Labour, Politics and the State in Industrializing Thailand

Andrew Brown

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Capitalist industrialization in Thailand has had a revolutionary impact on the organization and structure of the society. New classes, groups and interests have emerged, including an urban-based industrial working class who are essential to the new capitalist procedures. This book examines how industrial workers have come to occupy a strategic place in the contemporary political economy and charts their long-term activism in seeking redress for a range of industrial, social and political problems.

Labour, Politics and the State in Industrializing Thailand, unlike previous studies, does not argue that the political exclusion of organized labour is the result of an immature working class, but focuses on how the state has become entangled in the processes through which workers have been organized, reorganized and disorganized as social and political actors in different historical periods. By critically examining the themes of labour weakness, political exclusion and insignificance of 'class factors', this book aims to bring back workers from the margins by demonstrating that both in the present and past the state has been involved in processes that determine the forms of their struggles.

Utilizing new empirical data and largely neglected historical material, Brown highlights how the working class has emerged as an enduring facet of Thai society. Providing an innovative approach to workers and politics, this book will appeal to scholars of South-east Asia as well as those with research interests in politics and employment in rapidly developing countries.

Andrew Brown is a Research Fellow in the Department of Political and Social Change in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University.

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Series editors' preface

The Asian Economic Crisis that began in 1997 struck down some of the major economies of the region and had global economic and political consequences. In Hong Kong, the economic downturn also caused economic instability and coincided with the end of colonialism as Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China. The conjunction of these events meant that the launch of the South-east Asia Research Centre at the City University of Hong Kong in late 2000 was propitious.

This new book series reflects the Centre's research agenda that seeks to advance research and understanding of the political, economic and social forces that are shaping contemporary South-east Asia. This series reflects the Centre's emphasis on multi-disciplinary, comparative and holistic research. It also recognizes that the Asian Crisis marked a further watershed in the often turbulent development of the constituent nation-states of South-east Asia.

Through the turmoil of the Second World War, decolonization, independence and the cold war, great power rivalry and nationalist aspirations shaped the development of post-colonial South-east Asia in significant ways. The long struggle for national unification in Vietnam exemplifies the significance of the local in global contestation.

As the region emerged from these turbulent times, rapid economic development reconfigured the societies of South-east Asia. From the mid 1970s, a number of South-east Asian economies entered extended periods of significant economic growth. The economies of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia benefited from a more generalized development in East Asia, and made rapid advances, becoming some of the most dynamic economies and societies in the world. Huge flows of foreign capital and the development of relatively powerful domestic capitalist classes transformed these societies in just two to three decades. The World Bank and other international financial institutions celebrated the region's economic success and urged a continued unfettering of markets.

But the 1997 economic crash, and especially its negative social consequences, posed new challenges for the development models of the region. This led to increased questioning of the processes of capitalist globalization.

Further, the economic crash confronted the region's political regimes with significant challenges. The most notable of these was the collapse of the New Order in Indonesia. This confluence of economic and political turmoil stimulated a reassessment of the multiple impacts of globalization and associated ideas about regionalization. Nowhere has this reassessment been more vividly revealed than in the rise of China as an economic power. The regional reconfigurations that are under way indicate that multiple globalizing and regionalizing processes must be conceptualized to encompass economic, political, social and cultural processes.

Understanding how South-east Asians are negotiating the broad and multiple challenges posed by globalizing forces, and how they are reinventing their societies, are elements of the South-east Asia Research Centre's research agenda. Another focus is the divisions of class, ethnicity, gender, culture and religion that appear as fault lines underlying South-east Asia's post-colonial nation. Such rifts shape diverse patterns of conflict and fragmentation in the region. While much recent attention has been directed to Islamic 'fundamentalism', this is but one type of conflict in the region. A third area of interest involves regional interactions, including those between states, civil society, business, labour and migration. Finally, attention is given to the ways in which South-east Asian political economies are being reinvented following the Asian Crisis, examining new patterns of accumulation and allocation, and how these are shaped by political struggles in the region.

In this context, Andrew Brown's analysis of the development of Thailand's working class is an appropriate first book in this series. Dr Brown's study is the first English-language study that focuses on the history and politics of labour in Thailand. Thailand's working class emerged over a long period. Initially, the working class was small and dominated by Chinese immigrants. However, as the economy has grown, so the working class expanded and diversified. In 1960, more than 80 per cent of the economically active population worked in agriculture. Four decades later, this had declined to just 45 per cent. The expansion of the manufacturing workforce was especially rapid. The working class is now dominated by ethnic Thais, with women prominent in the export manufacturing and service sectors. Of course, these developments were associated with Thailand's rapid economic development that brought many benefits to its participants. However, as the economic crisis demonstrated, capitalist globalization also means that workers are increasingly tied to the vagaries of international markets.

While the economic significance of Thailand's working class has increased, it is common for these workers to be considered insignificant actors in pressing for political change. Utilizing new empirical and important historical data, Dr Brown indicates that workers and their struggles should be located at the centre of our understanding of political change in Thailand. This book shows that the long-standing struggles between

labour and capital have been central to the development of capitalism and the forms of political activism in Thailand. Dr Brown also draws attention to the interactions between labour and the state, and reveals that the state has been entangled in processes that have determined labour's economic and political struggles. This is reflected in the logic of the state's operations, the development of its administrative and bureaucratic structures, and in the very nature of the political regime and associated political space.

Kevin Hewison, Director
Vivienne Wee, Associate Director
Southeast Asia Research Centre
City University of Hong Kong

Preface

Few would argue against the proposition that Thailand's capitalism is having a revolutionary impact on economic, social and political life. Despite this, scholarly analyses of the relationship between capitalism transformation and processes of political change have largely ignored the economic and political role of the industrial working class. This book aims to partially redress this situation via an examination of the contested political processes through which industrial workers in Thailand have become organized, reorganized and disorganized as social and political actors in changing socio-historical contexts. Through this focus, the study draws attention to the manner in which the political control and accommodation of industrial workers and their activism have emerged as enduring historical concerns for that specific amalgam of social forces and interests involved in the struggle for political dominance through the agency of the state. From the period of the absolute monarchy, through military dictatorship and into the era of parliamentary rule and globalization, the question as to whether and how labour should or should not be accorded an organized and legitimate political voice will be shown to have attracted the recurring entanglement and interest of all. This fact suggests that, rather than being of peripheral importance, an understanding of the politics of the working class has much to contribute to the political science of Thailand's transition to capitalism.

An appreciation of the enduring historical and problematic character of the state's relationship with the politics of the working class is particularly timely given the contemporary Thai political environment. Thaksin Shinawatra and the *Thai Rak Thai* Party electoral victory in January 2001 signalled the rise to state power of a new complex of economic, political and ideological interests. Dominated by big domestic capital, Thaksin's administration has over the past two years been involved in a process of entrenching a new developmental 'social contract' that replaces that established by the government of Sarit Thanarat over four decades ago. Under the old developmental model political stability and security would be guaranteed by military government, private capital would be encouraged and domestic entrepreneurs would generate growth with the working class and

peasantry benefiting through a trickle-down effect (Hewison 2003: 11). However, rapid industrial expansion in the broader context of globalization, the emergence of a more complex society and pluralistic social structure, together with changes in the political area, marked especially by the growth of a civil society and the embedding of a parliamentary system, have combined to fundamentally transform the conditions that gave rise to the older development model. The final nail in the coffin of the model was the onset of economic crisis in 1997 (Hewison 2003: 12). It is in this environment that Thaksin and his government have been confronted with the challenge of dealing with the lingering socio-economic effects of the crisis and reigniting domestic processes of capital accumulation. Although yet to be fully established, a new social development model is emerging where a government dominated by the wealthy will provide assistance and protection to a reformed domestic capital class while at the same time offering increased social assistance to the poor (Hewison 2003: 13).

It is in this general context of entrenching a new social contract and development model that Thaksin's government appears to be on the verge of reorganizing the state's relationship with the industrial working class. To date, the government has moved slowly on matters of labour reform and the older exclusionary and repressive policies geared to providing a cheap, disciplined and weakly organized industrial labour force remain very much in evidence. However, pressures are building and substantial change seems inexorable. Internationally, competition from cheaper wage-labour competitors as well as trends that link market access to support and respect for labour rights and standards are forcing a rethinking of past labour relations policies and practices. At the same time, sections of big domestic capital, in their bid to engage in higher-value-added production and develop a more sophisticated globally engaged economy, are cognizant of the need to create a more highly skilled and motivated workforce. In this the question of better wages, improved and safer working conditions and a reformed and more efficient industrial relations system are becoming issues for significant policy debate. Alongside this are also pressures being exerted by workers and their families, as they have been challenged, particularly since the 1997 economic crisis, by an ever-widening gap between the theory and practice of industrial labour laws and the political promises of greater inclusion and participation within a system of parliamentary rule (Brown, Bundit and Hewison 2002). Just how the Thaksin government will respond to these pressures in the building of a new social contract is not clear. Nonetheless, very recent undertakings to establish an unemployment benefits fund in early 2004 (*Bangkok Post*, 27 February 2003), moves to finally ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) 1973 Minimum Age Convention (*Bangkok Post*, 7 March 2003) as well as the provision of extra budgetary resources to labour skilling and training would appear to presage a period of substantial change. In all this the question of how labour organization might also be reformed to have an improved institutionalized

voice in industrial and political arrangements also looms large (Athibodi krom sawatikan 2003: 10–14).

This study places these contemporary problems in a broader historical context, demonstrating that, while some issues are new, others represent dilemmas that have been part and parcel of the politics of the working class for over a century. If an understanding of this past sheds some light on present dilemmas then this book will have served a useful purpose. In Chapter 1, the study is located in the context of a body of research and a number of themes are discussed that serve to structure the narrative contained in subsequent chapters. Chapters 2 to 7 provide an empirical examination of the interplay between processes of working-class formation, the state and politics. The demarcation for each of these chapters is established by events that mark significant changes in the character of the political regime. Within each of these periods, the nature of working class struggle is explored, focusing especially on workers' attempts to build their organizational capacities. These struggles are located in the broader political dynamics of the time. In essence, each of the chapters examines working-class politics in action within specific episodes of regime transition, emphasizing a more central place for workers, but at the same time showing how different regimes have created varying opportunities for labour's political space and hence its organization and/or disorganization as a legitimate social, industrial and political actor. In Chapter 8, some of the main arguments contained throughout the study are drawn together and concluding comments are made.

Essentially this book charts the rise of a working class politics and suggests that an understanding of this politics enriches broader scholarly knowledge of Thai political history.

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Finally, my love and appreciation go to the Brown and Wijeyewardene families, particularly to Ingrid, Kestin and Angus, who have had to endure all the ups and downs associated with the research and writing of this book.

Abbreviations

AAFLI	Asian-American Free Labor Institute
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations
AUWB	Association of United Workers of Bangkok (Samakhom sahachiwa kammakon nakhon krungthep)
AUWT	Association of United Workers of Thailand (Samakhom sahachiwa kammakon haeng prathet thai)
BMA	Bangkok Metropolitan Area
CAKE	Committee for Assisting Kader Employees
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFD	Confederation for Democracy
CLU	Central Labour Union
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand (Phak kommunit haeng phrathet thai)
ECOT	Employers' Confederation of Thailand
EOI	Export-oriented industrialization
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
FLAT	Free Labour Association of Thailand (Samakhom seri raengngan haeng phrathet thai)
GTU	Group of Thai Unions (Klum sahaphaphraengngan haengphratet thai)
GTUA	General Trade Union Association
HSCC	Health and Safety Campaign Committee (Khana kammakan kanronarong phua sukaphap lae khwam phlot phai khong khon ngan)
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IDL	International Division of Labour
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISI	Import substitution industrialization
ISOC	Internal Security Operations Command
LAT	Labour Association of Thailand (Samakhom lukcang haeng phratet thai)

LCCT	Labour Coordination Centre of Thailand (LCCT) (Sunprasanngan kammakon haeng chat)
LCT	Labour Council of Thailand (Saphaongkan lukcang sapha raengngan haeng phratet thai)
LRA	Labour Relations Act 1975 (Kotmai raengngan samphan po so 2518)
NA	National Archives
NACFLD	National Advisory Council for Labour Development
NCTL	National Congress of Thai Labour (Saphaongkan lukcang raengngan haeng phratet thai)
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
NFLC	National Free Labour Congress
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPKC	National Peacekeeping Council
SEC	Siam Electric Company
SERG	State Enterprise Relations Group
TCWERPN	Thai Council of Work and Environment Related Patients' Network
TLA	Thai Labour Association (Samakhom kammakon thai)
TNTUC	Thai National Trade Union Confederation
TTA	Thai Tramway Men's Association (Samakhom kammakon rotrang thai)
TTUC	Thai Trade Union Congress (Saphaongkanlukcang sahaphan raengngan haeng phratet thai)
USOM	United States Operations Mission
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WWAB	Workers' Welfare Association of Bangkok (Samakhom kammakon songkhro krungthep)

1 Introduction

Labour has not figured prominently in the scholarship concerned with the political consequences of Thailand's transformation through capitalist industrialization. For much of the twentieth century, absolute monarchs, and later military leaders and civilian officials, presiding over a state that was insulated from extra-bureaucratic interests, figured in the academic literature as the principal shapers of historical and political changes (Wilson 1962; Riggs 1966). In these elite-focused analyses, industrial workers and their struggles were deemed largely irrelevant and often simply ignored. Over the last two or three decades, however, alongside industrial expansion, the development of a more complex division of labour and pluralistic social structure, it has been the bourgeoisie and middle class that have attracted the attention of political commentators. It is argued that the domination of the state machinery and policy processes by small coteries of civilian and military bureaucrats has now passed into history. A vibrant civil society comprised of diverse social interests, led by representatives of the aforementioned classes, has emerged and demonstrated an intention to bring the bureaucratic state to heel and force it to take account of popular aspirations for a more open and participatory political system. While no longer entirely ignored, labour's involvement in, and contribution to, these recent political transformations is seen to have been peripheral (see, for example, Vichote 1991).

Not surprisingly, for that relative handful of scholars who have focused their intellectual energies on labour history, the thrust of research has been directed towards accounting for the enduring weakness of organized labour and the underdeveloped character of a working class politics. As Samrej (1987: 2) has noted, in addressing themselves to this task, researchers have built their studies on models that posit a certain inevitability about the political forms, roles and demands that working classes are assumed to develop during the transition to industrial society. While there is considerable variation in the literature, two broad clusters of views predominate. The most influential of these is a liberal-pluralist perspective, associated with broader modernization approaches to the study of development processes. This approach has projected a role for Thailand's workers that

would more or less conform to the historical path taken by working class movements in western liberal democracies. There organized labour was accorded a legitimate, albeit contested, place in both industrial and broader political structures and arrangements via the granting of a range of rights guaranteed and enforced by the state itself. A second approach, linked with a more radical scholarship on Thailand's political economy, has drawn heavily on Marx's class-in-itself/class-for-itself model. Through the experience of capitalist exploitation and domination, workers are projected to emerge as a united class-for-itself confronting employers and the state and in the vanguard of a progressive and emancipatory politics. A range of positions that draw upon a mix of these two broad approaches may also be identified. The problem is that, in neither case, has the Thai experience conformed to such theoretical models. Scholars have thus been confronted with the task of identifying those economic, social and cultural factors that have formed impediments to the realization of the projected outcomes.

As a research strategy, constructing an historical account of Thailand's working class politics via the employment of models that embody notions of the course and forms that a labour politics has either taken elsewhere or might otherwise be expected to take, is not without its merits. In an academic context, where workers and their activism have been largely neglected, many of the studies conducted along such lines have produced pioneering investigations into Thai economic, social and political history and brought to light invaluable empirical material in what is an inherently difficult and complex area of intellectual research. More especially, this research strategy has indeed drawn attention to some of the very real difficulties that have confronted Thai workers as they have strived to build and maintain collective industrial and political responses to the challenges of class, and has thus accounted for, at least to some extent, why the liberal or more radical outcomes have not been historically realized. In doing so, these studies have effectively highlighted the very different levels of organizational and political capacities that have accrued to workers, the state and other classes as a result of the particular character and course of Thailand's industrialization experience.

Nonetheless, in building their analyses upon certain normative views as to what a real, proper or developed form of labour organizing and struggle should or should not look like, scholars have been limited in their ability to identify and explain the occurrence of labour activism in the Thai context that may not have assumed or corresponded with such forms. Moreover, this particular research strategy has also promoted a tendency to decentre the concept of class and, in extreme cases, has led to a denial that class and class analysis have any relevance whatsoever to an explanation of the historical relationship that has emerged between Thailand's workers, the state and broader processes of political change (Wilson 1962: 51, 57; Mabry 1977: 932; Sungsidh 1989: 264).[1] A major consequence of this is a fundamental inability to appreciate the way in which labour's

organizational weakness and exclusion from formal political arrangements and policy-making processes may be understood not as marking the absence, distortion, immaturity or underdevelopment of class, but rather as the product of a class politics as this has manifested itself in the specific Thai context. Moreover, rather than being of peripheral importance, it could be argued that an analysis of this politics is necessary if not sufficient to explain and account for the occurrence of patterns of social conflict and contestation that, as this study will empirically demonstrate, have emerged as enduring structural features of Thai political life.

Class as structure and process

In advancing these views, this study draws a distinction between the notion of class as a particular kind of relation and process that is the object or source of struggle, and a class formation, that is, an organized, conscious and collective social and political actor, which is the subject or agent of struggle. As a relation and process, class is defined by the specific manner in which 'surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers' in capitalist societies (Wood 1995: 76). It was, of course, a fundamental proposition of Marx's method that it is through an understanding of the structure and dynamics of class relations and the struggles they generate that we are able to explain processes of social and historical change in specific socio-historical contexts (Isaac 1987: 47; Dow and Lafferty 1990: 24). Thus, as Wood writes, the view of class as both structure and process stresses:

> that objective relations to the means of production are significant because they establish antagonisms and generate conflicts and struggles; that these conflicts and struggles shape social experience 'in class ways' even when they do not express themselves in class consciousness or in clearly visible class formations; and that over time we can discern how these relationships impose their logic, their pattern, on social processes. (1995: 82)

Such observations are especially germane for approaching the Thai case. Because of the apparent absence of 'class consciousness' or a 'visible class formation', writers have questioned the relevance of class and class struggle for understanding the relationship between industrial workers, politics and the state. Implicit in this is the view that, in order to 'make history', workers must become a self-consciously constituted, corporate entity; unless and until they reach this stage, workers will remain a 'mere mass', something still not properly formed or mature (Miliband 1988: 23). This assumes that, in the absence of classes acting as 'quasi-individual' subjects (Metcalfe 1988a: 132), class conflict does not exist and hence there has been a tendency to argue that class per se is an irrelevant category of analysis in the Thai context.

An understanding of class as both structure and process recognizes, however, that, while the emergence of class relations of exploitation and domination in specific contexts will generate conflicts, these will not necessarily express themselves in the form of a struggle between conscious and well-organized class formations. Indeed, the class struggle manifests itself first as a struggle to constitute class-based collectivities as organized social and political actors before it can become a contest between organized and conscious class formations. The results of such struggles are not predetermined but are contingent upon the outcome of a range of '*sui generis* practices concerned with the organisation and reorganisation of [class] forces' (Jessop 1982: 242). Moreover, change is persistent within capitalism. Therefore, the contested historical and social processes through which those who occupy a similar location within capitalist class relations and processes may come to be actually organized, reorganized and/or disorganized as actors are always necessarily partial and incomplete (Sayer and Walker 1992: 33). To quote Wood again:

> class at the beginning of a historical mode of production is not what it is at the end. . . . [C]lasses develop within a mode of production in the process of coalescing around the relations of production and as the composition, cohesion, consciousness, and organization of the resulting class formation change.
>
> (1995: 99)

In light of the above, this study does not attempt to establish the existence of class and class politics in terms of the extent to which Thai workers can be seen to be replicating certain theoretically privileged trajectories of struggle. Rather, this book advances the case for the adoption of a more dynamic and open-ended approach that aims to empirically trace the rise of a working class politics through a focus on the development of patterns of conflict and struggle as manifest in the interplay between processes of working class formation, regimes of accumulation, state and the structuring of political space in different historical periods. Struggles by workers to organize and pursue their interests are thus located in the broader economic and political dynamics of various conjunctures as different constellations of forces emerged to coalesce and contest state power. By documenting how these changing regimes created varying opportunities or problems for labour's political space, and hence its organization and disorganization as a legitimate political actor, the study draws attention to the manner in which the political control and accommodation of industrial workers and their activism have emerged to become an enduring historical problem for the Thai state. It will be argued that an appreciation of this patterning of class and class struggle on political processes is rather more important for an understanding of Thai political history than has often been recognized.

Having clarified the notion of class and the broad aims of the present study, it will be appropriate to turn to a consideration of those factors thought to have impeded workers' capacities to constitute themselves as an organized social and political force. In this I shall consider three broad areas of thinking and research that has focused on: the nature and timing of Thailand's capitalism; the impact of culture and ideology; and, finally, the state and political constraints. By discussing this literature, the aim is to set the study more firmly in the context of a body of ongoing research and indicate some of the themes that will serve as points of reference for the presentation of the data in subsequent chapters. To anticipate, it will be argued that while this mix of economic structural, political and socio-cultural arguments have directed attention to some very real problems that have confronted workers in their attempt to build and sustain collective responses to the dilemmas that stem from their class situation, their collective impact has been rather more contradictory than has often been acknowledged.

Working class formation and the structure and timing of Thailand's capitalist development

Concerned with the period of the 1950s, Wilson (1962) drew attention to the ways in which the character of Thailand's industrialization impacted on the ability of workers to organize. He noted that the majority of urban industrial workers at the time were employed in small, largely quasi-family-owned workshops and that this:

> involved an intimate pattern of interpersonal relations between employer and worker and probably includes a higher degree of social integration than is characteristic of large factories. Since the boss and workers are approximate social equals in a small shop, this pattern does not stimulate working-class solidarity or working-class political activity.
>
> (Wilson 1962: 43–44)

Over the years, subsequent writers have also remarked on the manner in which the nature, structure and timing of Thailand's industrialization experience has impacted on the capacity of workers to build and sustain collective responses to industrial and political problems. Thus, at one time or another, the limited scale of industrialization and restricted use of wage-labour itself; the particular kinds of industries and size of enterprises that have been established; the existence of surplus supplies of labour; and, most recently, the impact of globalization and the mobility of capital have all been cited to account, at least in part, for labour's organizational and political weaknesses. It will be appropriate to briefly examine some of these arguments in a little more detail.

Scholars have often drawn attention to the fact that recourse to full-time urban wage employment in Thailand has been limited and that the overwhelming majority of the country's labour force, at least in terms of officially gathered statistics, remain employed in agriculture (Blanchard 1958: 288; Wilson 1962: 38; Phiraphol 1978: 16). While four decades of industrialization has certainly expanded the demand for the employment of urban industrial workers, writers persist in pointing out that they still remain, in numerical terms, a relatively small proportion of the labour force, the majority of whom remain engaged in agriculture (Supachai 1994: 259). Whether the limited extent of industrialization and use of wage-labour is seen as the result of the persistence of a traditional economy (Wilson 1962), or whether it is seen as the product of Thailand's incorporation into a world capitalist system that has led to the development of a 'dependent' or incomplete form of capitalism (Kannika 1975: 46; Narong 1982: 67; Sungsidh 1989: 34), the implication is clear: the growth of a working class clearly separated from the means of production, a *class-in-itself*, has occurred relatively slowly and is still incomplete. The absence, in strictly quantifiable terms, of a statistically significant number of 'proletarians' is thus one of the reasons why it has not been considered possible to speak meaningfully of the existence of a legitimate working class in Thailand.

To be sure, the apparent limited extent to which Thailand's labour force has been drawn into the orbit of capitalist class relations and processes is indeed significant. Nonetheless, the focus on absolute numbers of proletarians and the forms of labour is misleading in at least two senses. In the first place, as Sayer and Walker stress:

> To say that wage-labor is a restricted experience does not mean that it is not widespread or that its force cannot be felt at a distance, however. Indeed, the power of class lies precisely in the fact that large effects issue from a limited cause, not that everything or everyone is in a class relation.
>
> (1992: 23)

Second, while it may be possible to identify a core of typical working class occupations (Donaldson 1991: 3), the concept of class refers not to the forms of work as such, but rather to the relational context within which the myriad forms of labour in any given society are performed. Thus, the focus of attention should not be on particular occupations or the specific locale at which labour is exercised. Rather it should be on the extent to which the variegated forms of productive activity in any given society are being subsumed by the dynamic of capitalist relations of production, thus transforming the direct producers into wage-labour and hence members of the working class.

Some time ago, Turton (1984: 33–37) emphasized just this point in his contribution to the debate over the extent to which capital had or had not penetrated Thai agriculture. While not denying that rural producers engaged in simple commodity production existed, he argued:

> there are greater numbers, who might appear to be possessors or owners of the means of production, namely small agricultural landholders, who should not be so regarded. For we need to consider what we understand by effective means and conditions of production in the new economic conjuncture, and what constitutes effective control over them.
>
> (Turton 1984: 34)

Turton cited an example where, although land was owned with full title, a whole range of means and conditions of production (irrigation, water, seeds, fertilisers, machinery, petroleum products, various technologies and decision making processes) were 'not owned, nor [was] their reproduction controlled, by the retail credit purchaser, any more than the crops themselves which [were] pre-contracted to the seller of inputs' (ibid.). Turton was thus interested to understand the complex ways in which rural producers in Thailand were losing control over means of production to become 'wage-labour equivalents' (ibid.). He noted:

> if we can speak of rural producers under a dominant capitalism, then the 'peasant' problematic as such may diminish in significance, and a new class problematic emerge in which the 'peasantry', or substantial sections, are part or parts, however distinctive, of a new working class.
>
> (1984: 33)

These comments suggest that an understanding of the development of a 'working class' in Thai society in a structural sense must go beyond a simple focus or concern with simple head-counting or changing occupation profiles. Indeed, a thorough analysis of the complexities of proletarianization – the processes through which the direct producer actually loses control over the means of production and becomes compelled to work for those who do control society's productive resources – would require several studies. In so far as this study deals with the structure of Thailand's working class in various historical periods, the focus of attention is placed on the industrial fraction of this class. As Hewison (1989a: 22) explains, class fractions are defined according to the circuits of capital: industrial, banking, commercial and agrarian/landed. As the wage-labour/capital relation is mutually conditioning (Marx 1932: 32–33), each fraction of capital creates a corresponding fraction within the working class. The industrial working class is thus that fraction of a society's total available labour-power employed by industrial capital.

There are two reasons for focusing on the industrial fraction of Thailand's working class. The first relates to its strategic importance. As Brown has stressed, the significance of the working class is 'more influenced by its economic position than its relative size' (1988: 35). The industrial fraction of the working class occupies a key strategic place within the entire capitalist system, for it is this fraction that actually produces the commodities that embody use- and exchange-values. Second, it is precisely the politics of Thailand's industrial workers that has puzzled previous analysts as they appear to have failed to pursue what have been considered proper trajectories of political activism. As this study will demonstrate, however, it is precisely by virtue of their key structural economic location that those drawn into industrial work have been afforded a degree of economic and potential political influence. This has gone largely unrecognized.

Apart from the limited extent of industrialization, labour's organizational and political weakness has also been seen to be the result of the particular character of Thai industrialization. Building upon the observations made by Wilson, writers have drawn attention to the ways in which industrialization has been constructed on the back of largely small-scale, often family-owned firms that employ fewer than ten workers (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 223; Supachai 1994: 259; Somsak 1995: 45–51). This, it is argued, has posed distinct impediments to the formation of both a distinct working class consciousness and strong, autonomous trade unions.

Such arguments resonate with themes raised by Deyo (1989). In his classic work he drew attention to the ways in which the specific character of industrialization in East Asia placed significant structural obstacles in the path of workers' abilities to build and sustain unity and solidarity and thus forge strong organizational capacities that could be deployed in negotiations with employers and governments. Reflecting on the particular nature of working classes created by light, labour-intensive, export-oriented industrialization (EOI) Deyo observed:

> The attraction of young, low-skilled, often female workers to employment characterized by low pay, tedium, minimal job security, and lack of career mobility encourages low job commitment, high levels of turnover, and lack of attachment to work groups or firms. These circumstances impede independent unionization efforts among workers in light export industries, the pacesetters for early-export-oriented industrialization (EOI).
>
> (1989: 8)

Deyo also suggests that working class communities in East Asia have 'failed to play a supportive role for workers' organization and political action'. This contrasts with the experience of some Latin American countries where working-class communities provided 'an essential foundation for labor protest' (ibid. 8–9).

In the late-late industrializing societies of South-east Asia, the structural impediments to effective labour organization associated with the specific character of EOI are perhaps even more pronounced. In this region of the world, the onset of EOI occurred alongside the rise of neo-liberalism and thus a pressuring of governments to open their markets as well as privatize former state enterprises. This has had a significant impact on public sector workers and their efforts to sustain their unions. Moreover, within a more globally competitive market, employers have been forced to reduce labour costs through the implementation of new and more flexible working arrangements and or forms of employment that has also undercut workers' potential to develop their organizational capacities (Deyo 1995: 214–218; Ogena *et al*. 1997: 42). Finally, as Hadiz (1997: 33) has noted, workers in South-east Asia have also been confronted with the prospect of attempting to develop their organizational capacities in a situation where there are often chronic labour surpluses, at least with respect to cheap and unskilled labour upon which EOI has been built, and at a time when capital is increasingly internationally mobile.

Collectively, these economic-structuralist arguments are persuasive and provide a sound comparative basis for explaining, in part, the changing capacities and opportunities that different working classes at different times possess for building and sustaining unity and solidarity. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, economic-structural factors certainly need to be taken into account in order to understand the specific environment within which Thai workers have at various times struggled to build and sustain a collective capacity to act. However, two caveats need to be entered. First, it is important not to reify these structural obstacles, for this excludes from analysis the ways in which workers develop strategies to overcome the problems they face in developing and sustaining unity and solidarity. Second, the economic-structural consequences that flow from the nature and timing of Thailand's capitalist development, both in earlier and more recent periods, should not be read as somehow distorting the emergence of a 'classic' working class (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 223). For, as this study will show, Thailand's capitalism has indeed created an industrial working class employed in medium and larger factories and housed in communities that historically have been spatially concentrated around Thailand's economic, social and political heartland. These workplace and community changes have created preconditions for the rise of struggle, solidarity, new experiences, new identities and new forms of collective endeavours. More especially, as producers of use- and exchange-values, the structural position these workers have come to occupy within the Thai political economy, in both earlier and more recent periods, should not be overlooked. For it is in virtue of this key structural position that even nascent forms of working class organization have embodied tremendous oppositional potential. While scholars have often overlooked the structural

power of wage-labour, it has not escaped the recurring attention of both employers and the state.

If the particular character and timing of industrialization itself can be seen as both constraining but at the same time creating opportunities for processes of working class formation to occur, other factors have also been seen to have impeded Thailand's workers from developing their organizational capacities. In this the impact of culture and ideology has been considered significant.

Culture, ideology and class consciousness

The impact of traditional culture and or a hegemonic ideology has often been invoked to account for the organizational weakness and political marginalization of Thai workers. In some of the earliest studies completed on Thai labour that dealt with the pre-1960 period, workers were perceived to be innately passive, individualistic, accepting of their subordinate role and position in society, deferential to authority and possessed with an in-built cultural reluctance to become involved in the affairs of others (Shurcliffe 1959: 1). The clinging to these 'traditional' modes of thought, values and behaviour is said to have impeded the development of class solidarity and consciousness (Wilson 1962: 51; Mabry 1977: 932).

Even today, with more sustained levels of industrialization, traditional culture is still seen to play a significant part in impeding the development of a working class identity. For example, Lawler and Chokechai have asserted that:

> Although Thailand is very much of a collectivist culture, there generally seems to be a lack of class consciousness among workers, resulting at least in part from a reliance on rural labor to fill the increasing number of jobs in the industrial sector. Such workers have, at least to this point, not formed a strong sense of class identity and are thus more difficult to organize. And the centrality of Theravada Buddhism to Thai culture certainly contributes to the industrial relations framework. Thai society is hierarchical in character, with those in the lower rungs of society tending to defer to their social superiors, which is often reflected in the processes within which Thai organizations are managed. Such ordering of society is supported by Buddhist doctrine, which encourages individuals to accept their current situation in life (seen as a consequence of one's past life) and to work for a good 'next life'. Theravada Buddhism tends to be personal and introspective and is not prone to social activism as is the Mahayana Buddhism dominant in East Asia.
>
> (2000: 216)

While many writers have argued that traditional culture has represented a barrier to the emergence of a distinct working class consciousness and the building of a sense of class solidarity, others have argued that labour's industrial and political weakness is, in part, the product of the operations of a dominant hegemonic ideology. Because Thailand was never formally colonized, *sakdina* ideology remained relatively unchanged. *Sakdina* ideology 'produces superior–subordinate relationships, between the ruling elite and the common people, between employers and employees. This restrains the development of working class consciousness, and facilitates . . . workers' submission to the capitalists and the repressive regime' (Narong 1982: 68). This 'internalization of hegemonic ideology' therefore 'undermined the possibility for the progressive labour movement to effectively develop an autonomous position vis-à-vis the ruling class and the state and to transform the social and political consciousness of the working class' (ibid.: 4).

Because of the operations of this hegemonic ideology, Thai workers have therefore lacked anything that might be realistically termed class consciousness. According to Sungsidh, for example, class consciousness is revolutionary consciousness; anything short of this is not true but distorted or underdeveloped. Reflecting on the industrial militancy of the 1970s, for example, Sungsidh argues that:

> strikers were dissatisfied more with certain individual members of management, rather than with the capitalist relations of production. Workers seem to have had little consciousness of the workings of a capitalist mode of production and almost no vision of an alternative structure of society to which their actions and struggles might lead. In so far as workers did not yet see the need of revolution, it is quite difficult to . . . [talk about] . . . 'class consciousness'.
>
> (1989: 271)

Thus while one can talk about 'group consciousness' developing during the important 1973–76 period, one cannot speak meaningfully about the emergence of 'class consciousness' (Sungsidh 1989: 270).

This study rejects the idea that either culture or ideology have acted as forces constraining the formation of working class identity. Cultural explanations embrace a view of culture as something that passes through history unchanged. But as Parenti has noted, culture 'is not an abstract force that floats around in space and settles upon us . . . culture is mediated through a social structure' (1999: 11). The assumption that there is a single historical cultural legacy inherited and shared by all classes of Thai is thus inherently problematic (Turton 1984: 22). For this ignores the ways in which cultural traditions can be 'invented' and deployed to serve particular ideological and political interests. Thus, rather than employing the concept of culture as an unproblematic principle of explanation, it is therefore

important to focus attention on 'who produces cultural meanings, and how they are contested, construed, resisted and recast' through and during concrete processes of struggle (Keesing 1991: 45).

While some authors have relied on reified conceptions of culture, other scholars have tended to work with a reified conception of consciousness. As noted, it has been argued that it is the operation of a dominant ideology – a complete subjection of labour to the ideas and fantasies of the Thai ruling classes – that has prevented workers from attaining the level of a fully conscious proletariat. Class consciousness is seen as an all-or-nothing affair. Unless and until workers involved in struggles speak specifically in a language that penetrates to the inner working of capitalism and calls for its complete overthrow, then one cannot speak meaningfully of class consciousness. Such views greatly underestimate the complexities of the processes of formation of social consciousness (see Turton 1984). This is especially evident in the failure to appreciate the ways in which workers, in response to their class experience, construct their consciousness or understanding of social reality by contesting and reworking dominant ideologies (Metcalfe 1988a: 133–136).

As this study will show, the explanations proffered by both groups of writers cannot be sustained on empirical grounds. Rather than being culturally reluctant to challenge authority and become involved in the affairs of others, it will be shown that Thai industrial workers have continually displayed a willingness to organize and struggle in defence of their class interests. Moreover, it will be shown that, while elements of what may be termed 'feudal' consciousness did and do remain within labour discourse, these elements have been subjected to a process of critical transformation and, rather than simply 'internalizing' dominant ideologies, industrial workers and their leaders have been able, during the course of their struggles, to map out rather different ideological conceptions of what exists and what is good and possible for the future development of their society.

The state and political constraints

A final cluster of arguments that have been deployed to account for labour's weakness and political invisibility, concern the impact of the role of the state. In considering the role of the state, however, immediate problems arise due to terminological difficulties. In particular, two key problems can be identified. First, there has been a marked tendency to conflate the state with particular state institutions – parliaments, cabinets, national assemblies and supporting bureaucratic structures. Because workers and their organizations have been largely absent from, or only have had token representation within, these institutions, labour's insignificance as a political actor is taken as read. But such approaches represent an extremely narrow view of what constitutes the political. Struggles that occur outside these officially recognized political structures are often simply ignored. In seeking

to avoid such problems, this study will take some care to maintain a distinction between the concepts of state, state apparatus, regime and government (Hewison *et al.* 1993: 4–5).

A second problem within the literature stems from the emphasis placed on a one-dimensional understanding of the state in its relation with social forces, such as the working class. As Migdal argues, such approaches are marked by the attention they give to the state's coercive and rule-enforcing character, highlighting 'its capabilities, its proficiencies in achieving a fixed set of goals and in implementing formal policies' (1994: 12). These one-dimensional views express themselves in the literature on Thai labour through the attention given to explaining how the state, largely through a reliance on repression, has been able to stall the emergence of a proper form of working class politics. Certainly, as this study will show, by shattering solidarities and creating dilemmas for labour's political strategies, state repression has been a significant factor in shaping the process through which workers have strived to build unity and solidarity and emerge as legitimate and organized political actors. Nonetheless, the emphasis on repression allows little conceptual space for appreciating the ways in which the state is not only a determinant of class struggle, but also an object and product of that struggle (Isaac 1987: 184). Thus as Migdal notes:

> as the state organization comes into contact with various social groups, it clashes with and accommodates to different moral orders. These engagements, which occur at numerous junctures, change the social bases and the aims of the state. The state is not a fixed ideological entity. Rather, it embodies an ongoing dynamic, a changing set of goals, as it engages social groups.
>
> (1994: 12)

Such observations are important, for there has been little recognition that a focus on the working class offers any insight into understanding changes in the nature of the Thai state itself. Indeed, much of the literature depicts a state that has been largely immune, unaltered and unaffected by its engagement with the political claims and aspirations of the industrial working class. What is missing, however, is an exploration of what Migdal terms 'the recursive relationship between state and society, the mutually transforming interactions between . . . the state and other social forces' (1994: 9; see also Isaac 1987: 185).

As a vehicle for exploring the 'mutually transforming relationship' (Migdal 1994: 8) between the state and the working class, this study offers an historical analysis of problems associated with labour control. A fundamental structural problem that confronts states within capitalist systems is to provide political protection for capital by constraining the organizational capacities of the working class. In examining the manner in which the Thai state has become confronted with and carried out this unstable, contested

and contradictory role, particular emphasis will be placed on the impact of the regime and the structuring of political space. Thus, the thesis does not seek to determine whether the state has acted to impede the emergence of a proper expression of working class politics. Rather, the primary focus is on the impact that different political regimes and the structuring of political space has had on the organization and reorganization of the working class in various historical periods.

Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion I have located this study within a broader context of academic and intellectual debate that has generally paid little attention to the historical and political development of wage-labour. For those who have focused their attention on labour politics, there has been an overwhelming concern with labour weakness and the underdevelopment of a working class politics. In outlining a different approach, it has been argued that, rather than attempting to establish the presence of a class dynamic in terms of normative models that embody images of what a class politics should or should not look like, the research focus should be placed on an examination of the contested processes through which workers have actually been organized, reorganized and disorganized in specific historical periods. Bringing this approach to the Thai case, the study will empirically demonstrate that, alongside the rise of capitalism and the industrial and political responses of workers themselves, the problem of organizing the industrial working class has long attracted the interest of a range of actors, but most especially the state. Rather than being peripheral, taking account of industrial workers and their organization as potential political actors will be shown to have formed an enduring concern for those changing amalgams of interests involved in entrenching rule through the agency of the state.

2 Monarchs, workers and struggles for a voice

> Apart from white-collar unemployment and a few anti-Japanese boycotts by the Chinese, other types of labor problems were virtually unknown under the absolute monarchy. In general the people accepted whatever their superiors chose to deal out to them.
>
> (Thompson 1947: 239)

Introduction

The place of labour in the politics of the decline of absolutism and the birth of a constitutional regime has been almost entirely ignored. Indeed, as the above quotation suggests, it would appear ludicrous to assert that a working class politics with significant consequences actually emerged at this time. In contradistinction to such a view, this chapter will establish that the pre-1932 period did see the rise of major problems for the absolute monarchy on the labour front. By securing the general conditions for the development of capitalism and a class of free wage-labour, the monarchy became confronted with the task of optimizing labour's economic potential while at the same time containing its possible political challenges. In response, the absolutist state adopted a strategy that was reliant on the consistent use of repression. The discussion begins with an examination of the relationship between the absolute monarchy, the rise of capitalism and the emergence of wage-labour.

The absolute monarchy, capitalism and wage-labour

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century the Thai monarchy embarked on an ambitious programme of internal modernizing reform. As Anderson has noted, this reform process resulted in a massive centralization of political power with the monarchy 'traditionally absolutist in formal claims . . . [becoming] . . . closer than ever to being absolutist in practice' (1985: 15). While the regularization, centralization and bureaucratization of its state and the securing of borders helped the monarchy deal with the

colonial powers, these changes were also crucial for securing the general conditions for the emergence of a national capitalism. As Hewison (1989a: 33–56) has shown, alongside the reorganization of its state, the absolute monarchy had by 1932 overseen the establishment of all the necessary conditions for the rise of a distinctly capitalist mode of production. Of particular importance in this regard was the role played by the monarchy in securing a supply of free wage-labour.

The use of wage-labour can be traced to the Ayuthian period (1350–1767). However, it began to assume special significance for the monarchy during the period of the reconstruction of state and society that followed in the wake of the Burmese sacking of the Siamese capital in 1767. With the corvée system in ruins, the Thai monarchs turned to the use of immigrant Chinese as sources of labour (Hong 1984: 45). Some of the immigrants developed close links with the monarchy and nobility through tax farming, merchant and other entrepreneurial activities (Hewison 1989a: 48–51). The vast majority of Chinese were, however, employed as both skilled and unskilled wage-labour working on state projects such as canal and temple construction. They also laboured in tin mines and agricultural plantations that produced crops such as pepper and sugar (Brown 1990: 15–17). Demand for wage-labour expanded following the opening of the economy to the West after the 1850s. By the 1870s it 'gradually became understood that paid labor was far more productive than conscripted labor' (Ingram 1971: 59). The monarchy's desire for wage-labour was reflected in policies adopted to encourage Chinese immigration (Brown 1990: 25–28). Through these policies, together with the gradual abolition of *sakdina* relations of bondage and servitude and of the corvée (Feeney 1993), the monarchy played a key role in securing one of the necessary conditions for the development of capitalism – the existence of a supply of free wage-labour.

The signing of the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in 1855, which opened the economy to expanded trade with the West, marked the beginning of great change within Thai society. For the next century, Thailand's position within the International Division of Labour (IDL) was essentially one of a producer and exporter of four main primary products (rice, tin, teak and rubber), and an importer of western manufactured goods. In light of dependency arguments that seek to explain development largely in terms of the need of western capital, it should be stressed that the opening of Thailand's economy to international circuits of capital also provided opportunities for social interests within the country to take advantage of changing circumstances. Of paramount importance was the emergence of a domestic capitalist class. The origins of this class can be traced back to changes that were occurring within the economy prior to 1855. Members of the *sakdina* class who, along with their Chinese clients, had gained experience in trading ventures and other activities such as sugar production, were presented with further opportunities to expand their investments following the opening of

the economy to international markets. It is notable, therefore, that, rather than emerging as an openly antagonistic class, the new class achieved these early processes of capital accumulation through cooperation with the ruling *sakdina* class in activities such as tax farming, provincial administration and merchant businesses, as well as by acting as compradors for western firms (Hewison 1985: 271).

For the overwhelming majority of the economically active population, these changes meant a continued life in agricultural activity, with increasing emphasis given to the production of rice both for domestic consumption and for export. Between the early 1870s and early 1930s, for example, the volume of rice exports increased twenty-fivefold. This growth was made possible not so much through technological innovation, but rather by an enormous expansion in the amount of land devoted to rice cultivation (Ingram 1971: 36–52). Although it appears that the specialization in rice production necessitated no radical break from the pre-capitalist socio-economic structure, significant changes did occur with the rise of a system of peasant commodity production (Hewison 1989a: 42). Rural producers were not totally separated from the means of production. However, their labour was gradually 'formally' subsumed under capitalist relations of production. Thus, instead of being oriented towards creating use-values that would meet basic subsistence needs, agricultural activity became increasingly geared towards the production of exchange-values to satisfy market demands. In turn, this led to a decline in rural industries as cheap imported goods replaced handicrafts in those areas where the market had the greatest impact. This growing pressure to produce for the market became further entrenched as traditional forms of bondage were phased out and replaced by the imposition of a general head-tax. This meant that rural producers developed an increasing need for cash. The shift from subsistence production to production for the market impacted on traditional cycles of reproduction, land ownership and relations of production, as well as furthering the circulation of commodities (Hewison 1989a: 43).

Although the majority continued to be engaged in agriculture, and while the number employed in manufacturing industry may not have been large in numerical terms, an emerging class of industrial wage-labour nonetheless gradually came to occupy a strategic position in Thailand's changing political economy. By the late 1920s Bangkok and its sister city Thonburi, located just across the river, formed the political and economic heartland of the country. It was in this area that early industrial development was concentrated and domestic and international commercial relations merged to produce a vibrant area of urban economic activity. It was also here that the king resided, where government policy was made and where the most important institutions and offices of the absolutist state were located. In this context, the 'collective wage worker' – employed in the rice- and saw-mills, on the railways and tramways, on the ports and docks, in the

electricity generating plants and gas works, in the cement and tobacco factories, on the construction of buildings, shops, houses, roads and bridges and in the growing number of smaller industrial establishments – was becoming embedded within the changing economy and society.[1] The strategic location of this emerging class of industrial workers generated a degree of economic power and potential political significance that has often gone unrecognized.

The monarchy was able to reap considerable benefit from the growth of capitalism via its own involvement in business and through revenues gained through taxation on new forms of economic activity. However, problems began to emerge that placed pressure on the absolutist state and its officials to modify their operations and roles. For example, as industry developed, state officials were urged to ensure that not only regular and stable supplies of labour be maintained, but that attention also be given to developing the skills and productivity of those drawn into industrial employment (*Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* [hereafter *BTWM*] 29 September 1919, 28 June 1920). In addition, as Kanchada has argued, the monarchy also began to face the problem of creating a new type of social subject, one who would be disciplined to 'cope with [the] new requirements of commodity production and urban work habits' (1989: 25). Thus, through sermons by high-ranking monks and through educational texts written in the early decades of the twentieth century:

> the new phenomena of the market system, money economy, social and international division of labor and technical knowledge on trade were explained. The virtues of money, profit-seeking, industriousness, punctuality, temperance and prudence were emphasized as prerequisites for a successful life.
>
> (Kanchada 1989: 32–33)

Another important development that placed pressure on the state to modify its roles relates to the emergence of collective activism among the ranks of wage-labour and the perceived threat this could pose to the economic, social and political order. In the following section the development of collective struggles involving Chinese workers during the 1932 period is examined. After noting how the state responded to these struggles, the discussion focuses on the emergence of struggle and organization among ethnic Thai workers.

Chinese labour activism

Little is known about the day-to-day working and living conditions encountered by Chinese wage-labour during the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The evidence that is available does suggest, however, that life was difficult. This was especially the case for those employed on

railway construction and in the frontier mining and plantation enterprises (Skinner 1957: 110–115). While workers employed in Bangkok fared somewhat better, they too faced a day-to-day battle to secure a decent livelihood (Brown 1990: 48–49). Chinese workers' responses to their often-harsh working and living conditions assumed a number of different forms. As Kanchada (1989: 76) has noted, some simply deserted their workplaces and took a chance on finding better employment elsewhere. Others appear to have sought refuge in gambling, prostitution and drugs.[2] A survey conducted in the 1920s, for example, showed that the average Chinese worker spent half of his earnings on opium, although less than one in fifty had smoked the drug before arriving in Thailand (Thompson 1941: 609). Yet another possible form of response available to workers was to engage in collective struggle in the attempt to improve wages and conditions.

Examples of collective unrest among the shifting and transient Chinese working population date back to as early as the 1820s, and are clearly in evidence in a series of riots that occurred in 1848 in the sugar plantation areas of Nakhon Chaisi and shortly after in Chachoensao, located to the south-west of Bangkok (Skinner 1957: 143). Further outbreaks of rioting occurred in 1869, 1883, 1885 and 1889, with a number of lesser conflicts also being recorded (Congcairak 1986: 23–25). Although much of this early unrest was related to internecine rivalries between secret societies (Skinner 1957: 144), attempts to improve 'wages and conditions' had clearly emerged by the latter decades of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries.[3] Aided by the declining power of the secret societies as well as a tight labour market, workers involved in these early industrial strikes laboured in the important export areas of the rice and tin trade as well as in the rapidly expanding transport industries.[4] While the precise circumstances surrounding these events remain obscure, it appears that these represent early examples of Chinese workers collectively contesting employer authority in order to negotiate the price of labour.

The disruption to the economy that such activism posed is clear. For example, the British Consul stated that in 1888 a strike by dock workers over a pay issue 'lasted for several days . . . causing an entire cessation of business [with some steamers] obliged to leave the port for a want of hands to load the cargo' (as quoted in Skinner 1957: 117). The negative economic impact of strikes was again demonstrated by the 1910 general strike. The strike began on 1 June and was reputedly the result of changes made to the collection of the Chinese head-tax (Skinner 1957: 162–163). While there is some doubt as to whether this was indeed the main issue, it is noteworthy that rickshaw pullers, dock workers, cargo and rice mill coolies, fisherman and construction workers all seized the opportunity to strike (*BTWM* 31 May 1910, 1 June 1910, 4 June 1910, 5 June 1910, 10 June 1910). Underscoring the growing economic significance of wage-labour, one contemporary observer commented at the time:

> It must be remembered . . . that the strike might have lasted longer had the participants been sufficiently organised, for the fact that the Chinese labourer is a commercial factor of the utmost importance in the trade of the port has just been brought home to the most unthinking.
>
> (*BTWM* 6 June 1910)

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the press continued to carry reports of strikes (Brown 1990: 74) and by the late 1920s it was reported that Chinese workers were 'well organised' (*Bangkok Times* 23 July 1927). Despite a hostile political environment, the capacity of workers to engage in more or less organized and collective forms of activism during this period appears to have been the result of gradual changes that were slowly occurring within the Chinese community itself. While earlier generations of Chinese migrants came to Thailand with short-term goals of working for a few years before returning to China, the early decades of the twentieth century saw increasing numbers taking up more permanent residence (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 178–179). For those engaged in wage-labour, a more settled and permanent commitment to urban wage work appears to have enhanced a capacity to develop and sustain some degree of collective organization over time. This contrasts with the often sporadic and ephemeral forms of collective activism that mark earlier periods.

Another significant development to occur during this period relates to the ways in which events in China came to animate struggles among Chinese wage-labour. While wages and conditions continued to form a focus of struggle, the rise of anti-Manchu republicanism, the emergence of Chinese nationalism, especially as this came to be directed against Japanese imperialism, and the development of Chinese communism were all to have an impact on Chinese workers and their organizational activity in Thailand. For example, Chinese wage-labourers became involved in a number of trade boycotts directed against Japanese commercial interests in Thailand. Boycotts occurred in 1919 and 1926, with the most serious incident occurring in 1928. This followed in the wake of a bloody battle that had erupted between Japanese and Chinese Nationalist forces at Tsinan in May of that year. A group called the 'Chinese National Association in Siam for Opposing the Japanese' appealed to all Chinese businesses to boycott the handling of Japanese goods. According to an archival report, representatives from a labourers' union attended a meeting of the association (National Archives [hereafter NA] R 7.18/6), which suggests that Chinese workers were organizing for themselves a distinct place within the broader Chinese community. In response to the boycott, Japanese residents in Bangkok asked for police protection and over 200 Thai troops were ordered out to patrol the streets. In August 1928 Thai workers, under police protection, were employed to work on the docks and the boycott was finally broken the following month (Skinner 1957: 239).

Apart from the participation in struggles for higher wages and trade boycotts, the 1920s also saw the spread of communist ideas among the ranks of Chinese workers. As Batson has observed, it was during the early years of the Seventh Reign (1925–35) that the activities of 'various Marxist, communist and "Bolshevik" organizations first became a cause of serious concern to the government' (1984: 165). Wedel (1982: 367) claims that the first attempt by communists to establish an organizational base in Thailand occurred during the 1920s, when six members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were sent to Thailand to enlist support for the party. This initial process of organizing was apparently coordinated through the South Seas General Labour Union, later known as the South Seas Communist Party. The penetration of communist ideas into Thailand received further impetus following the Nationalist (*Kuomintang*)–Communist split in 1927. Thousands of leftists fled China and many were reported to have arrived in Thailand (Kasian 1992: 30–31). In the same year, it is claimed that 'Marxist orientated students' established the 'Association of Communist Youth' in Thailand (Samrej 1987: 41), while the Communist Party of Siam was inaugurated in March 1930 (Kasian 1992: 30–31). Communist activists appear to have been instrumental in leading strikes as well as attempting to strengthen existing organizational capacities among Chinese workers (*BTWM* 7 May 1927, 25 May 1929, 13 January 1930, 5 May 1930). While much of the communist propaganda at the time attempted to encourage workers to devote their collective efforts towards opposing imperialism, some attempts were also made to direct attention to local economic and political conditions. For example, in October 1930 Chua Kiam Seng, reputedly the leading 'communist' in Thailand, was arrested after pamphlets had been seized urging labourers, peasants, soldiers and 'all oppressed people' to act against the Thai government (*BTWM* 20 October 1930).

In sum, the early history of organization and activism among Chinese workers prior to 1932 may be divided into three broad periods. Sporadic rioting in the frontier mining communities and agricultural plantations characterized the first of these periods. A second period commenced during the last decades of the nineteenth century. At this time Chinese workers employed in the strategic areas of rice milling and transportation began to engage in collective struggles to negotiate the price of labour and improved work conditions. Finally, a third period occurred when, alongside a more settled commitment to wage work, events occurring in China began to have an impact on Chinese workers stimulating both an increased organizational capacity and a growing political awareness.

State responses to Chinese labour activism

By the end of the 1920s, a clear pattern was evident in the ways in which successive governments dealt with struggles involving Chinese wage-labour. For the most part, this response was premised on allowing the logic of

economic compulsion, alongside strong employer authority, to subordinate workers to the requirements of newly emerging employment relations. As a number of writers have recognized, little or no interest was given towards developing labour legislation during this period (Thompson 1947: 235; Mabry 1979: 39; Congcairak 1986: vii). However, what is not generally appreciated is that, through policy inaction, the monarchy in effect supported strong market and employer control. For example, in the early 1920s, an article titled 'Factory Law' appeared in the *Siam Ratsadon* newspaper that argued:

> many factories belonging to both the government and private individuals have been established in our country . . . however there is yet no government legislation controlling these factories. The factories are thus controlled and operated according to the sole wishes and opinions of management. For these reasons factory rules create divisions and misunderstandings and occasionally lead to strikes . . . we feel that it is now time for the government to develop and promulgate factory legislation so that the 'poor' workers, women and children are not overly exploited.
>
> (30 April 1923)

Despite such appeals, the absolutist state remained committed to a largely laissez-faire approach towards production and the struggles generated by emerging capitalist work relations. Wage rates, hours of work, health and safety, as well as establishing formal procedures for mediating disputes, were not matters in which the monarchy wanted to become directly involved (Kanchada 1989: 50; Brown 1990: 34). However, on those occasions when the logic of the market and employer authority were challenged and conflict spilled outside the workplace, the absolutist state demonstrated a consistent pattern of responding through repression. As Therborn has noted, repression may be conducted through four basic modes: 'prohibition of opposition, restriction of intra-systemic opposition, harassment and terror and surveillance' (1978: 222). It was through a combination of these modes of repression that the monarchy dealt with episodes of Chinese labour activism. Indeed, the expansion and growth of the repressive apparatuses of the state itself should, in part, be seen as the product of government having to deal with the problems posed by actual or potential organizing labour (Kanchada 1989: 53).

There are a number of cases where the absolute monarchy used its military and police forces to suppress collective unrest involving Chinese workers. The 1848 riots, for example, were quelled by the military with thousands reported killed (Battye 1974: 23–24; Skinner 1957: 144). Subsequent cases of unrest were also violently crushed. During the 1889 rice mill strike, for example, 400 marines and 300 soldiers attacked those involved. Hundreds were arrested, some were shot as they tried to escape

and, later, a few were beheaded while others were flogged and fined (Royal Danish Ministry of Education 1980: 122; Skinner 1957: 144). Describing such action to have been 'highly satisfactory' the British Consul stated that:

> The action of the Siamese government on this occasion has certainly given the coolie class a lesson which they will not forget; but at the same time, one might expect that precautionary measures would have been taken against a recurrence of such outbreaks in the future.
>
> (as quoted in Skinner 1957: 144)

Precautionary measures were, however, not taken and government continued to deal largely with strikes as they arose, relying mainly on the military and police force. In 1892, for example, it was reported that troops were once again used to 'deal with labouring people who were not prepared to respect private property' (as quoted in *BTWM* 2 December 1936).

The first legislative measures to control strikes came with the promulgation of the 1897 Secret Society Act. As Skinner has noted, the Act provided 'for compulsory registration and police control of all societies as well as heavy punishment for organizing or managing unlawful societies' (1957: 145).[5] Under provisions of the Act, all organizations had to register with the government and any gathering of five or more people was deemed illegal if the purpose was 'thought to be a source of trouble to the people' (Anon. n.d.: 120–127). With penalties ranging from one to five years' imprisonment, the Act provided the authorities with a useful weapon that could be employed to suppress any form of collective action among workers. Further restrictions on the right to strike were imposed through the 1905 Mining Employees Act that outlawed work stoppages in the mining industry (Kanchada 1989: 77). Moreover, amendments made to the Commercial and Civil Code declared all strikes and lockouts to be illegal (*Kammakon* 17 February 1923).

Alongside the introduction of new legislation, the absolutist state began to compile personal information on those who were considered to be a potential source of trouble. In 1907, a new unit within the Police Department was established and began to fingerprint 'professional Chinese criminals'. The police also entered into an agreement with their counterparts in the Straits Settlements to exchange information about Chinese who had been deported for 'criminal activity' (Skinner 1957: 145). In 1909 a police special force (*kong phiset*) was also established. Headed by Athikorn Prakat this unit 'developed a certain notoriety for its heavy-handed policing in the capital's Chinese districts, and Athikorn himself came to be widely feared by the kingdom's ethnic Chinese' (Copeland 1993: 106). Finally, the state also adopted a policy of deporting strike leaders and labour activists. Those deported had a symbol tattooed on their left wrist that, along with their prison serial number, was designed to assist the police in ensuring that those so branded could not return to the country. Some of those involved

in the 1889 rice mill strike were dealt with in this manner, as were some of the leaders of the 1910 strike. Throughout the declining years of absolutism numerous Chinese 'undesirables' and 'communists' were also deported (*BTWM* 17 June 1919, 14 July 1919; Brown 1990: 83).

As a further measure in dealing with organizing labour and the actual or potential challenge this posed to absolutist authority, King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25) cultivated and promoted stereotypical images of Chinese workers as 'aliens' who posed direct threats to the fledgling Thai nation-state.[6] King Vajiravudh's anti-Chinese sentiments are well recognized and thought to have been developed as a response to the rise of anti-Manchu, nationalist and republican ideas within the ranks of Thailand's Chinese community (Skinner 1957: 155). The fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, in particular, promoted fears the monarchy held towards the Chinese, increasingly seen to represent a 'state within a state' (Thompson 1947: 218). However, the class bias of the King's writing has often gone unrecognized as he saved his most vitriolic comments for Chinese workers (*cek*), rather than leaders of the Chinese community (*ciin*).[7] In a famous piece titled 'Jews of the Orient', King Vajiravudh, writing under the *nom de guerre*, *Asawaphahu*, portrayed Chinese 'coolies' as dirty, money-grubbing, devious and untrustworthy troublemakers (Asawaphahu 1985: 79–80). Referring explicitly to the 1910 strike, the king stated that he 'should be loath to answer for the consequences' of what the police and military 'composed of Siamese not Chinamen' might do should another similar strike be repeated (Asawaphahu 1985: 85).

Violence, arrest, deportation, surveillance, the introduction of new laws and regulations that outlawed strikes, the buttressing of strong employer authority through policy inaction, as well as the cultivation and promotion of ethnic antipathy between Thai and Chinese, combined to form a pattern in the way the absolute monarchy reacted to the occurrence of collective Chinese labour activism. The late 1910s and early 1920s, however, saw two developments that were to bring additional pressures on the absolutist state to consider its relationship with labour – the first stemmed from Thailand's international commitments and the second related to the rise of activism and organization among ethnic Thai workers.

As a founding member of the League of Nations, Thailand automatically became a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Medhi 1949: 474).[8] Henceforth, labour issues were slowly to become intertwined with the conduct of the country's foreign and diplomatic relations. King Vajiravudh's government sent a representative to the inaugural meeting of the ILO in October 1919, and Thailand continued to be represented at subsequent meetings held throughout the 1920s (Congcairak 1986: 40–42). Consequent upon their membership, the Thais were asked to join with other ILO members and implement legislative measures for labour protection. In reply, Vajiravudh's government argued:

> The present state of industrial organisation in Siam does not require extensive legislation, for Siam being pre-eminently an agricultural country, has yet to become industrialised. In addition to agriculture, trade, chiefly retail, occupies most of the inhabitants. Factories have not yet developed to an appreciable degree. . . . [T]he standard of living among workmen in Siam differs greatly from that to which workmen in Western countries are accustomed. Living is cheap in Siam . . . their [the workers] wants are satisfied with a minimum of labour, and they have not yet raised any demands for a material change in their working conditions. [T]o one accustomed to the unrest of workers in Western countries, it is very difficult to realise that workers in Siam are not in a state of discontent, but are satisfied with the conditions of employment, hours of work, etc., to which they are accustomed. . . . There are no trade unions or organisations of workpeople. The result is co-operation rather than struggle between employer and worker. There are no strikes or lockouts among the Siamese. Their favourable conditions form one of the greatest sources of happiness of the country, and the Government should go slowly in the introduction of proposals which . . . might serve to upset Thai habits and customs without advantage to anyone.
>
> (*Bangkok Times* 27 November 1922)

This position, one to which the governments of King Vajiravudh and King Prajadiphok (r. 1925–35) continued to adhere, contrasts starkly with the problems the monarchy was actually facing on the labour front. As noted above, workers were becoming involved in organized forms of activism. Moreover, the logic of the operations, institutions and resources of the state had already been directed in a largely consistent fashion towards controlling, curbing and repressing actual or possible labour organization. Exercising control over actual or potential organizing labour was in fact a problem, one that was to become even more insistent through the 1920s. This was especially so as Thai workers began to agitate and seek to develop organizations through which they might advance both their industrial and developing political interests.

The emergence of Thai labour activism

Although it was ethnic Chinese who were involved in most of the early labour activism, Thais incorporated into the wage-labour relation through their employment in the railways, electricity generating plants and tramways also demonstrated a willingness to organize in the attempt to improve wages and conditions. The tramways, in particular, were a site of considerable conflict and it is government and newspaper accounts of a 1923 strike by tram workers that provide some insight into the early development of labour organization among ethnic Thai workers (Kanchada

1988; Brown 1990: 30–73).[9] The involvement of ethnic Thais in labour disputes posed special problems for state officials. While labour activism involving Chinese workers could be portrayed as the work of 'alien' trouble-makers or 'secret societies', it was difficult for officials to easily dismiss petitions by Thai workers. Indeed, as the strike by tramway workers which erupted in late 1922 demonstrated, Thai workers were developing an expectation that the monarchy and its officials had a moral duty to involve themselves directly in mediating industrial disputes.

The 1923 tramway strike

On 31 December 1922, 122 Thai tramway workers employed by the Siam Electric Company (SEC) stopped work.[10] This action was to be the first in a series of related events that combined to form the longest, most bitter and most violent industrial conflict involving ethnic Thais to occur during the pre-1932 period. Significantly, as discussed below, the strike marked a crucial moment in the process whereby Thai workers began to link their industrial problems with broader debates that were then emerging over the conduct and arrangement of politics. In its initial stages, the actions of the tramway men represented a struggle for justice and dignity within a new set of work relations, as they attempted to change existing employment practices where fines and other penalties had been arbitrarily imposed (Brown 1990: 31–32). The men complained that these conditions represented 'unjust exploitation', making them 'disadvantaged', and they felt that they were having their 'blood sucked' (ibid.: 31). It was in response to this experience of exploitation and challenge to their moral worth that the men began to agitate, and it was during the course of this struggle that they began to overcome divisions within their own ranks and forge a sense of unity and shared purpose.

Significantly, the men's struggle and that of their families did not remain confined to the workplace. In attempting to have their grievances addressed the men appealed for police mediation.[11] When this failed to produce satisfactory results, they marched to the offices of the Minister of Interior, Chao Phraya Yomarat.[12] Despite their appeals, the Minister of Interior insisted that it was not within the ambit of government to become directly involved. Indeed, not only did the Yomarat reject the idea that the government should intervene directly in relations between workers and their employers, but both he and King Vajiravudh refused to recognize any legitimacy in the men's claims, arguing that they were acting 'irresponsibly' and 'irrationally' (Brown 1990: 39). Nonetheless, the Yomarat, confronted by rallying workers, did declare that he would support the men and their families and broker some kind of agreement from the company. Despite this avowed statement of support, the Yomarat helped to break the strike by providing the company with police protection and allowing it to dismiss many of the strike leaders.

The Minister's failure to settle the matter in the men's favour, his indifference to their plight as well as his support for the company's position, created strong doubts in the minds of the tramway men as to whether the Minister, and the system of government which he represented, would ever be prepared to assist them in their struggle for justice and dignity. As one contemporary observer noted:

> The men had felt proud that Thais are fully united. The *phuyai* shows consideration towards the *phunoi*, whilst the *phunoi* is respectful of the *phuyai*. This is appropriate for prospering nations and shows that there is no disadvantage in being born a member of the Thai nation. . . . [I]n truth the Yomarat has his hands already full. The workers should not have depended so entirely upon him. However, their plight has led them to momentarily forget their status . . . but they could no longer restrain themselves.
>
> (*Siam Ratsadon* 16 January 1923)

In seeking assistance from the Minister, the tramway men were implicitly putting the system of absolutist rule to the test. The nature of the regime dictated that access to decision-making and influence over the direction of public policy be conducted through a system of patronage – that the inferior could depend on their master to look out for and act to protect their interests and solve their grievances. It was precisely with appeals to these kinds of relations and ideas that the men approached the Minister of Interior. As a result of his failure to support the striking workers, a bitter enmity was established between the Yomarat and the tramway men that continued to simmer for the remaining period of the absolute monarchy.

Towards the end of January 1923, as the dispute dragged on into its fourth week, a significant development occurred when a new weekly newspaper emerged on the streets of Bangkok. Called *The Labourer* (*Kammakon*), the paper was established by a group of activists who subsequently referred to themselves as the Labourer's Group (*khana kammakon*) (Brown 1990: 41–45).[13] Their stated reasons for establishing the newspaper merits extended quotation:

> Today those who think that there are no more slaves (*that*) are mistaken. If someone was to investigate the lives of the two groups, that is, the employers *(naicang)* and employees (*lukcang*) they would cry out 'Oh! slavery still exists concealed within the bodies of the employees'. That is the truth. One does not have to look far, it is enough merely to look at the situation as it now stands. It is true that the employee is given the option of either agreeing to work or not. But this is not a sufficient reason from which to measure the evils encountered by the employee as he falls into the great pit of slavery (*toklummahathat*). One must also consider what percentage of people who become employees

> are sufficiently wealthy enough to stand on their own two feet and what percentage are people who live from hand to mouth. . . . Under such conditions the making of a contract will necessarily lead [the employees] to be disadvantaged (*siapriap*). For whatever happens the poor must eat. No matter how much they might be disadvantaged, poverty forces them to accept. Is it just (*tham*) or equitable (*sameor*) to make a contract when one is suffering in times of hardship? Ah! But the employer, the bloody face (*naluat*) does not limit himself to this one advantage, for in addition he seeks further advantages. He includes in the contract, if you do this your wages will be cut by this much, if you do that your wages will be cut by that much. In next to no time the employee . . . will be in the little court of the master [where he will be] accused of error and be fined. If the employee leaves, it would represent the breaking of the contract and therefore all outstanding wages will not be paid. Thus the employee must simply bear it and allow the employer to suck his blood to the tune of this song. . . . Apart from such methods, there are hundreds of other tricks by which the employer is able to take advantage of the employee . . . the examples we have provided thus far should, however, serve to bear witness to our claim that slave conditions (*saphaphaengthat*) have not yet disappeared. . . . Who will lend a hand to these suffering workers? . . . we must look to ourselves . . . we raise our voices, we speak up like workers from other countries but we are ridiculed with the reply 'you are only an employee, you don't need to have a voice (*maitongmisiang*)'. With the suffering of our friends in mind we, a group of workers, have collected together a small sum of money, left over from the unjust exploitation of evil employers, to establish a newspaper, called the Labourer. Our major aim is to destroy slavery among workers . . . and to replace it with freedom (*isaraphap*).
>
> (*Kammakon* 12 January 1923)

Asserting that the aim of the group was to free workers from their 'slavery', Thawat Rittidet, leader of the Labourer's Group, and his fellow organizers went on to outline a strategy through which their objectives could be realized. In an article titled 'The Freedom of Labour', and using the example of the tramway strike, the author argues that freedom is something that must be won and workers themselves can only achieve this through unified and collective action. After outlining the circumstances surrounding the strike and pointing to the fact that the Minister of Interior was unable to ensure that the demands of the tramway men were met, the author continued:

> The actions pursued by the tramway men must be considered correct because they were no longer able to follow the rules and regulations

> laid down by the employers. It is right that they stopped work, and their actions are wholly appropriate for the times because our country has set itself on the path towards civilisation (*khwamcivilai*). . . . We must ask why the tramway men took such action? Wasn't it to find freedom for us all? If we workers are not united, where will freedom come from? . . . We are members of the labouring class (*pen khon chanphuak kammakon*), we must look to our own group rather than to others. . . . We should all realise that we are workers. Poverty forces us to become employees. But material wealth is not the issue for we can still survive and feed ourselves. But the important point is not to allow our freedom to slip away as well. If we lack both wealth and freedom, we will not be able to raise our heads in the future because the employer will oppress us. For this reason, we workers must help each other to recapture our freedom so that it remains stable and fixed. Our freedom rests on unity. . . . If the tramway men are united and really act together . . . they will secure their freedom. The men should all strike on the same day. If this is done, the company will have to give them their freedom immediately. Workers! Remember! Freedom does not lie with others, it lies within our own group. We should follow the correct method, that is, when we are dissatisfied with the regulations or oppression of the employers, we should all stop work. Having ceased working, we should all vote one of our members, who we think capable of discussing the issue with the employer, to be our leader. We should work out an agreement with the employer to the satisfaction of all concerned. When the employer has agreed and we think the proposal is acceptable . . . our leader should make the contract by which we accept to work. The contract should be made so that both sides have a solid and stable base.
>
> (*Kammakon* 27 January 1923)

Although encouraged by the actions of the tramway men, the author argued that workers throughout the country must join in the struggle and that together they should be allowed to have a leader who would represent them in industrial disputes:

> We direct these matters to the Minister of the Interior who is charged with the administration of the realm. . . . We, as the representatives of labour, are fully agreed that Siam has now entered into a civilised era (*khao khun sukhit haeng khwamcivilai*) and it is appropriate that we be allowed to have a labour leader. At the moment the Minister has the task of representing the labourers. We think that this is a great honour for we labourers that the Minister has tried to help us and we wish to show our deepest appreciation towards the Minister for the benevolent attitude he has shown towards us. However, we

> believe that it does not befit the honour of the Minister, for his position demands that he administer the entire realm. If the Minister is unable to settle the matter in accordance with the labourers' wishes, as is already the case, we feel this will reflect badly on the honour of the Minister. If the Minister feels kindness towards the workers and wishes to help them secure their freedom or the freedom (*khwampenthai*) of Thailand and not allow employers to oppress the labourers, then he will give his permission so that Siam can have its own labour leader.
>
> (*Kammakon* 27 January 1923)

Despite the emergence of *Kammakon* and the appeals made to the Minister to ensure an equitable solution to the conflict, the struggle was to end in defeat as the company sacked the striking workers and hired replacements. Nonetheless, the events of early 1923 brought the question of labour and labour organization into public view more dramatically than any previous dispute. As one contemporary observer noted:

> Strikes by Thais are not new, they are not the product of 'civilisation' or the 'new times' as some believe. However, previous strikes were limited to a particular place and only a few were involved and therefore no-one took much interest. . . . If the strikes are small nobody gives them a second thought. . . . But the strike by the tramway men is much more serious than previous strikes.
>
> (*Krungthep Daily Mail* 20 January 1923)

The fact that the men worked in an important area of the economy meant that the strike and the consequent breakdown of tram services had an immediate and widespread public impact and the extensive press coverage given to the strike is a reflection of this.[14] Many questions were raised and debated: Why were there struggles between employers and employees? What were the causes of these disputes? Who was this new class of workers? What role did they have in society? What responsibility did employers have towards their employees? What role should government officials play in settling these conflicts? What did the existence of these struggles bode for the future development of Thai society? Most significantly, during the course of the dispute, the tramway men were quickly led to a consideration of questions that dealt with the appropriate forms through which politics could be conducted in a 'civilized' society. Could their freedom and dignity be guaranteed by a system of government in which blood relations and personal connections determined access to decision-making? The major conclusion drawn from the experiences of the strike was that they could not. Indeed, the continuation of absolutist rule came to be seen as a distinct impediment to the realization of these objectives.

Labour and the expansion of political space during the 1920s

The struggles by the tramway men, and the kinds of issues and problems that were discussed and debated during the course of the strike, can be seen as contributing to the emergence of a more general opposition and dissatisfaction with absolutist rule. The development of this opposition was the product of changes in economy and society that the monarchs themselves had set in motion. Broadly speaking, oppositional groups and interests had, by the 1920s, begun to emerge out of the ranks of the expanding civilian and military bureaucracies, elements of the domestic capitalist class and urban middle class, and intellectuals, as well as from organizing labour. While disparate in make-up, this opposition was slowly to develop a view of the monarchy as a relic of the past that stood in the way of the development of a 'progressive', 'civilized' and 'modern' society (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 244–249).

By the early 1920s, elements of this opposition were voicing their criticisms of the monarchy through the press in increasingly vociferous, direct and critical ways (Copeland 1993). Such endeavours effectively embodied attempts to expand the boundaries of political space within which issues pertaining to the economic and political future of the nation could be legitimately discussed and debated (Hewison 1997: 11). In explaining this quest for an expanded political space, emphasis to date has been placed on the activities of the newly forming middle class and its spokespersons of 'disenfranchised urban literati' and 'metropolitan intelligentsia' (Copeland 1993; Barmé 1997). Both these writers, however, pay insufficient attention to labour activism, and especially the role of the Labour Group, in contributing to these developing efforts to expand the space within which emerging social interests could air their voices and attempt to exert an influence over government policy.

Throughout the 1920s industrial disputes involving both Thai and Chinese workers continued to occur, albeit rather sporadically.[15] While little is known about the immediate background to these events, it is clear that the occurrence of these struggles convinced Thawat and his fellow activists that the changing nature of Thai society required greater public and political attention be given to labour issues. It was towards the attainment of this goal that the Labour Group directed its efforts (Kanchada 1988; Sirot 1999). Although ignored by many writers, the contributions made by Thawat and the Labour Group in articulating the interests of labour during the last years of the absolute monarchy were significant. For example, considerable effort was made to ensure that the problems of workers became a legitimate focus of general public debate. Moreover, in the absence of state assistance some basic welfare services were offered to workers. Also, a great deal of attention was given to instilling a sense of collective identity and unity among wage-labourers. All workers

were seen to share a common situation, and it was argued that, if they were to free themselves from exploitation and oppression, it was imperative that they work towards overcoming their inclination to act individually and develop a sense of collective identity and solidarity. Writing in 1924 Thawat, for example, claimed:

> Currently all of us are still of high individuality. We still love to pursue life separately from each other. This does not match the basic principle of civilisation. So long as we, all Siamese workers, individually think of ourselves, don't expect to escape from the immorality which the wicked employers use in oppressing us. Don't you ever think of the saying 'In union is there strength?' The union can generate our power which others will have to respect and fear. Nobody can dare treat us as a stupid laboring buffalo anymore.
>
> (*Kammakon* 22 March 1924 as quoted in Kanchada 1988: 47–48)

In the same article Thawat sketched out a strategy through which workers could help each other to organize:

> we labourers and workers should come and join together to build up a union according to different vocations such as tramway workers, motorcar workers, horse-cart workers, loading coolies. After that we should elect a person who is intelligent enough to be our leader. By this way, in times of crisis, we could help each other far better than before . . . to have a leader would bring us a lot of advantages. For example, we can make good contact with our fellow workers in a more convenient way. Furthermore, when there is a dispute between us and the employers, our leader can be our representative in negotiating with the employer.
>
> (*Kammakon* 22 March 1924 as quoted in Kanchada 1988: 48)

Apart from their efforts in grass-roots organizing, Thawat and the Labour Group became further involved in matters that touched upon wider political debates. Problems of corruption and the misuse of power, the future economic development of the country and questions over the continuation of absolutist rule were some of the key issues that were debated during the latter half of the 1920s (Copeland 1993: 55–58; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 245–248). By entering into these debates, Thawat and the Labour Group established what were to become lasting links between labour issues and broader questions of politics and political reform. Thawat argued that a satisfactory solution to industrial and labour problems required organization among workers themselves. In turn, the objective of building organization, and the securing of a space within which such organizations

could operate legitimately, necessarily brought workers into direct opposition to a system in which blood relations and patronage determined access to political power. Such an arrangement over politics was seen as directly inimical to labour interests. Thawat's principal historical legacy emerges from the foundation he laid for the argument that a lasting solution of labour problems necessitated direct political intervention and the securing of a broad range of rights and guarantees that would be respected and guaranteed by the state itself.

The absolute monarchy and the labour problem

Struggles over the working day, workers' participation in trade boycotts, the activities of the Labour Group and the spread of communist ideas among some sections of the Chinese workforce presented government officials with significant problems during the latter half of the 1920s. The principal way in which the state dealt with these problems was to continue with its policy of repression. Chinese workers were deported, others were arrested and police were used to break strikes and prevent workers from organizing (*BTWM* 25 November 1929). Legislation was enacted that increased penalties for engaging in strikes and a new press law was introduced which, as a British Consular official noted, aimed to 'stifle' any criticism of the monarchy (British Foreign Office [hereafter FO] 371/13264).[16] Attacks against freedom of the press had, in fact, been launched as early as 1924 when, in June of that year, the Chaiyapoom press, which published *Kammakon*, was closed for publishing what was deemed libellous material.[17] Thawat was arrested and spent a short time in prison, following the publication of views that linked the Minister of Interior to the misappropriation of funds from the Siamese State Museum (Sungsidh 1986: 79–80).

While these repressive measures proved largely effective in keeping a lid on labour discontent, continuing bouts of labour activism brought a growing recognition that longer-term solutions were required. In 1927 King Prajadiphok established a committee that comprised the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Commerce and the Interior. These senior ministers were assigned the task of examining what was now being termed the 'labour problem' (*panha kammakon*). The committee met for the first time on 15 February 1927. Their brief was to once again discuss ILO draft conventions for the protection of labour. The ministers reaffirmed earlier decisions that the adoption of the ILO draft conventions would be premature, asserting again that the cheap cost of living, the independence and conservatism of workers and the generally easy conditions of life, as well as the absence of industrial discontent, meant that 'there was still no need for labour legislation in Siam' (NA R 7 Ph 13/1).

While the official policy was to deny the need for the introduction of labour legislation, government officials were, however, beginning to recognize a growing need for political authority to become more directly involved

in industrial relations. The Minister of Commerce, for example, argued that there was a need for legislation that would give the government the power to inspect factories. He stated that 'numerous' industrial accidents had been reported, some of which had occurred in enterprises in which the government had an interest.[18] It was claimed that, in the case of private industrial establishments, accidents where workers had either been killed or severely injured had been 'hushed up'. The Minister argued that such occurrences meant that 'we should think about protecting the lives and health of workers in order to benefit the country's economy' (ibid.). Nevertheless, he recommended that caution should be shown towards developing factory legislation, and that it should be restricted mainly towards clarifying the responsibilities of the factory owners and giving government officials the power to inspect factories. It was stressed, however, that such legislation:

> should definitely not be seen to represent an attempt by the government to help the side of the workers for this would serve to encourage them to establish trade unions or workers' organisations.
>
> (ibid.)

Officials of the absolutist state thus found themselves in something of a bind with regard to the introduction of measures to protect labour. While all members of the labour committee accepted that something must be done, it was emphasized repeatedly that, whatever concrete steps were taken, they should not be seen to be offering workers special rights. This situation led, in turn, to a discussion over what the term 'protecting labour' (*pongkan kammakon*) actually meant. Although this question of semantics remained unresolved, the committee did eventually manage to produce a series of draft laws, the final version of which was submitted to King Prajadiphok in January 1931. Known as the Draft Factory Act, the document contained provisions that would have compelled factory owners to register their premises and provide full details of the type of work performed, the machinery used and the number of workers employed. Factories were to be kept clean and free from injurious materials and all accidents had to be reported to the government. The Act also gave government employees the power to enter premises for the purposes of inspection. At a meeting held in September 1931, however, it was decided that, due to the general state of the economy and the cost of establishing an effective system for administering the Act, it would be inappropriate to proceed with the introduction of the legislation (NA R 7 Ph 13/4).

Conclusion

Thompson and others were mistaken – it is not the case that labour problems did not exist under the absolute monarchy, or that the emerging

class of wage-labour 'simply accepted whatever was dealt out to them' (Thompson 1947: 239). Rather, it is the case that a legally recognized and sanctioned political space within which workers may have been allowed to legitimately air their grievances did not exist. As this chapter has shown, both Chinese and Thai workers demonstrated a willingness to struggle to organize in order to collectively negotiate wage levels and working conditions. These efforts were, however, born into a political context dominated by an absolute monarchy that perceived any organization, especially that which involved wage-labour, as posing a possible threat to economic, social and political stability. In responding to these threats, successive monarchs employed a formidable, often vicious, range of repressive tactics to constrain workers' capacities to develop and sustain collective forms of activism. Confronted by this hostile political environment, labour struggles under the leadership of Thawat and his fellow activists assumed the form of an attempt to secure a measure of space within which workers might be permitted to establish their organizations, pursue their interests and seek to influence government policy. As shown in the next chapter, this objective of securing basic political rights subsequently brought labour into an alliance with other emerging oppositional groups and interests that were intent on challenging the monarchy, the personalism of its regime and its stranglehold on political power.

3 The 1932 *coup d'état*, political volatility and labour's fluctuating fortunes

Introduction

The significance of the overthrow of absolutism in June 1932 by the People's Party has been the subject of a long-running debate in Thai historical and political studies. Many have treated the event as representing a circulation of elites (Rose 1959; Thawatt 1972; Chai-anan 1982: 60). In arguing that the *coup d'état* represented merely a realignment of power within the urban-based elite, these writers fail to appreciate the longer-term structural changes that flowed from the overthrow of the monarchy. That is, the eventual defeat of *sakdina* economic and political arrangements with the logic of capitalism being more fully brought to bear on the operations of the state. Thus, as Hewison has argued, the *coup d'état* and subsequent events:

> represented the establishment of a new government, a new regime, and the further entrenching of a new state. Not only were the absolutist political regime and its highly personalised government dominated by royal relatives, with the nobility thrown out, but the development of a new social, ideological, economic, and political logic of power, best described as capitalist, was enhanced.
>
> (1996: 76)

This perspective provides a useful framework for understanding the fluctuating fortunes of workers in their attempt to achieve a political voice during the 1930s. Alongside the continued development of capitalism, and ongoing struggles by workers themselves in both industrial and political arenas, the political problem of controlling and accommodating labour was increasingly brought to bear on the operations of the state apparatus. Nonetheless, as this chapter demonstrates, how this problem was to be resolved was the subject of considerable contestation. While the absolute monarchy dealt with labour and labour-related issues through repression and policy inaction, the new configuration of economic and social interests that emerged to dominate government immediately after June 1932 began

to develop a new stance towards labour that recognized its economic and potential political role. This was reflected in government interest in tackling unemployment, establishing mechanisms for the mediation of industrial disputes, developing protective labour legislation and, most significantly, in according workers a legally protected space to organize. However, this recognition of labour proved fleeting, as those interests supporting broad-ranging reforms could not fully establish their ascendancy in the context of considerable political volatility. Following the military's rise to political dominance, the space that workers had managed to carve out for themselves narrowed considerably. In explaining labour's fluctuating political fortunes during this important period, the chapter begins with a brief discussion of the role played by workers in the events of June 1932.

Labour and the 1932 *coup d'état*

As indicated in the previous chapter, a key legacy created by Thawat and the Labour Group lay in their argument that a solution to workplace problems required explicit intervention in national political life. However, as the 1923 strike showed, appeals to political authority on the basis of traditional ideologies of master–servant relations proved ineffective in securing a satisfactory resolution of labour grievances. Indeed, the actions of the monarchy in actively repressing labour, together with the personalism of the regime, were seen as directly contributing to workplace problems being left unresolved. As a result, Thawat and his Labour Group were led into an alliance with Pridi Phanomyong (hereafter Pridi), who, during the latter part of the 1920s, became engaged in the task of organizing those who opposed the monarchy and its economic and political policies (Barmé 1993: 65–66). Although we know little about the relationship between Thawat and Pridi, it is clear that they shared similar visions for the creation of a more self-sufficient national economy and the establishment of a representative parliamentary-based political system. This became apparent when Thawat and members of the Labour Group, as well as tramway, rail and other workers, actively participated in the events of June 1932. Numerous historians and political scientists have ignored the role played by labour in the change of government. Reflecting upon the event some fifty years later, Pridi did not, however, forget their contributions:

> at the time of Thawat's involvement [in organizing the tramway workers] I was still a student in France and before I had returned the tramway men had struck. Thawat was the organizer. He had done a good job in establishing the workers. In both the change of government and during the Borawadet rebellion the tramway workers played not an inconsiderable part, the tramway men were well aware of themselves.
>
> (as quoted in Sungsidh 1986: 89)

Workers' active participation in the *coup d'état* represented a continuing contribution to the broader movement that had opposed the monarchy, its outdated economic policies and its control over government, where personal connections were seen as favouring the rich, privileged and well connected in society. At the same time, however, the *coup d'état* ushered in the beginning of a new period within which workers faced the task of building existing organizational capacities in the context of an uncertain and rapidly changing political climate, as a new range of competing forces clambered to promote their interests through the agency of the state. A focus on the fluctuating fortunes of workers, their attempts to organize and emerge as legitimate political actors, provides significant insight into the changing and uncertain nature of political struggle during the immediate post-1932 period.

Industrial struggles and organization under the new regime

Following a long period of repression, and in the context of difficult economic circumstances as the onset of depression began to impact on wages, conditions and employment, the June 1932 change in government was accompanied by a vigorous outburst of industrial activism. Between June 1932 and early 1934, the press carried numerous reports of strikes, demonstrations, protests and street marches involving cement workers, railway workers, tramway employees, rickshaw pullers, construction labourers, the unemployed, workers employed at the military arsenal and rice mill labourers. Through their involvement in this activism, workers continued with the task of slowly building up various networks, links and organization through which they might deal collectively in negotiations with employers and the new government authorities (Congcairak 1986: 59–70; Brown 1990: 88–90).

The most important of a number of labour groups to emerge publicly at this time was the Thai Tramway Men's Association (TTA). As noted in the previous chapter, labour disputes within the Siam Electric Company (SEC), which ran the tramways, date back to the late 1890s. It was, of course, also the tramway men who were at the centre of the violent events of 1923. Apart from another strike that occurred in September 1928 (*BTWM* 22 October 1928), it seems that the company had been able to keep a lid on worker discontent through the latter half of the 1920s and early 1930s. However, in September 1932, a major dispute arose following the dismissal of four employees. The company was apparently well prepared for trouble as it had hired police to guard the workshops and had recruited former employees to ensure that tram services were maintained (*Lak Muang* 2 October 1932). Thawat formed a committee and attempted to negotiate a settlement but was rebuffed. The directors of the SEC refused to recognize the legitimacy of the workers' claims, arguing that, in fact, there was no real dispute and that Thawat and others were simply inciting the

men to strike (*Bangkok Times* 28 September 1932). Thawat immediately appealed for government mediation. He also approached the Police Commissioner to seek permission to have the TTA legally registered. In response, the newly formed government made two significant decisions. First, it gave the men permission to establish their own association and, second, it encouraged them to look to the government for assistance in future disputes (Thompson 1947: 240).

The TTA was officially opened in October 1932. Of the 1,000 workers employed by the SEC, 700 applied for membership of the association (*Lak Muang* 12 October 1932). Thawat was elected president and an executive committee of 25 was appointed. Apart from providing its members with a range of benefits, the TTA also assumed the task of coordinating labour activism. Over subsequent months, the association played a leading role in representing workers by offering support and advice for those involved in workplace struggles for improved wages and conditions (*Bangkok Times* 17 October 1932). Importantly, Thawat stressed that the association was formed to represent all workers regardless of their ethnic background, a commitment that was eventually to bring the TTA into conflict with authorities. Moreover, while the TTA began to represent the tramway men and act on behalf of other workers in their negotiations with employers, it also became an important conduit for the voicing of workers' interests in the broader realm of political struggle and debate.

Labour and political conflict, 1932–34

Although comprised of a relatively small number of civilian and military state officials, the People's Party actually embodied a range of new economic and social interests that had emerged to oppose the continuation of absolutist rule (Hewison 1989a: 61). In the last chapter, it was noted how organizing labour had formed one element in this developing oppositional movement. Other components of this opposition included members of the expanded civilian and military state bureaucracies, who, among other things, resented royal absolutism for its cronyism and nepotism that overrode the values of merit and service in determining promotion (Nakharin 1992: 51–81; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 248–249). Within the changing urban society, various elements within the nascent capitalist class gradually came to perceive the absolute monarchs as inept economic managers. They also resented the favouritism shown to foreign capital over and above local efforts to develop trade and domestic manufacturing. In particular, local business argued for treaty revisions that would have allowed local industries to achieve some protection against foreign imports (Hewison 1989a: 57–61; Nakharin 1992: 90–97). Intellectuals and educated urban elites, exposed to democratic ideals and practices through print and film, also gradually came to oppose an arrangement of politics structured around blood relations and personal connections (Copeland 1993; Barmé 1993: 63–64).

While disparate in make-up, these newly emerging economic and social forces, located in both the state itself and within the changing urban society, were gradually brought together via a shared perception of the monarchy and its system of government as representing a barrier to national economic and political progress (Hewison 1989a: 57–58; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 249–251). Against this old system, the People's Party and its new government promised to establish a new national economic and political agenda. This would provide for 'freedom and equality in politics, the law and business; law and order; a national economic policy . . . guarantee remunerative work for everyone, no special privileges; and as complete an education as possible for every citizen' (Hewison, 1989a: 58).

In seeking to open up the political system to new players and redefine avenues of access to political power, the People's Party was quick to initiate steps towards establishing a constitutionally governed parliamentary regime. The party nominated a National Assembly of 70 members, who in turn chose Phraya Manopakon Nitithada (hereafter Mano) as their leader. Mano appointed fifteen assembly members to act as an executive called the People's Committee (Barmé 1993: 68). A constitutional committee was also formed and, by December 1932, a draft Constitution had been produced. Although the king was to be retained as Head of State, real authority was vested in the National Assembly. Initially, the Assembly was to consist of half-elected and half-appointed members, and a fully elected representative government was to come into existence within ten years (Wyatt 1984: 246; Barmé 1993: 68). While Pridi's supporters dominated the Assembly, a number of royalists were also given seats in the new representative body. Mano was appointed president of the People's Committee (Barmé 1993: 69).

However, conservative pro-royalist supporters were not prepared to yield their state. As Copeland has shown, following the 1932 *coup d'état*, a 'pro-royalist underground' was formed and pursued a range of strategies designed to undermine the new government and restore absolutist rule (1993: 207). Thus, rather than marking an unambiguous victory for the People's Party, the *coup d'état* ushered in a period of intense political conflict as supporters of the new order were pitted against that of the old. This struggle was not resolved until October 1933, although pro-royalist plots continued to be hatched until the end of the 1930s.

Within the new Parliament, the competition between the conservatives and those supporting the People's Party intensified following the presentation of Pridi's national economic plan. As Pasuk and Baker have argued, the plan embodied an attempt to undermine the basis of royalist and aristocratic economic power (1995: 262–263). It provided for the establishment of a new national economy within which the state would be accorded a key role in developing both agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Although Pridi asserted that capitalism would be retained, his plan provided more than enough ammunition for his conservative opponents to brand it

as communist. Pridi nonetheless had the numbers in the National Assembly, and there was support for adoption of the plan, as well as for the imposition of a range of new taxes on royal estates and lands. In response, Mano, with the king's support, subsequently prorogued the National Assembly in March 1933 (Terwiel 1983: 333), suspended the Constitution and quickly promulgated anti-communist legislation.[1] Pridi was removed from his position and forced into exile (Barmé 1993: 74). Shortly after, the Assembly was dissolved and political parties were outlawed (Wyatt 1984: 247). In June 1933, the junior military fraction within the People's Party led a *coup d'état* against Mano's administration. However, the conservative pro-royalist forces were not to be obstructed. In October 1933 they launched a full-scale military assault against the government that was only defeated after three weeks of intense fighting (Terwiel 1983: 334–335; Wyatt 1984: 248).

Throughout this period, organized labour under the leadership of Thawat and the TTA consistently supported Pridi's liberal fraction of the People's Party and its economic and political policies (Congcairak 1986: 48–50; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 252). Pridi was described as the 'natural leader' of workers and, when he left for Europe following the furore over his economic plan, large numbers of workers rallied to see him off (*BTWM* 28 August 1933). Just prior to this, groups of tramway men, carpenters and rail workers had publicly demonstrated their support for the *coup d'état* of 20 June 1933, claiming that Mano's dissolution of the National Assembly was 'unconstitutional' (Congcairak 1986: 49). In speaking out against Mano, Thawat was criticized for breaching the articles of the association that prevented the TTA from becoming involved in 'politics'. Undeterred, Thawat remained outspoken in his support for the government of Phahon Phonphayuhasena (hereafter Phahon) that had been installed following the *coup d'état* of June 1933. Indeed, it was Thawat's continued support for Pridi, Phahon and the emerging constitutional regime that may have produced one of the sparks that ignited the pro-royalist Borawadet revolt. Incensed over the king's criticism of Pridi's economic plan, Thawat and three others took the unprecedented step of bringing a libel action against the monarch (*BTWM* 28 September 1933, 2 December 1933). The action was reported to have 'greatly embittered the king [and] infuriated his followers' (FO 371/18210: 25).[2] When the Borawadet rebellion broke out a few weeks later on 11 October 1933, workers were quick to demonstrate their support for the government. At a meeting held the day the revolt began, and amidst rising tensions, law students, together with workers from the government aircraft factory, rail workers, dock workers, cement factory labourers, tramway workers and taxi drivers, pledged public support for Phahon's administration, offering to act as volunteer troops (NA S 0701.1/4). In all, it is claimed that 3,000 workers volunteered to fight the rebels (Sungsidh 1986: 130). This support came at a crucial time for the government, as it subsequently faced not only growing public

concern over the intensity of the fighting, but also charges that it supported 'communism' and that it intended to rid Thailand of its monarch (Barmé 1993: 85).

Recognizing labour

While initially successful in establishing their government and indicating new economic and political policy directions, the 16 months following the June 1932 *coup d'état* were thus marked by intense political manoeuvring. Neither the king nor his aristocratic allies were prepared to simply cede political power to the supporters of the People's Party. Labour's contribution to, and position within, these broader struggles for state power were reflected in government policies that provided for the establishment of new institutions that were to deal with issues such as unemployment, the development of labour legislation, the establishment of a permanent disputes committee and, finally, the granting of rights to workers to organize. Each of these developments merits brief discussion.

The phenomenon of unemployment had begun to emerge during the latter part of the 1920s. With the onset of depression, the problem became even more pressing. Indeed, the government of King Prajadiphok exacerbated the situation by retrenching nine to ten thousand bureaucrats. This action was taken in response to a dramatic fall in state revenues as the demand for agricultural exports began to contract (Barmé 1993: 64). After the change in government, the unemployed had been innovative in attempting to develop solutions to the predicament in which they found themselves. Apart from appealing to government and, in one case, directly to the monarch for assistance (*BTWM* 18 September 1933), groups of unemployed under the leadership of Bannoi Prabai established various cooperatives, set up a range of small businesses, arranged for various forms of voluntary work and also entered bids for government contracts (Congcairak 1986: 59–62). The newly formed government responded to this activism by enacting legislation that provided for the creation of publicly funded labour bureaus. For the first time, government assumed the role of finding work for the jobless. Established under the auspices of the Minister of the Interior, it was reported that, by March 1934, almost 2,500 had registered for work, of which 1,828 subsequently found employment (*BTWM* 21 March 1934). At the same time, the government also attempted to exert greater control over private employment agencies. All private agencies and their records were to be open to government inspection. In addition, provisions included in the Act aimed to ensure that contracts between employers and employees were made on the basis of free market principles. The Act expressly prohibited the establishment of employment agencies in hotels, coffee houses and other places where intoxicated workers may have been lured into signing unfavourable long-term contracts (Sathian 1934: 266–282; Congcairak 1986: ix).

Another development that indicated a growing government interest in labour issues was the attention given to the question of developing protective labour legislation. As noted in the last chapter, consequent upon its membership of the ILO, the Thai government had been pressured to give some thought to developing and implementing protective labour laws. By the late 1920s these pressures, alongside a growing domestic call for government to show a more concerted interest in regulating working conditions, had seen King Prajadiphok's government take steps towards drafting legislation. Nonetheless, as the effects of the depression began to have an impact and, fearing that the implementation of legislation might encourage workers' attempts to organize, the government had shelved the plan. However, as part of its broader policy to promote the expansion of industry, the post-1932 government announced that 'it intended to promulgate a labour law on the employment of labour with reference to hours of work and the health and safety of employees' (*BTWM* 21 September 1933). It was stated that due regard would be paid to both the interests of labour and capital. A draft of the proposed legislation was completed and sent to a newly formed labour committee for consideration, although no further steps were taken towards enactment of the legislation into law until the later part of the 1930s (FO 371/19375).

A third change to occur during the immediate post-1932 period relates to the establishment of the first formal administrative mechanism for mediating industrial disputes. An industrial disputes committee was established and charged with the task of bringing 'about a reconciliation between employers and employees whenever trouble arises' (*BTWM* 30 April 1934). The committee was established following what was reputedly the first major strike to have occurred within the Thai state railways. In January 1934, 800 men employed at the Makasan rail workshops presented authorities with a log of claims demanding wage increases, welfare payments, the provision of free transport to and from work and the removal of some officials from their positions (*BTWM* 20 January 1934, 25 January 1934). By April, the situation had reached a flashpoint and a strike was called. The rail workers seized signal boxes and rail carriages, closed the Yomarat bridge, rallied outside railway offices and held some officials. The strike only lasted half a day as Prime Minister Phahon quickly moved to settle the dispute. The strike highlighted yet again the economic dislocation that could be caused by striking workers employed in key sectors of the economy, and the government subsequently established a committee charged with the specific task of mediating future disputes. Chaired by the Governor of Bangkok, the disputes committee was dominated by government officials, but also included some representatives from business and labour (FO 371/19375; Blanchard 1958: 29). As one commentator noted at the time:

> One may well ask whether a biased body of politicians without any experience in practical administration is qualified to advise the government in future labour disputes. But important though this side of the question is, it is not the main point at issue. The important implication of the appointment is that the government accepts as a fact the existence of a genuine labour problem in Siam.
>
> (*Bangkok Times* 2 May 1934)

This observation is important, for it captures a significant shift in attitude from the policies and views expressed by the absolute monarchs to those that were beginning to be adopted by the post-1932 government. As we have seen, during the period of the absolute monarchy, state officials continually denied that any labour problem existed. Although archival documents demonstrate that state officials were gradually realizing that there was a need for the regulation of relations between workers and their employers, the overall thrust of official policy was to push the entire issue of labour away from open public debate. This was a stance that the post-1932 government rejected. Alongside the establishment of labour bureaus and a renewed interest in development labour legislation, the appearance of the disputes committee reflects both a growing awareness of the economic structural importance of wage-labour and the need for political authority to assume a more prominent role in mediating disputes between labour and capital.

The final, and perhaps most significant, development that reflected labour's rising importance within the overall operations of the state was embodied in government initiatives that granted workers a measure of legally recognized space within which they could contest and seek to influence future policy directions. The nature and parameters of this space were established by the terms of the 'Commercial and Civil Code' first promulgated during the period of the absolute monarchy (Nikhom 1982: 43). In using this legislation during the immediate post-1932 period, the government effectively accorded workers the right to establish 'associations' (*samakhom*), the objectives of which were limited to promoting the social, welfare and cultural interests of members (*BTWM* 25 September 1932). The involvement of associations in broader 'political' activities was proscribed (Nikhom 1982: 43; Congcairak 1986: ix). The law contained no provisions that recognized rights to collective bargaining, nor did it acknowledge a right to strike (Bunsong 1998: 255). It did, however, establish a space within which workers would, for the first time, be recognized as legitimate industrial actors. By implication, the law also encoded an attempt to ensure that workers' efforts to engage in broader political debates would be conducted via their role as 'citizens' by engaging in electoral politics, though this would only occur gradually as a fully fledged parliamentary system was established.

The activities of industrial workers during the 1920s, their involvement in the 1932 *coup* and their struggles in both the industrial and political arenas in the months immediately after the change in government meant that their voice could no longer be simply ignored by the new political authorities, as it had been during the declining years of the absolute monarchy. Indeed, as part of a newly emerging alliance of social forces engaged in a struggle to reshape the state, Pridi and his liberal fraction of the People's Party actively canvassed labour's support. They saw workers as playing a future key role in developing a more self-sufficient national economy and within an emerging representative-based parliamentary political system. As emphasized above, this shift to an official recognition of labour's place in both economy and politics was reflected in the interest shown by authorities in tackling unemployment, developing labour legislation and erecting structures for dispute settlement. It was also reflected in the provision of a legally sanctioned space within which workers could organize, seek to air their grievances and potentially influence government policy.

Nonetheless, this developing recognition of labour was not to last. While royalist attempts to recapture their state were effectively brought to an end following the defeat of the Bowaradet revolt, the emerging constitutional regime and the space this provided for political activity eventually succumbed to the rising might of the military. Notably, this turning of the political tide was to have a significant impact on labour, as reflected in the events surrounding the 1934 rice mill strike. This strike warrants brief discussion for it effectively marked the end of a period within which workers could become involved in public forms of collective activism.

The 1934 rice mill strike

In early January 1934, a major strike occurred involving Chinese rice mill coolies. Previously the men had been by paid by the mill owners after they had transported the paddy to the mills. This payment was known as *tail* or *book* money and represented a sum over and above the amount the men received in regular wages. The mill owners claimed that, due to a fall in trade, they could no longer pay the coolies the standard rate of three baht per *kwien* (approx 1,000kg) and promptly reduced the rate to 60 satang. The workers protested over the reduction, but the mill owners remained firm. A strike ensued which led to the closure of mills all along the Chaophraya River. The workers appealed to the TTA for assistance and Thawat assumed the role of representing the men by presenting their claims to government officials (*BTWM* 12 April 1934). The police had become involved in assisting some mills to remain open, a development that led the workers to send a petition to the head of the Police Department stating that such involvement was 'beyond their duties', and was not 'lawful'

(*BTWM* 3 February 1934). Thawat also sent letters to Prime Minister Phahon and the Director-General of Police questioning the legality of police interference. The police were subsequently instructed to refrain from becoming further involved in the strike (ibid.). The dispute, however, remained unresolved and continued through March and April, bringing the entire rice trade to a 'standstill' (*BTWM* 7 April 1934). The Ministry of Economic Affairs attempted to mediate, but the employers walked away from the negotiating table. A lockout followed and the dispute became marked by escalating violence (*BTWM* 7 April 1934).

Eventually, the government moved to restore 'law and order' (*BTWM* 1 April 1934). Seven of the strike leaders were arrested and subsequently deported. Although some labour activists and members of the National Assembly appealed against the decision, the government remained firm (Congcairak 1986: 53). Most significantly, Thawat and the TTA were prosecuted for their involvement in the strike by allowing their premises to be used for meetings of the striking workers (FO 371/19375). Shortly thereafter the TTA was forced to dissolve (FO 371/19375).

The defeat suffered by the rice mill workers and the dissolution of the TTA presaged the beginning of the end of a significant period of public labour activism as the government began to adopt an increasingly hostile stance towards workers and their struggles. While there were several attempts to coordinate labour, and re-establish a labour organization, these proved no more successful than a 1937 effort by workers to sponsor a candidate in National Assembly elections (Damri and Carun 1986: 33; *BTWM* 11 September 1937). From late 1934 onwards, the space for independent labour organizing was effectively closed as the military cemented its control over state and regime (Damri and Carun 1986: 33).

Labour under military rule

The conservative pro-royalist forces were largely defeated following the crushing of the Bowaradet revolt in October 1933. However, this was only achieved at great political cost. As Copeland has argued:

> As a result of the political turmoil of the 1932–33 period, the democratic ideal of a heterogeneous political community, a 'nation' which was allowed to speak with not one but rather a number of different voices, was increasingly perceived to be antithetical to the Thai nationalist project.
>
> (1993: 211)

In a situation where Thai society was 'politicized and divided' (Barmé 1993: 104) and when 'keeping the peace' had emerged as the nation's 'single most important problem' (Copeland 1993: 211), an opportunity was created for

the military, under Phibun Songkhram (hereafter Phibun), to move to the centre of the political stage. Rising to prominence following the key role he played in crushing the Bowaradet rebellion, Phibun was appointed deputy commander-in-chief of the Thai army and became Prime Minister in mid December 1938. With his admiration of the authoritarian regimes of Germany, Japan and Italy widely known, Phibun sought to create a similar type of political order in Thailand. He developed a conception of the army as the 'natural leaders of [a] new society, the embodiment of the popular will, with the duty to impose social change and economic reform by executive order' (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 244).

Although enjoying considerable autonomy from society-based interests, including business (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 256), Phibun's government nonetheless implemented a wide-ranging series of economic, social, cultural and political reforms that had the effect of securing the conditions for the further expansion of capitalism (Turton 1984: 28). In terms of economic policy, Phibun's government adopted a strategy first enunciated by Pridi in his 1932 plan. While Pridi's more radical proposals were rejected, his view that the state had a key role to play in promoting economic development and national self-sufficiency remained influential. After 1938, and with Pridi as Finance Minister, Phibun's government actively promoted state-led industrial development through building infrastructure and by establishing new manufacturing enterprises or assuming control of formerly privately owned firms (Akira 1996: 122–134; Kanchada 1989: 110–112). Under this broad nationalist economic programme, domestic capital was accorded the opportunity to expand and investment was directed into a range of largely import-substituting industries (Brown 1990: 22–24). While data on industrial development is not copious for the pre-Second World War period, a partial survey conducted by the Ministry of Commerce in late 1939 indicated considerable expansion in industrial capacity in the Bangkok–Thonburi area, with 445 plants surveyed (Anon. 1985: 77).

This development was not, of course, significant in international terms. It was, however, important for the domestic political economy and led to an expansion in demand for industrial wage-labour. Although figures on employment for the period need to be treated with some care, it is estimated that, by the late 1940s, the strategy of state-led industrialization had created employment for up to half a million workers who laboured in hundreds of factories and thousands of smaller industrial establishments, the vast majority of which were located in the strategic Bangkok–Thonburi area (*Bangkok Post* 21 June 1948; Kasian 1992: 6; Shurcliffe 1959: 4). While the majority of urban wage-labour was employed in small, often family-owned and managed workshops that employed fewer than ten (Wilson 1962: 43), a number of larger public and private industrial firms were also created (Kanchada 1989: 112; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 183). As discussed in the following chapter, employment in these larger industrial establishments provided workers with improved opportunities to erect and

sustain workplace organization, and it was workers within these firms, especially in the larger state-run enterprises, who formed the heart of a resurgent post-war labour movement.

The entrenching of capitalist industry via a strategy premised largely on the use of cheap and unskilled wage-labour (Thawi 1997: 21–38), within an emerging authoritarian political regime, combined to have a significant impact on workers and their political space. In the first place, Phibun's government eschewed enacting any protective labour legislation that might have imposed any extra costs on fledgling domestic industry. Such actions need to be understood in light of the military's emerging role both as state officials and as administrators of state-owned enterprises (Congcairak 1986: xi). As noted earlier, the issue of whether government had a responsibility in enacting laws that would set minimum standards in industry had been debated since the early 1920s. It was raised once again in 1936, when one of Pridi's supporters, a National Assembly member from the northeastern province of Nong Khai, brought the matter to the attention of Parliament. He argued that there existed a pressing need for the promulgation of a law that would cover areas such as working hours, annual leave, the employment of women and children and the provision of compensation for sick or injured workers. The proposed legislation called on the government to ensure a decent standard of living for workers, the provision of compensation and limitation of the working week to 40 hours. In his response, the Minister for Economic Affairs stated that the government was not in a position to pass the Bill because 'it might not be right in Siam to enforce rights such as were adopted in some other country. If unsuitably applied, such things might generally affect the national economics' (*BTWM* 18 September 1936).

The following year, the government introduced its own Labour Bill, which gave it the authority to collect data on labour conditions that could be used for the development of future policies (Nikhom 1983: 20; Damri and Carun 1986: 28). In introducing the Bill, the Minister of Economic Affairs stated:

> the Bill was merely intended to give the government authority to obtain statistics concerning the number of people employed as labourers all over the kingdom, their average earning capacity, the standard of living, housing conditions and other data which would be useful to the government in assisting labour to be raised to the same level and status as labour in other parts of the world. It was the government's intention to appoint a committee to make these investigations because employers would not provide such statistics, unless legally impelled to do so.
>
> (*BTWM* 1 March 1937)

After some further debate the Bill was passed and by the middle of the same month the government had set in motion the necessary machinery to

obtain the required information (*BTWM* 19 March 1937). Over the following years there were other attempts to have protective labour legislation passed in the National Assembly; however, on each occasion the proposed Bills were defeated (Damri and Carun 1986: 142; *BTWM* 10 January 1938). In 1939, a Factory Act was finally promulgated (*Democracy* 17 November 1946) but, due to the lack of adequate administrative support and a political will to police the Act, workers continued to remain largely unprotected within industry.

A second key role played by Phibun's military-dominated government in securing the general economic and political conditions for capitalist expansion relates to measures taken to break labour organization. As part of an alliance of new social interests, organized labour had emerged as one of a number of new political actors during the period immediately after the *coup* of June 1932. Under the auspices of the TTA, workers had consistently demonstrated support for Pridi and his liberal fraction of the People's Party in the establishment of a parliamentary-based political system. As a result of this political activism, organized labour became a target for the military authorities in the process of entrenching their grip over the state. A number of labour leaders and activists were arrested, some charged under the terms of the Anti-communist Act, and labour organization was banned (Damri and Carun 1986: 33). These actions formed a component of the military's broader dismantling of the fledgling parliamentary regime, the demobilization of emerging social forces and the establishment of its own brand of authoritarian rule (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 256).

This effective closure of labour's political space was also accompanied by policies designed to effect a longer-term ethnic reorganization of the industrial working class. These policies embodied a number of interrelated aims: to garner popular support for the government's nationalist economic programme, to drive a wedge between Thai and Chinese workers; and to break the back of ethnic Chinese labour organization (Skinner 1957: 220).

As noted in the previous chapter, the monarchy, supported by local domestic business, had consistently pursued policies aimed to attract Chinese labour. Nonetheless, the grip that the Chinese came to hold over wage-labour, their industrial militancy and their connections with Leftist organizations began to pose significant problems for both domestic business and state officials. From the early 1920s onwards, local nationalist businessmen were appealing to state officials to initiate measures that would eventually lead to a replacement of Chinese workers by ethnic Thais. In 1923, for example, the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* expressed the view that:

> It has been proved repeatedly that in the saw-mill or the rice mill here the Siamese workman has no chance of fair treatment. There is, in fact, a great lack of proper work for the Siamese workmen.
>
> (13 August 1923)

Further calls for the replacement of Chinese labour with ethnic Thais were made following the 1928 boycott of Japanese goods. The *Bangkok Times*, for example, insisted that:

> real efforts [must] be made to stimulate the growth of a Siamese working class. Such a class would act and react on the Chinese, who now hold a monopoly of the labour market.
>
> (28 May 1928)

Although some attempts were made to impose quotas on Chinese immigration in the late 1920s, effective steps to restrict Chinese immigration and encourage Thais into wage-labouring positions were not adopted until after the change in government in 1932. Not surprisingly, the first attempt to place restrictions on certain occupations followed in the wake of the 1934 rice mill strike. In 1935–36, a series of laws was passed requiring rice mills to employ a minimum of 50 per cent Thai workers (Skinner 1957: 219). In 1937 immigration fees were raised to 200 baht, a measure which Thompson notes only stimulated a 'great increase in the number of Chinese smuggled into Siam' (1947: 228). More effective measures to oust Chinese from their dominance over wage-labour were adopted after Phibun became Prime Minister.

During his first term as Prime Minister (1938–44) Phibun launched an ambitious programme to 'build the nation'. Integral to this programme were policies that the Prime Minister and his advisers adopted to 'Thai-ify' the economy by placing restrictions on the activities of Chinese and western business interests. As Hewison notes:

> Most restrictions, however, struck at the Chinese petty bourgeoisie, small traders and workers, leaving the larger capitalists relatively unscathed. Occupational restrictions did not severely restrict Chinese capital, but were designed to move Thai nationals into certain occupations.
>
> (1989a: 71)

Between 1939 and 1942, a further series of laws was passed that restricted certain jobs to Thai nationals. In April 1939, the Thai Vehicles Act required that taxi drivers be Thai. In the same year private and public industry was required to employ at least 75 per cent Thai workers. In 1942, another 27 occupations were specifically reserved for Thais and through the Occupational and Professional Assistance Act additional requirements were made to ensure that factories employed Thai labour (Thompson 1947: 264). Although ethnic Chinese continued to dominate wage-labour occupations well into the 1950s, the above measures, alongside further restrictions imposed on Chinese immigration after the Second World War (Skinner 1957: 177–178), did pave the way for a longer-term

ethnic reorganization of the industrial working class. As Glassman has argued, these policies were premised on the belief that breaking the Chinese hold over wage-labour would contribute in the longer term to maintaining labour peace, the assumption being that ethnic Thai workers would be less militant than their Chinese or Sino-Thai counterparts (1999: 272–273; see also Blanchard 1958: 29).

Conclusion

The question of the political control of the industrial working class emerged as a growing problem for the state in the 1930s. Nonetheless, as this chapter has indicated, how this problem might be resolved became the subject of contestation involving a range of newly emerging coalitions of social interests as they engaged in struggles for state power. Two broad responses can be detected. On the one hand, industrial workers were projected to occupy an increasingly important economic role in a more self-sufficient national economy. In recognition of this, government would assist in providing employment services, some welfare protection and legislate for minimum working conditions and standards. Industrial workers would also be accorded a legally recognized space within which they would be organized into 'associations' whose objectives would be largely restricted to protecting workers' welfare and other interests in dealings with employers and government. Broader involvement in politics would be achieved in the short term via political patronage and in the longer term through electoral and parliamentary politics. Pridi and his supporters, drawn from the ranks of organized labour, some nationalist businessmen, intellectuals, provincial notables and civilian bureaucrats generally advocated this response.

A second response, supported by military officers and civilian bureaucrats in a developing coalition with elements of Sino-Thai capital, also projected an increased economic role for industrial wage-labour. However, this did not include any notion of participation either in the workplace or in the broader political arena. Rather, at the workplace, worker's wages and conditions would be subject to the whims of individual employers and the whip of the market as part of a developing state-led industrial strategy premised on keeping production costs to a minimum. There would be no legally recognized space within which workers might be permitted to emerge as either legitimate industrial or political actors. Indeed, those fledgling labour organizations that had struggled to emerge were crushed and their leaders jailed. Labour's fluctuating fortunes and fleeting political emergence during the 1930s can thus be explained as products of the latter response coming to dominate over the former.

4 Radicalism, shifting alliances and managing labour's political space

Introduction

This chapter picks up the story of labour's continuing search for a legitimate political voice, with a focus on the period from the mid 1940s through to the late 1950s. Much of the academic writing that has dealt with this period has stressed the apparent artificial and manufactured character of Thailand's labour movement. Whereas trade unions in other parts of South-east Asia became politicized through an entanglement in radicalism and anti-colonial struggles, it has been claimed that workers in Thailand remained largely 'passive' (Wilson 1959: 83), 'never felt [themselves] oppressed as a group' (Blanchard 1958: 288) and possessed little or no class or political consciousness (Thompson 1947: 243). As a result, organized labour, to the extent to which it existed at all, has been seen largely as the creation of non-labour interests thus 'lacking in substance' (Vichote 1991: 101) and of little or no political significance (Fogg 1953; Mabry 1979: 47–48).

This chapter argues that such views simply cannot account for a great deal of historical data. More particularly, it will be suggested here that attempts by various non-labour interests to establish labour organizations attests to the growing importance of the politics of the working class within broader struggles for state power during this period. In part, these contests mirrored those that first emerged in the 1930s, although a new range of factors entered the equation as a result of changing domestic and international circumstances. The outcomes of these broader struggles were to have significant implications for the management of labour's political space and hence the manner in which workers might have been permitted to emerge as legitimate political actors. The discussion begins with an examination of the resurfacing of labour activism and organization from late 1944 through to late 1947.

Struggle, organization and radicalism

By the end of the Second World War, Thailand possessed an expanded industrial base, the product of the state-led industrialization policies that

had been pursued since the early 1930s. As indicated in the previous chapter, the successful promotion of industry created a growing demand for industrial wage-labour, with the overwhelming majority located in the economically and politically important Bangkok–Thonburi region. Although figures tend to vary, it has been estimated that, by the late 1940s, there were something in the order of between 300,000 and 500,000 workers employed in over a thousand factories and thousands of smaller industrial establishments (*Bangkok Post* 21 June 1948; Sak 1959: 24–25; Wilson 1962: 43).

Alongside this expansion in the size of the industrial working class, the war years had, however, also led to a dramatic lowering in living standards and working conditions. As supplies from Europe and the United States had been cut, there had been a shortage of many goods, prices had risen sharply and black markets had appeared in the wake of the government's attempt to institute rationing. Towards the end of the war, allied air raids had damaged many factories, shops and buildings and power supplies were cut for long periods. Urban residents were most severely affected as they experienced food shortages, rampant inflation and a difficulty in obtaining vital commodities such as medical supplies (Batson 1985: 229–230; Kanchada 1989: 108). Apart from these difficulties, workers also confronted what was described as 'appalling conditions in workshops and manufacturing plants' (*Bangkok Post* 13 November 1946), with one ILO official stating that overall 'labour conditions in Siam [were] far worse than those existing in Malaya, Ceylon and South Africa' (*Democracy* 2 September 1946).

In this context of economic deterioration, social dislocation and challenging working conditions, the immediate post-war period witnessed a vigorous resurfacing of industrial militancy. In early 1945, Thai tobacco workers struck and demanded wage increases and better working conditions. Over the following eighteen months there was a spate of protests, rallies and demonstrations. These involved workers employed in the rice mills, on the docks and railways and in oil refineries, cement factories and lumberyards (*Democracy* 22 January 1946, 25 May 1946, 6–7 June 1946, 13 January 1947, 18 January 1947; Blanchard 1958: 291; Congcairak 1986: xi; Kanchada 1989: 108–109). Between 1946 and 1947, 168 strikes were recorded, with 109 reported to have taken place in 1947 alone (*Bangkok Post* 21 June 1948). This industrial activism was accompanied by the gradual building of labour organization at workplace, industry, provincial and national levels (Brown 1990: 106–113; Kanchada 1989: 127–135).

This resurfacing of struggle and organization needs to be seen in light of several contributing factors. In the first place, it was made possible by economic-structural changes associated with state-led industrialization policies. While the majority of urban wage-labour continued to work in small, often family-owned and managed workshops that employed fewer

than ten (Wilson 1962: 43), a number of larger public and private industrial firms had also been created. For example, by the end of the war the Makasan railway workshops employed some 1,700, the state owned brewery at Banyikhan possessed a workforce of over 1,300, while the Thai Tobacco Monopoly at Banmai employed upwards of 1,200 (Kanchada 1989: 112; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 183). Workers employed in these firms and other state enterprises, as well as those employed on the ports and docks, in the numerous larger privately owned rice mills and in other places such as the water works and electricity-generating plants, oil refineries and textiles factories, enjoyed enhanced opportunities to develop and sustain workplace organization.

Apart from these economic-structural changes, social changes associated with urbanization and the embedding of urban industrial wage-labouring as a primary means of gaining a livelihood, were also factors that contributed to the successful mobilization and organization of labour. Although urbanization was still comparatively limited, the scale of migration from rural to urban centres, especially to the outlying areas of Bangkok, increased significantly during the Second World War (Caldwell 1967: 45). Moreover, while many urban workers were new to wage-work, having been drawn in from rural areas or formerly involved in petty trades, a growing number of workers and labour activists, especially those in the larger private and publicly owned firms, came from families of second- or even third-generation urban workers. For example, Prakop Tolaklam, who became a leading figure at the Makasan railway workshops, was the son of a railway worker who had been involved in the 1934 rail strike (Kanchada 1989: 144–145). This seems to have been a not uncommon occurrence. Certainly the continuing involvement of those who had been engaged in the industrial struggles during the 1930s, or the participation of their sons and relatives, seems to have been an important factor. It ensured that the various industrial strategies and tactics developed out of the experiences of earlier periods became available for deployment in the industrial militancy of the immediate post-war years.

Another significant development that helps explain the resurfacing of post-war labour organization was the emergence of a new generation of labour activists and organizers. A number of these were members of the Thai Communist Party.[1] In accordance with the Party's adherence to the Comintern's revolutionary strategy, a principal objective of these activists was to organize the industrial working class (Kasian 1992: 114–115; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 291). As noted earlier, connections between communism and labour date back to at least the late 1920s. The relationship between workers and communist or other leftist organizations that continued to operate during the 1930s remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that young Sino-Thais, who had been exposed to communist literature and ideas as students, became actively involved in labour organizing during the early 1940s (Kasian 1992: 114–115). The ability of these left-wing activists to

secure a constituency among industrial workers during this period appears to have been the result of excellent organizing skills, combined with an ability to integrate workers into the nationalist underground movement that had developed to oppose the alliance that the Thai military had formed with Japan.[2] Towards the end of 1941, when a Japanese invasion of Thailand appeared to be imminent, these activists established a number of 'labour welfare associations' (*samakhom songkhro kammakon*). The first of these was established at the shipyards owned by Thai Kasikon Utsahakam (Damri 2001: 160). Apparently, this became a model form of organization and similar associations were subsequently established among water transport workers, rice mill workers, tramway and railway workers, and government-owned tobacco factories and breweries (Sungsidh 1986: 147–155; Kanchada 1989: 127–128; Kasian 1992: 127–128). Ostensibly, these associations were created to provide welfare assistance to members. However, they developed links with, and became a part of, the anti-Japanese Free Thai (Seri Thai) movement, subsequently becoming involved in a range of clandestine activities directed against Japanese troops (Kasian 1992: 127–128; Bunsong 1998: 258–259).[3] This process of integrating workers into a broader anti-Japanese nationalist movement provided an organizational infrastructure that also supported the industrial militancy of the immediate post-war years.

Labour's organizational capacities were developed further when, at the end of the war, 23 of the original labour welfare associations combined to form a larger body – the Workers' Welfare Association of Bangkok (WWAB) (Samakhom kammakon songkhro krungthep) (Damri 2001: 198–201). After registering with the Office for National Culture in late 1945, this new body continued with the task of organizing other groups of rice and saw mill workers, dock and port labourers, railway workers and printers. In the middle of 1946, the WWAB changed its name and became known as the Association of United Workers of Bangkok (AUWB) (Samakhom sahachiwa kammakon nakhon krungthep). This new association applied for and received permission for registration from the police in November 1946. The AUWB held its first major rally on 1 January 1947 (*Bangkok Post* 17 December 1946, 3 January 1947). In an article titled 'Striking Proof of Unity' a journalist from the *Democracy* newspaper described the scene:

> Over ten thousand workers, men and women, attended a rally at the Pramane ground. The rally was held under the auspices of the United Trade Unions [*sic*] of Bangkok.[4] The hammer and sickle, signs of the communist party, were prominently displayed on flags in a sea of old Siamese and Chinese flags. . . . As the hour drew near for the meeting, the crowd of workers became so great that even the road around the ground itself was filled. . . . The president of the [AUWB] called for unity among all the workers to fight against capitalism. He warned

> them to be aware of inciters and instigators who would cause trouble and disagreement among them. . . . Prince Sakol was then invited to address the crowd and was received with loud and enthusiastic applause. Even though he used rather classical language which was difficult for the workers to understand, they gave loud 'chaiyos' all the time he was speaking. . . . Prince Sakol stated that he feared the future path of labour might not be very smooth. He was of the opinion, however, that if they maintained their unity such as they had shown on this occasion there was not much to fear. He warned them against machinations which might cause disagreements and trouble amongst them. The mass rally ended in peace and order, with all the workers dispersing to their factories and working places amidst singing.
>
> (*Democracy* 3 January 1947)

In April 1947, the AUWB hosted a conference at which representatives of workers from Bangkok, Thonburi and provincial centres met with a view to establish a national labour federation. These deliberations led to the creation of the Association of United Workers of Thailand (AUWT) (Samakhom sahachiwa kammakon haeng prathet thai).[5] The AUWT immediately began to arrange celebrations for Labour Day and on 1 May 1947 over 70,000 attended to mark the occasion. This represented one of the largest crowds ever to have assembled in the city. It was reported:

> Nai Thenthai Apichatbutr, chairman of the rally organising committee, opened the rally with a brief address on the need for a more ethical social evolution in which the doctrine of communism, he said, should play a leading role. Karmail Singh of the Bangkok Labour Union spoke on behalf of the 1,000 union members present urging unity between the various elements. Only through united action, he said, could labour succeed in raising its standard of living. . . . Spokesmen for the Sino-Thai labour association and of Indonesian labourers also spoke briefly, emphasising the need for labour to unite in the common cause of raising the standard of living. The various unions carried banners and the Central Labour Union flag, almost a duplicate of the communist flag, was displayed around the ground.
>
> (*Bangkok Post* 2 May 1947)

As is evident in the reports cited above, a significant feature of the re-emergence of organized labour during this period was the continued inroads that the left had been able to make within labour ranks. It was young Sino-Thai radicals who played an instrumental role in establishing the labour welfare associations during the early 1940s, gaining particular influence among rail, rice mill, tobacco and water transport workers. Communist Party members also rose to hold key leadership positions in the AUWB and AUWT (Kanchada 1989: 126).

This new generation of Communist Party members, labour activists and intellectuals brought with them new theoretical perspectives for meeting the challenges faced by workers. Thawat and his associates had advocated what might be termed a labourist mode of class struggle. They believed that workers could win their struggle for freedom and realize their interests within the existing relations of production. However, new labour leaders, such as Communist Party member and AUWT leader, Damri Ruangsutham, began to develop more radical solutions to workers' problems. For Damri, it was capitalist relations of production and a state that promoted and defended these relations that were the keys to understanding labour problems. Thus, while earlier leaders argued that workers should struggle for freedom and self-respect within a capitalist system, Damri argued that these goals could only be achieved through the eventual overthrow of capitalism (Sungsidh 1986: 20). This radical approach not only contributed to the broader development of the Thai left during the decade or so after the war (Reynolds 1987: 25; Kasian 1992: 7), it also appears to have received considerable support among the rank and file. In Thailand, as elsewhere in South-east Asia, the hardships of the war years had created a climate within which workers were led to a fundamental questioning of the merits of capitalism and its ability to produce genuine improvements in living and working conditions (Hewison 1999: 226). By 1949, AUWT membership was 60,000 and it possessed more than 60 affiliated associations nationwide (*Bangkok Post* 8 February 1949).

In sum, the rise of labour militancy and organization during the immediate post-war period was the product of a number of factors. These were associated with: changes in the class structure itself; urbanization and the embedding of wage-labour as a means of livelihood; the growth of larger enterprises; legacies inherited from the experiences of an earlier generation of workers; and, finally, the emergence of a new generation of left activists who became involved in organizing workers, first against the Japanese, and later in struggles for improved wages and working conditions. A final key factor in facilitating the rise of public labour activism and organization relates to the broader political environment. This was marked by the withdrawal of the military from the political stage and the reigniting of attempts to implement some of the economic and political programmes first enunciated following the overthrow of absolutism in June 1932.

Labour and battles for the state, 1944–47

The public resurfacing of labour activism discussed above formed part of and contributed to the opening of political space during the 1944–47 period. As Hewison has indicated, by the end of the war:

> with the military in decline, Pridi and his supporters reasserted civilian rule. Again political space was expanded as civilian politicians

> re-established themselves. For the first time political opposition began to be expressed through competing political parties, with royalists dominating the Progressives and Democrats, opposed to a coalition around Pridi.
>
> (1997: 12)

Pridi's reactivation of parliamentary politics was supported by a broad alliance of forces that had coalesced during the 1930s. This coalition was further cemented through a shared involvement in the anti-Japanese Free Thai movement (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 265–266). Under his leadership economic-nationalist businessmen, dissident provincial politicians, intellectuals and various elements within the civilian and military bureaucracies, as well as organized labour, emerged to engage in a struggle for control of state and regime within a broader climate of economic malaise, social disruption and fragmented political authority (Glassman 1999: 273).

In the attempt to dismantle authoritarian controls and rebuild parliamentary rule, labour became an important consideration for Pridi's political reformers. As noted in the previous chapter, since the late 1920s, organized labour under the leadership of Thawat had consistently supported Pridi, his constitutionalism and the political space that this offered them. These early links with Pridi's side of politics were strengthened during the war years, as labour groups joined with the Free Thai movement in opposing the Japanese presence in Thailand. The Pridi–labour alliance was cemented further after the war. Organized labour under the AUWT, along with former members of the civilian fraction of the People's Party, joined with Pridi to form the Sahachip (Cooperative) Party (Kanchada 1989: 130–131; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 266). For Pridi and his allies, supporting labour offered the prospect of securing a mass urban base of support. This could be mobilized in contests against both the military and the conservative pro-royalist forces who were then re-emerging in national political life under the umbrella of the Democrat Party (Kanchada 1989: 130). As had been the case in the early 1930s, alongside the emerging parliamentary regime, there were signs of a movement towards accommodating labour's claims by granting workers a guaranteed political space within which they could organize around industrial and workplace problems. As 'citizens' their political interests could be pursued through electoral and party politics. At the same time, the government would assist workers through the development of a range of policies that would provide improved working conditions together with some guaranteed welfare support should they become unemployed, sick or injured.

Although there was a great deal of political instability as governments and Prime Ministers came and went between 1944 and 1947, this trend towards accommodating labour was clear. For example, in assisting workers to establish their associations, the AUWT was permitted to draw on the organizational resources that had been established by Pridi's Free

Thai movement during the war (Fogg 1953: 369). Moreover, the AUWB and later the AUWT were accorded legal recognition under the terms of the Commercial and Civil Code. Although this legislation only recognized 'associations', Pridi's administration began to take an active interest in developing more comprehensive labour legislation that would allow for the formation of trade unions (*sahaphapraengngan*). These would possess the legal right to strike and represent workers in processes of collective bargaining. The legislation would also contain provisions for labour protection. Notably, AUWT representatives were accorded a participatory role in the formation of Sahachip's policy on labour and in the drafting of the legislation (Medhi 1949: 480–482).

A draft Labour Relations Bill was finally presented to the National Assembly for deliberation in July 1947. The Bill included provisions that gave workers the right to form unions, engage in collective bargaining and to strike. In the case of a breakdown of negotiations, disputes were to be settled by a labour committee that would be appointed by the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, the Bill stated that no children under the age of 15 should be employed, maximum working hours were to be set at eight per day, night work was to be paid at double rates and work after midnight was to be paid at triple rates. May Day, government holidays and Sundays were to be observed. Provisions were also made for female employees, who, after working for more than six months, would be entitled to three months' maternity leave. Also, every factory employing more than 30 workers was to provide a nurse, with workers employed in mines, rice mills and in forests to be given a free annual medical check. The Ministry of the Interior was to appoint a labour board that would consist of two representatives from labour, employers and government. The board would act as an arbiter in case of deadlocks over wage negotiations (*Bangkok Post* 14 July 1947).

As in other areas of South-east Asia, labour activism in Thailand during the immediate post-war years became entangled within the broader sweep of political change. This politicization of labour activism had its roots in workers' involvement in the anti-Japanese Free Thai movement, and was also evident in the industrial militancy of the 1945–47 period. Although their struggles were directed in the first instance against employers, workers recognized that adequate solutions to workplace problems required intervention in national political life. This developing political consciousness, assisted by the ability of the left to secure a constituency within labour ranks, was clearly reflected in the activities of the AUWT. Apart from its efforts to promote grass-roots organizing through the building of unity and solidarity, the AUWT pressured government authorities to promulgate labour legislation that would grant workers basic rights and a space within which they could have a legitimate voice in the political system. In turn, this struggle for political inclusion was reflected in the support given for the reactivation of parliamentary and constitutional rule. Confronted by

this developing class formation, the challenge for government was to manage labour's political space in ways that were in line with its broader economic, social and political objectives. The civilian post-war governments dominated by Pridi thus initiated measures that would revive some of the promises of the early 1930s. This would involve accommodating workers and their activism through the provision of a space within which they would be constituted as legitimate actors in the form of 'associations' and, later, 'unions' whose principle objectives would be confined to the workplace and economic issues. In turn, these industrial bodies would form a key component of support for the Sahachip Party in electoral contests.

This emerging form of accommodation proved, however, to be short-lived. The period 1944–47 was one of considerable political instability. Pridi and his Sahachip Party dominated successive civilian governments. Nonetheless, there were growing rifts developing between pro-royalist conservatives and those who supported Pridi. There were a number of key issues over which Pridi and the conservatives clashed (Fineman 1997: 19–20) and labour legislation was one of these. In particular, the royalists demonstrated they were not prepared to forget the role played by organized labour in contributing to the oppositional movement to absolute monarchy. They were quick to marshal numbers in the National Assembly to defeat the Labour Relations Bill, which, if passed into law, would have further cemented a legitimate role for labour in the emerging parliamentary system (Kanchada 1989: 135).

Return of the military, anti-communism and labour control, 1947–55

On 8 November 1947 the army moved back into the centre of politics and overthrew the government. The stated aim was to restore the military's honour and prestige, resolve the mystery surrounding the death of King Ananda Mahidol, clean up corruption in government, halt the encroachment of communism and reassert the principles of 'Nation, Religion and King' (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 269). Supported by pro-royalist conservatives, a notable feature of the military's return to political prominence was the alliance that was slowly being cemented with the capitalist class, particularly with the banking and industrial fractions of this class (Hewison 1989a: 81–86; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 278). As Hewison has argued, what emerged at this time was the development of a growing convergence of interest between capital and civilian and military bureaucratic groups (1989a: 83). In this, the former gained an influence over economic policy via political patronage, while the latter began to accumulate wealth through a growing involvement in a range of legal and illegal business activities (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 278–280; Akira 1996: 169–172). Over the next decade, this new alliance of capital and politico-bureaucratic groups, under the general leadership of a military fraction that controlled the key

First Army Division, gradually cemented their grip over state and regime through a systematic elimination of their business and political rivals (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 274–275). In achieving this they were actively supported by the United States, as Thailand became a front-line state in the global fight to curb the growing influence of communism (Fineman 1997: 66–67).

In dismantling the fledgling parliamentary regime and building authoritarian rule, the military targeted organized labour for special attention. Workers' post-war industrial militancy, the embracing of radical ideologies and their support for Pridi were perceived as a threat to the new military leaders and their political and developing business interests. While the period from the early 1940s through to the *coup d'état* of November 1947 may be seen as one in which workers were slowly being accorded a legitimate industrial and political role within an emerging parliamentary system, the subsequent eight years were characterized by sustained attempts by the military-dominated government to reorganize workers in ways that were in keeping with newly stated economic and political objectives. This was to be achieved through a combined strategy of destroying the radical AUWT through repression, and selectively co-opting strategically placed workers into publicly funded and government-controlled institutions.

The first hint of what was to become a concerted policy of outright repression of the AUWT occurred in 1948, when four of its officials were arrested as they attempted to broker an agreement on behalf of rice mill workers. Those arrested were imprisoned for a number of months and eventually convicted of 'secret society' activity and fined (*Bangkok Post* 8 February 1949). Phibun, who had become Prime Minister for a second time in early 1948, subsequently refused to renew AUWT registration and arranged for its offices to be raided by the police. This action was undertaken in accordance with a government decision, made in late 1948, to launch an investigation into the extent to which communism had penetrated into labour ranks (ibid. 1 December 1948). Despite this, the AUWT continued to provide support for workers and, in early 1949, announced that it had been admitted to membership of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) (ibid. 8 February 1949). In response, the government stepped up its policy of repression. From mid 1948 through to late 1952, hundreds of AUWT activists were bashed, jailed, fined, deported, harassed, terrorized and placed under police surveillance (Kanchada 1989: 156). Nonetheless, labour disputes continued in both private and public sectors, even though strikes were banned (Damri and Carun 1986: 68–125; Bunsong 1998: 270–280; Kanchada 1989: 113–115). This resistance sparked further attempts by the government to destroy the AUWT. Radical labour leaders were arrested and imprisoned for longer periods. As disputes continued to occur in state enterprises, the government began to define these as constituting 'revolts' (*kabot*) (Damri and Carun 1986: 103–125). This repression culminated in the promulgation of an Anti-Communist Law in

late 1952. This legislation, *inter alia*, outlawed criticisms of the private enterprise system and made illegal any action that could be seen as 'creating instability, disunity, or hatred among the people, and taking part in acts of terrorism or sabotage' (Reynolds 1987: 28). The Act effectively prevented the AUWT from openly supporting workers in their disputes, so it became largely inactive (Damri and Carun 1986: 124–134).

Over a period of eight years, a consistent policy of repression effectively destroyed the AUWT. However, if repression formed a dominant political response to labour's successful building of organizational capacities during the immediate post-war period, it was not the only one. Rather, in what was a unique development, attempts were also made to establish several publicly funded labour organizations. There were a number of reasons for this. First, while generally effective, the strategy of repression did not bring industrial militancy to a complete halt. In particular, public sector workers, especially in the railways and in the Thai Electric Authority (formerly the Siam Electric Company), had continued to engage in strikes and slowdowns (Brown 1990: 117–119). Private sector employees in textiles, soap manufacturing, oil refining and the rice industry had also been involved in sporadic activism (Kanchada 1989: 162, 172). Second, a view was emerging that repression was counter-productive, in that it could drive workers to support radicalism. Thus, it was suggested, if radical and subversive ideologies were to be prevented from gaining a grip over labour, it was imperative that government recognize basic rights and allow for the growth of 'responsible unionism' as well as provide basic labour protection (see, for example, *Democracy* 2 September 1946, 8 November 1946, 13 November 1946, 21 January 1947; *Bangkok Post* 30 June 1950). Third, borrowing a lesson from Pridi, a number of government officials realized the potential significance of developing a base of support within the urban industrial working class that could be mobilized in economic and political contests (Glassman 1999: 274).

These three reasons provided the rationale for the establishment of several government-sponsored labour organizations between 1949 and 1956. Of these, the two most important were the Thai Labour Association (TLA) (Samakhom kammakon thai), which was established in 1948 under the patronage of Phibun, and the Free Labour Association of Thailand (FLAT) (Samakhom seri raengngan haeng phrathet thai), established by Police General Phao Siriyanond in 1955. The TLA, subsequently renamed the Thai National Trade Union Confederation (TNTUC) was the product of an attempt to co-opt largely ethnic Thai workers employed in key state enterprises who had previously been affiliated with the AUWT.[6] Whereas the AUWT had involved itself in radical politics, the TLA/TNTUC aimed explicitly to raise work and living standards, develop skills and 'strive for better employer–employee relations without combating the principle of private enterprise' (*Bangkok Post* 19 April 1948). In effect, the TNTUC promised affiliates politically mediated access to improved wages,

conditions and some welfare benefits in return for eschewing an involvement in leftist politics.

FLAT was a somewhat more coercive organization. According to Bunsong (1998: 289), FLAT possessed two sets of administrative structures: an open and public face of businessmen and politicians and those who actually controlled the running of the organization – the Asawin waen phet (Knights of the Diamond Ring), an elite police unit established by Police General Phao Siriyanond.[7] While the TNTUC targeted ethnic Thai workers, FLAT's primary objective was to gain control over organization among ethnic Chinese, especially those employed in the strategic areas of water transport, docks and rice mills, formerly key bases of support for the AUWT (Bunsong 1998: 289; see also NA SR 0201 kk). Membership of FLAT was not secured on a voluntary basis. Leaders of targeted labour groups were 'invited' to join and if they refused they were ordered to present themselves at the Police Special Branch, where they were 'requested' to complete application forms (Damri and Carun 1986: 126).

Combined with the deployment of repression, the emergence of the TLA and FLAT and other government-sponsored bodies represented a strategic response to the growth of independent labour organization that had occurred during the 1944–47 period. What has often not been well recognized, however, is the manner in which workers, in turn, attempted to secure some advantage by becoming actively involved in these government-sponsored labour bodies. For example, while some AUWT activists refused to become involved with the TNTUC, others such as Wira Thanomliang adopted a strategy of working within this organization. Indeed, by 1952, five former AUWT officials had secured positions on the TNTUC governing council. Four years later, AUWT supporters actually held the majority of seats on the council (Kanchada 1989: 173). Consequently, the TNTUC was able to provide some benefits to affiliates through the provision of financial assistance, other welfare benefits and also by serving as a conduit through which workers could air grievances against employers and government policy (Kanchada 1989: 161; Bunsong 1998: 266). Similar kinds of process were occurring even within the more coercive and dangerous FLAT. Apparently rice mill workers made a conscious decision to work within the intestines of the organization and this provided them with some welfare and other benefits. Moreover, by becoming affiliated with FLAT, some former AUWT Chinese labour activists managed to secure a degree of political protection against harassment and arrest (Bunsong 1998: 290).

This strategy, whereby former AUWT activists joined with right-wing supporters of government-sponsored labour groups, did have the advantage of securing some limited space for activism and the securing of some benefits for workers within an otherwise very hostile political climate. Nonetheless, by the mid 1950s, as the military had cemented its authoritarian control over the state apparatus, any space for independent labour activism had largely been expunged. However, growing intra-elite conflict created new

opportunities, albeit briefly, for workers and their organizations to re-emerge and contest political space.

Political openings and reorganizing labour 1955–57

By the mid 1950s, Phibun's political position was becoming increasingly tenuous. On the economic front, growing criticism had arisen in relation to the policy of state-led industrialization. As Hewison has argued, a range of problems had emerged that posed significant problems for the ability of both foreign and local capital to expand and diversify their activities (1989a: 92–94). Following the economic boom generated by the Korean War, investment had gradually tapered off, especially in manufacturing. Growing trade deficits, problems associated with the provision and cost of power, and corruption within state enterprises, as well as government over-spending on large industrial projects, had led domestic business, together with a number of bureaucrats, to call for the implementation of a range of economic reforms. At the same time, Phibun's balancing of the political power of General Sarit Thanarat's First Army Division and the police under Phao Siriyanond in maintaining authoritarian rule was proving increasingly difficult (Kobkua 1995: 200–212).

In an attempt to bolster his precarious political position, Phibun returned from a tour of America and Europe in 1955 and declared that his aim was to 'restore democracy' to Thailand (Insor 1963: 77). Over the following two years, Phibun liberalized the regime. Press censorship was eased, political parties legalized, rallies and public meetings permitted and elections called (Kanchada 1989: 171). In this resort to populism, Phibun targeted urban labour as a potential base for support in the resurrection of electoral politics. Amidst this opening of political space, labour began to resurface once again in the guise of a number of different organizational vehicles. The most significant of these were the Labour Party (Phak kammakon), The Socialist Party (Phak sangkhomniyom) and the 16 Labour Units (Kammakon siphoknuay). Each of these groupings was the product of unlikely and inherently unstable coalitions of actors ranged across the political spectrum. The Labour Party, established by Phibun was essentially the political offshoot of the TNTUC and FLAT (Kasian 1992: 275–276; Sungsidh 1986: 205–206) and was created to mobilize workers' electoral support. The Socialist Party was the creation of former Communist Party and AUWT activists whose industrial base of support was located in the state railways and rice mills (Kanchada 1989: 182; Kasian 1992: 273). The 16 Labour Units were the product of an alliance of former AUWT members, elements from the Labour Party and some groups previously affiliated with the TNTUC (Congcairak 1986: 78–79).

This resurfacing of labour organization was accompanied by a great deal of activism as workers seized opportunities to openly express a range of economic, social and political grievances. In 1956, for the first time in a

decade, workers were allowed to celebrate May Day. Some 50,000 were involved in the street marches and rallies during which numerous government domestic and foreign policies were openly discussed, with US involvement in Thailand's domestic affairs the subject of much criticism (Bunsong 1998: 300). At the same time, various labour groups were calling for land reform, abrogation of the Anti-Communist Act, the establishment of a social security system, improved health and education and the restoration of parliamentary rule (Wilson 1959: 98; Damri and Carun 1986: 144–151; Congcairak 1986: 57–58; Kanchada 1989: 182–183; Bunsong 1998: 297–300).

Although a range of economic and political policies were being advanced, a key objective of a number of labour groups was to combine in order to bring concerted pressure on government to enact labour legislation that would establish a range of minimum workplace standards, as well as allow for the legal establishment of trade unions (Congcairak 1986: 57; Sungsidh 1986: 206). Such calls complemented arguments that were also being advocated from other quarters. Views had been circulating since the war suggesting that it would be in government's interest to encourage the development of responsible unionism. Some US officials also advocated such arguments. As Glassman (1999) has shown, throughout the 1950s the US had been keeping an eye on developments within Thailand's domestic labour affairs. While prepared to accept Phibun's repression of the left-wing AUWT, the US had, during this period, been involved in the slow process of building an infrastructure for labour administration within the Thai bureaucracy. As a result, US policy advisers had begun to argue the case for encouraging the development of 'conservative labour unions' (Glassman 1999: 277) that would focus on representing workers' grievances at the workplace. It was believed that these unions could also be used to halt the encroachment of leftist influence within labour ranks (Glassman 1999: 279; see also Blanchard 1958: 281; Wilson 1959: 84). During the same period, the ILO had been dispatching missions to Thailand to undertake various reviews of labour conditions. As a result, the Thai government had been continually reminded of its obligations, as a founding member of the ILO, to ratify conventions on basic labour rights and minimum standards (Kanchada 1989: 113).

It was in this context of external and internal pressures, alongside Phibun's increasingly tenuous political position, that his government reactivated an interest in labour legislation. In early 1955, representatives from both business and labour were invited by government authorities to discuss draft legislation that had been written with the assistance of US labour specialists (Blanchard 1958: 281). In June 1956, over 4,000 workers assembled to discuss the draft (Sak 1959: 3; Fun 1980: 8). With strong support from Phibun, a draft Labour Bill passed through the National Assembly on 20 September 1956 and became effective from 1 January 1957. The law provided for increased state intervention in the mediation

of wage-labour/capital relations in industry through the establishment of minimum standards related to working hours, payments for holidays and overtime, compensation for injury and other health and safety issues. The legislation also established clear guidelines for the settlement of industrial disputes (Phiphat 1977: 1–27). Significantly, workers were, for the first time, given the right to strike, to engage in collective bargaining and to establish trade unions (*sahaphap raengngan*) and labour federations (*sahaphan raengngan*), rather than just associations (*samakhom*).

Alongside Phibun's attempt to resurrect parliamentary and party politics, the passing of the 1956 Labour Act thus represented an attempt to organize the industrial working class into largely enterprise-based unions whose objectives would be limited to representing workers' interests in dealing with employers and with government authorities. Involvement in broader political matters and concerns was proscribed. This renewed endeavour to establish and embed a clear distinction between 'economic' and 'political' issues is reflected in the language of the law itself. By the late 1950s, the term *kammakon*, in use since the days of the absolute monarchy, had acquired subversive and dangerous semantic connotations that evoked images of the masculine manual labourer as a member of a potential revolutionary proletariat. There was no place for such a term in the new legislation that only spoke of *raengngan* (worker) or *lukcang* (employee). Everyone from factory workers right through to the Prime Minister could and would be described as *raengngan*.

Now formally protected by the law, workers were in a position to renew their efforts to organize. In 1957, 136 unions and two labour federations registered under the terms of the law (*Satithi* 1957: 65). These labour organizations had, within the first year, a combined membership of over 16,000 workers employed in the areas of mining, manufacturing, printing, chemicals, construction, electricity and water works, communications and services (ibid.: 79–81).

Nonetheless, while workers had, since the 1920s, involved themselves in struggles to force government to enact legislation that would both protect them from the arbitrary decision of employers and permit them to legally strike and form trade unions, these rights remained in force for less than a year. As indicated more fully in the next chapter, on 16 September 1957 Phibun's administration was ousted through a *coup d'état* engineered by Sarit Thanarat. This event marked a turning point in modern Thai economic and political history, as a new alliance of forces emerged to dominate the state.

Conclusion

In this chapter attention has been drawn to the growing involvement of the state in shaping actual or potential labour organization during the decade or so after the Second World War. The expansion of industrial wage-labour,

the resurfacing of activism, enhanced organizational capacities and the links forged between workers and the left combined to pose considerable problems for successive governments. But if controlling and accommodating labour presented a problem, there was no singularly agreed-upon strategy for dealing with the issue. Rather, there were competing perspectives held by civilian and military rulers. These swung wildly between the extremes of outright repression through to some degree of acknowledgement of workers and their struggles to be accorded a legitimate political voice.

In part these differing responses replicated those that had first emerged in the 1930s. The civilian post-war governments dominated by Pridi restarted the process of according a legitimate political role for labour as a partner in the establishment of a broader democratic and representative parliamentary regime. In this context, workers were to be provided with a guaranteed political space. Here they could organize around industrial and workplace problems and through these organizations have a legitimate voice within the political system. However, once again this emerging form of accommodation proved short-lived as labour's enhanced position within Pridi's post-war alliance was perceived as a threat to the compact of capital and military that emerged to dominate the state after the 1947 *coup*. In particular, AUWT association with left-wing politics marked it as a special target for those commercial and political interests intent on creating a pro-capitalist, anti-communist Thailand.

Nonetheless, if the AUWT's involvement in seeking to organize an urban-based revolution was relatively easily controlled through repression, the legacy of left-wing labour activism did force authorities to at least begin to consider new methods for dealing with the question of labour activism and organization. For the first time, a concerted attempt was made to create state-sponsored labour groups whose activities would be restricted to a focus on the workplace. These fledgling attempts at corporatism, in turn, were replaced by granting workers a slightly more independent political space amid the political openings that obtained between 1955 and late 1957.

5 Capitalist expansion, regime dynamics and the rise of enterprise unionism

Introduction

The mid 1970s has often been seen to mark the beginnings of workers' involvement in Thailand's politics in the form of an emerging extra-bureaucratic interest group occupying a legally sanctioned space within the broader context of a developing civil society (Mabry 1977: 935; Wehmhörner 1983: 494; Vichote 1991: 60). As later chapters will demonstrate, this space for labour organization proved to be less expansive, secure and robust than these writers imagined. Nonetheless, these views do raise a significant question. Why, at *this* particular time, were workers given the opportunity to occupy what appeared to be a secure political space within which they could build their organizational capacities and have a legitimate voice in shaping government policy? This chapter argues that the provision of this space represented a formative moment in the establishment of a new mode of political control over labour in the context of an expanding industrial economy, the occurrence of unprecedented levels of conflict and militancy and the rise of a new alliance of social forces intent on establishing their dominance through the erection of a representative, parliamentary political carapace. The chapter begins with a discussion of the economic and political changes that followed in the wake of the twin *coup*s of 1957 and 1958, focusing especially on the impact these had on organized labour.

Despotic paternalism, capitalist expansion and the destruction of organized labour

Led by General Sarit Thanarat, the Revolutionary Council (Khana patiwat) that came to power through the twin *coup*s of 1957 and 1958 represented the public face of a new alliance of social and political forces. Encompassing capital, the monarchy and civilian and military bureaucrats, this amalgam of interests had begun to first coalesce in the late 1940s (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 301). The rise to power of this new configuration of interests marked the beginnings of an era of significant structural change in Thai economic,

social and political life (Hewison 1989a: 97; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 281). In the economic arena, Sarit's government moved away from the state-led industrialization strategy of earlier periods and redefined the state's role in economic affairs. In line with advice from the World Bank, and with the support of domestic capitalists, the state would withdraw from direct competition with the private sector and assume the task of securing a more general investment climate that would be attractive to both international and domestic capital (Akira 1996: 179–181). From the early 1960s onwards, the state's role was limited to improving basic infrastructure industries in transport, communications and energy, developing a series of Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plans, streamlining investment laws and establishing new state agencies. These agencies were empowered to provide capital with special incentives, such as tax holidays, as well as reduce the level of import taxes on primary products and machinery (Saowalak 1990a: 60–61). Through such policies Sarit's government launched a development strategy that was to take Thailand away from its largely agriculturally based economy of the past towards an industrial future built, initially at least, around a programme of import substitution industrialization (ISI) (Falkus 1995: 22).

Alongside this reorienting of national economic development policy, Sarit's government established an authoritarian political regime premised on the demobilization and containment of society-based forces. As Keyes has observed:

> In the system instituted under Sarit, paternalistic leadership was provided by the army and legitimated by the king. The bureaucracy became the instrument for the implementation of policies the leadership determined were best for the populace. No provision was made for any sector of the society outside of the bureaucracy and the military to articulate its own interests or to seek to influence the formation of policies that would promote such interests.
>
> (1987: 77)

General Sarit and his supporters rejected notions of popular participation in politics that had begun to resurface during the latter years of Phibun's administration. Rather, Sarit placed emphasis on the goals of 'development' (*pathana*) and 'revolution' (*pathiwat*). These were to be achieved through encouraging private sector investment under a broader political regime later characterized as 'despotic paternalism' that was 'harsh, repressive, despotic and inflexible' (Thak 1979: xxxvii). From October 1958 through to January 1959, the government cemented its political control over state and society by issuing 57 edicts that *inter alia* abrogated the 1952 Constitution, emasculated Parliament, muted the press, imposed martial law and banned political parties (Yano 1972: 244–245; Thak 1979: 144–145). The closure of political space marked by the strengthening of

the executive power of the state against Parliament, the Constitution and notions of popular participation in politics had an immediate impact on the field of labour relations. Sarit set about destroying organized labour, ushering in a period subsequently known as the 'decade of darkness' (*yuk thamin*).

As we have seen, the space for workers to organize and air their grievances ebbed and flowed through the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The culmination of this struggle for political space reached something of a watershed with the promulgation of the 1956 Labour Act. The legislation promised workers a legally sanctioned space to organize and have an officially recognized voice in shaping government policy. However, this space was expunged following the Revolutionary Council's assumption to power. All existing unions and labour federations were ordered to cease operations and the labour movement as a whole was subject to 'extensive investigation' (United States Department of Labor 1963: 35). This led to the arrest, interrogation and imprisonment of a number of key labour leaders. Organized labour was effectively crushed and the remnants forced underground (Saowalak 1990a: 66–67; Vichote 1991: 122).[1]

In instituting these measures, the new government legitimized its actions by arguing that workers, their activism and their organizations represented potential vehicles of communist ideology and practice that directly threatened the three defining pillars of Thai identity – nation, religion and King. Revolutionary Party Order No. 19 of 31 October 1958 repealed the 1956 Labour Act on the basis that it was no longer appropriate for the new order as it encouraged 'employees to act in undesirable ways', had been used as a 'tool for instigating dissension' and opened a window of opportunity for 'communists' to threaten the 'economic development and progress of the country'. As a result, new measures would have to be found to 'protect the welfare and interests of employees' (Anon. 1972: 1).

These new measures effectively translated into a progressive strengthening and empowering of the state to unilaterally intervene in and regulate labour relations. Following the repeal of the 1956 Act, a series of Ministerial Announcements were introduced that enabled the state to determine working hours, conditions of employment of women and children, the payment of wages, holidays, levels of compensation and procedures for the mediation of industrial disputes (Saowalak 1990a: 67–68). With regard to the latter, the Ministry of the Interior was empowered to appoint persons to settle any conflict between employers and employees. While appeals could be made to the Director-General of the Public Welfare Department, the Director's decision would be final (Anon. 1972: 1–3).

This deepening of state intervention in the mediation of wage-labour/capital relations was accompanied by an expansion of specialized agencies within the state apparatus itself. Since the early 1930s, various 'sections', 'divisions' and 'bureaus' had been established as the administrative vehicles for dealing with labour-related issues (Nikhom 1967: 10). By the late 1950s,

these agencies had come under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, with the day-to-day administration and implementation of labour policy the responsibility of the Department of Public Welfare through its Labour Bureau (US Department of Labor 1963: 29–30). However, as the promotion of industry became a key national development goal, these small and inadequately resourced administrative units were poorly placed to deal with the complex logistical task of actually delivering a trained and disciplined workforce that would meet the changing needs of industry. In 1963, a joint Thai and United States Operations Mission (USOM) task force recommended to the government that the labour bureau be upgraded to a department. This took place in 1965 with Thian Atchakun appointed as the first Director-General (Halm 1973: 1). The new department and its various subdivisions subsequently became charged with carrying out an array of tasks ranging from the gathering of statistics, fostering labour training and skill development, to monitoring labour conditions, developing welfare policies and brokering industrial disputes (Saowalak 1990a: 76).[2]

The expansion of state intervention in labour affairs and the creation of new state agencies were accompanied by the emergence of a new generation of labour technocrats. It was their task to both administer already existing policy and provide input into the development of new policies to meet changing industrial demands. These technocratic officials, many of whom received training either in the US, or through other educational schemes under the auspices of United States Operations Mission (USOM), the ILO, the Asia Foundation, the Colombo Plan and the Asian Labor Education Center (Halm 1973: 4; Glassman 1999: 280), began to develop alternative views of labour problems to those held by other state agencies, especially the police and the military. Rather than viewing labour as an issue of 'social order' or 'national security', labour problems for these technocrats were seen to be amenable to neutral, rational and scientific management and planning. More particularly, these labour technocrats began to develop what were to become influential views with respect to the thorny question of labour organizations and the forms these should or should not take.

In sum, as Hewison has argued, Sarit's 'revolution' effectively translated into an emphasis on 'stability, order, authoritarianism, anti-communism, state intervention in certain areas of economy and politics and rapid capitalist development' (1989a: 97). The 'despotic paternalism' of the Sarit regime had a particularly significant impact on labour and labour organization. In a period when industrial wage-labour was to become increasingly vital within the national economy, workers and their organizations were demonized as communist aliens, denied basic rights and effectively excommunicated from having any legitimate role in participating in social and political affairs.

Capitalist expansion and social differentiation

The promotion of ISI by Sarit's government and its continuation by his political successors Thanom Kittikachon and Phraphat Charusathian, had a significant impact on Thai social structure. While the economic interests of foreign capital were well served (Akira 1996: 188–217), the domestic capitalist class also expanded with the industrial and banking fractions of this class, especially, accruing particular advantage from ISI (Hewison 1989a: Ch. 9). A middle class, located both within and outside the bureaucracy, also grew significantly (Anderson 1977), while a growing demand for wage-labour altered the size and structure of an urban-based industrial working class (LoGerfo 1997: 113–115). These structural changes created the material preconditions for the rise of new interests, identities and organizations within Thai society that ultimately emerged to challenge the regime and its restrictive grip over political life. In this section, however, I sketch out in broad terms the impact that ISI was to have on the structure of the industrial workforce.

ISI remained dominant throughout the 1960s, with the military maintaining authoritarian rule and the Board of Investment, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), the Bank of Thailand, the Ministry of Industry and local manufacturers supporting the approach. This support was reflected in the first (1961–66) and second (1967–71) development plans, where the majority of capital invested with government promotional privileges went into import substituting industries (Ingram 1971: 288–289). In terms of the political economy, there were significant developments. First, important structural changes occurred in the manufacturing sector, with increased production of consumer goods, and the manufacturing sector's contribution to GDP rising (Somsak and Chesada 1981: 180; Akira 1996: 181–182). Second, high protection encouraged domestic investment, advancing the whole process of capital accumulation especially, as noted above, among banking and industrial capitalists. Third, under ISI there was a change in the size and composition of the working class in general and the urban industrial fraction of this class in particular. This is reflected, in part, in data on employment and changing occupational status of the non-agricultural labour force. Employment in agriculture declined somewhat, alongside increases in employment in manufacturing and construction (Phiraphol 1978: 28; Sungsidh 1989: 53–54). Overall, between 1960 and 1975, industrial employment rose from around 600,000 to approximately 1.6 million (Alpha Research 1992: 174; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 187). Despite this increase in absolute numbers, the specific character of industrialization nonetheless created a workforce with differing capacities to build and sustain workplace organization. In this respect a number of factors deserve special mention.

First, as Pasuk and Baker (1995: 187–188) have indicated, between 1950 and 1970 the Thai population grew from 12 million to around 17 million.

These demographic changes meant that Thailand was slowly being transformed from a society that was labour-scarce earlier in the century to one in which labour was becoming increasingly abundant. Second, the industrial workforce created by ISI was heterogeneous in character, divided by differing skill levels, differing systems of recruitment, systems of payment and benefits and by differing degrees of commitment to wage-labour (Samrej 1987: 69–70). Third, although industrial employment expanded, much of this expansion was in smaller privately owned firms that employed fewer than ten workers. A survey conducted in 1963, for example, showed that 67.7 per cent of all workers in manufacturing in the Bangkok–Thonburi area worked in firms that employed one to ten people. A decade later 75.3 per cent of firms in this area employed fewer than ten (Sungsidh 1989: 29).

While labour surpluses and employment for the majority in small firms suggest weakened structural capacities, other factors at work did create improved possibilities for organization within the industrial working class. First, the reliance on Chinese labour for industrial expansion ended as domestic sources of labour became available, thus creating a more ethnically homogenous workforce. Second, as a number of other writers have noted, industry was mainly concentrated in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area (BMA) (Somsak and Chesada 1981: 187). This concentration of workers in an area that formed the centre of national and international trade, finance and government meant that they, as they had been in earlier years, were spatially at least 'well placed to give voice to their demands' (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 91). Third, although small firms proliferated, the proportion of manufacturing establishments employing more than 100 rose from 6.6 per cent in 1963 to 15.5 per cent in 1970, while the proportion of those employing between 10 and 19, fell from 49.4 per cent to 38.5 per cent over the same period (Akira 1996: 184–185). In the private sector, this growth in the size of factory employment occurred in textiles, auto-assembly, electrical appliances, steel products and food processing (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 187). The textile industry in particular contributed to the creation of sizeable numbers of workers employed in single factories ranged along Bangkok's expanding industrial belt. During the same period, the number of state enterprises also rose from around 80 in the late 1950s to over 100 by 1970. Several of these possessed workforces upwards of 5,000 strong and their strategic location in providing key services for industry meant that any dispute would very quickly have an impact on 'either the national economy or the government's stability' (Sungsidh 1989: 26).

ISI thus created an expanded demand for urban industrial labour and the community and workplace circumstances that formed the preconditions for workers to develop and sustain organization. As Samrej has noted, by the late 1960s and early 1970s the manufacturing workforce living and labouring in and around Bangkok was beginning to stabilize (1987: 82). Although ties to their rural homes remained strong, many 'were forced by

economic compulsion to sell their labour power in return for wages, and were likely to continue to do so for the rest of their working lives' (ibid.). Nonetheless, workers possessed differing capacities for self-organization. Generally speaking, workers employed in the relatively large-scale private sector firms located in the Rangsit area north of Bangkok possessed, together with workers employed in the larger state enterprises, the greater potential and capacity to organize. To the south of Bangkok, a proliferation of medium-sized firms employing between 10 and 50 workers developed in and around the province of Samutprakan. These workers were involved in car and truck assembly, textiles, spinning and weaving. Finally, a range of small manufacturing firms, owned largely by Sino-Thai interests, developed in Omyai and Omnoi in Nakhon Pathom province west of Bangkok. Although workers in this area possessed weaker capacities to sustain organization, some of the larger firms did become the sites of considerable industrial militancy.

Challenges to the regime

The changes in social structure noted above created the material preconditions for the rise of new interests, identities and organizations within Thai society that were slowly to emerge and challenge the regime and its restrictive grip over political life. By the late 1960s, in the context of Thailand occupying a key role in US strategy to contain communism in South-east Asia, the government was confronted by a rural insurgency in peripheral border areas led by the CPT. The government also faced the stirrings of a peasant movement that was emerging within the rural heartland and seeking redress for problems associated with growing indebtedness and landlessness (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 296). Moreover, while the capitalist class as a whole had generally prospered behind an authoritarian carapace, powerful elements within this class were becoming more assertive in arguing for the lifting of restrictions on free enterprise, and an alteration in political arrangements that would allow for a more independent space to influence the content and direction of government policy (Saowalak 1990a: 84; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 290). At the same time, the significant expansion of tertiary education had created a middle class student body that was also to become involved in voicing calls for great transparency and accountability in the way government policy was made (LoGerfo 1997: 112–13; Bartak 1993).

In response to these developments, the government promulgated a new Constitution in 1968 and held elections in 1969. While the military, through its own political party, managed to win the majority of seats and continued to dominate Cabinet, the Senate and National Assembly, it could not stop Parliament from becoming increasingly restive. With business occupying a more significant place in the National Assembly, the military was criticized, some of its bills rejected and the issue of bureaucratic

corruption openly debated (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 299; LoGerfo 1997: 117–119). When, in November 1971, Members of Parliament rejected a request for an increased military budget, Prime Minister Thanom moved to restore political control through a *coup d'état*. The Constitution was abrogated and Parliament dissolved (LoGerfo 1997: 119). Despite this, internal cracks were also appearing with the regime itself as the King, whose ideological clout and business interests had been greatly enhanced during the 1960s, criticized senior military figures within the government. At the same time, rifts were also occurring within the army (Saowalak 1990a: 86–87). Thus, as Pasuk and Baker have noted, by the end of the 1960s the 'coalition of bureaucracy, military, royalism, and business which had first asserted itself in 1947, and which had consolidated its power in 1957–8, was falling apart' (1995: 301). These emerging debates over the arrangements of politics and the extent to which society-based interests might be permitted to influence the content and direction of government policy were also being played out on the labour front.

Industrial conflict and debates over labour control

As for earlier periods, little is known about the conditions and experiences that confronted the majority of those drawn into urban waged industrial employment during the 1960s. Some scattered accounts do, however, exist. These draw a picture of young rural migrants possessed of a few years of primary education, lacking in technical training and skills, engaged in strenuous work in often unsafe and unhealthy working environments over long periods for very low wages. Work was to be endured on a day-to-day basis, there were few chances for advancement and commitment to a single employer or firm was low. In times of ill health or other family-related problems, workers relied on the patronage of their employers. Some employers supplemented low wages with food, uniforms and in some cases housing. Many others, however, did not. In some industries, workers were hired on a piece-work and/or daily basis, meaning that many lacked job security. Workers could be and often were sacked without notice or without receiving wages owing (see Nikhom 1971a: 9–10; Sungsidh 1989: 67–71). Certainly, for the vast majority of the newly created industrial workforce, life both in and outside the workplace was marked, as it had been for their predecessors from the 1920s through to the late 1950s, by considerable difficulty and a day-to-day struggle to survive.

Again little is known about how this newly emerging class of industrial workers reacted to their situation during the 1960s. Generally commentators have portrayed a compliant workforce, mostly satisfied with its lot and accepting traditional patron–client relations in the workplace. It is not until the early to mid 1970s that a different picture emerges and we see a departure from supposed traditional Thai worker behaviour (Mabry 1979: 51–63). But there is evidence of a different reality – one of persistent and

slowly increasing levels of industrial disputation throughout the 1960s (Saowalak 1990a: 70–71). As early as 1960, for example, the Labour Division was called in to mediate some 62 industrial disputes (Anon. 1960: 36). The following year there were 301 recorded 'disputes', while in 1963 there were a total of 372 'petitions' made by workers to state agencies. Of these, 335 were appeals to have employers follow labour laws (Sungsidh 1989: 85). By the mid 1960s, workers were apparently developing new tactics to press home their demands. With appeals and petitions to officials often falling on deaf ears, workers began calling strikes either before or immediately after presenting their demands to employers. In early 1965, 11 strikes involving hundreds of workers occurred within the space of a month (Thian 1969a: 4). As one senior labour official stated, these strikes had resulted in considerable economic disruption and created 'bitterness, disunity and hatred between the employers and workers' (ibid.). Levels of industrial disputation remained fairly constant through the latter half of the 1960s. However, the number of disputes and strikes began to escalate from around 1968 onwards (Samrej 1987: 52; Sungsidh 1989: 88; LoGerfo 1997: 120).

Against this background of simmering levels of industrial disputation, some significant adjustments were made to the state's machinery for settling and brokering disputes. After the repeal of the 1956 Labour Act, there were no clear-cut or well-established structures and processes available for industrial mediation (US Department of Labor 1963: 32). In the case of a dispute these were, depending on the situation, referred to a range of officials such as provincial governors, welfare officers, district officers, or officials from the Thai Department of Labour, but most frequently to the police (US Department of Labor 1963: 32; Vichote 1991: 124–125). However, as workers were learning to employ strike tactics as a means for pressing their claims, there appears to have been recognition that ad hoc procedures had to be replaced with more structured and formal processes. This led the government to issue the 1965 Settlement of Labour Disputes Act, drawing the state even further into the mediation of the wage-labour/capital relation (Saowalak 1990a: 73).

A tactic employed by workers during the mid 1960s had been to strike and then present demands to employers. The Act, drafted with the assistance of US labour advisers (Halm 1973: 5), was clearly designed to stop this strategy. Although strikes could still occur, the legislation put in place a series of gates through which workers had to pass before taking strike action. The procedures to be taken were complex and, if strike action was initiated without first moving through the several stages, those involved were liable to a fine of up to 1,000 baht and up to three months imprisonment. Moreover, strikes and lockouts were prohibited across a range of sectors, including railways, harbours, telephones and telecommunications; power and electricity generation and the manufacture of fuels; and government service, local government and other enterprises

specified in ministerial regulations (Anon. 1966: 48). In effect, the Act represented an attempt to channel labour activism into a highly regularized series of stages that were to last at least 50 days. Significantly, however, the legislation did not prevent strikes as these continued to occur (Thian 1969a: 5).

The 1965 Act made no provision for the establishment of labour associations. Nonetheless, as the impact of industrial disputation on economic development was being recognized as an important policy issue, labour technocrats were beginning to rethink the question of labour organization, especially in terms of the role this might play in the development of harmonious and productive industrial relations. As early as 1963, officials in the Department of Public Welfare, through the Ministry of Interior, had made a submission to Cabinet suggesting that a committee be established to examine 'labour relations problems'. Cabinet agreed to this proposal on 6 June 1966 and a committee was formed comprising officials from the Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Industry, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Public Health, the Police Department and some other technocrats (Anon. 1963: 1–2). There were no representatives from labour or employers.

As part of its brief, the committee was charged with the task of reviewing the Labour Act of 1956 to determine what kinds of errors and/or shortcomings had existed in the Act with respect to ways in which workers had been permitted to organize. While recognizing that some kind of organization among workers might be desirable, a continuing problem was how best to give shape to this. As the 1963 discussion paper had indicated, it was imperative to ensure that any right to organize would only be exercised in ways that did not exceed 'proper limits or [be] in breach of the law' (*chai sit koen khopkhet lae my thuktong tam cetanarom khong kotmai*) (ibid.: 1).

Just what these proper limits might be continued to be the subject of debate within the Thai bureaucracy throughout the 1960s. Notably, against the security stance advocated by military and police, Thai labour technocrats supported by a range of international labour organizations were advocating an approach that, as noted in the last chapter, showed some signs of emerging during the 1950s. While aware of possible negative political consequences if their activities were not closely monitored and clearly defined (Thian 1969c: 3), it was argued that allowing the formation of labour associations (*samakhom*) whose aims and purposes would be largely restricted to collective bargaining with employers would fulfil several purposes. First, permitting the establishment of such associations would, to some extent at least, counter international criticism of the government's negation of basic labour rights.[3] Second, it was argued that such associations, with the appropriate training and guidance of their leaders, would act as useful mechanisms for the disciplining of workers, limiting instances of industrial conflict and promoting harmony and cooperation in

the workplace (Bichai 1967: 33). Finally, it was argued that such associations would act as bulwarks against communism. As the US trained Director-General of the Department of Labour argued:

> Communism aims at abolishing capitalism entirely, whereas trade unionism still accepts the free enterprise system but demands the right to bargain for better working conditions and better share of the fruits of production. By its very nature, a trade union works to protect and maintain the interests of workers in accordance with its original objective and has been an institution working against Communism.
>
> (Thian 1969b: 9)

These debates over whether labour organization should be allowed and, if so, what forms it should take, were advanced following the promulgation of the 1968 Constitution. Section 36 of the Constitution stated that 'Every person enjoys full liberty of association provided that the object thereof is not contrary to law' (Thian 1969c: 2). This was interpreted to mean that workers thus had the legal right to establish 'occupational associations' (ibid.). Between 1968 and 1972, the task confronting labour technocrats was to draft the legislation that would define the parameters of the space within which workers and their 'associations' might operate (ibid.: 3). This eventually led government to issue new legislation – Revolutionary Council Announcement 103 – in March 1972. This legislation contained 16 provisions that *inter alia* provided for the establishment of a minimum wage and a Workers' Compensation Fund, as well as allowing for the formation of 'employee associations' (*samakhom lukcang*). The preamble referred to the growing significance of industry and industrial relations. It also recognized that labour protection and labour relations were increasingly 'important for the progress and advancement of the country' and therefore these had to be 'adjusted so as to be in keeping with development in the country's economy, society and politics [in order that] labour is used in appropriate ways and that conflict between employers and employees be resolved through cooperative methods ensuring justice for all concerned' (Sathian 1973: 1).

As mentioned, the legislation provided for the establishment of 'employee associations' (*samakhom lukcang*), the objectives and purposes of which were to 'monitor conditions of employment, workplace safety, and employee welfare and to promote good relations between employers and employees and also between employees' (ibid.: 54). Membership of an association was restricted to those employees who had the same employer or those who worked in the same type of industry and worked in the same province (ibid.: 54–55). As few as ten workers could apply to have an association established. There was, however, a range of restrictions placed on the operations and activities of employee associations. 'Unions' were still not recognized, nor was the right to collective bargaining, and,

most especially, associations were prohibited from becoming involved in 'politics' (Sungsidh 1989: 122). There were also provisions that excluded 'administrators, managers, foremen or work leaders who represented employers in matters of employment, wages, hiring and paying bonuses, imposing penalties or considering and handling grievances' (Sathian 1973: 55) from becoming involved in the establishment of an employee association or becoming members of an association established by other employees. Moreover, associations could not organize across provinces, so their activities were basically confined to single enterprises or single industries located within provincial borders. Finally, the legislation afforded the authorities ample scope for refusing application to register. Those wishing to establish an association had to apply to register in accordance with guidelines set by the Ministry of Interior. Applications had to include a range of information, such as names of promoters, internal rules that governed the activities of the members and levels of membership dues (ibid.: 56). Applications had also to be lodged with the Department of Labour, and these were then passed on to the *santiban* (police intelligence unit) which then ran a check on those involved in organizing the association (Sungsidh 1989: 122). If the Registrar refused an application, applicants had the right to appeal to the Minister of Interior whose decision on the matter was final (Sathian 1973: 57).[4]

In essence, the legislation provided for the establishment of largely single enterprise-based 'associations' whose activities were restricted to receiving and processing worker complaints and, though not formally recognized, in reality to bargaining over wages, hours, terms and conditions of employment (Sungsidh 1989: 122–123). Involvement in broader social or political concerns was proscribed and there was ample scope within the legislation for registration to be refused, or, once registered, an association could be easily deregistered if its activities were deemed to exceed the scope of legally defined objectives (LoGerfo 1997: 121–122). Over the following three years, Department of Labour officials became actively involved in fostering and supporting the creation of these largely enterprise-based associations.

In defining a space within which industrial workers could establish some collective capacity, the government was making a last-ditch effort to accommodate both international and domestic pressures for labour relations reform within the context of an increasingly volatile political environment. By the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the government was being challenged by the rise of a range of oppositional groups. Calls for reform, especially as these came to encompass a quest for democratic rights and guarantees, were also being played out in the arena of labour relations. As industrial wage-labour was becoming entrenched within the structure of the political economy, problems associated with industrial disputation were being seen as a major policy issue. In this context, the vexing question of whether workers should or should not possess the right to

organize was attracting substantial debate. The conundrum facing labour technocrats, together with their US advisers, was to develop a set of parameters within which labour organization might serve as a mechanism for managing and containing industrial conflict, yet which, at the same time, ensured that labour's political potential was constrained. The 1972 Act represented the government response to these problems. Thus as Pasuk argued, the regime's aims in Revolutionary Announcement 103 were threefold (1972: 133–134). First, the promulgation of the legislation aimed to assuage international pressure, especially from the ILO, to recognize basic labour rights (see also Mabry 1977: 934; LoGerfo 1997: 120). Second, the political leadership recognized labour's political potential and felt it necessary 'to organize labour associations in a form which promotes labour relations . . . [for] economic and social stability' (Pasuk 1972: 134). Third, the government was cognizant of the experiences of earlier industrializing nations. Allowing for legally sanctioned labour associations was meant to pre-empt any attempt by the left to establish a basis of influence among the industrial working class.

Arguing that the 1972 legislation represented 'unprecedented departures from Thai labor practices and [promised] to open a new era for Thai workers', a senior US adviser to the Thai Department of Labour nonetheless noted:

> It would be surprising if the next decade was characterized by labor peace and tranquility. The past fifteen years in which labor had no effective legal means to rectify abuses . . . has built up a backlog of complaints. Announcement No. 103 provides a means for, and tacit approval, of redress for these complaints. It seems probable that in the immediate future workers will energetically seek to improve their condition and to test their new rights. This activity should [be] recognized, noisy and troublesome though it may be, as a generally healthy release of pent up pressure through the 'safety valve' of Announcement No. 103. If this legal release of pressure were not available to workers, more explosive reactions would seem predictable in the foreseeable future. This seems particularly true since the recent rise in the cost of living has added a new dimension to the worker's difficulty.
>
> (Halm 1973: 29–30)

These predictions of a stormy future proved accurate, as the subsequent three years witnessed widespread industrial conflict and a broader climate of vociferous social and political struggle.

Regime change and the expansion of political space, 1973–76

Opposition to the government that had begun to coalesce at the end of the 1960s continued to build, leading eventually to the events of 14 October

1973. A coalition of social forces, led by students, took to the streets and combined to overthrow the military government and challenge the bureaucratic authoritarian regime (Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 145–150; LoGerfo 1997: 128–131). As Hewison has observed, the following three year period was:

> one of great political conflict and competition as rival political groups, interests and movements jockeyed to establish a position in a political environment where the military was clearly in disarray and unable to mould political developments. The political space created was as wide as it had ever been in Thailand.
>
> (1997: 14)

After the fall of the military's government in October 1973, a new Constitution was written and promulgated in October 1974, prohibiting civil and military bureaucrats from taking seats in either the Senate or the National Assembly (Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 100–101). After a period of interim government led by Sanya Thammasak, general elections were held in January 1975 (Girling 1981: 196–197). The pro-monarchist Democrat Party won the largest number of seats, but was unable to form a majority government. Kukrit Pramoj, head of the Social Action Party, in coalition with Chat Thai and Social Justice Parties, formed a Cabinet. Representing an 'alliance of royalists, businessmen and military groups' (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 303), Kukrit's administration initiated a programme of reform which *inter alia* aimed to develop a more neutral foreign policy, have US troops withdraw from Thailand, rescind anti-communist legislation, expand expenditure on public housing and pay increased attention to rural development and support for poorer farmers (ibid.: 306). These policies may be seen as an attempt by government to accommodate the claims of an increasingly complex array of political forces and groups within a broader commitment to building a system of parliamentary rule. It was in this climate, marked by the retreat of the military, the restoration of parliamentary processes and party politics, that workers began to build their organizations and press for industrial and political representation.

Labour activism and expanding political space

In the context of a fragmentation of state power, the restoration of parliamentary politics and expanding political space, the period from late 1972 through to mid to late 1975 witnessed an explosion of working class activism. This took the form of over 1,000 strikes, numerous rallies and demonstrations, street marches, sit-ins, factory blockades and, in one famous incident involving women workers employed in the Hara Jeans factory, the seizure of the means of production (Samrej 1987: 97; Hewison 1989a: 123; Sungsidh 1989: 67–71; Somsak 1991: 117–118). Through such

activism, and assisted by alliances forged with students, journalists and intellectuals, issues such as poor working and living conditions, below-subsistence wage levels, lack of overtime payments and welfare facilities, employer violation of laws and the suppression of worker rights became firmly placed on the nation's political agenda.

The eruption of labour discontent into the public arena during the early to mid 1970s has attracted a reasonable amount of descriptive literature. This has charted the expansion of labour organization that occurred at workplace, provincial and national levels during this period, the industrial bases of specific organizations, the various aims and strategies that were deployed in processes of struggle and some of the major industrial and political disputes that marked important formative moments in the gradual resurfacing of collective expressions of working class struggle.[5] For present purposes it is enough to stress that, after more than a decade of political repression, a key objective of these struggles was to force employers and government to accord workers a legitimate voice at the workplace and in the wider social and political arenas.

Before turning to an examination of how political authorities responded to this activism, it will be useful to look briefly at the general structure and ideological orientation of those organizational vehicles that emerged to represent workers on a national level. In particular, attention is drawn to the resurfacing of two broad ideological wings within the labour movement. First, a labourist wing emerged that argued for the establishment of trade unions that would represent workers' interests in collective bargaining with employers in the context of a capitalist system and a developing representative political framework. Second, alongside this labourist orientation, a more radical stream emerged whose principal focus was on a critique of capitalism, class relations and the state. Of course, neither of these two competing approaches was new. Rather, both drew upon and further developed legacies and traditions of working class struggles from earlier periods.[6]

As indicated in earlier chapters, labourism can be traced back to the 1920s and remained strong in the 1950s. The organization most closely associated with this position during the 1970s was the Labour Association of Thailand (LAT) (Samakhom lukcang haeng phratet thai), established after 14 October 1973. This body subsequently became the Group of Thai Unions (GTU) (Klum sahaphaphraengngan haengphratet thai) and finally, following the promulgation of the 1975 Labour Relations Act, the Labour Council of Thailand (LCT) (Saphaongkan lukcang sapha raengngan haeng phratet thai) (Somsak 1991: 119–120). The key industrial bases for this peak labourist body were located in the state enterprises. Although fractionalised, and often unstable, the operations of this group were governed largely by a strategy of seeking to secure workers' interests through developing trade unionism and engaging with employers in collective bargaining to raise wages and improve working conditions.[7]

Alongside the resurfacing of a labourist approach, the period also saw the rise of a radical stream within organized labour that formed a component of the broader re-emergence of the Thai left in this period.[8] The Labour Coordination Centre of Thailand (LCCT) (Sunprasanngan kammakon haeng chat) developed out of an alliance between labour, students and intellectuals, with key industrial support located among private sector textile workers in the Phrapradaeng and Omnoi-Omyai industrial districts, as well as organized hotel workers (Somsak, 1991: 119–120). Led by progressive intellectuals and students such as Seksan Prasoetkul (secretary), Thoetphum Caidi (for the hotel workers) (president) and Prasit Chaiyo (for the textile workers), the LCCT rejected a focus simply on the workplace, arguing for workers' involvement in broader social and political debates. Where the labourist stream emphasized negotiation and discussion, the LCCT attempted to cement broader alliances between workers, peasants and other social forces, as well as advocating confrontation as a strategy for dealing with employers and government. In the longer term, the LCCT argued that labour interests would only be effectively achieved through a fundamental change in social and political structures.[9] As Sungsidh has argued:

> They [the LCCT leadership] saw that foreign capitalists, local brokers, bureaucratic capitalists and landlords were the major sources of poverty of the laboring people. In the urban areas, it was the alliance between capitalists and bureaucrats and the co-operation between landlords and government in the countryside which exploited workers and peasants. They saw it [as] inevitable to alter the existing social structure and economic order. To them workers were 'proletarians' or the most advanced social class whose consciousness had to be raised by their own struggle and political education of [*sic*] the radical students. These leaders were aware that the small number of these 'proletarians' made it imperative to ally with the peasantry, and the 'petty bourgeoisie' . . . only through this alliance could the workers assume the task of [forming the] vanguard of social change.
>
> (1989: 170–171)

It should be stressed that, in distinguishing between these two general ideological positions, the reference is to broad trends that were emerging out of concrete struggles, experiences and the slow building of organizational capacities. It is thus important to recognize that, within each of these broad ideological positions, there was a range of differing, often contradictory, views being advocated in the context of what were complex, unstable and often short-lived attempts to forge together peak national labour bodies. These organizations were to be wracked by internal conflict generated by differences over appropriate strategies and tactics and also ultimately as a result of the penetration of hostile outside forces.[10]

The strikes, demonstrations, mass rallies and other kinds of activism, together with the relatively rapid re-emergence of organization among both public and private sector workers, significantly challenged employers and government officials. This activism was, for some time, ungoverned and ungovernable as workers ignored legislation and effectively extended the boundaries of existing political spaces. In the next section I turn to an examination of how government responded to these problems by redefining its relationship with workers and their struggles to organize.

Accommodating labour: the 1975 Labour Relations Act

While Revolutionary Announcement 103 provided a space for workers to form 'associations', as well as establishing mechanisms for the mediation of industrial disputation, the legislation proved unworkable in the face of the massive discontent shown by workers from late 1972 onwards. For some sections of capital and state, the growing militancy and organization among industrial workers meant that industrial relations reform became a key policy issue. The specific task faced by the reformist Sanya and Kukrit governments was thus to slowly bring labour activism under control in line with a general commitment to establishing a parliamentary regime. The Sanya government began this task by increasing minimum wage rates (Sungsidh 1989: 113) and introducing new legislation that reduced the 'cooling-off' period before a strike could be called from 50 days to eight days (Somsak 1991: 122). Through the Department of Labour it also encouraged the growth of the labourist wing of the labour movement (Sungsidh 1989: 136; Prakanphruk 1988: 41), as well as undertaking to review labour laws (Sungsidh 1989: 113).[11] A new Labour Relations Bill was drafted in September 1974, was quickly passed through the National Assembly in January 1975 and came into force two months later.

In a number of important respects, the 1975 Labour Relations Act (LRA) provided for a more expansive space within which workers could build their organizations and have a legally recognized voice in both the workplace and, through the appropriate channels, in ultimately shaping government policy (Brown and Frenkel 1993: 88). It contained all the elements traditionally associated with 'modern' systems of industrial relations. Workers were afforded the right to strike, to bargain collectively and to form trade unions (*sahaphapraengngan*), labour federations (*sahaphanraengngan*) and labour congresses (*ongkanlucang*). Philosophically, the system was underpinned by the ideology of tripartism, which cast workers, employers and government as equal partners in cooperating to solve industrial conflict and disputation. The 1975 LRA embodied yet another attempt to cement a clear institutional division between economic and political struggle. It provided for the establishment of a closely monitored movement of enterprise-based unions whose activities would be limited to an engagement in collective bargaining with employers, and in dialogue with

government, within a wider system of tripartite industrial relations structures and institutions. Workers' involvement in broader social and political matters could theoretically only be conducted via the exercise of their voting rights in a developing system of electoral and party politics.

Conservative reaction and repression

From mid 1974 onwards, conservative civilian and military forces, confronted with the prospect of their state incorporating notions of participation and representation, began to launch their counter-offensive.[12] What followed was a period of escalating violence and assassinations culminating in the 6 October 1976 student massacre at Thammasat University. The civilian government and emerging parliamentary regime were subsequently ousted through a *coup d'état* that installed a military-dominated government and marked a return to authoritarian rule (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 311; LoGerfo 1997: 217–220). This shift in the political winds and closing of political space was reflected on the labour front as workers and their organizations found themselves the target of the growing conservative backlash.

From the mid 1974 period onwards, workers were placed on the back foot as the military and conservatives began to reassert themselves. In particular, the radical wing of the labour movement became the subject of concerted attacks by conservative forces working through a range of paramilitary organizations such as the Village Scouts, Red Gaurs and Nawaphol as well as various groups of hired thugs, hit-men and gangsters. These groups, together with sections of the Thai military, most notably the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), began breaking up strikes and labour rallies through intimidation and violence.[13] At the same time, union leaders were sacked and harassed, and the law was increasingly invoked to reign in activism.[14] A number of assassination attempts were made against the LCCT leadership (Prakanphruk 1988: 42).

Following the 6 October *coup d'état*, the government of Thanin Kraiwichian outlawed strikes, banned union meetings, deregistered some unions and targeted those activists deemed 'social dangers' (Somsak 1991: 135; Vichote 1991: 134). Along with thousands of students and other activists, a number of labour leaders and activists fled to the jungles to join the Communist Party of Thailand. Others were arrested and imprisoned.[15] Those who managed to avoid arrest were nonetheless subjected to close police surveillance and harassment (Vichote 1991: 134). At the same time, senior officials within the Department of Labour who had supported the establishment of trade unions were transferred from their posts (Wehmhörner 1983: 484). Within this general climate, employers were provided with a golden opportunity to rid themselves of labour activists and leaders and as a result many fledgling unions simply dissolved (Somsak 1991: 136–137).

Conclusion

During the pre-1960 period, labour's struggle for political rights preceded substantial industrial expansion and was relatively easily controlled through repression. This chapter has indicated how a reliance on repression was becoming increasingly problematic in the context of a period of significant economic and political change. Alongside ISI, the expansion of industrial wage-labour and the outbreak of struggle, the political control of the working class represented a growing structural problem for the state. How this problem was tackled varied, however, alongside broader changes to the regime. Initially, the problem of control was filtered through an authoritarian regime born out of an alliance of business, bureaucracy, monarchy and military. This regime, characterized as despotic paternalism, dealt with labour through repression and empowering state officials to make unilateral decisions in terms of setting wages and conditions and dealing with cases of industrial conflict.

However, after roughly a decade, the alliance that was instrumental in building and maintaining this economic and political regime began to fall apart under the weight of both internal divisions and growing external opposition. Through this period, a new coalition of forces comprised of influential sections of domestic capital, the royal family and middle class elements was to emerge to claim control over government and engage in the task of redefining avenues of political access by reactivating parliamentary politics. Alongside this change in regime, and in the context of historically unprecedented levels of industrial activism and struggle, a new approach to labour control was beginning to emerge. Supported by a range of external and internal interests, this approach advocated that strategically placed public and private sector industrial workers would be organized into closely monitored labour 'associations' and, later, 'unions', whose membership and coverage would be restricted and whose objectives would be confined to a focus on conditions within the workplace. Organizations of workers along such lines, it was thought, might play a fruitful role in improving workplace relations and also act to pre-empt the growth of a more radical-inspired labour movement. The following chapters deal with how this mode of control actually operated in practice through the 1980s, a period of rapid industrial development, shift in development strategy and continued drift towards parliamentary rule.

6 Export-oriented industrialization, battles for the state and the disorganization of organized labour

Introduction

Rejecting the search for 'ideal-typical' forms of state capital–labour relations, Hadiz (1997) has drawn attention to the variations these relations have taken as a consequence of different historical experiences of industrialization. Without canvassing all possibilities, he argues that three 'models of accommodation' between state capital and labour can be identified: 'social-democratic', 'populist' and 'exclusionary', each of which is linked with, and part of, broader 'social and political frameworks' (Hadiz 1997: 12). In contrast with 'social-democratic' (associated with liberal democracies) and 'populist' models (associated with inclusionary corporatism such as that found, for example, in Latin America), Hadiz argues that export-oriented industrialization (EOI) in the East and South-east Asian regions has been characterized by 'exclusionary models of accommodation'. The principal features of this are the 'political marginalisation of the working class' and 'its demobilisation as a social force' in the context of broader state–society relations. These are arranged 'on the basis of state-controlled and established, monolithic and non-competitive institutions, geared to facilitate the control and demobilisation of society-based organisations and movements' (ibid.: 26–27).

When brought to bear on the Thai case, the application of Hadiz's argument appears problematic. Although there are difficulties associated with establishing a precise chronology, the shift to EOI in Thailand occurred during a period when workers had been afforded an officially recognized space within which they could build their organizations and have a legitimate voice in influencing employer and government policies. As indicated in the previous chapter, the provision of this space both reflected, and formed part of, a broader shift in regime marked by the establishment of parliamentary politics. From the late 1970s through to the late 1980s, the drift towards the establishment of a democratic and representative regime continued (Anderson 1990; Ockey 1992). Within this context, the basic rights accorded to labour during the 1970s, as defined by the 1975 Labour Relations Act (LRA), remained largely intact. Thus, one could argue that

the Thai case seems to be more akin with a developing 'social democratic' model of accommodation. Rather than being politically marginalized, workers and their organizations were gradually being incorporated into the social and political fabric via the granting of basic industrial and other democratic rights and guarantees within a developing parliamentary system.

Such an argument is implicit in the work of Vichote (1991). His view is that, from the late 1970s through the 1980s, organized labour emerged as one of a number of extra-bureaucratic forces that collectively formed a developing civil society. The steady expansion in labour organization through the 1980s, together with a growing demonstration of independent action on the part of workers, is seen to contrast sharply with earlier periods, when labour and labour organization were perceived to be the sole creation of civilian and military bureaucratic elites. Writing at the end of the 1980s, Vichote asserted that 'unions . . . have more room now . . . [than in earlier periods] . . . for involvement in politics, as the political system has become more open, as popular participation in various forms, such as, free election(s), [and] freedom of expression has increased' (1991: 9). Vichote did argue that workers had yet to reach their full measure of development, labour being 'more dependent on the process of democratization than it was an independent force that caused democratization'. Nonetheless, he did suggest that a focus on workers and their expanding organizations can, however, be interpreted as 'an indicator of the degree of success in Thai democratic development' (ibid.: 4).

Vichote's claims, however, stand in marked contrast not only to the views advanced by Hadiz, but also to perspectives held by Thai workers and their representatives. They have characterized the decade from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s as one in which organized labour became progressively weakened, fragmented and politically impotent, a situation which compares negatively with the political inroads and successes of the early to mid 1970s (Phrakanphruk 1988; Naphaphon 1993). Implicit in this work is the recognition that it is one thing to have an expansion in union numbers and be accorded basic rights. It is quite another to force the state to guarantee such rights. What should be significant for the analysis of the role of labour is thus the capacity of workers and their organizations to force employers and state to actually respect basic rights and comply with various rules, laws and standards.

In accounting for the progressive weakening and political isolation of organized labour through the late 1970s and 1980s, this chapter argues that a range of factors must be considered. First, some attention will be given to noting the demobilizing effects of rapid industrialization itself. Second, the particular character of the political space within which officially recognized labour organization could operate must also be taken into account. Finally, due consideration must be given to the continuing assaults against workers and their organizations in the wider context of a shift in

development strategy and ongoing political contests between conservative forces, led by the military, and an ascendant capitalist class. The discussion begins with a brief examination of the profound impact that the shift to EOI had on the recomposition of the industrial working class and the problems this posed for struggles to develop and sustain organizational capacities.

Export-oriented industrialization, the industrial working class and labour disorganization

The overthrow of the Phibun Songkhram government in September 1957 marked a watershed in Thailand's economic history, as the new administration launched an ambitious programme of industrialization based on ISI. While enjoying initial success, the ISI strategy had, by the early 1970s, begun to experience problems. As early as 1966, the Bangkok Bank had argued for an expansion of manufactured exports and a revision of tariff levels to assist local manufacturers interested in producing for external markets (Hewison 1989a: 120). Domestically, overproduction was also becoming a problem and investment began to decline. Moreover, fiscal problems began to force the government to consider the possibility of adopting export-oriented industrialization (EOI) as a means for overcoming trade deficits. As a result of higher rates of inflation in western nations and fluctuations in the international exchange rate, Thai manufactured goods were, by the early 1970s, becoming more attractive on the world market. Although EOI did not totally replace the ISI model, it has nevertheless been in the ascendancy since its formal recognition in the Third Development Plan (1971–76). The Fourth National Plan (1977–81) continued the emphasis on EOI while again indicating that ISI would be maintained in some areas. Export industries were, however, to receive additional privileges. This emphasis on export was close to the World Bank recommendations for labour-intensive, export-oriented industries. With minor changes, this trend to EOI held through the Fifth (1982–86) and Sixth Plans (1987–91) as well.

The emergence of an export-oriented strategy also reflected developments within the capitalist class. Under the relatively protected conditions of ISI, domestic industrial and banking capitals were able to expand to a stage where, in some cases, they were developing an international character (Akira 1993). Foreign capital investment has always been important, both in earlier and more recent times. Nonetheless, it needs to be stressed that the domestic capitalist class, dominated by banking and industrial fractions, had, at least up until the economic crisis of the late 1990s, been able to retain significant control over the economic base of society (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 143–172).

Within the wider context of the internationalization of capitalist production (Bryan 1995), the embedding of industrial capitalism based initially

on ISI and subsequently EOI has created a strong manufacturing base, founded principally on Thailand's comparative advantage in cheap labour. These changes are reflected in figures on production and employment. Agriculture's contribution to GDP in 1960 was 38 per cent, declining to 15 per cent by 1990. Over the same period, the contribution to GDP by manufacturing and services rose from 11.6 and 8.7 per cent to 24.7 and 12 per cent respectively (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 218). The more outward-looking face of the economy is indicated by data on manufacturing exports. These rose from an almost negligible 1.2 per cent of total exports in 1960 to 18.6 per cent in 1975, 32 per cent in 1980, 76 per cent in 1990 and 77.8 per cent by 1992 (Falkus 1995: 20).[1]

Changes in employment by sector and occupational categories also reflect the continued development of industrial capitalism under EOI through the 1980s. While employment in agriculture remained relatively high, at least in terms of officially gathered statistics, employment in manufacturing rose from 3 per cent of the economic labour force in 1960 to 10 per cent by 1990 (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 218; Bello *et al.* 1998: 78–79). By the early 1990s, there were approximately 7.8 million private sector employees with roughly 5.2 million employed in industry, of whom just over 4 million were classified by occupation as craftsmen and production process workers (Sakool and Voravidh n.d.: 7). These workers were distributed across a range of mostly light industrial and manufacturing firms, many of which engaged in producing goods for domestic, regional and global markets. In terms of industrial exports, the most important industries employing wage-labour were, by the early 1990s, textiles and garments, computer parts and equipment, gems and jewellery, frozen shrimps, integrated circuits, rice, rubber, footwear and canned seafood (*The Nation* 16 January 1996).

There is no doubt that Thailand's continuing transition to capitalism in the 1980s through the adoption of EOI furthered the growth of an industrial working class. Nonetheless, a number of writers have directed attention to the nature of some of the changes that have occurred in community and the workplace. These are seen to have placed structural obstacles in the path of workers' abilities to develop and sustain unity and solidarity and to deal collectively with both employers and government. A range of factors have contributed to this situation. These include: the nature of labour markets, especially the existence of a large reserve army of surplus labour; the effects of large-scale external and internal migration; the unsettling impact of rapid change on community and family life; the continuing existence of a large informal economic sector; and the temporally and spatially uneven ways in which people have, and are being incorporated into, the wage-labour/capital relation. At the workplace, writers have also focused on the implications that stem from the employment of workers in small firms and the emergence of new divisions within industrial wage-labour by location, occupation, age, levels of education and

gender. Attention has also been drawn to the impact of globalization, the increased mobility of capital and the application of new flexible production techniques and work organization.[2]

Collectively, these factors are seen to have combined to place significant constraints on the ability of workers to develop organized responses to the challenges thrown up by rapid capitalist development. Nonetheless, two points may be noted. If the process of proletarianization in Thailand is complex and possessed of its own specific character, it should not be seen as somehow failing to conform to patterns of proletarianization that have occurred in others places at other times (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 221–223). Moreover, within all the confusion, upheaval, difference and movements of population, the data do indicate the overwhelming expansion of *waged* labour. This is perhaps an obvious point, but its importance has often been overlooked. Recourse to waged employment, however transitory and insecure, has become a fundamental means through which livelihoods in both rural and urban areas are secured for ever-increasing numbers of Thai (Turton 1987: 68–69).

It should also be stressed that the continued development of capitalist industry under EOI through the 1980s did contribute to the creation of a relatively stable class of both public and private sector workers employed in firms geographically concentrated in Bangkok and its five surrounding provinces. Although the majority of industrial enterprises remained small-scale in terms of employment (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 221), those employing 300 workers or more actually accounted for 41.75 per cent of total industrial employment by the early 1990s (Somsak 1995: 44). Also noteworthy was the growth and expansion of large industrial estates (Venzky-Stalling 1993), some of which employed upwards of ten thousand (Fairclough 1992: 22). Collectively, these private and public sector workers employed in larger firms, and increasingly committed to waged labour as their ties with rural areas became more tenuous, came to occupy a strategically powerful position in Thailand's developing political economy.

As has been the case for earlier periods, the workplace and broader community experiences that confronted this burgeoning, urbanized and geographically concentrated industrial workforce have not been well documented. However, studies of individual factories, together with reports of labour conditions and labour activism within various industries, industrial sectors and industrial areas do indicate the slow, albeit highly uneven, emergence of a distinctly working class way of life. This is marked by changing forms of interaction, the gradual development of shared interests and a slow growth of new senses of solidarity and consciousness.[3] While these new forms of consciousness and solidarity have often been expressed in hidden, private and covert ways (see, for example, Ubonrat 1989), it is nonetheless possible to discern some core themes that weaved their way through labour struggles that occurred from the late 1970s to the early

1990s. In this, there is a remarkable continuity across the decades. Recourse to industrial wage-labour has, as for earlier times, been seen to entail a struggle to survive from day to day (*ha chao kin kham*), experiencing exploitation (*khutrit*), oppresssion (*khotkhi*) and a sense of being disadvantaged (*siapriap*). In response to these experiences and in seeking to improve their conditions, workers often interpreted their endeavours as involving a struggle for justice (*yutitham*), dignity (*saksi)*, equality (*sameophak*) and participation (*mi suan ruam*), both at the workplace and in the wider social and political life of the nation.[4]

A social history remains to be written. Nonetheless, what the available studies do indicate is that Thai workers should not be seen as passive victims of capitalist industrialization. Rather, despite the dizzying and disorienting effects of rapid change, workers continued to engage in collective attempts aimed to redress their grievances during the period under review. This willingness to attempt to collectively struggle for dignity, self-respect, equality and participation, combined with the key structural position that wage-labour came to occupy within Thailand's changing political economy, ensured that the problem of labour control remained one of concern for capital and state during the 1980s. In examining how capital and state responded to this challenge, it will be appropriate to first consider the formal system of industrial relations, noting, in particular, how the nature of the system itself contributed to a weakening of workers' organizational capacities.

The 1975 Labour Relations Act and constraints on labour organization

For much of the modern period the particular complex of economic, social and ideological power that is the Thai state has existed behind a succession of authoritarian regimes dominated by civil and military bureaucrats. In the last chapter it was argued, however, that, from the late 1960s onwards, Thailand's political landscape was marked by the rise of new configurations of social forces. These forces became involved in an attempt to limit the powers of the authoritarian bureaucratic state through the establishment of a parliamentary and representative system. During the 1980s, a period of rapid change, increasing social complexity and the rise of new political actors, the struggle for the establishment of a parliamentary regime continued. As Anderson has noted for this period:

> What was emerging was that characteristic political system we know as parliamentary democracy – the style of regime with which all ambitious, prosperous and self-confident bourgeoisies feel most comfortable, precisely because it maximize[s] their power and minimizes that of their competitors . . . one can view the entire . . . period [since 1973] (up to the present) within a single optic – that of the struggle of the

> bourgeoisie to develop and sustain its new political power (institutionalized in parliamentary forms) against threats from both left and right, the popular sector and the state apparatus.
>
> (1990: 40)

For capital, one of the appealing features of parliamentary rule is that it, as Hewison observes:

> promises a political space where activism is defined within certain boundaries and governed by rules which offer the prospect of preventing opposition from becoming undisciplined and uncontrolled.
>
> (1996: 89)

As shown in the last chapter, it was the 1975 Labour Relations Act (LRA) that established the boundaries of labour's space and the rules that governed activism within it. This legislation set limits on the forms that labour organization would be allowed to take, the range of objectives these organizations were permitted to pursue and the institutional structures and processes through which workers and their unions, federations and councils could seek to realize their legally defined objectives. In particular, the 1975 LRA emphasized that 'employees', 'employers' and 'government' should enjoy an equitable voice in settling workplace problems through consensus, harmony and cooperation, so that disruptive industrial disputation would be kept to a minimum and longer-term economic growth would not be threatened. Alongside a continuing drift towards parliamentary rule, successive governments remained committed to retaining and indeed further entrenching the industrial relations system as established by the 1975 LRA (Vichote 1991: 69–70). However, while the legislation recognized basic rights to organize and to strike, there were numerous restrictions placed on the forms and degree to which such rights could actually be exercised.

The 1975 LRA provided for the establishment of trade unions (*sahaphap raenngnan*), labour federations (*sahaphan raenngnan*) and labour councils or congresses (*ongkanlukcang*). Unions could be established on a workplace or industry basis and their objectives must be to secure and protect workers' interests relating to conditions of employment and the promotion of good relations between employers and employees and among employees (Krom raengngan 1984: 306). Two or more unions whose members are working for the same employer, or who cover employees in the same industry or in the same line of work, may apply to register as a labour federation. These can be established for the purpose of promoting better relations between unions and protecting the interests of unions and employees. No fewer than 15 unions or federations may join together to establish a labour council, the objectives of which are to foster education and improved labour relations (Krom raengngan 1984: 311–312).

A number of problems flow from the constraints the 1975 LRA placed on the form and objectives of labour organization. First, the limits imposed on union objectives make it difficult for officially sanctioned labour organization to develop alliances with other social groups and interests. As long-time observer of the labour scene, Lae Dolikovirat (in Banthit 1993: 8), argued, as a result of being restricted to dealing with 'economic' issues, unions through the 1980s became progressively isolated as they were effectively prevented from engaging in broader social and political debates. This situation contrasts with the period of the early 1970s, when the labour movement became entangled within struggles that aimed to bring about wide-ranging social and political reforms. Thus, as Somsak Kosaisuk has stated: '[to] register is to be locked-in, in that your objectives are circumscribed . . . if we speak about social issues or the environment, this is deemed to be illegal and we can be deregistered' (in Banthit 1993: 14). In turn, being confined to dealing with 'economic' issues means that unions have often been perceived as self-interested. Again to quote Somsak:

> it is as if we are stymied or caught in no-man's land . . . if we do something for ourselves, society says we are interested only in ourselves . . . if we become involved in issues of wider social interest, we are in breach of the law . . . it is being increasingly suggested that we don't register and then we can talk about and become involved in wider social issues . . . in reality, of course, things can't so easily be separated.
>
> (ibid.)

The 1975 LRA thus enforces a distinction between 'economics' and 'politics' and stipulates that the objectives of labour organization be limited to dealing with the former. The 1975 LRA also contains provisions that limit the ability of workers to build and sustain independent workplace unions through which they might bargain effectively with employers. For example, as few as ten workers can form a union and more than one union can be established within a single enterprise (Banthit 1994: 70). This creates the possibility for a plethora of unions to be established within a single enterprise, providing employers with the opportunity to promote inter-union rivalry and undermine unity and solidarity. Moreover, no legal protection is offered to workers involved in the often lengthy process of having their union legally registered. Union promoters are only legally protected once their union is given the official stamp of approval. In the interim, employers have the opportunity to dismiss union promoters with relative impunity (Sakool and Voravidh n.d.: 13). There are other obstacles that impede the establishment of unions or thwart the building of solidarity through collective action. For example, employers are legally permitted to hire replacements for striking workers. They can also close sections of factories where workers are on strike. Workers on strike may be sacked without employers incurring large fines or compensation payouts.

Only union members are permitted to strike. During strikes employers may, without penalty, close their factory for a period, move to new premises and re-employ a new workforce (Sakool and Voravidh n.d.: 13–14). The Minister of Interior also possesses considerable discretionary powers, both in terms of registering unions and in banning strike action. The 1975 LRA does not, moreover, allow for full-time professional unionists. All union committee members must be full-time employees within an enterprise and employers retain the right to decide whether unionists are able to attend to such things as legal cases, seminars and conferences on labour issues (Banthit 1994: 94). In addition, the lack of full-time professional staff poses significant obstacles for workers in terms of collecting relevant information, writing briefs and following various campaigns (Sungsidh and Kanchada 1994: 225).

Finally, as Somsak (1991b: 88) has indicated, the ideas of bipartism and tripartism, central elements of the industrial relations system, work to the disadvantage of organized labour. While fine in theory, these notions ignore the asymmetrical distribution of power that obtains between labour, capital and state. At the enterprise level, in situations where unions are weak and unable to back their claims with well-developed financial and organizational resources, workers claims can often be simply ignored by employers. Moreover, if a problem or dispute cannot be resolved at the level of the firm, it then moves into the tripartite system, thus bringing the state directly into the dispute through the mechanisms of the Labour Relations Committee or the Central Labour Court. Although various tripartite institutions comprise representatives from labour, capital and state, the state is able to enforce decisions through sheer weight of numbers. Vital information collected by state officials is not made available to workers and the chairman of all tripartite committees is always a state official and in a position to control the direction and eventual outcome of negotiations. Thus, as Somsak Samakkhitham notes:

> the tripartite system is a vitally important labour control mechanism as it shifts working class struggles into an arena of cooperation and negotiation between labour, employers and government. In this way government is able to control the overall rules of the game . . . under such circumstances the state exercises complete control over labour conflicts . . . all tripartite bodies have the function of moving power away from workers and employers into the hands of the government such that government decisions appear to have come about through the mutual agreement of all those involved, including labour.
>
> (1991b: 88)

In sum, while the 1975 LRA provided for a space within which workers and their organizations could legally operate in pursuit of their interests, it is neither of a robust or expansive character. In fact, it is a particularly

narrow space that only allows for the establishment of organizations whose objectives are limited, and whose activities are conducted in accordance with a network of rules, regulations and processes that effectively restrict capacities to actually build organizational strength and achieve desired outcomes. The law also provides both capital and state managers with adequate opportunities to *legally* thwart or undermine workers' struggles to organize and engage in collective industrial action. Moreover, while the character of labour's political space itself placed limitations on the capacity of workers to build and sustain their organizations, the degree to which that space should be respected was, and remains, the subject of ongoing struggle. Through the 1980s, some capitalists and state managers saw the need for an accommodation with labour as defined by the terms of the 1975 LRA. However, conservative capital and state elements continued to perceive labour as a potential threat to their social order. They remained opposed to the view that workers should possess basic rights and an independent and legitimate voice in debates about the direction that Thailand's economic and political development should take.

In examining this ongoing struggle for labour's political space, it will be worth drawing a distinction between three periods. The first of these periods has been termed 'semi-democracy' (Surin 1997: 152). Essentially, this was characterized by a compromise between capital and the military, where, under the terms of the 1978 Constitution, 'the military gained a legitimate role in a re-sculptured political system, which also recognised the involvement of extra-bureaucratic politicians' (Hewison 1999: 238). The second period, marked by the election of the Chatichai Choonhaven government, represented a significant victory in capital's attempt to cement its political rule through a parliamentary regime. A final period began with the seizure of power by the National Peacekeeping Council in February 1991. These broader political battles between capital and the military were each to have an impact on workers' political space.

Semi-democracy and contesting labour's political space

The period from the late 1970s through to the late 1980s has been seen as one in which an increasingly powerful domestic capitalist class engaged in an attempt to reorganize the state and state apparatus and redefine avenues of access to government policy-making processes (Ockey 1992: 16–18). In this, capital was pitted against the military-dominated conservative state. This contest was resolved in favour of a compromise within which conservative interests would still be protected in return for their support for an increased role for political parties, electoral processes and Parliament (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 338–339). Nonetheless, behind this compromise there was a great deal of jockeying for position and advantage. Competing interests struggled to entrench their own specific vision of the extent to

which a parliamentary regime should or should not be allowed to operate. Should Thailand's democracy be liberal in character, replete with an expansive and robust civil society? Or, rather, should it be a system that allows for some, possessed with the appropriate expertise and qualifications, to have a greater input into processes of policy-making? Would this retain hierarchical and non-participative structures consistent with traditional Thai culture?

A focus on labour relations during this period represents a microcosm of these broader struggles concerned with the character of the new political architecture. While some capitalists and state managers were prepared to accept an accommodation with labour as defined by the terms of the 1975 LRA, other capital and state elements saw workers and their organizations as a threat to their interests. On page 101, I focus particularly on the role played by the military in labour affairs. Before doing so, it will be appropriate to note briefly how some sections of capital dealt with problems of labour organization.

Battles at the workplace

Through the early to mid 1970s, some private sector employers were prepared to accept organized labour, even to the extent of seeing unions as conducive to increased productivity and higher profits. However, they were a minority. The anti-union resolve of the majority was strong (Brown and Frenkel 1993: 86). This anti-union stance became increasingly evident as the transition to EOI occurred. Employers who became involved in mobilizing young, often female, workers, in the production of manufactured products for export were subject to increasing pressure to maintaining globally competitive labour costs. In this context, workers forming unions was perceived as inimical to the realization of such objectives. Between the late 1970s and late 1980s, private sector industry thus developed into a battlefield, where workers' efforts to actually exercise their legal rights to organize were opposed by employers. This battle and the various strategies and tactics deployed passed through a number of distinct stages.

During the immediate post-October 1976 period, employers systematically sought to inhibit labour organizing and roll back the gains made in the earlier part of the decade. Initially this occurred within an extremely hostile political climate. As noted in the last chapter, the Thanin government outlawed strikes and imprisoned persons considered 'social dangers', which *inter alia* included those who participated in strikes and lockouts (Vichote 1991: 133–134). Labour meetings were subsequently banned. Many labour leaders and activists were arrested and incarcerated. Under these conditions, capital was in a position to attack unions and their leaders. Large numbers of labour leaders were sacked from their jobs and many unions simply disintegrated. The Department of Labour played its part by deregistering 22 unions in 1977 (Somsak 1991a: 126–127).

This steady undermining of labour's organizational capacities was achieved through the use of an eclectic range of tactics. Initially, violence, threats, intimidation and the harassment of labour activists (Anon. 1979a: 39) marked employers' counter-offensives against workers and their fledgling unions. Such tactics were common throughout private sector industry (Hewison and Brown 1994: 505; Somsak 1991a: 183–189). Gradually, however, more sophisticated methods were developed. Throughout the 1980s, the tripartite system was refined and entrenched as the main mechanism for dealing with industrial disputation. After the initial destruction of unions that occurred during the 1976–81 period, employers gradually moved to working within this system as a means for dealing with workers and their activism. As Chusak and Banthit have argued, through a process of cooperation and exchanging of information and experiences, employers began to recognize that the 1975 LRA provided ample protection for them should any dispute occur (1991: 86). Employers also started to employ legal experts to advise them as to their legal rights under industrial relations law. Through this enhanced knowledge and understanding of legal provisions, and the working of the industrial relations machinery, they enjoyed a considerable advantage in dealing with their employees (see Vichote 1991: 190–191).[5]

Another key strategy developed during the 1980s included hiring workers on a short-term or casual basis and also through the use of subcontracting (Somsak 1991c). Sungsidh and Kanchada have argued that the use of these methods of employment represented an attempt by employers to reduce production costs in an increasingly competitive global environment (1994: 230–236). However, as Somsak Samakkhitham has also indicated, the more temporary workers are, the 'less "capacity" unions have to mobilise workers . . . [as] . . . those employed on a short-term or casual basis do not dare (*maikla*) become union members or become involved in union activities' (1988: 1). To do so would obviously jeopardize their chance of having a contract renewed.

In adopting these various tactics, and rolling back the gains made by workers during the 1970s, as well as seeking to actively prevent the formation of new unions, employers were working within opportunities created by the state. The overthrow of the Thanin Kraiwichian government in October 1977 led to an easing of political repression. Nonetheless, government, especially during the Prem Tinasulanond period (1980–88), did little to protect workers' attempts to legally organize (Vichote 1991: 79). By failing to close the many loopholes in the labour law, not enforcing employer compliance and refusing to ratify ILO conventions which cover the right to organize, Prem's government presided over a political climate that was generally supportive of employer opposition to workers' organizing efforts (see Mabry and Kundhol 1985).

Alongside the attacks against private sector unions, specific elements within the state itself also sought to restrict worker autonomy. Of particular

interest here is the role and intervention of the military in labour relations from the late 1970s to the late 1980s.

The military and organized labour

In their combined roles as directors of state enterprises and as self-appointed guardians of nation, religion and King, the Thai military has, as we have seen, long retained an objective interest in shaping the potential political organization of the industrial working class. This historical interest in labour affairs was further entrenched through the late 1970s and 1980s. This emerged due to changes within the military itself and also as a result of the military's attempt to reposition itself within the changing forms of politics.

In the first place, challenged by the events of 1973–76, the military moved away from 'ultra-rightist positions' (Hewison 1999: 238). This shift in political orientation was embodied in the development of a new strategy to deal with the communist insurgency. Of particular importance here was the rise to prominence of the Democratic Soldiers fraction within the Thai army. This group drew its support from elements within the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the Chulachomklao Military Academy and the Army War College. Influenced by the thinking of former CPT member, Prasoet Subsunthorn, the Democratic Soldiers advocated a strategy for opposing communism through political means. This new strategy was embodied in Prime Ministerial Order 66/2523.[6] In essence, this aimed to cut the ground from under the insurgency. This was to be achieved by ameliorating the conditions thought to be conducive to the CPT receiving support – dictatorial rule, official corruption, a broadening gap between rich and poor and rapacious big business (Chai-anan *et al.* 1990: 9). Through the adoption of this new policy, the military began establishing for itself an enlarged role in economic and social development, especially in rural areas. Mass mobilization was seen as important for the success of the policy. As a result, the military organized a number of groups, such as the Thai National Defence Volunteers, Volunteer Development and Self-Defence Villages and Military Reservists for National Security. Other groups such as the *thahan phran* (rangers) had their roles expanded from purely military activities to include a civilian role through an involvement in various development projects and democracy programmes (ibid.: 80–81). Apart from developing rural-based organization, the Democratic Soldiers also advocated the establishment of organizational links with urban-based students, politicians, intellectuals and labour (Suchit 1987: 15).

At the same time, the changing forms of politics also fostered the military's interest in securing an involvement in shaping rural- and urban-based organizations. Thus, as political parties, elections and parliamentary processes gradually became more important during the 1980s, various military leaders were further encouraged to 'realise the political significance

of popular participation and mass support' (ibid.: 6). Thus, as Suchit argues, through the 1980s, the conflict between the military and civilian politicians was not so much over whether political participation should or should not exist, but, rather, revolved around the 'competition for mass support' (ibid.: 7).

In this context of a long historical interest in labour affairs, a shift in strategy for containing the influence of the left and an emerging parliamentary system, the military acted to secure influences over organized labour that could be used for its own changing economic and political ambitions. Leading the military's foray into labour affairs through the 1980s was ISOC, whose imprint on labour organization was pervasive, running from grass-roots level right through to that of national labour councils.[7] The following discussion focuses on the peak council level, showing how ISOC sought to secure an influence over key national labour groups. In doing so, it sowed the seeds of difference, division and disunity that could be exploited for its interests in ensuring that organized labour remained weak per se. At the same time it also attempted to ensure that organized labour would not form a basis of support for its civilian political rivals. ISOC achieved this via two main strategies: fostering competition and disunity within already established labour councils; and, in quasi-corporatist fashion, by sponsoring the establishment of rival councils. The impact of these strategies can be appreciated from an examination of the fluctuating fortunes of the Labour Council of Thailand (LCT).

Under the leadership of Phaisan Thawatchaianan, the LCT was one of a number of key labour groups formed during the 1973–76 period. Although forced to cease its operations during the period of the Thanin administration, the LCT resumed its activities following General Kriangsak's assumption to power in late 1977. Between 1978 and 1980, the LCT led a number of significant industrial campaigns. These included struggles to increase minimum wages and oppose the ban on strikes that had been in place since October 1976, organizing protests against rises in domestic oil and sugar prices and seeking changes to the tripartite system. The LCT also engaged in other activities, such as promoting May Day celebrations and providing assistance for other unions involved in disputes and strikes (Somsak 1991a: 162–164). As a result of these campaigns, the LCT was, by the end of the 1970s, emerging as the strongest independent body of organized labour, enjoying considerable grass-roots support from both private and public sector workers.

The rise of the LCT was clearly of concern to some elements of capital, but also to the military and especially ISOC. As a consequence, ISOC launched a concerted campaign to undermine the LCT. This was to be achieved in two ways. First, ISOC established its own labour organization, the National Free Labour Congress (NFLC), as a rival to the LCT.[8] Second, it moved to foster internal fractional ruptures within the LCT

itself. In pursuing the latter aim, ISOC found ready allies in Ahmat Khamthetthong and Sawat Lukdot. Ahmat and Sawat headed one of the powerful unions within the state railways (*Kanrotfai haeng phratet thai*) and both enjoyed a close relationship with former CPT chief and ISOC adviser, Prasoet Subsunthorn. By 1980, the LCT leadership was divided into two main fractions, one headed by Paisan and the other led by Ahmat and Sawat. By this time, a number of LCT-linked unions had also been infiltrated by ISOC and the *santiban* (police intelligence unit) (Prakanphruk 1988: 46).

These fractional differences revolved around conflicts over strategy. Phaisan argued that the LCT and the union movement as a whole should remain committed to a focus on improving wages, conditions and associated welfare issues. Phaisan explicitly warned of the dangers of becoming involved in military fractional politics and the obvious threat this posed to the independence of organized labour (Wehmhörner 1983: 488). Sawat and Ahmat, however, argued that the LCT should become involved directly in politics, both through patronage with influential political figures and through the establishment of a labour party that would contest electoral politics. Following elections for LCT senior positions held in August 1982, Ahmat and Sawat emerged victorious amidst claims of vote rigging and corruption.[9] Subsequently, Phaisan and his supporters broke away from the LCT and established their own labour council – the Thai Trade Union Congress (TTUC) (Saphaongkanlukcang sahaphan raengngan haeng phratet thai) (Somsak 1991a: 166).

Once in control of the LCT, Ahmat and Sawat took the peak body into a closer relationship with ISOC and other senior military figures. However, Ahmat and Sawat gradually fell out with their ISOC patrons, as they also retained an association with then Army Commander-in-Chief, Arthit Kamlangek. During the course of 1983 and 1984, in an attempt to further his own political ambitions, Arthit had led campaigns for constitutional amendments that would allow state officials to hold political positions. He had also opposed Prime Minister Prem Tinasulanond's decision to devalue the baht (Vichote 1991: 283). In both these campaigns, Arthit received support from LCT affiliated workers in water transport, the state railways and the Thai tobacco monopoly. A number of strikes and rallies were held as Arthit attempted to bring pressure on the government to change its policies (ibid.: 294–299).

At the same time, however, Ahmat and Sawat's authority within the railways was being challenged by a rival fraction led by Wanchai Phromphra, who, in turn, was being supported by their former patron, Prasoet Subsunthorn. Ahmat was eventually sacked from the railways in August 1985 for dereliction of duty (Prankanphruk 1988: 51). The loss of support from their own union within the railways, as well as from those military elements with whom they were formerly closely associated, saw Ahmat and Sawat throw their weight behind the 9 September 1985 attempted

coup d'état led by the Young Turk military fraction.[10] They hoped that a changed government would facilitate their return to the echelons of power. However, the *coup* attempt was quickly crushed and Ahmat, Sawat and three of their key supporters were arrested on charges of rebellion (ibid.).

The establishment of rival organizations, and the fostering of divisions within the LCT and its member unions, undercut the effectiveness of the strongest body of organized labour to have emerged out of the struggles of the mid to late 1970s. By the mid to late 1980s, national labour organization was in disarray and, despite attempts by the LCT and TTUC to reunite, nothing of substance was achieved. Through these interventions the military was thus able to restrict the autonomy of organized labour at the peak council level. In doing so it ensured that organized labour was weakened. At the same time, particular elements within the military were able to use their influence over labour organization for their own political ends (see also Samrej 1987: 158).

Apart from the military, other elements of the state played a significant part in limiting the building of strong independent organizations at peak council level. The number of unions, federations and councils grew rapidly during the 1980s and early 1990s (Brown 1997: 172). Given the tactics adopted by both capital and state to inhibit labour organization, this increase in union numbers appears anomalous. However, this growth was related to competition among union leaders to establish their congresses. Under the 1975 LRA and subsequent policy decisions, a number of tripartite bodies had been created. Seats on these bodies, most notably on the important National Advisory Council for Labour Development (NACFLD) and the Labour Court, were the focus of considerable competition involving labour councils and their respective leaderships.[11] This competition was facilitated by the law itself, which granted each union one vote regardless of the size of its membership. It was also promoted by elements within the then Department of Labour (since 1993, part of the new Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare). A review of Department records conducted by this author in May 1993 showed that officials had been in breach of the law by granting registration to unions without first receiving detailed information concerning the names of union executives. Details of annual general meetings were also found to be inadequate and there was a general failure to ensure that union registration cards were completed as stipulated by law. As a result, preferred unions and their candidates were able to monopolize positions on tripartite bodies, contributing further to labour disunity and a general weakening of organized labour as a whole.

Thus, from the late 1970s through to 1988, despite possessing formal political and industrial rights, the actual exercise of these rights by workers was effectively constrained as a result of both internal political machinations and external infiltration by capital and state elements. In essence, during the period of semi-democracy organized labour was continually on

the back foot, challenged by successful attempts to limit and disorganize it. In this a clear pattern was in evidence. From roughly 6 October 1976 through to the early 1980s, capital, together with military and police intelligence agencies, sought to break the back of labour organization in the private sector. Once this was achieved, in their dealings with workers and their attempts to organize, employers began to assert their rights under the 1975 LRA. By both using and abusing the law, they were able to halt the growth of potentially strong independent unions. At the same time, sections of the military singled out national peak labour bodies for attention. In this they were guided by a number of interrelated aims. Most especially, they sought to secure a basis of influence within the ranks of organized labour. This was especially so for state enterprise unions which formed key bases of support for the LCT. This influence could then be deployed in political contests both against capitalist politicians in electoral politics and against their opponents within the bureaucracy. As a result of these tactics, organized labour at peak council level became fragmented and subordinated to the dictates of outside interests.

By 1988, organized labour's report card looked bleak. In an era of rapid economic growth and a drift to parliamentary rule, workers confronted a range of outstanding problems. These included: long hours; low wages; lack of employer compliance on health and safety standards, minimum wage and other legislation; the widespread use of short-term employment contracts; lack of adequate social welfare; and the threat of job losses through the introduction of new technology (see Somsak (1995), where an extended list of issues is discussed). However, the organizational vehicles through which workers may have attempted to both give voice to, and seek redress for, their grievances were in disarray. In the private sector, organized labour had been almost totally destroyed, with some estimating that by the end of the 1980s only a handful of unions were actually operating (Somsak 1991a: 147). At the same time, cooperation between public and private sector unions had collapsed. Although state enterprise unions remained strong, they were challenged by the threat of privatization. While public sector unions managed to slow the selling of public assets to private interests, their campaigns had been achieved at some cost. Their involvement in strikes and demonstrations had alienated the public, who perceived them as being self-interested (Sungsidh 1991). Meanwhile, lacking a strong organized voice, workers were isolated in a developing electoral political system dominated by big money, vote-buying and the entrenching of links between crime bosses and local and metropolitan business (King and LoGerfo 1996: 102–117; McVey 2000: 12–17).

Chatichai, electoral politics and labour's political space

The ongoing efforts to inhibit the development of organized labour occurred during the late 1970s and throughout the period of 'semi-democracy'

presided over by General Prem Tinasulanond (1980–88). However, the rise of Chatichai Choonhavan to the position of Prime Minister promised something of a better deal for workers and their unions. The election of the Chatichai government represented a major victory for capital over its conservative rivals in the battle for control of the state. Most particularly, as Hewison has noted, between 1988 and 1991:

> [Chatichai] was not just developing capitalism as an economic system, but was fostering societal forces which were moving the state towards a new logic whereby the capitalist state would include notions of participation. This was at variance with the conservative definition of state, of governance, and of social and bureaucratic hierarchy.
>
> (1996: 81)

In seeking to entrench parliamentary politics, Chatichai recognized the potential importance of cultivating electoral support among the ranks of an expanding industrial workforce and, in doing so, also drawing organized labour away from military influence. As Hewison has shown, in the lead up to the 1988 elections, labour was courted by various political parties promising such things as support for social security legislation, protecting the right to strike and halting the process of privatizing state enterprises (1993: 173). Labour's general support for the Chatichai government was recognized with the appointment of his son, Kraisak, who had long-term links with workers, to the position of adviser. Moreover, Chatichai invited labour leaders to lunch at his home (*The Nation* 25 October 1988) and attended May Day celebrations in 1989 and 1990, the first time a prime minister had attended in almost a decade (US Department of Labor 1990: 4). He also recognized the right to strike by state enterprise workers and initiated measures to introduce a social welfare system and upgrade the Department of Labour to ministerial status (*The Nation* 17 October 1988). Furthermore, he intervened in a number of long-running labour disputes, achieving settlements that were largely in keeping with workers' demands (*The Nation* 3–5 September 1988). As one of Chatichai's advisers explained: 'We need labour on our side . . . [a]nd that means better wages and benefits' (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 27 July 1989).

There were also sound economic reasons for cultivating a better relationship with workers. Improved industrial relations would be more attractive to foreign investors, especially in a situation where there were growing calls for the Thai economy to move away from its reliance on cheap, unskilled wage-labour to higher-value-added production (see Tanasak 1992: 59; Suntaree 1994: 140). Thus, during a period when the effective use of human resources was seen as becoming more important for Thailand in an increasingly competitive global environment (*Bangkok Post* 30 March 1987), strategically placed urban industrial workers were being cast more in the role of partners with state and capital. As Sopon Wichitrakorn from the

influential Employers' Confederation of Thailand (ECOT) argued at the time:

> The employers' associations . . . should . . . make their members aware that resistance to organized labour is a futile effort. Employers must recognize that the right to organize is a universal right of the workers which is guaranteed by law. Rather than fighting against it, employers should take a more positive, enlightened approach to turn the adversaries into advocates, transforming negative energy into a constructive one. The . . . [ECOT] . . . has contributed its part to the process of educating its members in the proper concept of labour relation. Employers have been constantly persuaded that good labour relations are conducive to better productivity and higher profit.
>
> (1991: no page)

These views that labour organization could indeed be a productive force, together with the developments mentioned above, suggest that there were, during the Chatichai period, at least the signs of a developing government commitment towards respecting labour rights and granting workers an expanded political space. Here they could more effectively air their concerns, present their grievances and possess an enhanced voice in the planning and formulation of government policy.

It is worth noting, however, that, after some enthusiasm, organized labour's attitude to Chatichai began to sour. This was particularly true for state enterprise workers who had hoped for a reversal of privatization plans. This, however, did not eventuate. Indeed, the process of selling off state firms continued with state enterprise workers unable to force Chatichai's government to take into account their concerns regarding benefits and job security (US Department of Labor 1990: 13). A number of strikes within the public sector ensued. Some of these were instigated by the military in an effort to destabilize the government (LoGerfo 1997: 323). Nevertheless, the disappointment of state enterprise workers notwithstanding, the Chatichai period did see some significant developments. These included: the enactment of Thailand's first social security law; increases in the minimum wage; improvements in workers' rights – for example, raising the minimum working age from 12 to 13; and increasing the number of inspectors employed by the Department of Labour (see Reinecke 1993; Naphaphon 1993).

The National Peacekeeping Council and the demolition of organized labour

The election of the Chatichai government represented a victory for big capital intent on taking Thailand towards a more sophisticated globally engaged capitalism within a broader parliamentary system. This sparked a

conservative response. Chatichai's government was ousted in a *coup d'état* in February 1991. The Parliament and Senate were prorogued, the 1978 Constitution abolished and martial law imposed (Christensen 1991: 95–96). Hewison has argued that:

> the 1991 military coup, which overthrew Chatichai's civilian government, did not represent an attack on the state or simply against the government. Rather, it was an attack on the civilian-dominated parliamentary regime and its associated political space. This is clear when the coup-maker's targets are considered. The state, existing behind the government and regime, and its basic elements, were not threatened by the military. . . . Rather, the coup was an attack on the parliamentary regime and the political space it afforded.
>
> (1996: 80)

The attack on the parliamentary regime and associated political spaces being afforded to emerging social forces was clearly reflected in the National Peacekeeping Council's (NPKC) move against labour. The NPKC leadership launched a sustained offensive against organized labour. Some claimed that the labour movement experienced its 'most important defeat since the coup of October 1976 . . . [while also representing] . . . the greatest success the state has ever had in splitting and controlling the power of labour' (*Khao Phiset* 26 August–1 September 1991).

Initially, the NPKC was, to some extent at least, supported by some conservative sections of the union movement, especially as the military informed unionists that the 'suffering of the workers was the suffering of the military' (*Khao Phiset* 25–31 March 1991). Apparently sections of the powerful State Enterprise Relations Group (SERG), the peak state enterprise union group, were also led to believe that the NPKC would reverse the privatization policies pursued by the Chatichai government. However, on 4 March 1991, Deputy NPKC Chairman, Air Chief Marshal Kaset Rojananin, soon dashed such hopes, stating in an interview that 'it will be necessary to abolish state enterprise unions as they always generate chaos and are therefore obstacles to economic development'. Subsequently, on 5 April, in response to a question concerning the lifting of martial law, General Suchinda Kraprayun replied 'it will only be lifted after we have separated state unions from the 1975 Labour Relations Act' (cited in Somsak Kosaisuk 1993: 3–4).

The attack on the power of the state enterprise unions and organized labour more generally was embodied in three pieces of legislation enacted shortly after the *coup*. These included: (1) The 1991 Amendment of the 1975 Labour Relations Act. This removed state enterprise workers from coverage by the 1975 law; (2) the State Enterprise Employees Relations Act 1991, which was to govern labour relations within state enterprises; and (3) the NPKC's Announcement 54, which amended sections of the 1975

Labour Relations Act as it applied to private sector workers. Basically, the combined effect of these laws was to change industrial relations regulations in ways detrimental to labour and favourable to capital and the state. Justifications for these changes were couched in terms of meeting the demands of the economy, as well as maintaining national peace and security (*Khao Phiset* 25–31 March 1991; Sungsidh 1991: 2). Under the State Enterprise Employees Relations Act (1991), unions and strikes were banned in state enterprises. Workers were allowed to form 'associations', but the objectives of these were limited, especially as all final decisions were to be made by committees dominated by either management or government representatives.

The withdrawal of state enterprise employees from coverage by the 1975 Act had a major impact on the structure of organized labour generally. Apart from depriving the union movement of some of its most experienced leaders, a number of unions, federations and councils had to be either dissolved or reformed. The loss of 186,000 state enterprise workers meant that the trade union movement was left with a mere 152,000 private sector employees. Labour councils were also badly affected, with the Thai Trade Union Congress (TTUC) losing 18 members from its governing committee of 39, including its President and four Vice-Presidents, and 23 affiliated unions. Meanwhile, the second largest council, the Labour Council of Thailand (LCT), lost 30 state enterprise unions and a number of its committee members, including its President and Secretary (Banthit 1991: 266–267). Apparently, 65–70 per cent of the affiliated membership of labour councils was lost.

Combined with this restructuring of organized labour in the public sector, the power of unions in the private sector also came under attack. NPKC Announcement 54 was issued because 'the 1975 Labour Act carried provisions ... [that are] ... unsuitable for current economic and social conditions and therefore it is appropriate that [the Act] be amended so as to be more in keeping [with the times]' (as quoted in Banthit 1991: 243). The main amendments reduced the support unions could call on during disputation by placing restrictions on union advisers. Secret ballots were also introduced, so at least 50 per cent of total union membership had to vote in the affirmative before a strike could be called. Moreover, the role of the Department of Labour (subsequently renamed Department of Labour Welfare and Protection) was strengthened (Banthit 1991: 255–257). It is clear that these changes placed extra obstacles in the path of the union movement in the private sector, and that following the *coup* the capacity of unions to adequately represent the interests of their members was greatly reduced.

Combined with the fragmentation and political exclusion of the 1980s, the actions taken by the NPKC represented a devastating blow to workers and their organizations. Workers fought back as best they could to oppose the NPKC's industrial relations policies. They also joined with broader

struggles that opposed the NPKC's attempt to reinstate an authoritarian regime (see Somsak Kosaisuk 1993). Nonetheless, the February 1991 *coup* marked a significant turning point in the recent history of labour organization in Thailand. Through restructuring labour's political space and placing even further obstacles in the path of attempts to build strong, independent and effective unions, the NPKC inflicted a defeat on organized labour from which, in many respects, it is still to recover. There were a number of reasons for targeting organized labour in this manner. First, the NPKC policies reflected historical concerns to weaken organized labour per se. At the same time it represented an effort to undercut the support rival civilian politicians had been developing with organized labour during the Chatichai period (Naphaphon 1993: 132). By attacking state enterprise unions, the new military leaders were also seeking to curry favour with those sections of business keen to see the privatization of state firms continue. Finally, restrictions placed on state enterprise unions also represented an attempt to elicit popular support for the *coup*, as industrial action by state enterprise workers during the period of the Chatichai administration had led to considerable public dissatisfaction (LoGerfo 1997: 323).

Conclusion

This chapter has accounted for the progressive weakening of labour's organizational capacities during the period from the late 1970s through to the very early 1990s. It has been argued that this was the product of a range of factors associated first with the demobilizing consequences of rapid industrialization itself. That is, as rural communities were uprooted and people sought wage work across a range of industries, often employed in small enterprises, the challenge of, and maintaining, existing organization proved extremely difficult. Despite this, as indicated at various points through this chapter, workers were not passive in the face of change. Rather, in both private and public sectors they did strive to develop their organizations and contest capital and state over a range of industrial issues.

However, the collective capacity to realize these aims was constrained by the character of the space within which responsible, legally recognized, enterprise-based unions could operate. In particular, restrictions placed on union objectives meant that workers as a collective and organized force gradually fell out of step with the broader development of civil society during this period. Moreover, even within the limited space available to them, workers' attempts to actually exercise their legal rights were the subject of ongoing struggle, contestation and negotiation. This involved not just a contest between labour and the state, but also within the state, within the capitalist class and between state and capital. Thus, while some sections of capital were prepared to accept workers' organization within the parameters established by the tripartite system and a developing parliamentary

politics, other sections of capital remained opposed to unions. They engaged in a range of tactics designed to destroy unions that had been established in the 1973–76 period, and then developed a range of responses geared towards the pre-empting of the development of new unions.

The issue of labour organization was also one over which capital and the military clashed. As the military attempted to reposition itself in a changing political climate, it attempted to secure a mass base of support within sections of rural and urban society. Such support could be mobilized in political contests, first against the left but later against civilian politicians. In this, organized labour formed a key target. At the same time, in seeking to foster and entrench electoral politics, civilian politicians perceived a growing role for industrial workers. This became particularly evident during the period of the Chatichai administration. However, the attempt to accord workers an expanded space within the broader development of a parliamentary regime was opposed by the military in a last-ditch effort to recapture their bureaucratic conservative state.

7 Organizing labour in the 1990s

Crisis and continuing struggles for a political voice

Introduction

From the late 1970s through to the early 1990s, organized labour became progressively weakened, fragmented and politically marginalized. This was the combined result of the demobilizing impact of rapid industrial expansion, the particular character of the political space that labour occupied and the ongoing struggles over the boundaries of this space as workers confronted stiff opposition from capital and state elements. During the period of the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC), labour organization was subject to even further restrictions. Combined with the fragmentation and exclusion of the 1980s, the actions taken by the NPKC represented a significant blow to workers and their collective capacity to deal with employers and government.

Against this background, this chapter examines how workers responded to challenges associated with securing an effective and organized participatory voice in both workplace and broader political arenas during the final decade of the twentieth century. Focusing on problems of workplace health and safety, it is argued that, in the context of attempts to rebuild and revitalize organizational capacities, activism seeking to improve health and safety standards saw some new alliances forged between labour and non-labour actors. The material gains won through this activism were limited. Nonetheless, some interesting developments occurred in terms of organizing and consciousness that were not entirely insignificant. Following an examination of processes of class formation that centred on health and safety issues and government responses to this activism, the chapter concludes by reflecting more broadly on the politics of the working class amid the hectic economic and political changes that occurred during the 1990s.

Organized labour in crisis

Reflecting the attempt to reinstate authoritarian rule, the NPKC implemented policies that narrowed the space within which workers and their

organizations could legitimately operate. Both private and public sector workers fought back as best they could, as they joined with broader struggles that opposed the NPKC's attempt to roll back the clock and rebuild an authoritarian regime (Naphaphon, 1993; Somsak Kosaisuk 1993). Nevertheless, the events of May 1992 and the inability of workers to mount a united campaign against the NPKC precipitated a sense of 'crisis' (*wikritkan*) within labour ranks. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, this was a term that was used time and time again by workers and their representatives. Often it was used in a dual sense, referring both to the seemingly endless number of challenges that confronted workers and their families, and to the inability of the officially sanctioned trade union movement to effectively secure redress for labour grievances.

This situation generated the development of a process of critical evaluation and debate within the ranks of organized labour and the labour movement generally. In part this was assisted by the rise of a new, younger and more progressive generation of leaders (see *The Nation* 28 January 1996). It also included a process of critical reflection and evaluation of past objectives and strategies (see Banthit 1993). A number of changes were advocated. For example, increased priority was to be given to the creation of wider and more effective links with both domestic and international forces. It was also argued that there was a need to improve union finances and establish training and skill development programmes. Developing a better understanding of economic and social changes was also suggested, as was the democratization of unions to ensure improved transparency in decision-making and that leaders be more accountable to the rank and file (*The Nation* 28 January 1996). It was within this general environment of a weak, divided and fragmented trade union movement and the emergence of a process of revaluation, criticism and reorganization, that problems associated with workplace health were to arise as a major issue.

Organizing for improved health and safety

Job-related accidents and illnesses have posed major problems for Thai workers and their families over many decades. In the late nineteenth century, for example, thousands of workers engaged in the construction of Thailand's railroads died from malaria and other jungle fevers (Skinner 1957: 115). A similar fate also befell many wage-labourers who worked in the mining areas, where it was claimed even 'bars and bolts' could not prevent workers from fleeing as the death rate among new arrivals exceeded 60 per cent (ibid.: 110–111). While health and safety has long been a major source of concern, rapid industrialization over the past 30 years has seen accident and injury rates escalate alarmingly. The mobilization of cheap unskilled wage-labour for the production of goods for sale on local, regional and world markets has demanded not only low wages. It has also meant that few considerations be given by either employers or government to

protect the health and safety of the workforce in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. Although figures need to be treated with care, both the incidence and rates of workplace accidents and related illnesses have increased markedly over recent years in tandem with industrial expansion. For example, rates of accidents increased nearly fourfold between 1974 and 1984 from 1,173 to 4,003 per 100,000. Across all industries, death rates by the mid 1980s stood at 31.7 per 100,000, compared with 2.1 per 100,000 for Britain and 4.6 per 100,000 for the Netherlands (Symonds 1997: 23–24).

Despite the long history of worker concern, it was, however, only during the 1990s that workplace health and safety issues attracted increasing attention outside the workplace. The onset of the 1997 economic crisis notwithstanding, the decade may yet be best remembered for the occurrence of a series of accidents and multiple cases of occupation-related illnesses that left a trail of dead, maimed and injured in their wake (see, for example, Forsyth 1998). Arguably, the one incident that highlighted the health and safety dangers confronting Thailand's industrial workforce was the fire at the Kader Industries (Thailand) factory on 10 May 1993, which left 188 workers dead and almost 500 injured.

The Kader fire

Kader Industries (Thailand) was a joint venture involving Hong Kong, Thai and Taiwanese interests in producing dolls and children's toys for export to European and US markets.[1] The toy industry has enjoyed considerable government support through the provision of a range of tax holidays and other incentives. The total value of exported toys grew from US$2.5 million in the early 1980s to US$380 million by the early 1990s. By the mid 1990s, there were some 115 firms involved in the industry with some of the largest factories employing 10,000 workers (Centre for Labour Information Service and Training 1995: 130).

The toy industry in Thailand has become well known for its low wages, long working hours, despotic forms of managerial control, poor working conditions, feminization and casualization of its workforce, vigorous opposition to the formation of trade unions and a disregard for legislated health and safety standards. Room temperatures in toy factories are high and there are often inadequate fresh water and toilet facilities. Workspaces are cramped and cluttered. The labour process involves workers handling various chemicals, often without recourse to the use of protective equipment. Because of poor ventilation and the lack of air filters, shop floors are filled with dust and lint particles. As a result, many employed in the industry suffer from lung diseases, sinus problems and debilitating allergies. Workers are also often exposed to fire risks due to the presence of flammable materials in buildings that are cheaply constructed and lack adequate fire escapes. Emergency fire training has been virtually non-existent (Centre

for Labour Information Service and Training 1995: 128–130; Naphaphon 1993a: 51–57). Conditions within the factory operated by Kader Industries (Thailand) generally conformed to these 'industry standards'.

Most workers employed by Kader Industries (Thailand) were unskilled and low-paid women engaged on short-term contracts that were renewed every four months. This precluded them from the right to receive various welfare benefits and form trade unions.[2] Supervision of work was coercive in nature, with the sole emphasis placed on meeting production targets and with little regard shown for worker fatigue or basic needs, such as adequate toilet and drinking facilities. Failure to reach set production quotas was accompanied by harassment, intimidation and occasional violence. Although Kader Industries claimed that the factory in Thailand was 'one of the most modern air-conditioned industrial complexes in Thailand' (*Bangkok Post* 14 May 1993), the four main buildings in the factory complex contained a number of major structural flaws. These included the use of non-insulated steel pillars, stairwells, entrances and exits that were too narrow and the absence of a functioning fire alarm system. Ventilation systems were inadequate and flammable materials were also stored in various passageways. Subsequent investigation revealed that, collectively, these factors contributed to the very high death toll.[3] The materials stored in the building generated intense heat that the supporting steel structures, which were not coated with fire-insulating materials, were unable to withstand. Twenty minutes after the fire started, the first floor of the building collapsed. This caused the three floors above to cave in on workers who had found their escape routes blocked. This was because exit doors had been locked, supposedly to prevent the petty thieving of raw materials. The fire raged for some six hours before being brought under control. Of the 188 killed, 159 were women. Many had died as a result of being overcome with poisonous gases.

The Kader fire attracted enormous national and international media attention. However, it was simply one of a series of accidents that occurred during the 1990s. In the following section, I examine the nature of the responses by workers and their organizations to dangers associated with the workplace.

Organizing for improved health and safety

In the aftermath of the Kader fire, a great deal of criticism was levelled at employers and government for the failure to either conform to or enforce legislated health and safety standards. The trade union movement was also taken to task for its inability to protect workers against occupation-related accidents and illnesses (see Nidhi 1993: 4). These criticisms provided further input into a growing body of critical literature, produced both within and outside the ranks of organized labour that sought to account

for the declining industrial and political fortunes of the trade union movement in Thailand.[4] It will be shown that the ongoing struggles to rebuild, reorganize and revitalize the trade union movement were advanced somewhat through activism that attempted to improve health and safety standards. This saw some significant new alliances and networks forged between labour and non-labour actors – even though the material gains won through this activism were limited.

Incidents such as the Kader fire ensured that workplace health and safety issues became the topic of considerable public scrutiny and debate. A notable feature of the debate was the range of social interests and actors who became involved. Nationally, individual workers, trade unionists, academics, various non-governmental organizations, health care workers, lawyers, monks, civil liberty groups, bureaucrats and child welfare agencies, as well as police and politicians, were all drawn into the debate, as were international media, labour federations, unions and other welfare, development and labour agencies. This plethora of actors, interests and agencies proffered widely different explanations for the occurrence of incidents such as the Kader fire in particular, and the problem of health and safety in general. These explanations included the supposed carelessness of individual workers; the lack of adequate health and safety training at the workplace; the avarice of employers; the nature of national development goals; the corruption of local officials; the character of the relationship between business and government; the absence of popular participation in Thai social and political institutions; and the detrimental impact that globalization was perceived to be having on labour and labour standards. Importantly, the health and safety crisis was also seen to be partly the result of the ineffectiveness and weakness of existing labour organizations (Naphaphon 1993a). The Kader fire was viewed as a case that exemplified this weakness.

The fire occurred in an industrial area with a long history of conflict and labour activism. During the 1973–76 period, the district became known for the preparedness of its workers to struggle and organize against employers. Labour organization in the area also formed an important industrial basis for the leftist Labour Coordination Centre of Thailand (LCCT). However, by the 1990s, as a result of structural changes and hostile opposition by employers with the tacit consent and, at times, direct involvement of state officials, labour organization in the region had been almost totally decimated.[5] In the early 1990s, Nakhon Pathom province contained some 7,583 large- and small-scale firms employing about 53,000 workers. Yet only seven unions operated in the region, one of which was located in the Kader factory. The union at Kader was established in March 1991 and at the time of the fire it had 413 members out of a total workforce of some 3,000. The Kader union had links to the Free Labour Congress (a congress established by the military in the late 1970s) and appears to have been set

up as part of struggles within the trade union movement over competition for seats on various tripartite bodies (Naphaphon 1993a: 53; Voravidh 1998: 78).[6]

It is clear that the health and safety record at Kader Industries (Thailand) was poor. Kader employees not only experienced problems of allergies and lung-related illnesses, they had also been confronted with the dangers posed by fire. Fires had occurred at the factory on two prior occasions – in 1989 and early 1993 (Gold 1993). As a result of these incidents, the company had been ordered by local building inspectors to make significant changes to health and safety practices. Despite this history, the Kader union had been unable to force any improvement in safety conditions within the factory by ensuring that official directives were indeed implemented. Immediately after the fire, the union simply disintegrated (Voravidh 1998: 78).

The inability of the Kader union to protect the rank and file, its precarious existence in a region known for its anti-unionism, as well as its links with a military-sponsored labour council, reflected some of the persistent difficulties that beset labour organization nationwide. At the same time, however, the incident furthered the belief of some workers in the critical importance of building a collective capacity to deal with employers. I demonstrate below the existence of such a resolve by focusing on those attempts that were made to organize to improve health and safety standards, noting in particular the links that were forged between labour and non-labour actors. In doing so, it is worth drawing a distinction between activism that was conducted to meet the needs of those immediately affected by specific accidents and those campaigns that were initiated to seek longer-term improvements in health and safety standards.

Committee for Assisting Kader Employees

One type of activism to emerge aimed at providing immediate assistance to those workers and family members who had been directly affected by accidents or occupation-related illness. For example, the suspected heavy metal poisoning of electronic workers at Lamphun Industrial Estate in the north of Thailand saw the emergence of 'a new alliance of women workers, specialist medical staff, media and activists groups'. This alliance sought not only to assist those affected but 'also . . . helped bring attention to the neglect of environmental health issues in government policy' (Forsyth 1998: 210). Similar kinds of alliances were formed after the Kader fire.

Chaos reigned in the aftermath of the Kader fire. The company was unable, or unwilling, to provide lists of those who were actually in the building at the time of the accident. The local union was also unable to provide any information to family members who came to the site looking for their relatives. Meanwhile, government officials arriving from different state agencies only contributed to the confusion. It was in this situation

that a new, loosely linked network began to form. This network was created from relatively independent elements within labour councils, labour federations and district labour collectives, who, together with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics and members of the legal profession, began operating as the Committee for Assisting Kader Employees (CAKE) (Naphaphon 1993a; Voravidh 1998). Apart from providing material assistance to the families of injured workers, CAKE became involved in lobbying politicians to have government provide longer-term support for victims, to ensure that Kader workers received adequate compensation and to ensure that those found to have breached safety standards would be brought to trial.

One of the main aims of CAKE was to ensure that Kader workers received adequate compensation. Initially compensation levels were calculated on the wage individual workers received at the time of the fire. As most of those employed were receiving the minimum wage, these compensation levels were deemed to be totally adequate. The families of deceased workers were originally to receive a mere 10,000 baht (US$500). CAKE argued that the fire was no accident, but resulted from the company's disregard for labour laws, and that compensation payment should be increased. When the company began dragging its feet on the issue of increasing payments, CAKE stepped up its campaign. Representatives from CAKE and two Kader workers travelled to Hong Kong. There they joined with local activists in a two-week campaign. This involved demonstrating outside Kader offices and calling for an international trade boycott against Kader products to which consumer groups in Hong Kong, Australia and the United States responded (*Asian Labour Update* 12 July 1993). Demonstrations were also held outside the Bangkok offices of giant Thai multinational, Charoen Phokpand, which held interests in the Kader (Thailand) operations. As an International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) report later stated: 'These actions attracted media attention and served to mount sufficient pressure on the company to properly recognise negotiations with [CAKE]' (ICFTU 1994: 12).

In July 1993, the company agreed to negotiate with workers and raise compensation levels. A settlement was reached and compensation payments were lifted to 300,000 baht (US$15,000) (*Asian Labour Update* 12 July 1993; Voravidh 1998: 79). Kader also agreed to meet medical costs not covered by government and also provide funds for the education of children of deceased workers. Payments were also made to those who had previously been excluded from receiving compensation as a result of their being employed on short-term contracts. Kader also offered jobs to injured workers, to relatives of victims and to other workers who had been in its employ for more than three years. Finally, the company also agreed to pay all outstanding wages and holiday payments (ICFTU 1994: 12).

Significantly, these cooperative efforts between Thai- and Hong Kong-based labour groups spurned a more permanent campaign in which

working conditions in toy factories in China, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand were to be monitored by local activists in cooperation with the Hong Kong-based Asia Monitor Resource Centre. Another development that occurred through this activism was the formation of a regional network that links together groups of injured workers. Finally, the linkages between Hong Kong-based activists and Thai labour organization have continued through various exchanges (see Apo 1998). As Voravidh, one of the academics involved in CAKE, stated, the activities of the group underscored the importance of forging solidarity among both labour and non-labour groups, as well as developing domestic and international networks (Voravidh 1998: 79).

Health and Safety Campaign Committee

In the latter part of 1993, CAKE held a public seminar. This aimed to canvass suggestions as to how the group might continue to be active on health and safety issues and ensure that incidents such as the Kader fire were never repeated. As a result, a new group was formed – Health and Safety Campaign Committee (HSCC) (Khana kammakan kanronarong phua sukaphap lae khwam phlot phai khong khon ngan). Like CAKE, the HSCC was formed as a coalition of labour and non-labour actors.[7] Working out of the offices of labour NGO, the Arom Phongphangan Foundation, members of the HSCC met regularly through 1993. In February 1994, the HSCC declared itself publicly for the first time. It made a number of recommendations for the improvement of health and safety standards to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Health, Board of Investment and the Parliamentary Commission on Labour and Social Welfare (Banthit 1997: 10). From 1994 onward, HSCC continued to be active on health and safety. It became involved in organizing a range of activities, such as public seminars, street marches and demonstrations and lobbying politicians to have new legislation passed and improve enforcement procedures. It also established a Health and Safety Hotline, through which workers could inform authorities of health and safety breaches in factories, and also sought to have an independent occupation health and safety institute established (Voravidh 1998: 79). At the same time, activists involved developed sophisticated analyses of problems of health and safety and, through contacts in the media, ensured that the issue remained the subject of public debate (see Banthit 1997).

A key aim running throughout these campaigns was to challenge bureaucratic control of decision-making on issues of health and safety. Members of the HSCC asserted that labour participation in the development of workplace health and safety, as well as in the formation of public policy that deals with health and safety matters, was absolutely essential. Aruni Srito, long-time activist and chair of the HSCC, asserted, 'we can no longer allow the mechanisms for protecting and overseeing workers' health and safety

to be located within the bureaucratic system, both workers and employers have to have a role in overseeing safety issues' (cited in Cadet and Nakul 1997: 10). The goal of forcing the state to cede a greater space for worker participation in the process of developing improved health and safety can be documented through a brief account of two HSCC campaigns. The first was to establish 10 May as National Health and Safety Day and the second, to have an independent health and safety institute established.

In late 1994, the HSCC launched a campaign to have 10 May, the date of the Kader fire, designated as National Health and Safety Day. The HSCC argued that the day would serve to commemorate the victims of the Kader fire, encourage all interested parties to appreciate the importance of health and safety issues and ensure that they cooperate to prevent a repeat of the Kader tragedy. The day would also provide an occasion upon which the activities of government charged with responsibility for health and safety could be assessed. Finally, it would give a sense of hope and encouragement to those workers injured as a result of workplace accidents (Banthit 1997: 10). Activism to have 10 May designated as National Health and Safety Day led the HSCC to become involved in numerous discussions with bureaucrats and politicians working across a range of state ministries, departments and divisions. As Banthit noted, the aim was to challenge the bureaucratic state that had hitherto exercised a monopoly over the designation of nationally significant days (ibid.: 12). Through its commitment to having 10 May set aside as National Health and Safety Day, the HSCC argued that new criteria be used in determining what is and is not of national significance.

This quest for greater participation was especially evident in the campaign for the establishment of an independent occupational health and safety institute (see Cadet 1998). The basic thrust of the argument for the establishment of an independent institute began by stressing that, in the past, the administration of health and safety had been the sole responsibility of a number of state agencies working under the jurisdiction of a range of different ministries. This, it was argued, led to considerable confusion, lack of coordination and inefficiencies (ibid.: 84). More especially, control over the development and administration of legislation as the sole prerogative of state officials, with a singular lack of participation by workers, was seen as a root cause of health and safety problems. It is for these reasons that the HSCC adopted, as one of its aims, the establishment of an institute that would bring various relevant state agencies together into a single autonomous body that would be responsible for workplace health and safety. A guiding objective of this campaign was thus to empower workers by attempting to institutionalize their participation in decision-making processes on occupational health and safety issues (Voravidh 1998: 80).

In summary, activism for improved health and safety revolved around providing immediate material assistance and support for workers and their

families, as well as mounting campaigns that aimed to bring about longer-term improvement in health and safety standards. This activism saw the creation of new networks and alliances among a range of actors drawn from elements that had managed to retain some autonomy within officially sanctioned trade union structures as well as non-labour actors. Notably these alliances and newly established organizational vehicles existed in somewhat of an ambiguous legal state, standing outside the officially sanctioned and legally regulated parameters of labour organization. These developments were quite significant as they realized in practice some of the strategies that have been established to further the process of building a more viable and effective movement of organized labour. Among the most important of these was the view that organized labour must seek to rehabilitate its public profile by joining with other social groups and interests over issues of shared concern (see Somsak Kosaisuk 1993: 133). The activities and social composition of both CAKE and the HSCC were examples of the practical pursuit of such a strategy.

Government responses

Following the overthrow of the military regime in May 1992 through to the end of the decade, Thailand had four elected governments, each of which was confronted with the task of tackling the issue of workplace health and safety. Health and safety problems became the subject of widespread media reporting and there was sustained activism by an alliance of labour and non-labour actors. Internationally, incidents such as Kader were also seen as tarnishing Thailand's international image (*The Economist* May 1993), throwing an uncomfortable and unwelcome spotlight on the country's labour standards. Politicians became acutely aware that a failure to raise standards to internationally acceptable levels could result in embargoes being placed on the sale of Thai products to European and US markets *(Bangkok Post* 19 November 1997). It was also being suggested that improving health and safety levels was necessary if Thailand was to move away from its reliance on cheap, unskilled wage-labour to higher-value-added production. If this was to occur, so the argument went, increased investment would have to be made to create a better-educated skilled labour force (*Bangkok Post* 9 December 1998). The investment in human resources would, in turn, require improved health and safety standards.

These internal and external political and economic pressures combined to produce some changes. Successive governments launched numerous inquiries into health and safety problems. They adjusted and modified state agencies, so as to ensure greater efficiency and coordination, introduced new legislation that provided for the establishment of health and safety committees in the workplace and promulgated a new Labour Protection Act, which, despite considerable employer opposition, contained some new

health and safety provisions. Occupational health and safety training and education programmes were also extended to workers. Alterations were made to investment promotion policies to incorporate a health and safety component and plans were established to train more occupational health specialists. Workers were also provided with free health and safety checks. Commitments were made to train more factory inspectors, while rates of factory inspections also increased. The date of 10 May was, despite considerable opposition from elements within the bureaucracy, officially designated as National Health and Safety Day. Finally, there was some undertaking to increase rates of prosecution of employers found to be in breach of legislated health and safety standards.[8]

Given government's general neglect of health and safety issues, such developments are not insignificant. There is no doubt that there had at least been some greater official recognition that a major problem did exist. However, it should be emphasized that it required a series of terrible accidents and considerable domestic and international criticism, as well as economic structural pressures, to force government into action. Moreover, although these measures do indicate some resolve on the part of successive governments to address some of the health, safety and environmental problems associated with rapid industrialization, few of those involved displayed much optimism that lasting improvements would be achieved in the short to medium term.[9]

Notably, there was little government concession towards granting workers and their organizations any greater capacity to participate in developing improved standards. Some concessions to worker participation in the workplace appear to have been made through legislation that provided for the establishment of health and safety committees. Some progress was also evident in labour participation in the drafting of legislation for the establishment of an independent health and safety institute. As Nikhom Cantharawithun noted, both workers and employers participated (*mi suan ruam*) in drafting the legislation. He pointed out that this compares favourably with the past where 'labour . . . never had a participatory role' (cited in Cadet and Nakul 1997: 11). Yet, many contended that these apparent concessions were largely symbolic.

It seems clear, however, that, in responding to activism over health and safety, various governments were prepared to accept that some degree of worker participation was allowable – the question being the extent and degree of participation. This was particularly clear with respect to the campaign for the establishment of an independent institute. While successive governments initiated some steps towards the establishment of such a body, the whole process had stalled by the late 1990s. A major sticking point revolved around the nature of the powers to be exercised by the proposed institute, especially with regard to the imposition of fines and penalties and the conduct of workplace inspections (Cadet 1998: 88–89). For example, would the institute inspect and then leave it up to other

government agencies to impose penalties? Labour activists believed that the proposed institute should have two main roles – administration and law enforcement. But the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare argued that the proposed institute should perform an administrative role first (ibid.: 91). Allowing workers a participatory role in the process of actually enforcing legislation and imposing penalties and fines was seen as taking things too far. So, while there appeared to be agreement on the need for an institute that would better coordinate the development and implementation of policy, there was continuing dispute over the degree of independence that the institute should have from the state and bureaucracy in the actual exercise of power.

At the level of public policy, the outcomes of labour activism on health and safety thus tended to underscore the continuing difficulty workers and their organizations faced in forcing governments to accommodate their interests. Despite the occurrence of numerous accidents that cost hundreds of lives, and despite the national and international pressure on government to initiate effective measures to deal with the problem, it could be argued that gains made were more symbolic than real. This is not to say that new legislation was entirely insignificant or that the notion of labour participation embedded in celebrating a National Health and Safety Day was totally devoid of meaning. However, given the past history of failure to enforce legislated standards and the continuing reluctance to actually implement a philosophy of labour participation, such developments must be approached with some pessimism.

Nonetheless, the campaigning and activism that was built around the struggle to improve and protect workers from health and safety risks did produce some interesting and not insignificant outcomes. Organizationally, this activism saw the birth of some alliances, some new, some of older origin, some labour-based and other involving non-labour actors, that did operate outside of the officially sanctioned industrial relations system. Moreover, this activism did contribute more generally to the broader process through which workers attempted to rebuild their organizational capacities after the devastation wrought by the NPKC. More particularly, activism associated with health and safety saw the hardening of attitudes of some towards the absolute necessity of continuing the process of struggle and taking the fight into the political arena. As Somsak Kosaisuk, member of the HSCC, asserted in a piece that commemorated the fifth anniversary of the Kader fire:

> it is clear that the government represents the interests of the capitalist class. Bureaucrats still support the interests of the powerful. They co-operate with capitalists to the detriment of the interests of workers and the people more generally . . . [this is yet another example of the fact that] the working class . . . gains nothing except through struggle . . . an independent health and safety institute, social insurance, child

> welfare, old age pensions and unemployment benefits, rights to vote, rights for protection to form unions and other guarantees that make for a stable and secure existence are things which workers must join together to fight for.
>
> (1998: 14)

In the following section, I reflect further on these developments in consciousness and labour organization in the context of the broader political and economic changes of the late twentieth century.

Capitalism, political reform and labour's political space

The Kader case study has drawn attention to processes of class formation that were built around the issue of workplace health and safety during the mid to late 1990s. A similar discussion could be extended to an examination of a range of other struggles within which industrial workers were involved during this period. Such struggles *inter alia* included campaigns to raise minimum wage levels, to extend and improve the social security system, to have government legislate for paid maternity leave, to rescind the draconian labour legislation passed during the NPKC period and to ratify various ILO conventions and reform the education system (see Banthit 2000). As was the case for struggles to improve health and safety, these campaigns were conducted through a range of organizational vehicles. These included those that worked within officially sanctioned structures and some that operated outside these arrangements and thus occupied a dubious legal status. This continued a trend that had begun to develop during the late 1980s, when a range of district-based labour organizations emerged that chose to eschew the registration procedures as established by the 1975 LRA. As Naphaphon has noted, the emergence of these groups needs to be understood as a response to the general ineffectiveness of the officially sanctioned and legally registered labour movement and the political space that this was permitted to occupy (1993: 128–130). Also of interest were the alliances that workers forged with largely middle class elements and intellectuals working through some twenty domestic and international NGOs, who focused specifically on labour issues (Chokchai 1999: 4). It was thus through this mix of organizational vehicles, deploying a range of tactics and strategies, that questions of the accommodation of the working class were brought to bear on the operations of the state through the 1990s. Collectively, these struggles embodied a quest for an improved and expanded political space within which workers could rebuild their organizational capacities and attempt to influence government policy.

These ongoing attempts by labour to contest state power and the arrangement of politics need to be located within broader processes of political reform. As Hewison argued, by the early 1990s 'Thai social and

political life [had] reached a watershed . . . [as] a new amalgam of social and political forces [had emerged] to reshape the state' (1993: 181). Identifying the nature of these new social and political forces and the character of their specific political ambitions has been the subject of considerable academic debate (Connors 1999; McCargo 1999). Hewison (1993) for example, emphasized the growing political power of the domestic capitalist class, while Anek (1993) focused his attention on the role of the middle class. In providing another perspective, Pasuk and Baker have suggested that tracking the political changes that occurred during the 1990s requires an understanding of the compromise that initially existed between the conservative bureaucratic state and the rising forces of urban and provincial capital (2000: 153–154). Within this compromise, representatives of provincial capital through the manipulation of electoral politics had risen to dominate Parliament and Cabinet. In turn, Cabinet positions were then used both as a vehicle for recouping money spent on elections and as a source for accumulating further wealth through corruption and cronyism. While marking a significant challenge to the conservative bureaucratic state, bureaucrats nonetheless managed to adapt to these changing circumstances by affiliating and aligning themselves with politicians and political parties.

During the course of the 1990s, this compromise was subject to sustained attack by a variety of interests intent on reforming the political system. First, the bureaucratic-provincial capitalist compromise was opposed by an admixture of largely urban-based interests working through a range of organizational guises. The key objectives of these groups were to advance the cause for civil society, constrain the unchecked exercise of state power by bureaucrats and demand a range of political rights and guarantees that would empower individuals, community and various non-governmental organizations (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 154). Labour activism during the 1990s can be located within this broad coalition. Workers' involvement in the Confederation for Democracy (CFD), in pressing for constitutional reform and in struggles for improved health and safety, as well as their activism over a range of other issues, embodied a quest for improved political rights and greater political access.[10] This activism was often conducted through alliances forged between labour and non-labour actors. This represents a significant change from the period of the 1980s, when organized labour fell out of step with broader social and political developments. The 1990s, to some extent at least, thus marked something of a return to the period of the 1970s, when labour worked through alliances with other interests in pressing for social and political reform. These alliances have been evident in struggles on health, safety and environmental issues, as workers and their representatives linked with elements from the Thai middle classes. Labour activists, most especially within state enterprise groups, also linked with rural interests through an involvement in the 'Forum of the Poor' (Baker 1999: 37).[11]

While this activism needs to be recognized, workers and their struggles were nonetheless subsumed beneath the broader aims and aspirations of those that dominated the coalition of forces that opposed the bureaucratic-provincial capitalist compromise. First, there were those who inherited the legacies of the 1970s' radicalism and now occupied important positions within bureaucracy, political parties, media and NGOs. Alongside this mix of interests were the 'conservative modernists', drawn from the ranks of some senior bureaucrats, and modern businessmen and executives. While the former sought to constrain bureaucratic power by enshrining a range of democratic rights and guarantees, the latter's main aim was to contain the 'power of primitive capitalism'. In this they stressed the importance of 'good ethical people', western constitutional models, the separation of powers and good governance (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 155). The promulgation of the 1997 Constitution is seen to represent the successful culmination of challenges to the bureaucratic-provincial capitalist compromise involving these two key groupings of interests (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 155; Connors 1999: 202–203).[12]

Together with labour activism itself, these pressures for the development of a more sophisticated globally engaged capitalism within a reformed parliamentary system did translate into some policy responsiveness on labour issues. The activism that revolved around health and safety did lead to some policy initiatives on the part of government. Although slow, and while problems of actually enforcing new legislation remained, there were some policy outcomes that were not entirely insignificant. There were also some other notable developments that occurred during the 1990s. In November 1993, the Chuan government established the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. This major adjustment to the state apparatus, the first in over 25 years, may be seen as indicative of the growing economic and political importance of industrial wage-labour in terms of the overall operations of the state (Brown 1994). In establishing the Ministry, Chuan reiterated the importance of the tripartite system and the need for cooperation between government, employers and workers in building harmonious and consensual industrial relations. Moreover, during a period of political reform, there was no further attempt to restrict the political space within which labour operated during the 1990s. Activism on health and safety as well as other campaigns often occurred outside formally recognized structures. This pushing of the boundaries of legally recognized political space did not attract any major clampdown. Moreover, the draconian legislation that ripped state enterprise workers from coverage under the 1975 Labour Relations Act was eventually repealed, and state enterprise workers were once again accorded the right to form unions and federations that could affiliate with labour councils (Anon. 2001: 14–15). Also, over the last years of the decade, the Chuan government pushed through a new Labour Protection Act despite strong objections from some employers (see, for

example, *Bangkok Post* 27 February 1998, 31 May 1998, 6 June 1998). The government also began to examine worker proposals for the drafting of new labour relations legislation that would eventually replace the 1975 Labour Act (Anon. 1999: 17).

When set against the background of the 1980s and the NPKC period, these changes do indicate increased attention being given to labour issues, as well as some greater commitment to respecting the space within which workers and their organizations were operating. Nonetheless, a notable feature of the 1990s was the generally slow pace of change and reform. This highlighted labour's continuing weak organizational capacities and the ongoing problems workers faced in more forcefully inserting their interests into the political agenda in a period that was significantly less hostile compared to the previous decade.

However, as the decade closed, the liberal–modernist coalition that succeeded in pushing through political reform could not sustain itself in the face of the onset of economic crisis. The causes and economic, social and political consequences of the crisis remains the subject of debate. However, it is seen as marking a significant turning point in the history of Thailand's capitalism (Pasuk and Baker 2000; Hewison 2001). Large sections of the capitalist class were wiped out, with the once powerful banking fractions of this class undergoing major restructuring (Hewison 2001). In turn, the closure of many businesses had a devastating impact on employment. By 1999, lay-offs were estimated to have reached three million, with between nine and fifteen million people overall being affected by the rising tide of unemployment (Somyot 1999: 17–18). The economic and social impact of unemployment on workers and their families continues to unfold (Pasuk and Baker 2000: 69–106; Somyot 1999). It is clear, however, that the economic crisis placed further structural difficulties in the path of workers' struggles to develop their organizational capacities (Deyo 2000: 270–271). By the end of the 1990s, therefore, despite some of the organizational gains made during the post-NPKC period, workers confronted a new round of challenges in their efforts to build and sustain a collective industrial and political voice.

Conclusion

Focusing on activism that arose over the issue of workplace health and safety, this chapter has suggested that some significant developments occurred during the 1990s. In the context of weak, fragmented trade union movement this activism fruitfully contributed to an ongoing process of self-conscious assessment and debate within trade union ranks. More specifically, it saw links forged between international and domestic-based organizations. This led to the birth of new alliances and organizational vehicles that stood outside officially sanctioned institutional structures.

In terms of consciousness, the period also saw a hardening in attitude towards the absolute necessity of continuing the process of struggle and taking the fight into the political arena.

These struggles for improved health and safety, combined with activism that centred on a range of other issues, may be seen to have embodied attempts to renegotiate the parameters of the political space within which workers could air their grievances. Notably, in a period marked by ongoing pressures to move away from primitive capitalism to a more sophisticated globally engaged strategy of accumulation, alongside a broader reform of parliamentary politics, there was some greater attention given to labour issues. In terms of government policy this was reflected in the passing of some favourable legislation and some signs of a commitment to an improved recognition and respect for labour's political space. Against the background of the weakening of labour organization of the 1980s and the NPKC period, these changes were not entirely insignificant. Nonetheless, the gains that were made in terms of developing organizational capacities were placed in jeopardy as workers confronted new challenges generated by the onset of economic crisis.

8 Conclusion

The difficulties that scholars have encountered in trying to understand the political implications of the development of industrial wage-labour in Thai society stem from the attempt to locate stages of working class political development in light of certain historical projections. Thus, it has often been assumed that the working class will *inevitably* become cohesive, conscious of its strategic location and be capable of acting upon and challenging social and political arrangements. When these projections have been used to compare with the real world, few analysts have been able to locate what are believed to be the 'proper' forms of activism, or fully appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of the working class in Thailand's politics. Indeed, the failure of projections to materialize has encouraged a shying away from the concepts of 'class' and 'class struggle', leaving scholars with the task of identifying those 'base' and 'superstructural' factors, supposedly unique to Thailand, that have impeded the projected outcomes.

This study has rejected endeavours that seek to establish the operations of a class dynamic through the use of pre-classificatory models that project images of the *forms* that a proper working class politics is expected to take. In contrast, this study has advanced a view of class as a relation and process. This understanding has encouraged a shift of focus away from the activities of already constituted classes and the concern with identifying proper forms of struggle. It instead promotes an analysis of the inherently contested and open-ended social and political processes through which those collectivities that occupy positions within class relations and processes actually become organized, reorganized and disorganized as social and political actors in changing socio-historical contexts.

In pursuing aspects of this task, the book has focused especially on the political mediations of these processes. In concentrating on the role of the state, some care has been taken to avoid one-dimensional views that focus solely on the coercive aspects of state power to the detriment of an understanding of the interplay between the state and working class. To do this I have placed episodes of working class struggle in the broader context of

contests for state and regime. Within this the impact that the outcomes of these contests have had on labour's political space has been seen as problematic. Thus, the study has not sought to determine whether working class struggles can be seen to be heading towards a theoretically privileged end point. Rather, it has sought to examine how different regimes have structured labour's political space and thus shaped the processes through which workers have actually been organized, disorganized and reorganized as legitimate political actors.

This study has shown that industrial workers in Thailand have long demonstrated a willingness to band together in order to collectively negotiate their incorporation into capitalist class relations. In an intellectual context, where working class organization has often been seen to emerge as the inevitable product of modernization or the unfolding contradictions of capitalism, mention has been made of the moral dimension of labour activism. Our knowledge of the history of this aspect of working class struggle is limited. However, it is clear that the vast majority of workers who have been incorporated into capitalist class relations and processes have not sought the revolutionary overthrow of the entire capitalist system or even a radical response to their relationship with employers. Rather, as indicated in various parts of this study, they have argued for a more equitable, just and dignified treatment *within* these relations. Without an appreciation of this history of a daily, often private, search for justice, dignity and equity, it is impossible to understand the impulses that have driven workers to try to publicly organize their struggles even in the face of often hostile, economic and political circumstances.

Since at least the 1920s, Thai workers have consistently recognized that a solution of workplace problems requires the building of unity, solidarity and the bringing of a collective pressure to bear on employers and governments. These attempts to build collective capacities have invariably led workers to become enmeshed in broader struggles for basic political rights. This needs to be emphasized, as previous studies have rarely afforded any significant role for labour in the building of democratic rights and guarantees in Thailand. Contemporary accounts suggest that it is the politics of capital and the middle classes that have been fundamental for the emergence of civil society. This particular civil society is seen to be placing constraints on the coercive powers of the state through the erection of representative political forms and processes. Such arguments, however, ignore the key historical role played by workers and their organizations in placing issues of democratic rights and guarantees on the political agenda. In each of the periods examined in this study, workers fought to secure an independent and legally recognized space within which they could build their organizations, legitimately air their grievances and attempt to influence the policies of employers and government. This ongoing quest for political space by the working class needs to be recognized and accorded the historical significance it deserves.

While workers have long been involved in struggles to be accorded a legitimate political voice, this study has attempted to explain why labour has, however, so often been politically invisible and excluded. I have sought to explain this situation not as the product of the immaturity of class, but rather as the expression of class politics as this has worked itself out in the specific Thai context. At various points in the analysis, attention has been drawn to the nature and timing of the industrialization process and the impact this has had on shaping the capacity of workers to develop and sustain an organized and public response to the challenge of class. The particular character of Thailand's industrialization in different periods and the varied impact this has had on community, family and working life has indeed posed enormous problems for Thai workers in their efforts to forge unity, solidarity and build their organizations. At the same time, however, capitalist industrialization has also generated workplace and community changes that have formed the preconditions for the rise of struggle, solidarity, new experiences, new identities and new forms of collective endeavours.

If capitalist industrialization has both constrained and at the same time created the material preconditions for labour organizing, how do we explain the changing capacity of workers to emerge and re-emerge as political actors? It has been argued that this can only be understood in relation to the character of state, regime and political space in particular historical conjunctures. Different regimes create differing problems and opportunities for labour's political space, and thus the way in which workers are organized and reorganized as social and political actors. Rather than being peripheral, this question of the organization of the industrial working class has long represented a source of concern for changing amalgams of social and political forces. This issue has been unavoidable in any attempt at entrenching rule through the agency of the Thai state. Thus, even when labour is invisible, in the sense of not being a public, organized actor overtly engaged in formal political processes, the politics of the working class is nonetheless there and is significant. For, behind the scenes, there has been a continual jockeying to channel and control workers and their struggles. This is to ensure that they either do not emerge as a public, organized force, or if they do, they are organized in a manner that is in keeping with the broader economic, ideological and political interests of those dominating contests for state power. In other words, taking account of wage-labour and its organization as a political actor has emerged to become an enduring structural concern in Thailand for those specific configurations of forces and interests involved in the struggle for political dominance.

A defining feature of the Thai experience has been the lengthy periods marked by an absence of a legally recognized space within which workers could build their organizations and legitimately strive to influence government policy. This situation is clearly the result of the military's domination

of state and regime. As self-appointed guardians of the nation-state and as directors of state enterprises, the military has developed a view of workers and their collective struggles as the source of actual and potential opposition to their economic, ideological and political interests. Over the decades, the military has employed a range of strategies designed to undercut organizational capacities and curtail the ability of industrial workers to emerge as legitimate political actors. Whether these actions were justified in terms of populism, nationalism, anti-communism or combating parliamentary dictatorship, their impact was the same: to weaken workers' capacity to sustain organization through which they might have used their collective muscle to acquire a legitimate industrial and political voice. But it should be emphasized that, in each case, these repressive policies and the character of military actions were taken precisely in *reaction* to workers' attempts to expand the space for organized and public forms of activism.

But if repression has been one dominant response, it has not been the only one. Indeed, the fact of different responses accounts for the periodic re-emergence of organized labour during the periods 1932–34, 1944–47, 1955–57 and 1975 through to the present. Alongside the periodic rise of representative and parliamentary regimes, workers have been conceded a space within which they could organize into 'associations' or 'unions' through which they could pursue their industrial interests and, as 'citizens', seek to effect broader social and political reforms through electoral politics. On each occasion then the regime and associated political space involved attempts to entrench an institutionalized division between economic and political issues and struggles.

But the installation of parliamentary rule, especially over the past two decades, has not as yet provided for the greater involvement of workers in the formal realm of politics or the promotion of markedly enhanced organizational capacities. Indeed, working class organizations remain weak, fragmented and politically isolated. Why? In part, this is the result of the timing of the political reform process itself. Broader challenges to the conservative, authoritarian state have occurred during a period of major upheaval in community and working life that has emanated from rapid capitalist development. As has been the case in other parts of East and South-east Asia, the rapidity of change combined with the character of the industrialization process itself has presented workers with significant challenges in their attempt to build and sustain unity, solidarity and collective organization. In turn, this has meant that labour has been poorly positioned to take advantage of opportunities created by wider processes of political change.

However, organized labour's weakness and relative political isolation is also the product of continuing struggles over political space within a developing parliamentary framework. While some have argued that 'parliamentary democracy has become the uncontested and legitimate form of

government' (Arghiros 2001: 16) in Thailand, the extent to which workers should be allowed to actually exercise their formal political and industrial rights continues to be the focus of ongoing contestation. Indeed the question of labour's political space directs attention to key sources of disagreement that have developed not only between workers and state, but also among various forces within the state, within the capitalist class and between sections of the state and capital.

Arguably, the tensions between workers and the state, and those that exist within the state and between sections of the state and capital over the extent to which organized labour may be accepted as a legitimate industrial and political actor, have become even more pronounced since the 1997 economic crisis. As indicated in the Preface to this study, the Thaksin government represents a new complex of economic, political and economic interests and, since its election in January 2001, has moved to entrench a grip over the state apparatus and map out new development strategies. In charting new development paths and in attempting to put into place a new social contract, the control and political accommodation of the industrial working class represents a significant arena of contestation and debate. Apart from continuing pressures being exerted by workers themselves, Thaksin's government is confronted with the prospect of managing a range of conflicting interests seeking rather different policy outcomes on the labour front. On the one hand there are those capitalists, bureaucratic and other interests who generally wish to retain the older cheap wage-labour policies of the past and have an associated desire to ensure that labour organization remains weak, fragmented and industrially and politically excluded. On the other hand, there are those interests that seek to develop a better-skilled and motivated workforce that would enjoy new and improved social safety nets to protect against market failures, and possibly the provision of an enhanced organizational voice, albeit with the strict rules of a reformed and more efficient industrial relations machinery and parliamentary system of government. To date, both sides appear to have enjoyed some policy success. Some signs of government providing greater social protection are in evidence, yet at the same time policy inaction has allowed employers to continue to evade legal responsibilities with respect to recognizing rights of association, payment of minimum wages, compensation and the provision of healthy and safe working environments (Brown *et al.* 2002). The manner in which Thaksin and his government attempts to accommodate these conflicting pressures and interests over the next few years, in the broader context of cementing new social development strategies and objectives, will therefore merit close scrutiny.

Nonetheless, whatever happens in the short to medium term, Thailand's ongoing march into capitalist modernity will mean that the labour–capital relation will be of no less significance in the lives of large numbers of Thais. This, in turn, will ensure that it forms a central focus for their industrial

and political struggles. Rather than being peripheral, an analysis of the processes of class formation that emerge from these struggles will, as they have done for over a century, continue to yield significant insights into those changes that are yet to occur in the nature of the Thai state, its institutions and shifting political forms.

Notes

1 Introduction

1 For a recent discussion of how scholarship has baulked at employing the concept of class in the analysis of Thailand's politics more generally, see Hewison (2001a).

2 Monarchs, workers and struggles for a voice

1 Many writers have dismissed the idea that any significant level of industrialization occurred during the pre-1932 period (see, for example, Phiraphol 1978: 16; Blanchard 1958: 326–327). To be sure, there were constraints on the potential for industry to develop during this time. Initially, this was due to the fact that, with cheap imports, a limited domestic market and provisions contained within the Bowring Treaty that prevented government from imposing tariff barriers, the development of industrial capital was certainly impeded. Despite these constraints, movement into industrial production did take place and on a more significant level than has sometimes been recognized. For a more detailed discussion of the development of industry during this period see Hewison (1989: 117–141) and Akira (1996: 21–37). It is symptomatic of the vigorous nature of early industrial development that, for virtually the whole of the pre-1932 period, the demand for wage-labour outstripped supply. This was despite the fact that, between 1870 and the 1920s, there had been a net addition of almost one million Chinese immigrants to the workforce (Skinner 1957: 38, 215).

2 In Bangkok, Chinese workers were housed largely in the Sampheng district which, as Barmé (1997: 56) has noted, was both 'the major commercial centre in the capital, [and also where] most of the brothels were located'. He goes on to state that 'These houses of prostitution, largely staffed by local women, played a vital role in providing the coolie labour force with a source of pleasure and solace and as such are to be seen as integral to the growth and development of the city.'

3 The character of the relationship between Chinese 'secret societies' (*angyii*) and early labour activism has been a vexed issue. Much debate has revolved around the question whether the secret societies might be seen as 'pre-modern' forms of labour organization (Thompson 1947: 238; Mabry 1979: 37; Sungsidh 1986: 50–57). However, it may be argued that, rather than facilitating or promoting struggle among Chinese workers, the secret societies provided Thailand's monarchs and nascent domestic capitalist class with key resources through which they could first secure wage-labour from China, and later control workers

once they arrived in Thailand. As such, the societies would have placed significant constraints on the ability of Chinese workers to develop independent organizations of their own. For a similar argument on the relationship between secret societies, wage-labour and capitalist control in the British Straits Settlements see Tan (1983). See also note 5 below.

4 Those involved in these and subsequent episodes of industrial disputation included rice mill workers (1880s, 1890s), tin miners (1880s), railway construction crews (1890s), drivers (1893), tramway workers (1896, 1897, 1921), port labourers (1900, 1901, 1905), moulders (1905), lightermen (1907), rickshaw pullers, dock workers, cargo and rice mill workers, railway workers (1910, 1917) and printers (1921). See reports carried in various editions of *BTWM* (14 October 1919, 21 March 1932, 25 December 1933, 29 August 1925, 30 April 1927, 14 February 1920, 2 May 1921, 12 March 1923, 26 March 1923, 23 July 1928, 6 May 1929, 20 May 1929, 25 November 1929, 9 June 1930, 21 March 1932, 25 December 1933). Also see *Bangkok Times* (28 March 1901, 15 July 1925, 12 July 1925, 14 July 1926, 9 December 1926). Also see reports cited in Skinner (1957: 109–117) and information contained in Samrej (1987: 34), Hewison (1989a: 51–54), Kanchada (1989: 77), Congcairak (1986: 23–25) and Pasuk and Baker (1995: 174–177).

5 It is important to recognize that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the term 'secret society' was not only used to refer to the organizations that the Chinese brought to Thailand. As Battye explains: '*Angyii*, a proper name and generic term for secret society would creep into Siamese writing as a figure of speech for serious lawlessness measured by numbers and organisation' (1974: 77). As independent labour organizations were struggling to emerge, they were often labelled 'secret societies'. For example, in 1896 tramway workers were reported to have formed a 'secret society' (*Bangkok Times* cited in *BTWM* 21 March 1932) and there are a number of other cases where workers' attempts to organize were said to be the work of secret societies, thus effectively branding such endeavours as illegal. For example, in 1929 a group of women workers employed at the military arsenal were reported to have formed a 'secret society' and were attempting to organize a strike (*BTWM* 6 May 1929). In the same year the Min Sae Match Factory opened, employing seven hundred workers and three policemen who were retained to ensure that 'secret societies' did not carry out their activities (*BTWM* 25 November 1929).

6 For an extended discussion of King Vajiravudh's anti-Chinese stance, see Streckfuss (1993).

7 The distinction made here between *ciin* and *cek* is drawn from Hewison (1989: 135).

8 Thailand was admitted to membership of the League of Nations as a result of its declaration of war against Germany in 1917 and its subsequent dispatch of a small motorized expeditionary force which arrived in France in September 1918 'just in time to witness the end of hostilities' (Terwiel 1983: 305).

9 The emergence of organization among Thai workers is shrouded in myth. Nonetheless, the date of the establishment of the first legally recognized labour association has been the subject of general agreement among scholars. Indeed, the year 1897, when it is claimed that a group of tramway workers registered their association in accordance with the 1897 Secret Society Law, has formed the starting point for many subsequent analyses of the development of organized labour (Mabry 1979: 38; Morell and Chai-anan 1981: 182; Damri and Carun 1986: 25; Sungsidh 1986: 59; Samrej 1987: 39). Apart from being empirically inaccurate, this view clouds the fact that it was to take a further 35 years of struggle after 1897 before workers were able to win legal recognition for

their right to organize. One of the significant features of the 1923 strike is that it affords us insight into a crucial moment in the process, whereby workers were struggling to develop an organized and collective response to workplace issues. Bizarre as it may seem, the confusion that surrounds the date of the establishment of the first legally recognized labour organization stems from a simple misreading of Thompson (1947). In this study, Thompson notes correctly that the first legal labour organization was established in 1932, but also shows that the history of the tramway association dates back to 1897 (1947: 239). A small report carried in the *Bangkok Times* in late 1897 (later reprinted in *BTWM* 25 December 1933) does indeed refer to an incident in which workers employed in the Bangkok Tramways were said to be attempting to form a 'secret society' (see note 10 below). It is clear, however, that, while the tramway men may have attempted to organize at this time, they were unsuccessful. On the basis of evidence provided in reports of the 1923 strike, it is readily apparent that no organization existed among workers employed by the Siamese EC that owned and operated the tramway concession. In fact, one of the central problems that workers faced during the strike lay in building up an organized and united front against the company. Finally, it should also be noted that a check of the relevant archival documents demonstrates that no labour organization had attempted to register in accordance with the 1897 Secret Society Law (See NA R 5N 20/28). The confusion that surrounds this entire issue is symptomatic of the scant attention that writers have paid to the empirical evidence in their analysis of organized labour and its emergence. Moreover, implicit in much of this work is the assumption that class organization simply springs on to the historical stage and there is little recognition of the importance of struggle in building and sustaining such organization. See also Kanchada (1989: 95 n. 63) for further clarification of this matter, although it should be noted that she still offers a misreading of Thompson.

10 The 1923 strike represented the culmination of a series of struggles by the tramway men, the earliest of which dates back to 1896. Little is known of the actual events, but one newspaper reported that, in March of that year: 'The Bangkok Tramway Company during the last week has gone through a trying crisis of the nature of a labour dispute. For some reason the drivers and collectors were dissatisfied and agreed to strike work upon a given day. The directors fortunately heard what was afoot, and now a large number of new faces meet one on the trams' (*Bangkok Times* as quoted in *BTWM* 21 March 1932). Late in 1897 the same newspaper reported that: 'The employees in the tramway company have formed themselves into a secret society. The management have not got an easy task in coping with the tendency of the workmen, clothed with little authority, to run a society for their own benefit, but they seem to be doing their best, and if they do not weary in well-doing no society within the ranks of their employees can become a serious menace to the peace' (as quoted in *BTWM* 25 December 1933). Little is known about the organization or industrial militancy of the tramway men between 1897 and 1923 except for a report of another strike which occurred in 1921, when it was claimed that 78 workers had gone out in protest over the disciplinary rules which were then being enforced by the company. Objections were also lodged against the severity of fines that had been levied on some of the men. All those involved in the strike were arrested for holding an illegal meeting and, following a warning from the police, they were reinstated only after admitting that they had been wrong for striking without giving the company prior notice (*BTWM* 14 February 1921).

11 The first official to become involved in the dispute was Athikorn Prakat who, as noted above, headed the 'special force' within the Bangkok Police that played

a key role in dealing with Bangkok's urban Chinese community. Athikorn was described by a contemporary observer as:

> a self-made man ... exceedingly ambitious, ... astute, courageous, purposeful. ... He was one of those who have the make-up of a despot, and he prided himself in being one. And so ... he liked to be feared or to be pleased, and he took good care that the Chinese either feared or pleased him. ... The privileged few did please him, but the rest of the Chinese feared and hated him, and in fearing and hating him, they feared and hated the Siamese government.
>
> (as quoted in Copeland 1993: 106)

Under Prakat's leadership the 'special force' were alleged to have become involved 'in a wide range of criminal activities: counterfeiting, illegal gambling, illegal opium sales, the trade in Chinese prostitutes, and the operation of unregistered brothels to name but a few' (Copeland 1993: 106).

12 Born Pan Suckum in Suphanburi province, Chao Phraya Yomarat was one of the most powerful figures of the Sixth Reign. As Batson notes he 'was a rare example of extreme social mobility in the semi-hereditary bureaucracy, having risen from obscure origins to the highest rank of the appointed nobility' (1984: 23 n. 35). He was originally sent to Europe as a tutor to the sons of King Chulalongkorn [r. 1868–1910] and was later attached to the legation in London where he served as chargé d'affaires. After nine years in Europe he returned to Thailand and was appointed to the Ministry of the Interior, where he 'soon became known as one of Prince Damrong's rising young men'. Under the name of Phraya Suckum Nayavanit he was High Commissioner to Nakhon Sri Thammarat for eleven years. In 1906 he was appointed a Minister of State as acting Minister of Public Works. He became Minister of the Interior in August 1922 and retired in 1926 among what was reported to be a 'storm of criticism from the Thai press' (*Bangkok Times* 11 March 1926). It was said that 'throughout the greater part of his career he had more than most Ministers the confidence and the ear of his sovereign' (*BTWM* 31 December 1938). Chao Phraya Yomarat died in December 1938.

13 The central figures in the group were Thawat Rittidet (1894–1950) (hereafter Thawat), Wat Sunthoracam (1892–1954) (hereafter Wat) and Sun Kitcamnong (1898–1965) (hereafter Sun). Thawat was born into a well-to-do family in the province of Samutsongkhram. He was educated in a local Buddhist temple school where he later taught novice monks. He became attached to the household of a member of the Thai nobility and was a civil servant for four years in the Department of the Navy. In 1922 he became editor of the *Sayam Sakkhi* newspaper. One of Thawat's relations was involved in the abortive 1912 *coup* attempt against King Vajiravudh. Influenced by the writings of such well-known Thai authors as Thienwan and K.S.R. Kulap, Thawat was the pre-eminent figure within the Thai labour movement from the time of the tramway strike through to the mid 1930s. He died penniless in 1950. Wat was born in Ratburi province. Like Thawat, he completed his primary education in a temple school and later continued his studies at the Police Training Academy in Nakhon Pathom. He worked for four years in Utaradit province, where he clashed with local interests, and this led to his eventual dismissal from the force. He returned to Bangkok in 1921 and began studying law. Along with Thawat, Wat spent almost all his adult life in the services of the Thai labour movement. After the Second World War, he acted as legal adviser to the Central Labour Union (CLU). He was arrested during the course of the 1948 rice mill strike and was

subsequently imprisoned. In 1949 he travelled to China as the Thai representative to the conference of the World Confederation of Trade Unions. After the conference he requested political asylum and died in Peking in 1954. Sun was one of the few early Thai labour leaders to have travelled outside Thailand. He was a member of the Thai expeditionary force that had been sent to France during the closing stages of the First World War. After the war he remained in France for about six months. A trained mechanic, Sun also spent most of his adult life within the Thai labour movement. In 1952 he was arrested for his participation in the Peace Movement and spent five years in prison. For a fuller biographical account of these three key early labour activists see Sungsidh (1986), Lungdamri (1998) and Sirot (1998).

14 Some 50 years later, the popular author Yuthisathian was still able to remember the interest and controversy that the strike generated among the population in Bangkok (1971: 64–68).

15 Those involved in these disputes included pawnshop clerks (1923), construction workers (1925), hotel workers (1926), labourers employed in the Bangkok waterworks (1926), port workers (1928), tramway workers (1928), women workers employed at the military arsenal (1929), weavers (1929), match factory workers (1929) and railway employees (1930). (See *BTWM* 12 March 1923, 26 March 1923, 23 July 1928, 6 May 1929, 20 May 1929, 25 November 1929 and 9 June 1930. See also *Bangkok Times* 15 July 1925, 12 July 1926, 14 July 1926 and 9 December 1926.)

16 Revisions made to the Commercial and Civil Code in 1927 meant that a person could face execution or life imprisonment if found guilty of having attempted to:

> urge any person through fear, threat or violence to become a member of any organization or to become engaged in a strike or the withdrawal of employment or trade activities . . . or helping any organization, or aiding in a strike . . . if such activities are deemed part of a wider plan to overthrow the government, or to change economic or political policies.
>
> (Sathian 1934: 151–172)

17 *Kammakon* was briefly reopened on 26 June 1926 and its final issue was published on 17 July 1926. Thawat and his fellow activists subsequently established *Paka Thai* (*The Thai Pen*), which remained in publication for three years (Sungsidh 1986: 129). In an effort to circumvent state interference in the publication of their views, Thawat and other members of the Labour Group wrote under various pseudonyms. Fictitious names were also used on the official newspaper registration forms that had to be lodged with the government. See, for example, NA R 6 N 20/122.

18 By the mid 1920s the king and other members of the royal family had become actively involved in a range of commercial and industrial operations. Through the Privy Purse Bureau, these included investments in railways, tramways, shipping, banking, cement, trading, coalmines and river transportation. For further discussion of the royal family's growing business interests, see Akira (1996: 90–94).

3 The 1932 *coup d'état*, political volatility and labour's fluctuating fortunes

1 The law came into force on 2 April 1933. Under the law communism was defined as: 'Any doctrine which supports or promotes the nationalisation of

land or industry or capital and labour'. Directed in the first instance against Pridi and those who supported his Economic Plan, the Act stated:

> Any person who is the head, or manager or official of any association, whether secret or otherwise, the purpose of which is to support or promote communists or communism will be decreed in breach of the law and will face a penalty of not more than 10 years imprisonment and a fine not exceeding 5,000 baht. Any person who is a member of such an organisation will be decreed to be in breach of the law and will face a penalty of not more than 5 years imprisonment and a fine not exceeding 1,000 baht.
> (Sathian 1934: 9–11)

From 1933 through to 1946, 991 people were arrested under the terms of the Act (*Bangkok Post* 19 October 1946).

2 Later, Thawat and his associates faced a counter charge of 'revolt' and *lèse majesté* (Congcairak 1986: 47–48). Some months later, the *Bangkok Times* reported that Thawat had apologized to the king for his actions. It was stated that:

> [Thawat] assured his Majesty that the idea of his taking up the leadership of the labourers was not based on any idea of selfish gain on his part. His real intention was to exert himself to the utmost towards assisting the poor and needy to find employment . . . the constant anxiety of the poor to 'find rice and curry' did not allow them any leisure to embark on political movements. . . . It was possible that these poor folk might have displayed some anger on certain occasions but that was due to the fact that the limit of their endurance had been reached. . . . Thawat was further of the opinion that if assistance could be rendered to farmers it would be a popular policy. What the farmers really wanted was the removal of the middleman and to be placed in direct relationship with the capitalists.
> (2 December 1933)

The king accepted Thawat's apology and all charges were withdrawn.

4 Radicalism, shifting alliances and managing labour's political space

1 The Phak kommunit thai (Thai Communist Party) held its first Congress in December 1942. It was later renamed the Phak kommunit haeng phrathet thai (Communist Party of Thailand, CPT) in February 1952. In return for Soviet support for Thailand's application for membership of the United Nations, the CPT was permitted to operate legally in 1946 (Reynolds 1987: 25). Until the late 1940s, the Party adhered to the Comintern line of fostering revolution based on the organization of the urban industrial working class. However, from 1947 onwards, as a result of government repression, the CPT slowly moved towards the adoption of a Maoist strategy of rural-based revolution. After the CPT's urban organizational network was destroyed in the later 1950s, CPT activities became largely concentrated in Thailand's rural north-east (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 291–294).

2 On the Thai–Japanese alliance see Pasuk and Baker (1995: 265).

3 The Seri thai (Free Thai Movement) was formed in January 1942 as an underground movement that opposed the Thai military–Japanese alliance. The two key figures were Seni Promoj, the Thai ambassador to the United States, and

Pridi, who resigned from government after the Japanese invasion and became Regent for the young king Ananda Mahidol (Thienchai 1993: 85–86).

4 It is important to recognize that the use of the term 'union' here is inappropriate as there was no law that provided for the registration of 'trade unions' (*sahaphapraengngan*). Rather, the AUWB, as were other labour organizations at this time, was required to register as an 'association' (*samakhom*) under the terms of the Civil and Commercial Code. This legislation was first used to define a legally sanctioned space within which labour could operate in the immediate post-1932 period. It should also be stressed that a failure to distinguish between 'associations' and 'unions' makes it impossible to understand the significance of struggles by workers throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. An enduring aim of these was to force successive governments to pass legislation that would explicitly allow workers the right to form 'unions' that would possess basic rights to strike and engage in collective bargaining.

5 This association has been usually known as the General Trade Union Association (GTUA) or most commonly the Central Labour Union (CLU). However, for the reasons stated in note 1 above, the use of the term 'union' in this context is misleading.

6 In 1950, the TLA affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The following year it was renamed the Thai National Trade Union Confederation (TNTUC), establishing itself as the peak labour body for the country. The name change was made in an attempt to give the organization a higher international profile, and in turn to attract international financial assistance (Congcairak 1986: 76).

7 Although established by the police, the military also had an interest in FLAT. The first president of the association was Luen Buasuwan, a Chinese merchant who retained close relations with 1947 *coup* group leader, General Chin Chunhawan. The Knights of the Diamond Ring were used by Phao to murder, bash and torture the regime's political opponents during the decade between 1947 and 1957 (Anderson 1985: 17; Pasuk and Baker 1995: 270).

5 Capitalist expansion, regime dynamics and the rise of enterprise unionism

1 While legally banned, the process of dismantling labour organization was not, however, achieved overnight as pockets of resistance remained. In early 1959, a number of leaflets bearing the name of the 'Thai Workers' Council', were distributed around Bangkok. These criticized Sarit for his attack on labour rights. Subsequently Suphachai Srisati and ten others were arrested on communist charges. Labour activist and CPT member, Suphachai, was interrogated personally by Sarit, who then invoked Section 17 of the Anti-Communist Act and ordered Supachai's public execution. The sentence was carried out on 5 July 1959. The others were imprisoned. They spent nine years behind bars before the charges against them were eventually dropped (Thak 1979: 203; Saowalak 1990: 66–67).

2 Apart from the establishment of the Department of Labour, a labour training centre and a child development centre also began operations. A number of Labour Offices were also established in regional areas. The Ministry of Industry established a Factory Control Division, the Ministry of Public Health began holding a series of industrial health programmes and provincial and municipal administrations expanded their roles into the field of administering and enforcing certain labour and health laws. In the latter part of the 1960s, a National Labour Advisory Committee and the National Council for Skill Promotion were also established (Nikhom 1969b: 3–5).

3 The repressive policies first introduced by Sarit had been the subject of continuing criticism from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) (US Department of Labor 1963: 33) and, later, the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) and the West German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), both of which established their operations in Thailand in the early 1970s. Such criticisms, it has been claimed, caused Sarit's successor, General Phrapat Charusathian, considerable embarrassment (Mabry 1977: 934). More particularly, there was concern within government that ongoing criticism of its labour policies would adversely affect access to development assistance from various international sources (Mabry 1977: 934; LoGerfo 1997: 121).

4 Workers were understandably cautious in applying for registration under the terms of the legislation (Sungsidh 1989: 122). Twelve months after Announcement 103 came into force 14 'associations' had registered. The first workers to register their association were employed in the Metropolitan Electricity Authority of Thailand. Led by Phaisan Thawatchaianan, labour organization within the Electricity Authority can be traced back to the 1920s and the Siam Electric Company (SEC). The SEC had become a state-owned enterprise in 1950. The capacity of electricity workers to literally switch off the power to the Bangkok Metropolitan Area ensured that these workers were and remain among the most strategically powerful within the industrial working class. By the end of 1973, 19 associations had officially registered (ibid.: 122–123).

5 See, for example, Somsak 1991; Sungsidh 1989; Samrej 1987; Morell and Chaianan 1981: chapter 7; LoGerfo 1997: 145–148. These accounts provide a good general overview of labour activism during the 1973–76 period. For some other accounts that examine the rise of labour activism within specific industries see Arom Phongphangan Foundation (n.d.), which provides an interesting narrative of the politics of labour organizing within the metals, vehicle assembly, mining, hotel and water transport industries. See also Chusak and Banthit (1991: 112–130) for an insightful account of the rise of industrial conflict in the volatile Omnoi-Omyai district.

6 In both public and private sectors, activists who had been involved in labour politics during the 1950s re-emerged to occupy key leadership positions. For example, within the Metropolitan Electricity Authority, Chui Thongthapthim, Chamnong Phongsaengchan and Santi Yamin had all been involved in organizing strikes during the 1950s. They played an important role in establishing the Metropolitan Electricity Authority Workers' Association under the terms of the 1972 legislation. Similarly, in the private sector, activists from the 1950s were involved in organizing workers in both the transport and metal industries. For some further discussion of how the legacies of struggles from earlier periods informed 1970s activism see Sungsidh (1989: 97–99).

7 The LCT's ideological stance, its commitment to labourism and economic unionism need to be tempered by the realization that this organization actually embraced a broad range of ideological positions. For example, Arom Phongphangan, a leading figure within the LCT, could certainly be seen to advocate a more expansive and radical role for labour organizations (see Naphaphon 1999). Nonetheless, the general labourist drift of these bodies is obvious and most clearly reflected in the work and activism of Phaisan Thawatchaianan (see Phaisan 1988).

8 On the re-emergence of the left during this period see Morell and Chai-anan (1981: chapter 11) and Pornpirom (1987).

9 For a more detailed discussion of the LCCT and its politics see Somsak (1991), Prakanphruk (1988: 40) and Sungsidh (1989: 159–160).

10 For more detailed accounts of the politics of policy and the factional infighting within both the LCT and LCCT see Somsak (1991) and Samrej (1987: 113).
11 With the rise to prominence of the radical LCCT, government, through the operations of the Department of Labour, sought specifically to cultivate the development of the labourist wing of the labour movement under the general leadership of the GTU and later the LCT (Samrej 1987: 113; Prakanphruk 1988: 41). This overt government intervention meant that the GTU/LCT did not at first enjoy widespread support from the rank and file. Nevertheless, under the astute leadership of Phaisan Thawatchaianan, the GTU/LCT demonstrated a capacity to gradually build genuine worker backing. Following the demise of the LCCT in mid 1975, leadership of the labour movement at the national level came to rest largely with the GTU/LCT (Somsak 1991: 122–123). By July 1976, 80 per cent of all registered unions had affiliated with the LCT. Of course, the Department of Labour was not the only institution involved in encouraging the development of largely enterprise-based economic unionism at this time. For example, LCT leaders also received training from the German Social Democratic Party's Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI), the international arm of the AFL-CIO (Sungsidh 1989: 226; Glassman 1999: 284).
12 On the development of right-wing and conservative forces during this period and the various organizational vehicles through which they acted to reassert their grip over the Thai state see Anderson (1977), Bowie (1997), Sungsidh (1989: 143–144), Pasuk and Baker (1995: 307) and LoGerfo (1997: 217).
13 On the links between the military's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), right-wing groups and attacks against workers see Pasuk and Baker (1995: 308). For detailed account of episodes of political violence as directed specifically against labour see Prakanphruk (1988: 42), Somsak (1991a: 126–127) and Samrej (1987).
14 Department of Labour records show that, between January and September 1975, over 8,000 workers were sacked. The majority had been activists or union leaders (Sungsidh 1989: 233).
15 The extent of the connections between the CPT and labour organization within the city between 1973 and 1976 requires further investigation. As noted in an earlier chapter, although the CPT operated within urban areas immediately after the war, its organizational infrastructure within Bangkok was largely demolished following Sarit's assumption to power. Subsequently, its main bases of support were located in rural areas, especially in north-east and southern Thailand. By the late 1960s, 35 out of the country's 71 provinces were supposedly 'communist infested' (Pasuk and Baker 1995: 294). By the end of the 1970s, the Party claimed a membership of 10,000 (ibid.: 312). The extent of CPT infiltration into labour ranks during the 1970s is not clear however. Certainly, even though some CPT cadres began to re-enter the city after 1973, the party's adoption of a Maoist strategy meant that it placed less emphasis on cultivating support among the urban industrial working class than had been the case during the decade or so after the Second World War. Indeed, it would seem that the question of the role of the industrial working class in contributing to a revolutionary change in society was the subject of considerable debate among the CPT's leadership. To some extent, this is indicated in the activities of Prasoet Subsunthorn. As the only member of the CPT ever to be elected to Parliament (in the 1946 elections), Prasoet subsequently opposed the CPT and its rural strategy. He was arrested in Bangkok in the late 1960s and later worked with the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) as an adviser on labour affairs (ibid.: 295). Prasoet's links with ISOC certainly cast doubts on his

communist credentials. Nonetheless his stated support for workers' interests and his ongoing involvement in labour affairs, especially within the Thai state railways, does, however, accord with what appears to have been his long-held belief that the mobilization of industrial workers represented a key task for the successful realization of any revolutionary political project.

6 Export-oriented industrialization, battles for the state and the disorganization of organized labour

1 For more general discussions of Thai economic transformation during the 1970s and 1980s see, for example, Hewison (1989a) and Medhi (1995).
2 For example, on the structure of labour markets and labour surpluses see Chalongphob (1995), Pasuk and Baker (1995: 173) and Chira (1990). On internal and external labour migration see Pasuk and Baker (1998: chapter 6) and Nipon (1994). On the enormous changes that occurred in community and family life see, for example, Suntaree (1989, 1994). On the informal sector see Chira (1990: 158–161) and Sakool and Voravidh (n.d.). On the complexities associated with processes of proletarianization see Sungsidh and Kanchada (1994). On the feminization of industrial work see Mills (1999). For information on the size, location and employment structure of manufacturing see Somsak Tambunlertchai (1993). On flexible production and the organization of the labour process see Deyo (1995, 1996).
3 See, for example, Saowalak (1992), Pricha (n.d.), Apichat (1992), Wanna (1988) and Nongyao (1987). The most important sources of information that afford insight into the emergence of a distinctly working class way of life are to be found in the numerous publications supported and sponsored by the labour-affiliated non-governmental organization (NGO), The Arom Phongphangan Foundation. This foundation was established in 1982 to commemorate the life and work of 1970s labour activist Arom Phongphangan. Through the publication of a monthly newsletter, the sponsoring of numerous seminars and conferences and the commissioning of various studies, the Arom Foundation has been instrumental in producing an invaluable body of empirical material that offers invaluable insight into the industrial workplace and community experiences and problems that have confronted workers in the contemporary periods.
4 For an example of how these terms have been expressed in the discourse of workers and their representatives see Wathana (1992), Aruni (1992) and Wilaiwan (1992). For how these sentiments, experiences of hardship and the discourse of resistance and struggle have been embodied in various songs see Wichai (1993). For examples of how they have been expressed during the course of industrial disputes and campaigns see Somphon (1988). On the general theme of participation see Banthit (1992).
5 For a particularly good example of the ways in which industrial relations law was used to contain industrial unrests see the case of the strike at the Thai Melon Polyester Factory (Vichote 1991: 190–191). More broadly, this strategy of using the industrial relations machinery proved successful as the number of strikes and lockouts declined during the period of the 1980s (Brown 1997: 171). At the same time the number of cases dealt with within the tripartite system itself increased. Between 1981 and 1988, for example, approximately 40,000 cases were brought before the Labour Court (Suchat *et al.* 1989: 81).
6 The adoption of this new policy also included an amnesty offered to CPT members. It is estimated that, from a peak membership of approximately 11,000 in 1979, CPT membership had, by 1984, declined to just over 1,800

(Chai-anan *et al.* 1990: 76). The successful undercutting of CPT influence, through the deployment of new political strategies and a general amnesty, was also assisted by the war between China, Vietnam and Cambodia at the end of 1978. The Sino-Thai CPT leadership openly supported the Chinese. This led the Vietnamese to deny access to areas that had previously formed safe zones for CPT activities. China then entered into an agreement with Thai military leaders. Under this agreement, the Thai military agreed to back China in its war with Vietnam. In return, China promised to ensure that its provision of military assistance to the CPT would end. Faced with an internal revolt from middle class students and intellectuals who had joined the Party after 1976, and denied support from China, the CPT's fortunes nose-dived (see Anderson 1993).

7 For a general discussion of the history and activities of ISOC see Chai-anan *et al.* (1990: 103–111). After the 6 October 1976 *coup*, ISOC became especially active in cooperating with business and various local criminals in ridding organized labour of perceived 'communist' influences. A journalist writing for *Khao Thai Nikon* reported that ISOC was particularly active in the Omnoi-Omyai area, formerly a key industrial base of support for the radical LCCT (Anon. 1979b: 30–34). ISOC held a number of programmes in the region that provided anti-communist training for employers. By the end of the 1980s, the combined efforts of employers, ISOC and gangsters meant that only two or three unions were still operating in the area (Somsak 1988: 3). For further information on the role of ISOC's involvement in labour affairs during the late 1970s see the articles in *Sayam Nikon* (Anon. 1980b: 19–21) and in *Khao Thai Nikon* (Anon. 1980a: 32–35).

8 Reminiscent of Phibun Songkhram's establishment of the Thai Labour Union in the early 1950s, the NFLC was completely funded by ISOC (Prakanphruk 1988: 45). Around the same time, capital also used the 1975 Act to sponsor the formation of a national labour council, the National Congress of Thai Labour (NCTL) (Saphaongkan lukcang raengngan haeng phratet thai). Established in January 1979, the NCTL was reportedly backed and financed by textile employers associated with the Chat Thai Party. Although the NFLC and NCTL never received any widespread support among rank-and-file workers, the latter did nonetheless manage to often muddy the waters, especially during periods when minimum wage rates were being negotiated (Phrakanphruk 1988: 63–64).

9 Both Sawat and Ahmat also received Senate appointments. A few months later, the governor of the state railways was asked by senior military figures to allow Sawat and Ahmat to be relieved from their duties so that they could be seconded to assist ISOC in what were deemed to be 'special activities'. This request sparked internal conflict within the railways union as Sunthon Kaewnet, who was on the committee of the union, initiated a move to overthrow Ahmat and Sawat. He was not successful. In fact Sunthon was driven out of the union. Subsequently, Ahmat and Sawat's union became a vehicle for increased ISOC penetration into a number of other railway unions (Phrakanphruk 1988: 47–48).

10 The Young Turks were a group of graduates from Class 7 at the Chulachomklao Military Academy. Their politics were shaped by an opposition to 'big capitalists, corrupt politicians, weak leadership in the Army, and personal rivalry among political élites' (Suchit 1987: 13). The group played a key role in supporting General Kriangsak Chomanand's rise to the premiership in 1977. They then switched their support to General Prem in 1980, but soon became dissatisfied with him. Two failed *coup* attempts against Prem's government in 1981 and 1985 resulted in a significant diminution of their political influence (Suchit 1987:

11–33; Chai-anan 1982). On the links between Ahmat and Sawat and the failed putsch see Vichote (1991: 307).

11 A dominant figure involved in fostering inter-union rivalry for seats on tripartite bodies was Phanat Thailuan. Phanat rose to prominence through the key role he played in engineering Sawat's and Ahmat's successful attempt to overthrow Phaisan's leadership of the LCT. Known to have retained links with ISOC, Phanat's fortunes ebbed and flowed through the early part of the 1980s, as he was eventually expelled from the LCT and also from the position he occupied within one of the state rail unions. He subsequently established a new union within the railways, affiliating with the NFLC. In 1986, Phanat became actively involved in securing registration for an expanding number of private sector unions, all of which affiliated with the NCTL. He also developed an alliance with the moribund NFLC. By 1987 the NCTL controlled 174 unions with a further 34 unions being affiliated with the NFLC. Phanat was able to use NCTL- and NFLC-affiliated unions to successfully compete for seats on the NACFLD and for the prestigious associate judgeships in the labour court. In March 1987, for example, Phanat's candidates won all five positions on the NACFLD and 19 out of the 20 positions in the labour court (Prakanphruk 1988: 56).

7 Organizing labour in the 1990s: crisis and continuing struggles for a political voice

1 For further details on the Kader operations and its corporate structure see Symonds (1997).

2 Fuller descriptions of working conditions in the Kader factory can be found in International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) (1994).

3 See comments by Nikhom Cantharawithun, who chaired the committee appointed to officially investigate the causes of the fire (*Sunday Post* 15 May 1994). See also ICFTU (1994).

4 See, for example, Prakanphruk (1988), Saowalak (1990), Somsak (1991), Sungsidh (1991) and Sakool and Voravidh (n.d.).

5 For more information on the nature and structure of industry and the history of labour activism in this area see Somyot (1991) and Chusak and Banthit (1991).

6 As one union member later stated:

> We were affiliated with the National Free Labour Union Congress. Two days after the fire, officials from the Congress came [to the factory], but I don't see that they have done anything. They came for a while, went away and then they did not do anything. Workers have to help themselves. They can't rely on the trade unions very much. The members of the trade union complain that the union has not helped them.
>
> (cited in Symonds 1997: 34)

7 Labour actors involved with the HSCC include the Buranakan Women Workers' Group, the Metals Federation of Thailand, the Petroleum and Chemical Workers' Federation of Thailand, the Bank and Finance Federation, the Textile, Clothing and Leather Federation of Thailand, the Paper and Printing Federation, the State Enterprise Relations Group, the Thai Trade Union Congress and the Labour Council of Thailand. Also involved have been labour-affiliated NGOs, the Union of Civil Liberties and the Ramkhamhaeng University Labour Welfare Group (Anon. 1994: 4). Another group that joined with the HSCC

was the Thai Council of Work and Environment Related Patients' Network (TCWERPN), a group that has been established by victims of workplace accidents and occupation-related illnesses. The HSCC has also on occasions been supported by artists, painters and sculptors, whose involvement has been sparked by the realization that industrialization 'has had devastating effects on the environment, whether [this involves] the safety of workers, or the poisoning of communities' (*Thailand Times* 16 May 1994).

8 With the assistance of the Lawyers' Federation of Thailand, a case was finally brought against 16 owners and managers of Kader Industries (Thailand) 'for neglect and non-compliance with safety regulations'. However, proceedings are moving very slowly as the court presiding over the case has been sitting only one day per week. As of March 1996, only half of the 1,000 witnesses had been called (US Department of Labor 1996: 7). The case is still continuing.

9 See, for example, opinions expressed in the special issue of *Raengngan Porithat* (Anon. 1998), which was published to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Kader fire.

10 For a detailed discussion of the involvement of labour in the process of constitutional reform see Robertson (2002).

11 While sections of state enterprise workers did remain involved in supporting broader campaigns and wider pushes for political reform, the overwhelming focus for state enterprise unions was on the privatization of state firms. While managing to slow the selling of state firms, workers nonetheless were unable to halt the process (see Deyo 2000). The inability of state workers to halt privatization and the threat this posed to income levels, employment security and other benefits underscore the ongoing difficulties that both private and public sector workers had in ensuring their protests had desired policy outcomes. Indeed, as indicated above in the discussion of health and safety campaigns, while some positive developments in labour organizing did occur, the failure of state enterprise unions to exercise their collective muscle and garner broader support for their anti-privatization campaigns would indicate a further weakening of the strongest organized section of Thailand's labour movement. The reasons for this are complex, but *inter alia* include an inability of state enterprise workers to rehabilitate their negative public profile and the legacy of restrictions imposed during the NPKC period on the space for legitimate activity, as well as ongoing military co-option and infiltration of state enterprise unions.

12 For some further reflections of the complexities of the politics of reform that led eventually to the promulgation of the 1997 Constitution see various chapters in McCargo (2002).

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