

Abstracts

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Vietnam: Political Overview 2008

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This paper presents an overview of the major political developments in Vietnam during 2008. The paper opens with a brief consideration of how political scientists have framed their analysis of politics in Vietnam.

The main body of the paper is divided into three parts. Part one considers “formal politics”, that is, decision-making by the Vietnam Communist Party and the National Assembly. In particular, the paper analyses the main outcomes of the sixth and seventh plenary sessions of the party Central Committee, held January and July, respectively. Next, the paper discusses the legislative outcomes of the third session of the National Assembly that met in May-June.

Part two of the paper explores “informal politics” in Vietnam during the year. In particular, the paper discusses public protest in a number of issue areas. Five case studies are discussed: pro-democracy activism; labour strikes in the garment and textile industries; media reporting of corruption scandals; Catholic protests over property claims in Hanoi; and ethnic minorities and religious freedom in the Central Highlands.

Part three presents an analysis of how Vietnam’s party-state responded to the rapid rise in inflation. This section considers tensions between party and state over how to demarcate responsibility for dealing with this issue.

The paper concludes with a reconsideration of frameworks for analysing the Vietnamese political system in light of developments in 2008.

VN Two Years After WTO Admission: What lessons can be learnt?

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The presentation is about two things:

1. VN economic performance during two years after WTO accession (in comparison with what were expected/predicted before WTO membership)
2. The lessons we have learnt so far.

Protective State versus Repressive Market? Labour Practices in Vietnam’s Fashion and Footwear Factories

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This paper examines labour practices in Vietnam’s fashion and footwear factories. The main question is to what extent labour practices differ according to factory ownership: state-owned,

domestic private, and foreign-invested. Literature on labour relations in Vietnam tends to make certain assumptions: that state-owned factories are better than their private counterparts, of both domestic and foreign origin; and that foreign factories, especially those from Taiwan and Korea – the largest foreign investors in the fashion and footwear industry – are more abusive to their workers than their domestic counterparts. However, there has been little systematic research into these presumed differences. This paper thus compares reward systems, disciplinary practices, and communication patterns between workers and management among the three types of factories. In doing so, it not only illuminates labour conditions in the industry but also fills a large gap in the literature. Data are drawn from in-depth interviews with more than 100 workers in 50 factories, which were carried out in mid-2005 in the southern industrial centers of the country (Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong Province, and Dong Nai Province).

Transforming Political Processes in Multinational Factories in Ho Chi Minh City

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This study explores how and why the politics of production in multinational labour intensive factories in Ho Chi Minh City have recently changed. By comparing workers' experiences at home and at the workplace in the late 1990s with that in past few years, this study offers an ethnographic window into Vietnam's rapidly changing larger socio-economic processes. At the micro-level this study first seeks to understand worker resistance to and compliance with the rapidly changing capitalist industries in Vietnam by examining the concrete social and political processes that occurred in several exemplary multinational factories. It identifies recently changing factors such as increasing social economic differentiation, radical changes in the labour codes, the growing service sector, the shortage of workers in the labour intensive industrial sector that leads to increasing pressure for higher wages, and how these factors affect the social-political processes in the multinational factories. Finally, this study explores how these changing conditions affect the workers' consciousness against or in support of foreign capital, and their long sustained corporatist relations between trade unions and the Vietnamese state.

The Challenge from Below: Wildcat Strikes and the Pressure for Union Reform in Vietnam

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Despite radical revisions of labour legislation in the last two decades, the official trade union of Vietnam (VGCL) had remained largely unreceptive to change until the recent explosion of wildcat strikes. This paper examines the nature of recent wildcat strikes in Vietnam with a focus on how they are organised, why they have become increasingly prevalent, how the patterns of strikes have changed, and their impacts on the labour regime in particularly on the VGCL. The key finding of this paper is that the wildcat strikes have grown both in terms of quantity and sophistication due to the leading role of team leaders and skilled workers, the informal supportive network of workers in the factories and the community, and particularly, the pro-labour responses of the state and the civil society to strikers. Though wildcat strikes have placed significant pressure on the VGCL to act more like a member-representative union than a state organisation, its conflicting mandate and subordination to the Communist Party remains a major obstacle to any serious union reform.

Labour Conflicts and State-Society Relations in Vietnam

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The paper will examine overt labour conflicts on the shop-floor of three garment workshops of different ownership sectors in suburban Hanoi. The structure of trade union organizations at all levels will be studied and it will be argued that without the trade unions assuming their proper roles, it is difficult for labour conflicts to develop in accordance to the procedures set down by the laws regulating collective actions. The paper will analyse workers' overt resistance in the three companies in the light of state-society relations. It will be seen that the emerging civil society possibly plays a role in influencing workers' protests. The mass media's focus on strikes and labour conflicts in the foreign investment sector might also be seen as a reflection of the negotiation between the state and society. Such biased media coverage actually encourages stronger unabated workers' protests in the foreign sector compared to other sectors.

Strikes in the Export Sector: Vietnam and China Compared

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Strike waves have been hitting Vietnam in the past three years, while strikes in China have been sporadic. An obvious explanation of the strike waves is that Vietnamese workers are acting on grievances due to poor labour standards. But given that labour conditions in China are just as bad or even worse due to massive unpaid wages, we need to seek a further explanation for the Vietnamese strike waves. This paper explores the reasons for these differences by focusing on Taiwanese owned factories.

Based on interview data and documentary research the paper compares the two countries' labour conditions, the legal regulatory frameworks, and the attitudes of key players related to the strikes. While in both countries management has violated the labour laws, only in Vietnam have workers systematically violated the laws on strikes. By contrast, Chinese workers' strikes are not considered illegal, due to the absence of a law making strikes illegal. Oddly enough, although illegal, the majority of the Vietnamese strikes are resolved peacefully with intervention by the Vietnamese authorities, while Chinese strikes, although not illegal, tend to result in violence and arrests. This difference leads us to conclude that legal regulatory regimes are not that pertinent in regulating strikes in both countries. It is the attitude and actions taken by the state, which in turn affect the behaviour of Taiwanese employers, that condition the emergence and settlement of strikes.

'Awakening the Conscience of the Masses': The Vietnamese Confederation of Labour and International Labour, 1947-1975

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During the 1960s and early 1970s, South Vietnam saw perhaps the highest level of labour-related strife of any country in Asia. Several large labour federations and dozens of trade

unions organized hundreds of thousands of urban and rural workers. Strikes and protests remained an almost constant feature of the landscape during this period. Today, in spite of the current spate of strikes in Vietnam, the workplace tumults of the past are largely forgotten.

This paper will examine trade unionism and labour-related strife from the end of World War II to 1975. It will focus in particular on the strongest of South Vietnam's labour federations, the Vietnamese Confederation of Labour (CVT). Begun in the waning days of colonialism, the CVT set forth an ambitious agenda of empowering Vietnamese workers and building cooperative labour relations grounded in the mutual interests of workers, employers, and government. Such hopes, however, often ran foul of the realities of post-colonial Vietnam and the constant challenges of war and foreign intervention.

While the CVT ceased to exist after 1975, its story offers a powerful example of the militancy of Vietnamese workers and the challenges they faced seeking to mould a labour-friendly world. Indeed the complex history of Vietnamese labour might serve a didactic prelude to the present-day crisis.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Trumps the Vietnamese Labour Code: Overcoming the Weak Tripartite CSR Monitoring Regime with Workers' Participation

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After more than ten years of making inroads into Vietnam, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) gives ethically-conscious consumers a false sense of comfort. Relying on private monitoring to implement CSR initiatives on labour standards not only fails to benefit workers, but also legitimizes the power of multinationals and the Vietnamese government. Taking advantage of the disconnect between CSR and the Vietnamese Labour Code, and by manipulating the "Social Affairs" component under the charge of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the government and corporations promote CSR as charitable activities and corporate "favours," rather than obligations to Labour as originally intended. Moreover, the tripartite CSR monitoring regime—of companies, unions, and the state—is ineffective, due to uneven power relations among the dominating multinationals, the enterprise-level labour unions with structural weakness, and the nominally socialist state. On the other hand, a local triangle—local officials, local unions, and the labour press—has proven to be effective in championing workers' rights; invisible workers at the bottom of the supply chain can initiate their demands, which are advocated by these local players upward through the chain to the national and global levels. This local triangle could turn the tide of the race-to-the-bottom vicious circle into an upward spiral: ensuring a well-compensated workforce that can result in lower turnover rates and higher labour productivity, with workers playing an active role in workplace improvement, which benefits all involved.

Workers' Power and the Socialist Legacy in the State-owned Sector in Vietnam

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Vietnam's powerful state sector is often described as either a little-reformed socialist rust-belt or an unabashed commercially-driven 'state-capitalist' sector. Undoubtedly, workers' power is challenged by the market and global integration, but the reality is more complex, exemplified by the continuing role the organised workforce plays in the management system, backed by a 'Grass-Roots Democracy' decree for SOE workers.

Visits to some large “unreformed” state enterprises, including discussion with workers, found much of this socialist legacy remained a fact of life. Better conditions in terms of wages, benefits and work hours also suggest that workers’ conditions in these enterprises are still better than those in the private and foreign sectors.

However, this legacy is being challenged in “equitised” SOEs. Equitisation transforms state management into a shareholders’ meeting, challenging state enterprise institutions such as the workers’ congress, leading to conflict between “reforming” SOEs and workers.

Articles in *Lao Dong*, mouthpiece of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), tend to support these struggles by state sector workers. This suggests the VGCL – a mass organisation integral to the “party-state” – is no mere tool of that state, though the CPV runs both SOEs and the VGCL. As equitisation is CPV policy, *Lao Dong*’s attitude indicates an accepted form of social opposition within the Vietnamese polity.

Re-organization of Rural Labour in the Globalizing Traditional Woodcarving Industry: A Case Study of a Craft Village in the Red River Delta

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Thanks to de-collectivization and land reforms since the late 1980s, agriculture and rural livelihood in Red River delta of Vietnam have experienced a great transition. This change in rural livelihoods is a result of government rural industrialization programs that included a policy to revive and develop traditional craft villages. This policy means promoting the specialization and commercialization of rural labour in some agricultural villages while promoting other villages as centers of handicraft or small industrial production. The craft making industry’s high demand for labour has absorbed both local and outside labourers. This facilitated rural labour migration flows which are not just rural-to-urban, but also rural-to-rural. This has led to changes for female labourers who can now participate in working in fields from which they used to be excluded. In fact, women have become key actors in integrating the traditional handicraft industry into the global market. By doing this, women can empower themselves and contribute to changing gender relations.

This paper aims to investigate: (1) How is “craft work” conceptualized by different actors involving in the context of globalization? (2) How does migrant movement of rural labourers happen in a traditional craft village? (3) How is the gendered division of labour changing in the village? And (4) What are the policy implications for rural labour issues?

Vietnam’s Labour Export Industry and its Social Impact: Migrant Workers in Thai My village, Ho Chi Minh City

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Under post-*doimoi* labour export programs, Vietnam has been able to send hundreds of thousands of workers to numerous nations, though mostly to Asian countries such as Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Malaysia. Recognizing the benefits of developing a labour export industry, the Vietnamese government has prioritized labour export as a lead industry in national economic development plans.

The paper aims to investigate Vietnamese labourers sent to work under the overseas labour export program. Who are they? What are their motives in seeking work abroad? What are their experiences? Using as a case study Thai My village in a sub-urban district in Ho Chi

Minh City, a major labour-sending area, the paper examines the social economic impact of labour export on Vietnam's sending areas.

A large part of the research data used in the paper was collected through interviews with returnees and with the local authorities of Thai My Village. The paper presents both positive and negative impacts of labour export on the workers' and their families' economic and social well-being, on their employment prospects, on their education and on social mobility.

Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Malaysia: State and Private Interests and Workers' Responses

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Transnational labour migration within the Southeast Asia region is a factor in national economic development and globalisation, and has the potential to benefit both labour sending and labour receiving countries. It improves economic development in the receiving country and is a conduit through which workers from poorer countries could earn higher wages and contribute to family income.

This paper which is part of a bigger multi-country Australian Research Council funded project aims to analyse some key features of Vietnamese labour migration to Malaysia and present some case studies on workers' responses to unfair labour practices in some Malaysian manufacturing industries. The focus is on Malaysia because it is one of the key overseas labour markets for Vietnamese migrant workers and it is the largest labour receiving country in the region. However, exorbitant recruitment levies imposed by Vietnam and Malaysian governments, and harsh labour contract conditions experienced by the migrant workers' means their expectations are seriously dampened. Vietnamese migrant workers are at the mercy of both governments' labour policies that are part of their economic development strategies. Despite the appearance of regulated labour standards in Malaysia, we found that Malaysian laws on foreign workers, and profit motives of Vietnamese quasi-state overseas manpower companies and Malaysian outsourcing companies and representative agents have undermined both Malaysian and Vietnamese labour codes. Foreign workers in the Malaysian garment industry are often denied basic labour rights, and while they are legally permitted to join trade unions, there are barriers in practice and in the labour contracts they have signed. In addition, the necessity to work overtime due to low wages in the multi-level supply chain and the privatization of social monitoring has weakened the corporate code of conducts.