CAPITAL EXPANSION AND MIGRANT WORKERS: FLEXIBLE LABOR IN THE THAI-BURMA BORDER ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the political-economy of mobile capital and labor migration. The research focuses on migrant workers from Burma in Thailand who work for (Taiwanese) capital in Mae Sot. The study argues that Taiwanese capital is mobile and in search for more flexible labor, avoiding labor that is organized and better positioned to assert their rights. It hypothesizes that the state often facilitates mobile capital while portraying itself as the nationalist protector of the Thai people, despite the social and economic reality that the Thai state encourages the exploitation of workers, regardless of nationality.

The study reveals that from the perspective of labor, mobile capital is problematic not only because it can undermine the autonomy of national and regional development, but more particularly because labor rights are consistently sacrificed in order to attract and maintain investment. As Thailand and neighboring countries take further steps to increase border development, labor standards are being pushed down both directly for the migrant workers employed in border industries, and often for domestic workers who are being forced to accept lower standards. This is often perceived as the only way to prevent capital from relocating within or outside of the country.

Moreover, the development of the Thai-Burma border economy has led to a differentiated labor pool on the sub-national level, characterized by migrant workers from Burma who are fleeing political and socio-economic hardship and thus equipped for greater informality and, accordingly, non-protection by the state against highly exploitative work arrangements. Migrant labor holds one valuable commodity, its labor, which is accorded a much lower value than that of Thai nationals, leading to divisions among the working class within the country. The state facilitates these divisions, and prevents the collective force of labor, primarily to maintain competitiveness in export-oriented industries and flows of direct investment.

This research also finds that past research focusing on migrant workers in labor-intensive, export-oriented sectors in Thailand has paid little attention to the dynamics of Thai and migrant workers who are working in the same sectors, creating the impression that they are not a part of the same production networks or the same working class. This inadequate analysis only reinforces and creates a number of barriers relating to the implementation of migrant workers' basic rights.

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