

# ISSUES OF LABOUR UNREST IN ASIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HOTSPOTS AND FLASHPOINTS

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## ABSTRACT

*The expansion of global production into the Asian countries has led to the rise of intense labour movements in recent times. The hotspots of the labour movements have been mainly Cambodia and Indonesia in Southeast Asia; Bangladesh, Pakistan and India in South Asia; China and Vietnam in the erstwhile socialist Asia; and South Korea in the advanced economies of Asia. This paper is a comparative study of the flashpoints of the labour movements in these hotspots. The study highlights that the issues concerning these rising labour movements are certainly not an indication of labour problem as the biggest threat to social stability. Instead, these are desperate expression of labour's quest for a life of decency and dignity in the widespread context of neoliberal patterns of economic organisation and policy undercutting worker's well-being with labour conditions returning to the level of brutality and exploitation that existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the industrial labourers were exploited by the double whammy of low wages and poor working conditions, without any labour right.*

**Keywords:** Automobiles, demonstrations, electronics industry, factory occupation, formal sector, informal workers, justice, Labour movement, rail workers, strikes, textile and apparel industry.

## INTRODUCTION

With the proliferation of global factories in Asia due to outsourcing of manufacturing by the transnational corporations in conjunction with the adoption of export-led models of development in the Asian countries, especially under neoliberal-imperial globalisation (Pratap 2014), labour in the Asian countries has been subject to such a brutal exploitation that in the

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last 10 to 15 years, workers' activism is flaring up and working class power has shown signs of rising as a countervailing power to resist the exploitative power of capital as well as the state. Consequently, it is the concern of this paper to document and comparatively analyse the issues of workers' struggles to seek justice in a "world without ethical rules and action" (Brockway 2001).

## **LABOUR MOVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

### **Cambodia**

The garment industry in Cambodia is the single most important sector generating major share of the manufacturing GDP and employment. It is also the single largest source of exports. The labour movement has also been focused on the garment sector and union density in this sector has already reached more than 40 percent. Due to the low wages and harsh working conditions combined with almost no job security and very little, if any, social security; discontent among garment workers has been rising steadily. This is reflected in the data on strikes. The number of strikes and man days lost continuously increased from 2003 onwards. In 2003, there were 55 strikes and 130,284 man days were lost. In 2012 and 2013, the number of strikes reached 121 and 131 respectively, with 542,827 and 825,646 man days lost. The year 2012 particularly marks the beginning of large scale strikes and very high rates of participation by workers in the strikes.<sup>1</sup>

In 2013, the labour movement took another leap. Throughout the month of December in 2013, there were a series of rallies of workers demanding a revision of the minimum wage upward to US\$165 per month. On 23 December 2013, the government declared that it would raise the minimum wage from the existing US\$75-80 per month (probationary/non-probationary workers) to US\$100, a level far short of the workers' demand of US\$165. On 24<sup>th</sup> December, almost all the garment, footwear and textile workers' union federations, including Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C.CAWDU), National Independent Federation Textile Union of Cambodia (NIFTUC), the Collective Union of Movement of Workers (CUMW), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU), Free Trade Union of Workers of Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC), Worker Friendship Union Federation (WFUF), and the Independent Youth Union Confederation (IDYTU) declared a strike in protest. Together, the federations comprised 386 plant-level unions and represented 249,700 workers in the textile, garment and footwear industries. Workers of around 127 factories went on strike. The active participation of workers and unity among unions showed the gravity of their grievance. There was also a radicalization of the labour movement, which became particularly visible during the 2014 strikes.<sup>2</sup> Violent clashes began when the government tried to stop the workers from marching peacefully on Veng Sreng Road on 2nd January 2014. Riot police and soldiers beat up union leaders, workers and supporters. Many were arrested with severe injuries, including Vorn Pao, President of Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA) and Theng Savoeun, Coordinator of Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Communities (CCFC). Angered workers began to burn tyres and set up roadblocks against the armed forces. On the morning of 3rd January, 2014, the armed forces started shooting live ammunition directly at

the workers, killing four workers and severely wounding many others.

A series of protests were organised in Cambodia and solidarity actions were organised in many countries, demanding the unconditional release of all arrested workers and rights defenders. In the mid-January, an international trade union, the ITUC took the initiative to work to resolve the dispute but the outcome was only a disappointment: "Unfortunately, our sincere efforts to build bridges with the Garment Manufacturers Association (GMAC) were met with outright hostility and with a complete disregard to the sustainability of industrial relations. Indeed, GMAC embraced the prospect of creating further conflict in the industry. We hope that the hard rhetoric was just that, and that there may still be a way forward, but we cannot but express our deep disappointment with their attitude."<sup>3</sup> On 16 January 2014, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on the Cambodian government to conduct an independent, internationally led investigation of the election and the killing of five garment factory protesters.<sup>4</sup> The European Parliament urged the Cambodian authorities to thoroughly investigate and hold to account those responsible for the deaths and injuries, and also urged that the 23 arrested during the protest strikes be freed and that the government's ban on freedom of assembly be immediately revoked.<sup>5</sup> On 15 January 2014, the U.S. House of Representatives also passed a draft spending bill that would cut some aid to Cambodia unless similar demands regarding the flawed election were met.<sup>6</sup> The European Union is Cambodia's single largest aid donor, and about 50 percent of all shoes and garments produced in Cambodia are exported to the E.U. market. On 11<sup>th</sup> February 2014, two arrested workers were released on bail, but the bail applications of 21 other arrested workers and rights defenders were rejected by the Phnom Penh Appeal Court. The struggle to release the workers continued.

Probably, this struggle of Cambodian garment workers also marks a beginning of a new kind of international solidarity actions going beyond the petitioning and one-time show of ritual solidarity. A series of solidarity actions were organized in various countries across the world. Demonstrations were also organized in the countries where the global brands which have invested in the garment sector of Cambodia, are based, like the U.S., Germany, the UK, Turkey and South Korea. The most important demonstrations were held in Asian countries including Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. 10 January 2014 was observed by organizations of Asian workers organizations as *International Day of Action in Solidarity* with garment workers in Cambodia and demonstrations were organized in many Asian countries.

## Indonesia

Indonesia seems to be entering a new period of awakening and emerging as one of the most important flashpoints of the labour movement in Asia. It is worth mentioning that the Indonesian labour movement was almost completely destroyed both physically and ideologically after the defeat in 1965 and was not allowed to advance for decades when Indonesia was under dictatorial regimes. In the mid 1980s, manufacturing industries started expanding in a big way with an obvious export oriented focus. This period coincided with the emergence of strong democratic movements against the authoritarian regime. These two factors helped the re-

emergence of labour movement in Indonesia and also shaped its main characteristic features. By virtue of these two factors, the labour movement was able to steadily expand its base both in traditional sectors as well as in manufacturing. As the new labour movement, as part of democratic movement, was more open and equipped to go beyond traditional forms of unionism, it was able to evolve new and innovative strategies of organizing and collective bargaining. The power of the working class increased significantly and this was reflected in the rise in the number of strikes from 61 in 1990 to 300 in 1994. Largely, it was the force of the working class movement that shook the Suharto regime. The Reformasi Movement of 1998 further opened the democratic space for labour movement. It was the force of Reformasi movement, along with other factors, that started a debate within the SPSI, the government sponsored monopoly trade union of the Suharto period, and finally a more progressive fraction came out of SPSI to form a separate trade union (Sprague 2012).

After the restoration of trade union rights and end of the monopoly of SPSI, the labour movement in Indonesia progressed in leaps. A wave of strikes emerged in 2011 and continued throughout 2012. During this time a coalition of trade unions, the Council of Indonesian Workers and Labourers (MPBI) was formed that united five million workers under one banner. Finally, with the 2012 General strike the Indonesian labour movement entered a new phase, moving towards consolidation of the working class movement at the national level and gradually emerging as a political force. The general strike was more a celebration of victory than a protest. And it was really a victory in itself, since the working class was able to organize a general strike after fifty years. More than two million workers participated in this strike. The major demands included a fifty percent increase in the minimum wage and the abolition of outsourcing system and anti-labour laws.

The power of working class emerged again on the streets of Indonesia in the 2013 general strike. Around three million workers in 20 provinces and 150 regencies held a nationwide strike for two days and paralyzed activities in around 40 industrial areas in Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi and Kalimantan. The demands were by and large the same as in the 2012 General strike, i.e., a 50 percent hike in minimum wages and an end to job outsourcing and the contractual system. They also demanded the immediate passage of the bill on housemaids and revision of the newly enacted law on mass organizations that, according to them, has been devised to silence labour unions. The power of working class unity forced the administration to announce an 11 percent increase in the minimum wage from Rp 2.2 million to Rp 2.4 million, on last day of strike.<sup>7</sup>

It is also interesting to note that the general strike of 2013 was a part of and also the result of a consolidation process in the Indonesian labour movement. Consolidation between the Confederation of Indonesian Unions (KSPI) and the Workers Joint Secretariat (*Sekber Buruh*) almost culminated in September 2013, and it was agreed to accelerate the further process of consolidation. A Preparation Committee of National Consolidation was formed. In the national meeting of the Indonesian labour movement in September, more than 100 trade union representatives from 18 provinces participated. The meeting decided the priority issues of the movement: a) Rejection of low wage politics by using the strategy of struggling for a 50 percent wage hike; and b) elimination of the outsourcing system. The decision to hold a

general strike was also taken by this committee.<sup>8</sup>

One more interesting aspect of the Indonesian labour movement needs a mention here. In the formal sectors, similar to India, the violation of trade union rights and victimization/repression of workers and trade union activists has emerged as a major problem. With the rising power of the labour movement the Indonesian trade unions have adopted a unique strategy to fight this - the factory occupation or factory raids. In these factory occupation/raids, the trade unions in the region collectively mobilize their members and other workers to block the gate of the target factory which has been prohibiting union activities and victimizing workers and union activists. They demonstrate in front of the target factory and demand the management to comply with the labour rights.

One such factory raid was held at the Samsung for not allowing union activities in its factories. Around 200 workers of Samsung Electronics had formed a trade union in 2012, but all the leaders and members of the union were dismissed and the union was literally removed from the factory. Repression was unleashed on union activists. Similar repressive measures were adopted to remove unions and stop union activities in Samsung's supply-chain factories as well. The unions suspected that Samsung was behind all incidents of busting the union in its supply-chain factories. Therefore in November 2012, the trade unions in the region along with those in the supply-chain of Samsung decided to occupy/raid Samsung and demand that the company respect labour rights and stop union busting. Around 10,000 workers gathered at the union secretariat to march towards Samsung. However, on reports of the march, hundreds of anti-riot police with trucks, water cannon cars, tear gas launchers and guns were dispatched to stop the workers. In fact, the police had been on guard in that area around the Samsung plant for a few days before this action. The workers were finally able to break through the police circle.

However, the factory raid that day could not reach the Samsung factory. In December, the union again mobilized the workers and made a strong demonstration in front of the South Korean Embassy, demanding that the Embassy take action to punish Korean companies that violate national laws, and direct Samsung, in particular, to stop union busting and reinstate union members who had been terminated. The representatives of the South Korean Embassy promised to take action against the management of Samsung. The struggle continues (Mufakhir 2013).

## **LABOUR MOVEMENT IN SOUTH ASIA**

### **Bangladesh**

Here too, the garment industry is the single most important sector, contributing the largest share of manufacturing GDP and employment as well as the greatest share of exports. Therefore, the labour movement in Bangladesh is also more concentrated in the garment industry. However, unlike Cambodia, trade union density in Bangladesh is extremely low. In the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, there are only 63,000 unionised workers out of a total of about 3.5 million workers. Moreover, in about 5,000 factories there are only about 140

unions, and out of them only 20-30 are active. The anti-union environment is so strong that in the whole RMG sector, only two new unions were registered in 2008, none in 2009 and 2010, and just one in 2011 (ITUC, 2012).

Wages are very low and insufficient for survival, and working conditions are one of the worst. 414 garment workers lost their lives in 213 factory fires between 2006 and 2009 (Pratap 2011). According to the Safety and Rights Society (SRS), 388 workers were killed in occupational accidents in 2011 and 490 in 2012, and ILO claims that 11,000 workers die each year in work-related accidents in Bangladesh (Tazreen and Sabet, 2013). According to incidents reported in newspapers, during the three months from December 2011 to February 2012, seven garment workers were killed and 119 workers were injured in workplace accidents (ITUC 2012).

It is in this environment that the global brands are able to capture the major share of revenues generated at the lower tier of the value chains located in Bangladesh. According to a study conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, value added by workers is about 31 for every 100, and out of this 31, only 7 is paid as wages and 24 goes as profits to investors. According to a World Bank estimate, a Bangladesh garment worker gets US\$ 290 by producing 2,536 T-shirts per year; on the other hand, an Indian worker gets US\$668 by producing only 56 pieces more than his Bangladeshi counterparts (Pratap, 2011)

Owing to these conditions, the labour movement in the Bangladesh garment industry emerged with very different dynamics. Forming shop floor unions is highly difficult, and therefore the organizing strategies are focused on organizing the workers under the banner of federations. This is reflected in the fact that a huge majority of members of federations are individual members, rather than shop floor union members. With no scope for collective bargaining at the shop floor level, the dominant practice emerges as sectoral bargaining and political struggles in the form of general strikes and road blocks to compel the government to intervene and take initiatives to resolve the problems (Pratap 2011).

The first phase of the major struggle for a system of fixation and revision of minimum wages emerged in 2005-2006. A series of demonstrations were organized and thousands of workers participated. These were followed by repression, leading to radicalization of the movement. Finally, a minimum wage board was constituted and the minimum wage was fixed at TK 1,662.50 (US\$25) per month, far below the workers' demand for TK3,000. The second phase of the struggle lasted from 2008 to its culmination in the latter half of 2010. There were a series of strikes. Due to a virtual price war that started in 2008-09 among the main garment exporting countries, i.e. Bangladesh, China, Pakistan and India, the wages of Bangladesh garment workers were cut by almost 30 percent between 2008 and 2009. Many employers were paying less than the minimum wage and wages were not paid on time, while the workloads were increased. It was in this situation, widespread discontent emerged, and strikes and demonstrations took a violent shape. In 2010, from January to June there were about 72 incidents of labour unrest in which about 988 workers were injured in clashes with the police. Finally the minimum wages were increased to TK3000, again well below the demands of workers for TK5,000. Even then the employers were not ready to pay this amount and demanded to fix the minimum at TK2,500. A demonstration held in December 2010 took

a violent turn again. Four workers were shot dead by the police during demonstrations in the port city of Chittagong. Later on 14th December, there was a major fire in a sportswear factory of Ha-Meem Group near Dhaka which killed about 30 workers. Only after these incidents and fearing wider labour unrests did the factory owners accept the new wage (Pratap 2011).

It has become the norm in Bangladesh that the minimum wages are not revised unless the labour unrests compel for that. Every year there have been large scale demonstrations and strikes for this demand. The wages were not revised after 2010, and therefore from mid-2012 to 2013, there were another wave of radical demonstrations and strikes. More than 50,000 participated in strikes, road blockade and demonstrations, particularly in the Narayanganj and Ashulia regions around Dhaka. There were several violent incidents and clashes with police. During the same period, two major fires occurred, killing more than 1,000 workers. Finally, in November 2013, the minimum wage was increased to TK5,300 (\$68), again much below the demands of workers for TK8,000.<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note that even after all these incidents and even when the Bangladeshi safety accord (signed by more than 80 Western retailers) gives a central role to the trade unions, employers continue to fiercely oppose the unionization efforts and victimize the workers and union activists.<sup>10</sup>

## **Pakistan**

In Pakistan, the textile and apparel industry is the most important industry in terms of generating the largest share of manufacturing GDP and employment, as well as major share of exports. Therefore, the labour movement is also more concentrated in this sector.

The most important centre of Pakistan's textile industry is Faisalabad, which is country's third largest city and is often called the Manchester of Pakistan with about 200,000 power looms out of a total of about 300,000 in the whole country (Mallick 2013). The nature of this industry and the employment structure is unique in that there are a small number of workers in each unit, and they are mostly hired with a casual employment relationship. The majority of the workers live in surrounding areas in some sort of community relationship. These factors, along with other political factors, make it highly difficult for the formation of shop-floor unions. However, they provide immense scope for organizing workers in common platforms, i.e. federations. Hence, here, as in case of Bangladesh, more workers are organized in federations than in shop-floor unions, and there is more focus on industry-wide collective bargaining than at the shop-floor level.

However, there is a big difference here from Bangladesh. In Pakistan, there is no such competitive multiplicity of federations as in Bangladesh. The textile workers' movement in Faisalabad is more or less united under the banner of the Labour Quomi Movement (LQM). The LQM was formed in 2003 in response to the increasing repression of power loom workers. After that, the textile workers' movement took a big leap forward and developed a strong base in Faisalabad and later expanded to surrounding districts (Mallick 2013).

In 2008, there was a large scale strike by power loom workers in Faisalabad that lasted

for four days. More than 50,000 workers went on strike and thousands others joined them in solidarity. The strike started when the power loom owners opened fire on a peaceful demonstration of workers. Nine workers were seriously injured. The workers were demanding implementation of a previous agreement signed by the owners and workers. The attack enraged the workers and in retaliation they ransacked some factories. As the news spread across the city, thousands of workers took to the streets and joined the protest demonstrations, and the workers' action committee announced that the strike would continue for an indefinite period. In the end, the government intervened and ensured the implementation of the agreement (Bhatti 2008).

The historic strike of Faisalabad took place in 2010. This was probably the first time since the 1970s that the power of the working class emerged on the streets with all its strength, courage and lively dynamics. The strike started on 20<sup>th</sup> July and lasted for nine days. Thousands of workers rallied throughout the strike, despite the Punjab government banning public gatherings on 19 July. As many as 250,000 powerloom workers in Faisalabad were striking together and demanding a hike in the minimum wages, a hike that had been recommended by the Minimum Wage Board.

The strike was held in the period when state subsidies on gas, electricity and petroleum were withdrawn and the privatization drive was at its peak. The prices of essential commodities were skyrocketing, and for some household items it increased up to ten times. The whole society was in anger. To pacify the discontent, the government increased the wages of public sector employees by 50 percent, and in the meantime the Minimum Wage Board also recommended a wage hike of 17 percent. Moreover, the factory owners were directed to pay at least seven percent of wages into the social security system. However, the factory owners did not implement the wage hike, and the workers were not provided with social security cards. It was against this background that the LQM started mobilizing workers and demanding the implementation of the recommended 17% wage increase. There was a sudden outburst of anger when in early July, ten strongmen hired by factory owners stormed into the office of LQM activist Mustansar Randhawa and killed him and his younger brother Naseer. The workers in Faisalabad, including those in Jhang, went on a general strike. In Faisalabad, 100,000 powerlooms were completely shut down and 250,000 workers joined the strike. On the eighth day of the strike, police and goons hired by factory owners brutally attacked 20,000 workers engaged in a peaceful march. The clash lasted for almost 10 hours and hundreds of workers were injured. Fourteen workers, including six chapter presidents of the LQM were arrested. On 10<sup>th</sup> day of the strike, 25,000 people marched to the District Commissioning Officer's (DCO) house, and camped there. Finally, the DCO ordered the factory owners to implement the recommended wages, register workers with the Social Security Board and issue them social security cards. The strike ended and some of the earlier arrested workers were released. But the six local chapter presidents of the LQM were not released. They were tried and convicted by an anti-Terrorism Court. An unimaginable punishment was ordered. For their dedication and courage to fight for the people, they were awarded a combined sentence of 594 years in prison! The Faisalabad strike very powerfully exposed the nexus between capital (factory owners) and the state against labour (Mallick 2013; Tariq 2010).

In 2012, approximately 10,000 power loom workers, led by LQM, organized a 155-km march from the industrial city of Faisalabad to Lahore against factory owners who were not complying with statutory minimum wage legislation. The protest was successful in compelling the government to take the initiative to ensure that factory owners increase the wages by 28 percent in line with minimum wage during the relevant period (Mahmood 2012).

## **India**

In India, manufacturing is more diversified. Three major sectors, i.e. textiles and apparel, automobiles and electronics together contribute a significant share in manufacturing GDP and employment as well as a major share of exports. Therefore, the labour movement is also widespread across these sectors. However, in the garment sector, the labour movement is one of the weakest. The dynamics of movement seen in Bangladesh and Pakistan have yet to emerge in India. In the textiles, particularly at some major centers of industry, such as Panipat, Ludhiana and Tirupur, the labour movement is gradually emerging with a somewhat similar dynamics as we have observed in Pakistan and Bangladesh, but at a lower scale of activity.

In Panipat (Haryana), 30,000 spinning mill workers from 500 mills went on indefinite strike in 2006, demanding implementation of the minimum wages and other labour standards.<sup>11</sup> Textile mill workers in the Tirupur knitwear cluster and power loom workers from thousands of units in Coimbatore and Tirupur went on strike in 2011, demanding a wage hike.<sup>12</sup> In Ludhiana (Punjab) 2,500 textile workers from more than 150 textile factories went on a month long strike demanding a wage hike and the implementation of labour laws. It is interesting to note that the factory owners in Ludhiana spoke the same language against workers as was used in Pakistan. They issued an advertisement in newspapers, saying: "Dear Chief Minister, Terrorism has Struck Ludhiana" and demanded action against the textile workers' union leading the movement (Amritpal 2011).

There have been several strikes in various other sectors in India in the last 10 years. For example, tea workers strike in more than 200 tea gardens in West Bengal in 2012 (demanding a daily wage of Rs. 250 or US\$ 5.00)<sup>13</sup> and an strike of almond processing workers in Delhi. However, a more dynamic labour movement has been emerging in formal sectors, more focused in the automobile industry, but also spread in other industries such as electronics and food sector. In the last decade a new wave of workers' struggle in the formal sector has emerged, mainly on the issue of the formation and recognition of trade unions. This phase can be said to have started with the Honda workers' struggle in Gurgaon in 2005. Thereafter, we observe a continuing wave of such struggles (Pratap 2010). These include the Hyundai workers' struggle in Chennai between 2007 and 2011; the MRF workers' struggles in Chennai, 2006- 2009; the Graziano workers' struggles in Noida, 2007-08; the Pricol workers' struggle in Coimbatore, 2009; the Nestle workers' struggle in Rudrapur, Uttarakhand, 2009; the Rico Auto and Sunbeam workers' struggle in Gurgaon, 2009; the Foxconn workers' struggle in Chennai, 2010; the Satyam Auto and Rockman Industries workers' struggles in Haridwar, 2012; the General Motor workers' struggle in Gujarat, 2011; the Pepsico India workers' struggle in West

Bengal; the ILJIN India Electronics workers' struggle in Noida, 2012; the Bajaj Auto workers' struggle in Chakan and Pune, 2013; and the Maruti Suzuki India workers' struggle in Gurgaon, which has been ongoing since 2011.

In all the above struggles, the major issue was related to trade union rights. The workers either attempted to form a trade union, or after the formation of a trade union demanded recognition of their trade union and the corporate-state collusion unleashed a large scale victimization and repression against them. In most of the cases, particularly in later struggles, the issue of regularizing the contract workers had been inbuilt in the process of unionization. In most of the struggles the contract and regular workers came together, with varying levels of unity, thereby challenged the capital's strategy of dividing contract and regular workers (Bose 2012).

The Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle brought it to a culmination by (a) strongly raising the demand to abolish the contract labour system, and (b) going for a second occupation of the factory on the issue of contract workers. At no stage were the workers prepared to compromise on this issue. Another important aspect of Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle is that it came out with innovative strategies, for example the strategy of factory occupation, that increased the effectiveness of the struggle, They decided to remain inside the factory day and night and stop the factory's operations, rather than move out of the factory. Maruti Suzuki workers struggle was also benefitted from a qualitatively higher level of traditional trade union solidarity in the region, developed through the continuous struggles of auto- workers in the region. The Joint Trade Union Council of Auto-workers' unions fully supported the Maruti Suzuki workers with qualitatively higher levels of solidarity action, such as solidarity strikes. However, during the struggle a qualitatively new and higher form of solidarity action emerged. There were simultaneous factory occupation by workers of two other units of the company, Suzuki Power Train and Suzuki Motorcycles, where the same issues were raised.

The most important aspect of the Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle that makes it qualitatively different from most of the above workers' struggles is in its strong social linkages. On the one hand, the struggle was able to build strong links with various pro-labour social and political organizations, including various leftist groups working in the NCR Delhi. At the same time, they successfully mobilized the local people in support of their struggle and against the injustice done to them by corporate-state collusion. It was the strength provided by these social linkages that after being crushed again and again, the struggle did not accept defeat and emerged again and again with a new power, new collectivism between contract and regular workers, and with an expanded alliance in society.

In the second stage of the movement after the 18<sup>th</sup> July incident<sup>14</sup>, when the workers were fully crushed, and when the Suzuki management and the state was mobilizing the local elites against the workers, and the whole media was creating an atmosphere against them, without the above social links it was not easy for the struggle to rise up again. It is probably one of the India's longest factory workers' struggles of the decade, and is still ongoing. In all, 2,300 workers, including 546 regular workers, have been terminated (Pratap 2013). So far, 147 workers have been jailed and their bail applications have been rejected by the courts since long. But at last, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2015, 77 of the 147

workers accused of violence nearly three years ago were granted bail. The 2012 arson, which killed the company's human-resources manager and injured many others, eclipsed the stories of the workers' year-long struggle for a union and better working conditions (Yadav 2015). The following poetic expression about the Maruti Swift car captures the reality of the Maruti workers (Katyal 2015):

### **Maruti Swift**

It takes a 1248cc diesel engine,  
4 cylinders,  
16 valves,  
a max. torque of 190 newton meters  
@ 2000 revolutions every fuckin' minute,

it takes rack & pinion steering  
& drum brakes & disc brakes  
& steel tyres,

it takes one thousand five hundred kilos of metal  
moving, always moving  
in 48 second loops on the assembly-line,

painted & cut & bolted & fed  
by workers.

It  
takes  
workers

on 9 hour shifts,  
one 30min lunch break,  
and two 7 minute tea-cum-toilet breaks  
(those two-seconds-late-&-pay-cut-breaks)

it takes "if my leg itched, I do not even  
have time to scratch it,"

it takes waiting  
for one's own fingers

it takes white-hot "discipline" cut by teeth,  
welded by metal to townships  
with smoke-grey evenings

it takes 13 days of occupation,  
months of sit-ins, lock-outs, it takes 147 workers  
arrested on manufactured evidence,

to make one of these.

In recent decades, another important feature of the Indian labour movement has emerged, wherein almost all the Central Trade Union Organizations (CTUOs) have come together to form a joint trade union council and organized a series of general strikes, almost one every one-two years. In the leadership of central trade unions, 200,000 workers organized a demonstration in Delhi in February 2012, and 1,000,000 workers across India courted arrest in November 2012. The major demands included raising minimum wages to INR10,000 per month; a decrease in the price of essential commodities; a halt to further privatization of public sectors, universal social security coverage; and compulsory registration of trade unions within 45 days (ITUC 2012). Strikes and demonstrations have increasingly been taking a more violent turn, and so also has the repression. In India, the media completely ignores the labour movement, and therefore reduces the impact of the general strikes and demonstrations.

## **LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ERSTWHILE SOCIALIST COUNTRIES**

### **China**

In China, the labour movement has passed through three phases. In the initial phase, the strikes undertaken almost everywhere in China was the work stoppage in the real sense of the word -- suddenly stopping work but not leaving the workplace. The movement entered its second phase at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was seen in the waves of wild-cat strikes in Shenzhen and other cities in 2007-08. In most of these strikes, the strategy was to come out of the workplace peacefully and block the roads, and thereby compelling the government authorities to address their demands. The movement entered in the third phase with waves of strikes in 2010. In these strikes rather than blocking roads, the workers stopped or attempted to stop the production and enter into direct negotiations with the management. The length of the strikes also increased. Most importantly in some of the strikes, the workers openly raised the general demands of labour rights, along with specific workplace demands (Leong and Pratap 2011).

In recent years, the number of strikes both spontaneous and organised increased in China and on average each day around 1,000 workers have been involved in industrial action in Guangdong Province alone. Strikes/ protests are generally dispersed by the armed police and they lead to victimization of workers, in the form of dismissals, black listing, arrests and sometimes also political charges. However, it is worth mentioning that despite all these, there is an increasing tendency, particularly in the local administration, to consider the strikes as a normal affair, and so the level of hostility against the strikes and strikers has been in general reduced to a large extent. This is also one of the reasons that many strikes are emerging successful in terms of compelling the companies for some form and some level of collective

bargaining. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the only legal union in China, still avoids direct engagement in workers' collective disputes and protests at the plant level, but some of its branches have started offering legal-aid-related services to workers.

The situation of migrant workers is still the same. They suffer from low wages (half the salary of urban workers) and excessive working hours (Chan 2007). Their precarious situation was reflected in the fire in 2011 in an illegally constructed garment factory near Beijing, in which 18 migrant workers died and 23 others were injured. Later 80,000 migrant workers working in various such factories and small workshops were expelled from the district. During the same period, rumours of a pregnant migrant hawker allegedly beaten to death led to three days of rioting in south China, the arrest of 19 and detention of 100 migrants. In the same period, in the nearby city of Chaozhou, hundreds of migrant workers, aggrieved on the issue of unpaid wages at a ceramic factory, attacked government buildings and set vehicles ablaze. In 2011-12, there were many important strikes of workers in China, including taxi drivers' strikes against rising fuel prices and stagnant wages, a strike of bus drivers and conductors on the issue of wages and wage setting policies, a strike of 2,000 coal miners on the issue of the closure of Baidong mine, protest demonstrations of hundreds of laid-off textile workers for proper severance pay, a strike of 2,000 truck drivers against rising fuel prices, protest demonstration of workers at the Nanjing Huafei Colour Display System Co. Ltd. against alleged corruption in the factory's bankruptcy, leading to layoffs, and offering very low severance payments, a strike of 4,000 electronics workers of Simone Handbag factory in Panyu, in southern China against low pay, a strike of 8,000 Chinese workers of a Nanjing factory owned by LG of South Korea against the shutting down 80 production lines, and a strike of 2,000 workers at the Guanxing Precision Machinery Product Factory making parts for Japanese watchmaker Citizen Holdings Co. Ltd. against bad working conditions, deductions of pay and overtime (ITUC 2012).

Among the important recent strikes, a furniture workers strike in 2013 at Diweixin Product Factory in Shenzhen is worth mentioning, in order to understand the dynamics of lower ends of the value chains moving to low wage hinterlands with a steady rise in wages in the main industrial zones, such as Shenzhen, and to see how the employers openly violate the labour rights and the police blindly takes their side.

The Diweixin factory was set up by Hong Kong people. Early in 2013, workers in the factory heard that there were plans to move it to another location. This was in line with the emerging trend in Guangdong where more and more factories were moving to other low wage provinces or to low wage Southeast Asian countries to lower the costs of production. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 2013, some 300 workers went on strike against the planned relocation of the factory, and to demand enough compensation for workers in the event of such a move. But the employers outrightly refused to compensate the workers. The workers obstructed roads and marched to the local government office and submitted their petition on this issue. The strike continued for two weeks. Finally, the employers offered the workers a compensation of RMB 400 for every year of service. However, this was lower than the standard prescribed by law. Angered by the attitude of the employer, the workers collectively marched to the offices of the local authorities to organize a protest demonstration, but they were stopped by the police and many of them

were arrested. The workers continued their strike and protests for the release of the arrested workers. At the end of 2013, a workers' leader called Wu Guijun was still in prison, charged with committing a criminal offence. This was such a naked case of repression of workers that it triggered the concerns of people in China and Hong Kong, as well as attracting international attention, and a strong demand was raised with the Chinese government to release Wu.<sup>15</sup>

## **Vietnam**

Vietnam experienced a wave of wildcat strikes since the adoption of the Labour Code in 1995. The difference between China and Vietnam seems to be in the fact that in Vietnam the cadres of the official trade union tend to display stronger support for striking workers and often put pressure on the management to accept the reasonable demands of the strikers, along with persuading the workers to return to work. In response to the wave of wildcat strikes in late 2005, the Vietnam trade union came out openly in support of the workers and went to the extent of criticizing the government for its failure to raise minimum wages. In Vietnam, there is no institutional discrimination against migrant workers as it exists in China, and this helps in building broader solidarity among all workers for taking a collective action (Yoon 2009).

In recent years, the emergence of a vibrant economy as well as a vibrant labour movement in Vietnam has been witnessed. The number of strikes has increased from about 140 cases in 2005 to 387 strikes in 2006, 541 in 2007, 762 in 2008, then slightly declining with 310 cases in 2009, and again showing a steady increase 2010 onwards. During 2010-11 there were about four strikes per week. One interesting phenomenon that emerged is that of repeated strikes in particular factories, especially in foreign invested enterprises such as the Taiwan-owned footwear factory Hue Phong Shoe Company in Ho Chi Minh City, where five large-scale strikes happened from 1997 to 2008. The strikes by and large were peaceful. Generally the workers stopped work and gathered outside the factory gates without creating much disturbance in the area, and therefore they did not invite any large-scale repression by the police. But since legal strikes are still almost impossible, and therefore, the trend of apparently leaderless, wildcat strikes still dominates. They are also successful in getting significant media coverage with a significant number of apparently pro-worker newspapers (Siu 2012).

In 2011, there was an upsurge in the number of illegal strikes, a total of about 1,000, up from 423 in 2010. The reason behind the upsurge in strikes was rising inflation while real wages remaining almost stagnant. One of the most important strikes in the 2011-12 period was a strike by 90,000 workers at the Pou Yuen shoe factory (a supplier of major footwear brands such as Adidas) demanding a wage hike. The striking workers faced large-scale victimization in terms of dismissals and arrests. Another worth mentioning strike is that of My Phong shoe factory strike in the Tra Vinh province in 2010 in which 10,000 workers took part. Three workers and rights activists participating in the strike were sentenced to seven to nine years' imprisonment. They have also been subjected to physical torture in prison. Do Thi Minh Hanh, a young woman of 26, has lost her hearing in one ear, and has swollen joints and stomach pains as a result of beatings received in detention (ITUC 2012).

In 2013, several strikes were held which were met with violence. In one strike at a Taiwanese-owned auto parts factory in Hanoi where workers were seeking a wage hike, one worker was killed.<sup>16</sup> There is another interesting case reflecting the plight of women workers in Vietnam. There had been an increasing number of complaints against the employers dismissing female workers after getting pregnant. The labour law of Vietnam has a special provision directing to avoid pregnant women and new mothers for working extra shifts. For employers it means availability of lesser number of workers for working in extra shifts. Therefore, the employers simply dismiss the women workers when they are pregnant and avoid hiring pregnant women and new mothers. In 2013, the Doojung factory, a South Korean cosmetics producer, openly announced its plans to dismiss women workers in their sixth month of pregnancy for failing to meet company regulations on working extra shifts. It also banned all female employees from having babies for the next three years.<sup>17</sup> According to the workers' accounts quoted in newspapers, the workers were paid an extra VND18,000 (USD0.86) an hour for overtime work, and according to contract that they signed, they were allowed to take off Sundays but had to then work from 7 am Saturday to 8 am Sunday. The discontent of workers in Doojung factory was growing for a long time against such exploitative practices and in April 2013, they went on a strike.<sup>18</sup>

## **LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ADVANCED ASIAN ECONOMIES**

The labour movement has been advancing in almost all the countries in this group, mainly focused on issues related to factory closures, the rise in the number of low paid, irregular workers, wage hikes and against increasing incidents of union busting. In Taiwan, there have been a wave of protests against anti-union dismissals<sup>19</sup>, and a series of protest actions by workers of closed factories under the banner of the National Alliance for Workers of Closed Factories. In one action in February 2012, 100 workers paralyzed the Taiwan Railways Administration system by jumping off the platforms and laying on the tracks at the Taipei Railway Station.<sup>20</sup> In Singapore, Chinese bus drivers went on strike in 2012, for equal pay and payment for overtime. There were strong demonstrations in Malaysia in 2012, demanding an increase in minimum wages and an end to union busting, and in 2013 the electronics workers took to the streets against the refusal to recognize their union.<sup>21</sup> In Japan, one of the longest strikes of teachers of the Berlitz General Union Tokyo (Begunto, associated with the National Union of General Workers, NUGW) which lasted for almost two years (2007-08), attained finality at the end of 2012 after the High Court decided in their favour. In a similar case of the dismissal of a teacher from Yokohama, the struggle continues and the case is pending at the Labour Commission.<sup>22</sup> After a long time, many of the industrial federations in Japan are gearing up for a struggle on wage hikes. Recently, in January 2014, the Japanese Electrical, Electronic & Information Union (with 600,000 members) and Toyota Motor Workers' Union (with 63,000 members) have put forward strong demands for a wage hike.<sup>23</sup> The Hong Kong dock workers strike in 2013 clearly gave an indication that labour in Hong Kong is coming back into action. The long struggle of dock workers in the first half of 2013 injected new life into all the trade unions and activists in the territory and that was in itself a victory.

## **South Korea**

However, among this group of countries, South Korea clearly emerges as the major flash point of the labour movement. There are several reasons for this. The country already has very high levels (more than 50 percent) of casualization of labour. More than five million workers, or one-third of the South Korean workforce, have already been made contract workers, receiving just 60 percent of the average wages of permanent workers. Casual/contract workers have very limited rights to organize and collective bargaining. A whole anti-union environment has been created. On the one hand, new labour laws are more anti-labour in nature providing rights to employers for termination of collective bargaining agreements and reducing the number of full time workers in union along with not allowing the temporary workers to be part of union. On the other hand, big corporations, such as Samsung and POSCO, openly follow a 'No Union' policy. Moreover, incidences of crackdowns on trade unions have been rising, both in the form of physical repressions and also in the form of lawsuits against them. It is interesting to note that the compensation being claimed by management over labour disputes is increasing despite an agreement eight years ago between labour and management restricting large indemnification suits, after a series of worker suicides resulted from these large lawsuits. Several trade unionists were jailed in 2011 for strike-related activity. The major concern of workers in this period has arisen from issues related to industrial restructuring, privatization, closure of factories and layoffs, which are leading to mass unemployment of workers. The government and the courts believe that restructuring, privatization and layoffs fall under the category of management rights, and therefore, strikes on these issues are illegal. For example, Hanjin Heavy Industries undertook restructuring that resulted in the loss of 400 jobs, including 230 voluntary resignations and 170 dismissals. The workers' strike against this was declared illegal. More interesting, the strike of in-house subcontracting workers at Hyundai Motor demanding regular employee status in accordance with a Supreme Court ruling was also declared illegal. On the one hand, a legal strike is almost impossible, and on the other hand, in the case of an illegal strike the trade union has to face law suits by employers claiming painful amounts of compensation from workers and activists who participated in the strike (ITUC 2012).

Compelled by these situations, the South Korean labour movement is aggressively moving forward to build a strong working class power, and increasingly taking a radical shape. There have been a number of strikes worth mentioning: A strike in 2010 by irregular workers at Hyundai and the occupation of its Ulsan, Asan and Jeonju plants demanding regular worker status, the strike and occupation of the Yoosung factory in 2009; a strike by the security guards working at U.S. military bases in South Korea in 2011; the Hanjin workers' strike in 2010; a strike by the Kumho Tyre workers in 2011; the Hongkik University contract cleaners' strike in 2010; Department store workers' strike in 2010; railway workers' strike in 2011; and the Hyundai motor workers' strike in 2013. The dynamics of the South Korean labour movement is more powerfully reflected in two most important struggles of the past decade, the SsangYong workers' struggle in 2009 and again in 2012-2013, and the most recent railway workers strike against privatization held in December 2013 and January 2014.

The SsangYong Motor workers' strike and factory occupation, which lasted 77 days in 2009, is one of the most protracted workers' struggles of the decade. A total of 976 workers seized the auto plant on May 22, 2009 and held it in the face of repeated quasi-military assaults. Even if this struggle ended largely in defeat in terms of direct gains, it was a victory in terms of boosting the morale of Korean workers.

Three years before the 2009 strike, SsangYong Motor Company had been taken over by China's Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation. The downsizing of the workforce started just after the takeover and within three years, the number of workers had been cut from 8,700 to 7,000. Then, the company filed for bankruptcy and proposed a restructuring, offering the plant as collateral for further loans. Subsequently, the court approved the bankruptcy plan, pending adequate layoffs to make the company profitable again. The workers protested against proposed lay-offs. On May 22, when the list of workers to be laid off was announced, the SsangYong Workers' Union (affiliated to the Korean Metal Workers Union, KMWU) went on strike and the 1,700 workers, who were to be laid off, occupied the plant demanding no layoffs, no casualization and no outsourcing. The company wanted to force 1,700 workers into early retirement and had already fired 300 casuals. The workers who were proposed to be laid off had been working in the factory for 15-20 years. For the next three weeks, until the middle of June, about 1,000 workers occupied the plant in protest. About 5,000 workers, who were not to be laid off, stayed at home, directly or indirectly supporting the occupation.

To suppress this struggle, various measures were taken, including an anti-strike rally of more than 1,500 people outside the factory gates, mainly attended by the 1,000 supervisory staff, 200 hired personnel and 300 workers from those not proposed to be laid off. In addition, 400 riot police was stationed there. Trade unions in the region responded against this and 700-800 workers reached out to defend the SsangYong workers. There were consistent attempts by the police to arrest the workers and recapture the plant, and therefore the occupying workers also made plans for an armed defense against these attempts. A full-fledged offensive against the workers occupying the factory was launched on 26-27 June, when riot police entered the factory by using force. At this time, a strong solidarity among trade unions and other sections of the populace emerged and demonstrations were organized in the form of street campaigns, a four-hour general strike by the KMWU during which metal workers from nearby plants rallied in front of SsangYong factory gate and other rallies. On 1 July, water and gas supply to the occupied plant were cut off by the government to compel the workers to come out. All access to the plant was blocked and negotiations collapsed. For sustenance, the workers were dependent on rain water in whatever amount they could get. On 4 July and 11 July, the KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions) held nationwide labour rallies in support of the SsangYong workers' struggle. In addition, 927 activists held a one-day hunger strike in Seoul on 11 July. On 16 July, 3,000 KMWU members organized a rally, but they were blocked by police and not allowed to go to the factory. Of them, 82 workers were arrested. The big battle began on the 21st, when the police began repeatedly dropping tear gas from helicopters onto the workers, and riot police again tried to enter the paint shop. Days of fighting ensued, but by the end of July, only about 700 workers were left in the plant, many of them injured, and with only rice

balls to eat and rain water to drink. On 25 July, the KCTU rallied workers and other supporters, who armed with iron pipes and stones, marched on the factory gates and fought with the riot police, however, the police forced them to retreat. On 27 July, SsangYong workers held a press conference and another rally in front of the paint plant and put forward their demands, including the withdrawal of the police, direct negotiations with management and government, and the release of the results of the investigation into illegal effluence resulting from the use of hybrid diesel engine technology. However, on 1 August, electricity to the paint department was finally cut off by the police, signaling the start of the final battle. This lasted from 3-5 August, when the occupiers were finally overtaken and the occupation of the factory came to an end. The defeat was also reflected in the final negotiations. The local union president was forced to agree to early retirement for 52 percent of the occupiers, with the remaining 48 percent to be laid off for one year without pay, after which they might be rehired.<sup>24</sup>

Many workers who occupied the factory were arrested and some were sentenced to years in prison. They faced such mental tortures that five workers committed suicide and five died from cardiovascular diseases, such as heart attacks or brain haemorrhages.<sup>25</sup>

Rail workers' strike in Korea, reflects on another interlinked dimension of Korean labour movement. In early December 2013, the Korean government approved a license for a new subsidiary for the state-run rail operator Korea Railroad Corp (known as Korail) to run the new Korea Train Express (KTX). Employees of Korail saw this as the first decisive move toward the privatization of Korean railway system. In protest, about 15,000 union members who formed about 45 percent of the workforce went on strike on 9 December. Rather than listening to their demands and concerns, Korail hired an army of scabs from its railway engineers' school and other pools, and declared that it would dismiss 4,213 unionists and also filed a damages lawsuit against 194 union leaders. A court issued arrest warrants for 10 union leaders on charges of obstruction of business operations. On the same day the police raided the union's offices nationwide. On 22 December, 4,000 riot police sealed off a Seoul building leased by the KCTU and a small independent newspaper. Riot police also conducted a 10-hour, door-to-door, warrant-less raid in an 18-story building in search of strike leaders. The massive raid on the KCTU prompted the Korail union leaders to publicly seek sanctuary in a Buddhist temple in central Seoul. In the face of this large-scale repression, workers and people from all sections of society all over Korea poured out onto the streets to show their discontent. At the same time, donations poured into the union and to the temple where the leaders were encamped. The KCTU called for a general strike on 25 February. Participation in the strike was amazing. Nearly all sections of society, particularly the youth, took part in large numbers. According to some estimates more than 60 percent of young people in their 20s and 30s supported the strike (San 2014).

From these situations people got a clear message that the attack on Korail workers and unions was actually an attack on democracy and basic public services. Thereafter, the protest demonstrations took on a political dimension, which was clearly reflected in a mass demonstration of 100,000 protesters in Seoul on 28 December. The protesters raised slogans against the clampdown on labour, privatization of the nation's railway system, as well as against government's election manipulation scandal.<sup>26</sup>

The strike ended on 30 December, after two major political parties agreed to form an ad-hoc committee in the National Assembly to study the feasibility of rail privatization. Korail management was not part of the compromise, and instead has been seeking an injunction to seize the assets of the union and its leaders as part of its 11.6 billion won (US\$10.8 million) damages suit. There was also no clarity on whether Korail had withdrawn its plan to fire the unionists. It had summoned 256 unionists to a penalty commission, a routine step before dismissal. The prosecution had also moved for the arrest and detention warrants for eight union leaders who had no option but to surrender to the police after the strike (San 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Worker activism has become the new norm as protests and strikes of various kinds have erupted across Asia. This has been actually a burning reality of the past two decades. Chan (2007), for example, gives a vivid description of this in South China. Instead of ignoring or detesting this phenomenon as is usually done, it should be seen as the desperate way of seeking a life of decency and dignity on the part of the working people in a contradictory world.

But, how will the workers manage to preserve their humanity in a hostile, inhumane working environment? Will they ever come together and oppose the current situation? Is sabotaging production the only way to stop the exploitation of human beings by other human beings? Such issues are cinematically examined in South Korea (Guarneri 2014) even as intellectuals like the mainstream economists are not concerned about workers' struggles. Economists, unfortunately, suffer from a peculiar mental retardation; they have not grasped, inter alia, two factors that make labour unique: first, "Employment is indeed an exchange (trading labour for money) but it is a very unequal exchange."; and secondly, "Labour is alive. Labourers are living, thinking beings, who can influence their surroundings and circumstances. One important consequence of this is that they always find ways—individual or collective—to resist work arrangements or practices they believe are unfair" (Stanford 2008).

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## NOTES

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