



For a few dollars more: Towards a translocal mobilities of labour activism in Cambodia



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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the context of Cambodia's 2013/14 and 2015 minimum wage campaigns to demonstrate the translocally rural-urban nature of worker agency and activism within global production networks. In doing so, it first highlights the gendered and hierarchical nature of the Cambodian union movement, emphasising in particular the disjuncture between its thriving, inter-occupational grassroots support and the male dominated, top down hierarchies of the union leadership. Secondly, the authors present primary informant testimonies and quantitative figures produced from 13 years of secondary strike data to highlight the key role of agricultural pressures in motivating strike participation. This translocal perspective on protest is used, finally, to demonstrate how certain features of the Cambodian union movement – hierarchy, male predominance and structural disjuncture – are rooted not in abstract norms, but in the everyday mobilities of translocally rural-urban livelihoods, which have rendered grassroots activism largely independent of the structures that represent it.

1. Introduction

Sparked by the meteoric rise of the garment industry from near non-existence in the early 1990s to the cornerstone of the national economy today, the past four years have seen Cambodian social movements enter the international spotlight like never before. Following years of growing unionism, a new wave of coordinated, nationwide strikes demanding a \$160 monthly minimum wage for garment workers began in late 2013, but was brutally interrupted in January 2014, when police opened fire on protesters in the capital, killing five. Little momentum was lost, however. Eighteen months later, a new campaign saw factory workers, farmers, teachers, and the young united in support of a \$177 minimum wage for the garment industry, as a nation described as ‘a shattered society’ only two decades earlier (Martin, 1994), gave rise to vibrant evidence of its own solidarity.

Despite its egalitarian ethos, though, contemporary activism in Cambodia possesses long embedded structural features that constrain the voices of certain groups. The emergent factory-scale unions of the 1990s have gradually coalesced into a handful of large scale federations, characterised by hierarchy and a lack of responsiveness to grassroots supporters. The result is an organized labour movement which is at once bottom up and top down; grown and enthusiastically supported by workers, but lacking dialogue between leadership and membership. The collective agency of this overwhelmingly female labour force is therefore sustained and constrained by complex translocal

relationships rooted in non-union structures such families, social networks and the household economy.

Evidence of similar disjunctures between thriving informal activism and uncommunicative formal hierarchies – both in Southeast Asia (Brown and Ayudhya, 2013; Mills, 2012, 2008, 2005) and elsewhere (Barrientos, 2013; Wad, 2013) – has led to a growing interest in the concept of ‘horizontal agency’ in global production networks (Nielsen and Pritchard, 2009) and in particular how it intersects with vertical structures of representation (Coe and Hess, 2013). However, such analyses have adopted largely immobile foci, failing to fully reflect the translocal nature of pressures and incentives in the developing world. Cyclical mobility, communication flows of money and goods mean that workers’ – and especially women’s – livelihoods are determined as much by the livelihoods of their rural sender households as their urban wages, yet the role these linkages play in activism is significantly underexplored.

In view of this lacuna, this paper offers a translocal perspective on labour activism in Cambodia. Using a combination of rural and urban interviews and focus groups conducted both prior to and during the 2015 nationwide \$177 campaign, it uses informant testimonies from the garment sector and other unionized sectors to explore the gendered and hierarchical nature of labour activism in Cambodia. Secondly, it extends the examination of these norms beyond unions themselves, to demonstrate how the translocal nature of migrant work renders both chronic and acute rural pressures key to determining the strength and

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volume of activism in the garment sector. Finally, it highlights how translocal obligations also play a role in determining the specific form of activism, encouraging the development of inter-occupational horizontal linkages at the expense of progression within vertical union structures.

2. Framing the translocal mobilities of protest

In recent decades, processes of globalisation have transformed both local and global economies, drawing millions of people in the Global South into the industrial sector. Geographers have attempted to understand this by focusing on Global Production Networks (GPNs) as a means of ‘interpreting the complex spatiality of power relations’ that govern people’s interactions with these economic processes (Cumbers et al., 2008:371). However, the GPN literature has been criticised for a ‘top-down’ (Cumbers et al., 2010:51), ‘firm/capital-centric approach’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011: 221) that has remained ‘largely silent’ (Coe and Hess, 2013:5) on how workers actively participate in shaping these multi-scalar economic systems (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Coe, 2013).

Recent efforts to bring actors – such as unions, communities and workers themselves – back into the study of GPNs have helped to explain Southeast Asia’s contemporary development (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Nielsen and Pritchard, 2009; Nadvi, 2008), highlighting in particular the role of worker agency on economic systems (Lier, 2007). However, they have focused overwhelmingly on collective agency (Carswell and De Neve, 2013), thereby neglecting the agency of individual workers and failing to consider the agency of workers on each other (Rogaly, 2009). As Nielsen and Pritchard (2009) argue, this means that so far only ‘vertical’ agency – i.e. top down or bottom up agency – has been explored, at the expense of ‘horizontal’ agency, enacted by peers upon each other. The result has been a poor understanding of why some groups – most notably women – are significantly underrepresented in labour movements.

Part of the reason for this is that – despite detailed explorations elsewhere (Ford and Gillen, 2015; Ford, 2013; Cohen and Rai, 2004) – the institutions that facilitate collective agency have become something of a black box within labour geography (Cumbers et al., 2008; Coe et al., 2008). They have been shown to under represent women in leadership roles (BWI, 2014; Broadbent and Ford, 2007), but the broader structures that produce this unequal representation are unclear. Closely linked to this issue is the failure to consider the wider factors that affect women’s ability to exercise agency in labour movements. Garment workers are not a homogenous or undifferentiated group; rather, ‘their diversity – in terms of gender, caste, and migratory status – is important for understanding their agency’ (Lier, 2007: 66). Trade unions are therefore organizations that represent *particular forms* of labour and express the tensions and contradictions stemming from the geographical entanglements of space and power that run through them (Cumbers et al., 2008: 385). However, the ‘refined analysis’ necessary to understand how these complex structures influence labour agency as a whole are ‘lacking’ in the contemporary literature (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011: 8).

A particular issue is the persistently industrial focus exhibited by studies of labour activism (e.g. Barrientos, 2013; Wad, 2013; Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). Modern sector growth in many emerging economies has been fuelled not only by foreign direct investment, but also pressures on traditional livelihoods (Bowen et al., 2012; Tacoli, 2009). Climate pressures, falling agricultural prices and a lack of opportunity at home are among the triggers that have ‘pushed’ (Bylander, 2015; ADB, 2012) rural households to diversify traditional agricultural income strategies, encouraging family members to migrate and take up work in urban manufacturing sectors. Variations in rural conditions (Parsons, 2016), mediated via gendered household norms (McDowell, 2005), are therefore key determinants of garment workers’ economic behaviour. However, the wider impact of these factors on

agency within production networks remains unclear.

Underpinning this lacuna is a historic schism in the geographic literatures between the rural and urban dimensions of mobility, which retains a persistent influence on studies of migrant work despite mounting evidence of its inaccuracy (Rigg, 2013; 2012, 2005; Potts, 2010; McGee, 2008). Efforts to resolve this disjuncture may be traced to Magobunje’s migration systems framework (1970), a seminal early framework that aimed to embed migration flows more fully in social institutions by bringing the influence of local institutions such as households and community councils into the analysis of mobility. Nevertheless, this approach has since remained underutilized as the Todaro (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Todaro, 1969) and other unilinear models (e.g. Zelinski, 1971; Lee, 1966) came to dominate geographic – and more broadly economic – conceptions of mobility from the 1970s onwards. Only recently has a re-examination of migration systems frameworks (Bakewell, 2014; Bakewell et al., 2012; De Haas, 2010) invited greater attention to migration’s ‘micro and macro elements, allowing subsystems to nest within larger systems’ and local institutions to be incorporated into the same analytical framework as price differentials and historical flows of people’ (King, 2012: 140).

Nevertheless, migration systems approaches have been criticized for their ‘mechanistic, positivist nature and... neglect of the personal and humanistic angles of mobility’ (King, 2012: 21), an issue translocality frameworks (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013a; Brickell and Datta, 2011; Poe et al., 2014) – which consider the rural and urban dimensions of mobility as an integrated system rooted in livelihoods and lived experiences – have sought to resolve (Herbeck, 2015). These frameworks have had a broad influence. In conjunction with recent research in the human-environment systems literatures, they have been used to demonstrate that translocal communities’ mobility is linked to environmental factors (Afifi et al., 2016; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013b), while research in the geographic (e.g. Ang et al., 2014; Lindley, 2010) and mobilities literatures (Manderscheid, 2014; Merriman, 2014) have highlighted how translocal communities are mobilized by cultural and interpersonal factors (Philips and Robinson, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Mackay, 2007).

Despite their influence, though, the insights of migration systems and translocality frameworks have not been used to explore how everyday worker livelihoods play a part in shaping agency within GPNs (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Lund-Thomson and Coe, 2013), or labour activism more broadly (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). Consequently the ‘top down’ interpretation of agency (Cumbers et al., 2010:51) that characterizes labour geography is underpinned by a failure to understand fully the multi-sited, interpersonal and mobile nature of agency at the “bottom” of supply chains. There is therefore a pressing case for ‘reconnecting agency to the wider societal structures in which it is embedded’ (Coe, 2013: 272) by paying greater attention to economic agents’ translocal livelihoods and voice finding strategies in order to understand the complex and multiple ways in which agency manifests in practice.

Building on classic studies such as Elson and Pearson (1981), amongst others, this paper therefore aims to show how the agency of workers – and in particular women’s agency – is constrained and shaped both by the vertical structures of unions themselves and by horizontal, translocally mediated, structures and associations such as the family and household economy. In addition to its implications for the mainstream GPN literature, this perspective speaks also to the literature on transnational feminist solidarity (Fouger and Kurtoğlu, 2011; Bandy, 2004), which has tended to focus on how solidarity is built through the interaction of unions themselves. As shown here, horizontal solidarity may be an equally important force in sustaining solidarity movements across borders, sectors and social groups. Moreover, it may be sustained (and constrained) by actors who possess no direct geographical or industrial link to union movements themselves.

From this perspective, this paper aims more broadly to elucidate questions of significance to three areas of the labour geographic and

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