conflict between peasants and plantation workers. Here is a common story of social conflict taking place in palm oil plantation in North Sumatra province, Indonesia. During land grabbing process, the foreman/supervisor at the plantation orders the casual plantation workers to destroy the peasants' crops. Spontaneous resistance action coming from peasants then is quickly directed to the workers.

Another story is the road blocking carried out by plantation shortcutting the distribution route. This road block then disrupts social activities of the community. It is then demolished through spontaneous action. Meanwhile, this spontaneous action disrupting production process costs casual workers their daily income. Plantation normally invites state apparatus, police or military, to arrest peasants. Since the plantation creates water irrigation shortage, many peasants are forced to give away their land or engage to sort of contract farming method that is cultivating palm oil in the former agriculture land. Again there is a competition for water between peasants who still keep their land for crops and those converting their land into small scale plantation. Of course plantation benefits from this divided society as collective solidarity is eventually destroyed.

(AMRC-KPS Workshop, 2010)

Box X: Diminishing of union power and discrimination against irregular workers

In Korea, the government does not want to recognize any new unions – youth union, civil servants union. The trade union, which tries to organize casual workers hired directly by the employer, has already had their CBA for several years. **Yet, the employers no longer recognize this CBA and they refuse to negotiate with unions that have casual workers as members.** The in house union full timers used to be paid by employers. Nevertheless, the Korean government has banned the employers from doing so. Starting from July, the government will punish the employers who still pay for in house union full timers. In dealing with high rate of unemployment, South Korea government then is planning to invest 20 billion USD in the construction industry. This plan is not suitable for South Korea which is service industry oriented. Informal workers are more and more marginalized. The percentage of irregular/informal workers reaches to 30 percent of the total workforce. Other sources say it reaches 50 percent in which the 70% is women.

(Korea Women Trade Union (KWTU) presentation at AMRC Regional Workshop, 2010)

Yellow unions at garment factories in West Java province, Indonesia refuse to advocate industrial dispute experienced by contract workers. The yellow unions even sometimes play a role as supplier of workforces and earn commission from companies. The contract signed by contract workers explicitly bans them from joining the union.

(KASBI-AMRC Workshop, 2009)

On Santa Rosa plant, Laguna, Philippine, Toyota workers are familiar with “Toyota Way” and “Toyota Production System”. In practice, the rights to unionize or set up a genuine and independent trade union is part of irregularities and waste that, according to Toyota, must be minimized (Fumio, 2004). The struggle of setting up a genuine union on Toyota plant at Santa Rosa has been ongoing since 1997. Toyota, itself, has applied various strategies to bust the union. In pre-empting the union power, management applies various tactics such as offering job promotion for activists willing to compromise, illegally dismissing union leaders and members, recruiting contract workers (informalization) during the strike and replacing dismissed workers with contract workers, bribing government officials and using violence by inviting military to intervene the labour dispute. Replacing striking workers with short term contract workers, serves an example of divide and rule tactic applied by management to destroy workers’ power (Wulandari, 2009).

Box XI-Job insecurity as the most effective tactic to manipulate workers

Organizers of beer promotion workers in Cambodia argue that the initial step of organizing is overcoming the workers’ fear. Most of BPWs are afraid to be demoted to places least visited by customers if they join workers’ organization. At plantation, casual workers are even afraid of only listening to the word of “union”. This is because the violence approach used by plantation to destroy any attempts to set up an organization. Some workers finally managed to set up a workers group which they name: the group of the braves. Most of contract workers at factories are reluctant to join the union because of job insecurity. Thus, job insecurity is very effective to manipulate workers preventing them to join collective action.

Box XII-Competition among workers

Waste pickers organization in Central Java Province in Indonesia recognizes the competition among them as their earning depends on the weight of scrapes they collect. The division and control over earning territory quickly established. Again, this constitutes an obstacle in establishing social solidarity. Tuk-tuk drivers in Cambodia have to compete with taxi drivers. The taxi drivers themselves work for Taxi Company whose service is exclusively used by big hotels. The rise of taxi industry threatens the livelihood of tuk tuk drivers.

(AMRC Regional Workshop, 2010)

So then, here we arrive to the power dynamic inherent in informalization. Indeed, with brief observation, we can quickly pointing finger at the unholy matrimony of capital and State and its apparatus for naturalizing the informalization through regulation and violence. Nevertheless the power dynamic on the ground is much more complex. While workers are made highly fragmented and segregated, capital and its agents keep consolidating their power. Added to this complexity is the subjugation of workers emanated from workers' own desire to survive. As a result, organizing informal workers poses quandaries for the organizers. The complexity of power dynamics and workers' subjugation are often overlooked in the process of designing organizing strategy. We often encounter situations where formalization of informal workers is considered as the ultimate aim of struggle. It is more like we compromising ourselves to be subordinated in the power game invented by capital.

Nevertheless, organizing work is always a dialectical process. In the course of process, even demanding for formality, usually carried out by demanding policy changes, requires skill to negotiate and bargain. The learning lies in exercising workers' political rights and building capacity to represent themselves before the authority.

Power Mapping: Process toward political collective bargaining

How to consolidate the power of the working people? First, we need to deconstruct the mindset, deeply ingrained in society, of considering politics as a power game of elites, confined to the formal political sphere. We need to go back to democracy concept which has been redefined to support capitalism. Some countries in South East Asia like Indonesia and Philippines, where State coercion against people and dispossession of means of production continue to happen, are already dubbed as countries applying democratic political system. The formal political sphere, encompassing (formal) political, juridical and military institution, leaves the economic power untouched. Meanwhile the economic sphere owns its power to carry out appropriation, exploitation and distribution. The power of economic sphere, proliferated widely through web of power it constitutes, is enormous that it has precedence over juridical and political sphere.[\[7\]](#) This explains that the political sphere works under the imperatives of power owned by the economic sphere. Thus the prevailing democracy system leaves the economic sphere untouched.

Let's say if in the past workers as a class could seize the space through strong union to challenge the power of the economic sphere-capital and its agents, but then now informalization has transformed society that even workers are forced to accept the subjugation. Thus, the power of capital goes unchallenged. If we go back to the early philosophical concept of democracy in the pre-capitalist society in Athens, Greek, then we should look at democracy as a substance of political equality not a formal political process. Political equality-gained and constituted through working people political struggle- will transform the society to have democratic control over mode of production. This is a niche of formulating strategy of political collective bargaining power.

In the series of workshops on collective bargaining power of informal workers, AMRC and partners in Indonesia, Cambodia and Philippines, recognizing the complexity of power dynamic inherent in informalization, designed a tool called power mapping. The tool is to assess the internal power of working people organization, analyze actors involved in the power dynamic and identify target and strategy for political collective bargaining. Before going into case studies of applying power mapping, we need to refer to the previous account on how the society is transformed without the consent of population. The entanglement of all everyday life activities into capital is accompanied with workers' subjugation due to the need to survive. The formation of mobility network, competition among workers, peasant-labour process and uprooted communities are examples of obliteration of social solidarity and values. Thus, in assessing power of workers, the most salient aspect is to reinvent the social solidarity among workers. Following are case studies showing how power mapping was introduced by sharing success struggle stories and output of the power mapping. The process was varied depending on the local context. The mapping involves the process of reinventing social solidarity and envisioning democracy as political equality.

Box XIII-Reinventing Social Solidarity and Scenario of Change

In the workshop attended by casual plantation workers, peasants and community, the discussion on political collective bargaining is initiated by envisioning organic relation between peasant and plantation workers. The initial step is to recognize divide and rule tactic applied by the plantation. The mapping of impacts of the expansion of plantation industry on the society and analyzing the actors involved in the dispossession of lands and rights, brought in understanding of political inequality between society versus capital, represented by plantation.

Landless peasants in the workshop quickly emphasized the importance of political struggle to reclaim their land. **The social solidarity was re-invented** in this forum when the peasants conceptualized their strategy as they mentioned that plantation workers were also fully entitled to land and livelihood. As for workers, who often experienced violence in attempting to organize workers, now they gained reassurance that community and peasants would support their struggle. Some people committed to provide their houses as hiding place for workers escaping from violence.

As promoting cross sector alliance became the main objective of series of workshop preceded by several focus group discussions and small research in plantation communities, at the last round of the workshops, the peasants and workers designed what they called scenario of change depicting strategies that they would take up. Indeed, the struggle to constitute political power of this cross sector alliance is a long term struggle. Besides commitment to have regular meeting and sharing the issues, they also designed general plan.

They agreed on the idea of 'organizing' more chief of villages to be in favor of peasants and workers' struggle. This was based on the output of power mapping that chief of villages often became the extension power of the plantation. Yet, already some village chiefs joined the meeting. Political education also became the main program as they also planned that in future some of them had to become village chiefs.

Besides the general plan, each sector also develops their plan for collective bargaining. For example, a group of casual plantation workers named as "the group of the braves" would soon negotiate with the management over bonus and working equipment. They gained their confidence after successful organizing a strike at plantation. The landless peasants planned to consolidate themselves and assessed their strategy in the past in dealing with land grabbing.

The road to political collective bargaining power, in which this cross sector alliance is recognized as a political entity challenging the power of plantation and State, is still long. Nevertheless this process lays a foundation toward this aim.

(AMRC-KPS Workshops 2009 and 2010)

Box XIV-Political recognition

This is a story shared during a workshop involving urban poor and fishermen groups in Central Java Province, Indonesia. We can refer to Box VI to see the background of this case study. The urban poor organization keeps expanding their organizing scopes covering community around the riverbank and other slum area. They look at the issue of forced eviction as dispossession of livelihood as the relocation program offered by government would deprive them from their earning territory. The so called relocation program is often only government lip service to pre-empt any forms of resistance.

During the discussion, the representatives from urban poor communities emphasized their constitutional rights as citizens. Referring to Indonesia constitution, every citizen is entitled to decent livelihood, access to natural resources such as water and land, equality before law etc. They also argued that “constitutional rights” could be used as a basis to initiate political struggle.

The group claims, that through several protests and resistance taking up some demands such as land certification, rights to clean water etc, it somehow gained political recognition. The mayor, usually instructed his subordinates to put out the resistance under pretext of dialog with society, now has no option but inviting the group for negotiation over the eviction plan. The group considered it as a small victory where they managed to create a space to exercise their political rights.

This story then inspired the fishermen group in applying power mapping. The main issue of the fishing community is the privatization of coastal area which obviously threatens their livelihood. They tried to identify an initial issue or common interest to consolidate the community. The issue of local tax paid at fish auction intended for social security was considered as an issue to start consolidating the community as they were never compensated for any accidents. The strategy to question this tax to fishery department would be an initial step to build the capacity to negotiate. The strategy was expected to escalate, depending on the readiness and awareness of community, into struggle for livelihood and against the privatization of coastal area.

(AMRC-KASBI Workshop, 2010)

Box XV : Organizing contract workers

The process of “re-inventing social solidarity” also takes place here. In Indonesia, for instance, so-called independent or progressive unions also organize contract workers. The issue of contract workers cannot join the union, as explicitly stated in the contract, is overcome through outside-factory organizing. In Tangerang and Krawang industrial zones contract workers, assisted by experienced organizers, set up community forum. The forum, open for contract workers from various factories, regularly discusses workers’ rights issues etc. In Tangerang, some organizers carried out an initiative to investigate the practice of contract system and living condition of the workers. Workers also pushed for hearing process with the local parliament in which the data elicited through the investigation was presented.

In Cambodia, organizers from federation of food and service workers incorporated the initiative of linking up workers and community into their organizing strategy. Recently, during the strike at a bread factory, the community helped workers by providing electricity supply for the loudspeaker. The community was aware that the factory closure or massive strike would have economic impacts on their small business—food stalls and house rent. This is not a really new initiative in history of workers’ movement. Nevertheless, a continuous attempt is necessitated to reinvent the social solidarity. Another example is organizing beer promotion workers (BPWs) in Cambodia where the organizers applying multi-layered strategies. So far, around 1050 out of 4000 BPWs join unions. The organizing is initiated by building self-confidence of workers to speak up. This is to remove the barrier created by long-held traditional values. Basic training on union structure and collective bargaining is also the prominent part of organizing. The process of reinventing social solidarity takes place by linking up BPWs with beer factory workers through exchanging solidarity support.

(Workshop organized by AMRC and partners in Indonesia and Cambodia, 2010)

Conclusion

From the conceptualization above, we can draw several conclusions on constituting workers’ political collective bargaining power.

First, as mentioned earlier, the society is reshaped to serve the interests of capital without consent of the population. Thus, the reinvention of social solidarity is the initial step to consolidate workers’ political power. Embedded in this process, within the context of cross sector alliance, is defining collective aims of the struggle. Recognizing intricate impacts of informalization on workers, taking form of workers’ subjugation due to will to survive, there is a need to build workers confidence, acknowledging the potential power they have.

Second, political self-organization of people has been incompatible with formal politics operates under capital imperatives, where the power of market combined with the parliamentary democracy facilitating capital accumulation. Nevertheless, political compatibility can be gained by inducing the values of democracy, not as a formal democracy but political equality as a substance of democracy. Thus, the concept of democracy here refers to transforming the very form of democracy by creating spaces which allow people, as they fight to change their circumstances, to transform themselves as well (Hanecker, 2010).

Third, local situation and readiness of workers determine strategy of collective bargaining and forms of organizing. Case study of beer promotion workers in Cambodia, for example, in which organizers convinced individual workers the benefit of joining the union before stepping up to building solidarity with beer factory workers and bargaining for the improvement of working condition.

Fourth, indeed the local context is predominant in elaborating the political aspects informalization.

At the regional context, the issues of reorganizing production system and reconfiguration of space-geographical setting for capital accumulation-can be the basis to formulate regional agendas in which the sub issues can be varied such as issue of land concession, labour migration etc.

Fifth, the idea of democratic control over production translated into multi layered strategies and political actions along with the concept of participative democracy induced in organizing work are valuable experiences to be shared at regional level as an outlook of Asia workers movement.

Endnotes:

[1] Harvey (2010) provides explanation to understand intricate geographical dynamic of capital accumulation:

Processes of capital accumulation do not exist, obviously, outside of their geographical setting and these setting are by nature immensely diverse. But capitalists and their agents also take an active and prominent role in changing these settings. New spaces and space relations are constantly being produced.

[2] Accumulation by dispossession entails the dispossession of rights and assets. In practice it is exercised through legal and illegal means. The legal means include privatization of what were once considered common property resources (like water and education), the use of power of eminent domain to seize assets, widespread practices of takeovers, mergers and the like that result in “asset stripping”, and reneging on, say, pension and health care obligations through bankruptcy proceedings (Harvey, 2010). The illegal means include violence, criminality, fraud and predatory practices (Harvey, 2010).

[3] AMRC works several partners in Indonesia, Cambodia and Philippine; Indonesia Congress of Union Alliance (Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia, KASBI), Group for People Welfare (Kelompok Pelita Sejahtera, KPS), Ecumenical Institute for Labour Education and Research (EILER) and Cambodia Labour Confederation (CLC)

[4] Here we can refer to Braudelian scheme (cited by Broad,2000) to look at the process of commodification of labour. Referring to the scheme, the informalization and casualization of labour takes place through several historical stages. First, the corporate restructuring of capital where Fordism regime of capital accumulation through mass-production and mass-consumption set the stage for bargaining power vis a vis with capital. The stage was seized by proletariat labour in mid of twentieth century that they gained their rights, high living standard and other benefits. Second, the proletariat labours then gained their strength as a class constituting impediment for capital dictation over production process. Third, global restructuring then was introduced in 1960s to reassert capital control over labour. The global restructuring entailing re-organization of work and flexibilization of labour then becomes a trend of weakening workers’ collective power through casualization and informalization.

[5] Deruralization has been widespread that anthropologist have considered abandoning concept of peasants altogether and replacing it with concepts that speak directly to multiple identities of uprooted populations (Crichlow, 2000).

[6] As cited in Labor Mobility: Structural Impositions Accompanying the Incorporation of Indigenous People to the Market, Chevez (2009)

[7] We can refer to succinct explanation provided by Wood (1995)

Capitalism made possible the *redefinition* of democracy, its reduction to liberalism. On the one hand, there was now a separate political sphere, in which ‘extra-economic’-political, juridical, or military-status had no direct implications for economic power, the power of appropriation, exploitation and distribution. On the other hand, there now existed an economic sphere with its own power relations not dependent on juridical or political privilege.

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