2022

# A YEAR IN REVIEW

PUBLISHED BY

ASIAN LABOUR REVIEW

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# EDITOR'S NOTE



---

In 2022, we launched the Asian Labour Review (ALR) as an independent platform for reporting, analysis and exchange of views. We are proud of the articles published over the last year. To us, ALR was always imagined as more than a publication. At its best, it is a political project to support grassroots efforts to build stronger labour movements.

As the year drew to a close, we posed a number of questions to activists and researchers. The responses collected here touch upon a range of overlapping concerns: migrant labour, care and domestic work, gender-based violence, platform labour, digitalisation, neoliberalism, the pandemic, authoritarianism and more.

We hope these reflections can deepen our understanding of each other's work, and stimulate more dialogues on our projects of building workers' power.

Finally, to quote Rosa Luxemburg who wrote at the end of 1905:

*"Strong in our belief, confident in our strength and the sanctity of our cause, we march on to a renewed struggle and to new battles. A year of struggle is behind us; years of struggle lie ahead."*

As we were finalising this collection, we learned of the passing of Simon Clarke, an advisor to ALR and a mentor to many. We dedicate this collection in memory of him.

Editors

IN MEMORY OF SIMON CLARKE (1946 – 2022)
MARXIST, MENTOR & FRIEND

# DAISY ARAGO

**Centre for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR), Philippines**

---

*In 2022, what workers' struggle in Asia impressed you?*

I am particularly impressed by the struggle of platform workers wherever they are.

There was an impression that while the pandemic closed the door to many workers, particularly women workers, it opened a new window of opportunity for special groups of workers such as platform workers. At least, they have motorbikes, smart phones, and can control their working time.

As the pandemic dragged on, the impression was proven wrong. They are not special after all. They are workers, even if they are classified as independent contractors.

Dismayed, platform workers are banding together to improve their income and benefits and demand recognition as workers entitled to labour protection. This is exemplified by workers at Grab, Foodpanda, and Lazada.

Platform employees are workers and should enjoy their labour rights. This presents a new challenge for organising.

*What is one thing that deserves more of our attention?*

State authoritarianism is rising in Asia, yet unions are declining.

Unions continue to face intimidation, threats or harassment of members and their families to discourage union organising.

This concretises the argument that corporations and the states that host them share the same interests. Companies need not lift a finger to dissuade workers from union organising. The state will do the job for them under the guise of counter-terrorism, employment creation and national economic development.

The challenge to workers' struggle is not confined to their employers' anti-worker actions, but also those of the state.

With rising fuel and food prices, coupled with environmental disasters, workers are bound to demand wage increases, and we should be prepared for state repression in response.

*Is there any new insight you gained this year?*

What is interesting is the role of labour in addressing the climate crisis.

The world is in crisis and we all need to respond. This raises the need for workers to have that capacity to cope, to be resilient.

*What should we be looking to in 2023?*

The rise of workers against attacks on democracy and against corruption amidst poverty always brings hope to the movement.

# AMAY KORJAN

**IT for Change, India**

---

*In 2022, what workers' struggle in Asia impressed you?*

In India, a promising development has been the struggle championed by the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT). They have been advocating for the recognition of the employment status of app-based transport workers.

Towards the end of last year, they filed a public interest litigation in India's supreme court, seeking foundational labour guarantees from ride-hailing platforms and the extension of all associated social security benefits to platform workers.

The court has agreed to hear the petition, and a positive judgment on this front may prove momentous for the platform worker struggle within India. There is ground for optimism, given the spate of judgements in similar cases across the world have sided with workers lately.

At IT for Change, we have been collaborating with IFAT on research and capacity-building to help ride-hailing workers comprehend and respond to new forms of algorithmic managerial control. This is a story worth tracking as it unfolds, and we hope to have a view from the frontline.

*What is one thing that deserves more of our attention?*

As digitalization has come to organize economic activity increasingly around burgeoning 'data-value chains', it has become more and more salient that worker's rights need to be reconceived within this novel context.

We are increasingly convinced that a strong set of 'worker data rights' ought to become a central part of labour advocacy today. The scope of these rights should not be limited to issues of civic rights, privacy and non-discrimination. What is needed is a codified acknowledgement of the collective nature of value generation that 'data' represents, and a move towards giving labor a claim to a portion of the value that their data generates.

*Any new insight you would like to share with us?*

We've been working on a landscape study to map the impact of digital technologies on workers across the developing world. A recurring theme that we encountered was the idea that neoliberalism had hollowed out traditional worker power to such an extent that trade unions were truly struggling to navigate and contend with the new challenges that, for instance, the 'gig economy' is bringing about.

We also saw vibrant experimentation with new organizational forms, from support groups, social intermediaries, to platform cooperatives. Yet, these were often cut off from older traditions of organized labor. Bringing these movements together seems like a vitally important means to bolster the institutional capacities of workers.

*What is one article or a book you read this year that has stuck in your mind?*

'Governance by Numbers' by Alain Supiot provides a powerful account of the perils of modern governmentality. It is striking in its continued relevance, for the proliferation of digital technologies and the datafication of entire sectors is only likely to exacerbate many of the same issues.

*What should we be looking to in 2023?*

Given the way the global response to the inflation crisis is shaping up, it looks increasingly likely that raising interest rates will continue and governments will seek to bring back austerity measures. These conditions are likely to cause persistent financial outflows from the Global South, and potentially set off debt crises in vulnerable nations.

Labor movements are likely to face brutal attempts to rollback recent gains. It will be a tumultuous period and a serious test of resolve. Our commitment to collective solidarity will be decisive.

# JAYA ANIL KUMAR

**Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), Singapore**

---

*What are the most important labour issues which you have been working on and are not given enough attention?*

I would say workplace safety and rest days for migrant domestic workers.

In Singapore, there have been 40 workplace deaths so far this year, surpassing pre-Covid levels of 39 deaths in 2019. Workers are fearful of losing their jobs if they were to whistleblow unsafe practices at their workplaces.

Reasonable opportunities for re-employment will guarantee workers to speak up and protect themselves and their fellow workers. Accountability should also be apportioned to those who can influence the workplace safety culture, and should come from top management.

From 1 January 2023, migrant domestic workers (MDWs) are to be given one mandatory rest day a month, i.e. one rest day which cannot be compensated away. However, as rest days (including the upcoming mandatory rest days) are not defined as 24 hours, many MDWs still complete chores during the course of their rest day, without compensation.

A guide by MOM also recommends that MDWs get eight hours of continuous rest on their rest days, which is far below the 24 hours of rest that international standards stipulate.

*What is one article or a book you read this year that has stuck in your mind?*

*Brown is Redacted*, a collection of essays highlighting experiences of racial minorities in Singapore.

# KRIANGSAK TEERAKOWITKAJORN

**Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI), Thailand**

---

*What is one thing that is not given enough attention?*

I believe we are not paying enough attention to questions of power and strategy.

My main work uses research as stepping stones to strengthen organizing and campaign for several groups of gig workers. I realize that researchers including myself may not necessarily engage with the questions of collective power: what kinds of power different groups of workers (already) have and from where they could draw more power.

Having observed activists and workers taking actions over the years, I am puzzled why they rarely discuss these questions, let alone think explicitly about winning strategies or how to win. I often ask myself how our research would help strengthen emerging workers' collectives, with the potential to become a movement.

For those working at the juncture of authoritarianism and corporate hegemony, powerful trade unions are an exception rather than a norm. This context is vastly different from the post-industrial experiences, for which the Western vantage point has shaped literature.

For these reasons, we need more insights and shared wisdom from workers, activists, and researchers from the Global South.

*Any important insight you have gained this year?*

For some time, researchers have begun to ask what the workplace means for gig workers such as couriers, or on-demand masseuses. This is a key question with myriad implications on workers' organizing tactics and power structure.

Having followed gig workers' organizing activities, I realized that workers are going far beyond traditional workplaces when it comes to finding central issues to unite rank and file. Their self-organization is driven primarily by everyday problems, from road safety to daily interaction with abusive customers. Trade unions in relevant sectors seem to grapple with such challenges and struggle to support the cause.

As a whole, platformization leads to changes that prompt rethinking what we take for granted. Inevitably, dominant labor institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), or even the industrial relations system, are losing their legitimacy and relevance.

It sounds like we are in some sort of crisis, but this crisis is not necessarily bad for the future of labor. These institutions, organizations and frameworks are no longer effective, or one may claim, were never built for making labor strong in the first place.

The question is, hence, how labor could build power to scrap these remnants and rebuild new ones that serve labor the best.

# ELI FRIEDMAN

**Cornell University**

*In 2022, what is one instance of workers' struggle in Asia that has particularly impressed you?*

I was very impressed with the mass refusal of work and escape by thousands of workers at the Foxconn facility in Zhengzhou, China. It has been a very difficult couple of years for workers in China, as they have suffered under the combined effects of the slowing economy, the pandemic, and stiff political repression. Particularly in light of the latter, workers' collective resistance has been much more muted than it was in the 2010s.

Although the Foxconn event was born of extreme hardship in the "closed loop management" – workers were facing the threat of infection, while having inadequate food and medical supplies – it was also a reminder of Chinese workers' long and proud history of militant collective action. Equally impressive was the mutual aid mobilized for the escaped workers in the surrounding communities, as people provided food, water, and transportation. This was a good sign that there is broad-based social support for workers facing down the world's most powerful corporations.

*What is one a book you would recommend?*

Although it is not primarily a book about labor, Darren Byler's Terror Capitalism has really stuck with me. He details the various forms of enclosure and dispossession that Uyghurs have experienced in northwestern China during the mid-late 2010s. Although this might seem peripheral to the concerns of the working class in China proper or elsewhere in Asia, in fact it is not.

As in other colonial situations, I learned from his book that there are technologies and forms of unfree labor being developed in the periphery that are in fact seeping into the broader society. And this is not just a China story, as some of the surveillance and policing technologies developed in Xinjiang are now being marketed elsewhere in Asia and beyond. It is a good reminder of the old slogan that an injury to one is an injury to all.

*What is one thing that we have not given sufficient attention to?*

This is rather particular to China, but the ongoing effects of zero Covid need to be analyzed from the perspective of the working class. There has been so much attention to what zero Covid means for global supply chains, for China's GDP targets, and even for the stability of Xi Jinping's rule. But from the Shanghai lockdowns of last spring through the more recent Foxconn revolt and the militant protests in Guangzhou's migrant communities, it is clear that workers are being exposed to extreme risk, insecurity, and even subsistence crises.

*Is there any insight you would like to share?*

While counterintuitive, I have been impressed by the resilience of labor amid growing repression. I am most familiar with China and Hong Kong, places that have become remarkably more hostile to labor and any form of collective organization by workers. And yet, we also see that growing repression has not been able to snuff out resistance altogether.

*What about 2023?*

I am quite interested in the extent to which supply chains will relocate from China to elsewhere in Southeast and South Asia. There has been a lot of discussion of this trend for many years, but it does seem as though the combination of the US-China trade war and the zero Covid policies have led to a real shift.

Major electronics suppliers, garment production, and other labor-intensive industries seem to be moving to Vietnam, Indonesia, India, and elsewhere, and it will be important for us to assess how this impacts workers. This will be true both for the workers who are left unemployed as a result of factory relocation, as well as the newly proletarianized people in receiving areas.

# MICHELE FORD

**University of Sydney**

*In 2022, which workers' struggle in Asia would you like to highlight?*

I am really impressed with the efforts of labor activists in and from Myanmar, who are keeping the struggle alive in very difficult circumstances.

Before 2011 unions weren't even legal in Myanmar. In just eleven years they not only established a presence but even started making some headway, especially in the garment industry. This wasn't easy with successive governments that weren't really interested in supporting labor rights.

But a degree of opening up in the industrial relations system served a purpose for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) insofar that international observers saw labor rights as something of a bellwether for Myanmar's commitment to democracy in the 2010s.

Things of course became incredibly difficult after the 2021 coup. Union offices have been ransacked and union activists have been arrested and terrorized, with key figures forced underground or into exile. But even though the current situation poses a fundamental threat to unions' very existence, workers and labor activists continue the fight.

*What is one labor issue you have been focusing on?*

This year I've been focusing on gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the Cambodian construction sector.

On construction sites, women and men labor in very poor working conditions, often without a formal contract, let alone access to the protections promised to them under Cambodian law. The fact that many of them live onsite or in employer-provided accommodation adds to the risks of GBVH that they (and especially women) face in the course of their working day. My team is interested in documenting those risks, and identifying opportunities for unions, their international allies and the government to take steps to reduce the prevalence of workplace GBVH.

*What is one trend that we should be watching in 2023?*

A key trend that I think we all should watch in 2023 is the success or failure of campaigns to create legal pathways for workers in the gig economy to unionize.

This matters around the world, but Asia is a particularly important site, I think, as a test case for whether such pathways can be created outside the Global North. Despite all the problems associated with gig work, in many Asian contexts it serves as a vector of formalization of jobs that were previously firmly in the informal sector by providing an employer-like target for collective action.

It is true that the power imbalance is massive. What's more, it's exacerbated by the reach and immediacy of the technologies that power global platforms. At the same time, however, I think we already have evidence that collective action is much more likely to have an impact in the gig economy than in most parts of the informal sector.

# DENNIS ARNOLD

**University of Amsterdam**

---

*In 2022, what is one instance of workers' struggle in Asia that you want to highlight?*

The Naga World struggle in Cambodia is impressive for the workers' tenacity and strength of the organizing, that is clear.

It's also a significant struggle in Cambodia at this particular moment, as unions have been pushed into a corner over the past seven or eight years. The labor movement in Cambodia really needed this. I hope that it can contribute to a renewal, or new cycle of struggle.

*What is one labor issue that you have been working on?*

I've been doing research on social protection. One aspect I'm looking at is how this policy and practice has been picked up by such a wide range of stakeholders with very different agendas, from the World Bank and governments to radical social movements.

Social protection can be operationalized to deepen the logic of the market and commodification of labor and life, and it can also be used in the toolkit to alter power relations in workers' favor.

It's a critical issue, highlighted of course by the Covid pandemic, which will only increase in relevance as the possibilities for work to contribute to a decent life are put under increasing strain.

*What is one book you have read this year that has stuck with you?*

To Live Is to Resist: The Life of Antonio Gramsci, by Jean-Yves Frétigné has stuck with me.

I really liked how the author draws out the fact that Gramsci was a militant communist committed to revolution, and confronted with a specific reality shaped by Fascism, Stalinism and Americanism that no longer exists.

In his time Gramsci undertook the project of translating communist internationalism into Italy's own political language, and the book helped me to see more clearly the challenges of translating Gramsci to our current conjuncture, even though many of the battle lines remain similar.

*What trend should we be paying attention to in 2023?*

Unfortunately, authoritarianism, at least across much of Southeast Asia where I do my research.

We're dealing with it here in Europe too where I live, and it's on the rise in my home country, the U.S., as well. It's a blight on the global political scene that isn't going away.

# CHRIS CHAN

**Royal Holloway, University of London**

---

*Which workers' struggle in Asia particularly impressed you in the past year?*

I was impressed by the role of Chinese migrant workers played in the anti-zero Covid movement in China. The movement involved people from different social backgrounds, including university students, urban middle class citizens and peasant-migrant workers.

As some analyses pointed out, migrant workers were less articulate and tended to be invisible compared to students and urban middle class, but their militant actions have forced the government to grant significant concessions.

For example, in the city of Guangzhou, the government lifted Covid restrictions shortly after the clash between migrant workers and the riot police in the evening of 29 November. It reminds us, once again, of the power of workers during a crisis.

What is one labor issue you have worked on that you would like to share?

In the summer, we organised an online Asian Platform Labour Conference. Scholars and activists were invited to present their research and observations on employment conditions, patterns of struggle and prospects of organising in the platform economy.

The labour market has been further informalized and workers have lost limited employment protection under the current wave of digitization in Asia. The Asian platform economy has been dominated by a few global business players and the working-class conditions are very similar in different countries.

This creates an opportunity for workers and labour organisations to exchange experiences and build up cross-national solidarity. The conference ended with a panel of trade unionists from Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is important to continue the dialogue and build up new networks to advance the interest of workers.

*What about 2023?*

Asia today is the new center of capital accumulation and political tension. Economically, some countries and corporations in Asia have caught up well in the fourth industrial revolution and are globally leading in the high-tech sector, while the region remains as the world's manufacturing center in the labour-intensive industries.

Politically, the rise of Asia has created new tension between the old and new power of global capitalism. As a response to the failed neoliberalism, many countries in Asia are turning to authoritarianism. How to build working class internationalism and a constructive relationship with broader social movements is the new challenge for the labour movement in Asia.

# MYUNGKYO HONG

**Platform C, South Korea**

---

*In 2022, what is one case of workers' struggle in Asia that has impressed you?*

The recent strike by cargo truck workers in Korea was impressive.

The cargo truckers solidarity union demanded an extension to the Safe Trucking Freight Rates System. The Safe Trucking Freight Rates System is a three-year program introduced in 2020 to prevent dangerous driving and guarantee minimum cargo rates for truck drivers, and it is set to expire at the end of 2022

The union pointed the finger at the South Korean government and the ruling People Power Party (a traditional conservative party in South Korea) for attempting to remove the Safe Trucking Freight Fee guarantee from a shipping fee system under discussion.

The strike lasted 16 days from 24 November to 9 December amid the participation of union members and also non-union members. This strike almost paralyzed the nation's industrial logistics system. The Yoon Suk-Yeol government ignored even the ILO Conventions and put all-out pressure on the union. Pro-capital media also strongly criticized the workers' struggle.

The union voted to end their strike 9 Dec. Of the 26,144 union members, only 3,574 participated in the vote. A majority of 61.82% voted in favor of ending the strike while 37.55% were against. The majority of workers did not participate in the vote because they did not agree with the union leadership's decision to vote.

Liberal intellectuals and newspapers are saying that this struggle has been completely defeated.

However, the union's organizational power has not been weakened, and no one left the union. Workers still believed the strike was justified, and they are prepared for the next fight. And, very importantly, both union members and non-union members fought together. There will certainly be a next fight.

*What is one labor issue that you have focused on this year?*

I am interested in the struggle of East Asian food delivery platform workers. This year there have been several strikes by food delivery platform workers in Myanmar, Malaysia, Hong Kong, China, Japan and South Korea.

At a time when companies owned by Delivery Hero are gaining influence in markets throughout East Asian countries, connection and solidarity between workers in each country should be strengthened.

*Is there any interesting insight you would like to share?*

Roh Joong-ki's recent book, The Neoliberal Labor Regime and the Democratic Trade Union Movement analyzes problems of labor in South Korea today through a framework of analysis called Subordinate Neoliberal Labor System. I think this view helps to recognize the internal divisions within the working class, both contemporary and historical. When this issue is well recognized, the workers' movement can better organize the mostly exploited and marginalized workers.

*What is one book you have read this year that stuck in your mind?*

Automation and the Future of Work by Aaron Benanav, and In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony by Darren Byler

*What should we be paying attention to in 2023?*

The challenge of organizing delivery platform workers is a topic that we should continue to pay attention to next year, as well as migrant workers' movements in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and beyond.

# ANDI CIPTA ASMAWATY

**Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)**

---

*In 2022, which workers' struggle in Asia has particularly impressed you?*

The Filipino workers' struggle really pushed forward the resistance against the Marcos Jr regime. In recent years, at least 134 human rights defenders have been killed, and according to Karapatan, at least nine human rights defenders have been killed since the Pandemic started. The death of even one human rights defender is way too many. The cases of union busting, threats and attacks to workers, union leaders and human rights defenders in the Philippines are unfortunately not isolated cases.We demand justice for human rights defenders who have been victims of extrajudicial killings.

And, women gig workers in India have protested platform companies and the government, demanding better wages and working conditions. Gig workers were organised and mobilised, and most of those involved were women. Workers argued that the platform economy claims that flexible working hours are to the worker's advantage, but, in fact, they force women to work more than their capacity.

*What is one labour issue that you think is not given enough attention?*

Women workers in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are left out somewhere in the big union conversations.

Eighty-five percent of the workers in Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in Sri Lanka are women. Most women migrated from rural areas and are generally economically marginalised because they are hired as low-wage workers and trapped in labour exploitation despite the hope to improve their and their family's quality of life.

In Katunayake FTZ, thousands of garment workers have to cope with long working hours for little pay and are forced to work in an exploitative system where it is difficult to get unpaid sick leave. Soaring cost-of-living crises brought more misery for women workers who have been working in low-standard employment and harsh conditions. Some experienced retrenchment, and for the rest, the pay and benefits are rock-bottom. They are forced to bear the risk of economic recession.

Moreover, the impact of digitalisation on not only gig workers but on all workers is really crucial to touch upon, as well as how the different types of jobs will change due to artificial intelligence and robotics, or even what the platform companies refer to as "SMART manufacture supply chain". We really have to think and revisit how we define the future of work.

*continue on next page*

# ANDI CIPTA ASMAWATY

---

I*s there any interesting insight that you would like to share?*

Capital will follow cheap labour. We should really pay attention to one particular country, which claims to be a superpower and expands its national investments to other countries, and links these issues to the giant power of big technologies.

For instance, a study in 2019 identified and listed Chinese financing and investment in ICT development, and looked into how this development takes place to support Chinese-funded SEZs in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other countries, where some claim that the internet makes it easy for them to communicate with each other within suppliers, with buyers, brands or investors as well as with their government.

From this example, we can see how the digital divide happened in factory settings, particularly during the Covid pandemic. Most SEZs workers are women who also take care of their children. Their children had to be schooled at home during the lockdown. How can those women manage their time and energy to assist their kids from the factory floor? They have to buy internet quota which is often not affordable. So, from the parallel reality, you can see how digital inequality emerges in factories.

And, household debts. In 2022, a study looked at gender-based violence against women that occurred on and was done by online lender platforms. Before, during and after the pandemic, working-class women suffered from over-indebtedness, due to their limited access to finance, low wages, and lack of free public services available to them.

The narrative that blames financially illiterate women who take out a loan supposed to be used for productive purposes and use the money in reproductive spending for household/family is a neoliberal lie. This narrative maintains their economic ideology and enables the ruling class to run the world while millions of women are losing their livelihoods and trapped in household indebtedness.

*What is one book that has stuck with you?*

This is a classic book. The accumulation of Capital by Rosa Luxemburg. We really want to review the book and analyse it to understand the trend of digitalisation and how it impacts women's labour rights.

*What should we be paying more attention to in 2023?*

The rise of authoritarianism and the role of big tech companies and their connection to union busting, and digitalisation and its impact on women's labour rights and the future of work.

# HYUNOK LEE

**Yonsei University, South Korea**

---

*In 2022, what workers' struggle in Asia has particularly impressed you?*

There were various care workers rallies throughout the year to demand the improvement of working conditions. The care workers' rally in 2022 was organized by the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers Union on 22 Oct. One of the key agendas was opposition to the privatization of the social services.

*What is one labor issue that is not given enough attention?*

'Labor issue' tends to be associated with paid labor. I am interested in unpaid labor. I have engaged in the discussion on unpaid care labor at home and the recent socialization of care including the formation of the care labor market in South Korea.

I found that women's voluntary labor in the community has been an important part of the social care and I try to conceptualize it in the context of socialization of care.

*Is there any interesting insight that you would like to share?*

Over the last few decades, a series of innovative policies on building community and promoting social economy have been implemented in South Korea to address problems of low economic growth, an ageing population, and polarisation of the society due to neoliberal restructuring.

While Korean women played pivotal roles in these innovative community-building projects, the sociopolitical connotations of their voluntary work have rarely been discussed. Women's work in the social and solidarity economy needs to be discussed more critically.

*What is one book you have read this year?*

Fortunes of Feminisms by Nancy Fraser.

It was published in 2013. I revisited this book and found her insights were very helpful to conceptualize the emancipation movement in the gendered political economic changes in South Korea.

# VEASNA NUON

**Union Aid Abroad APHEDA, Cambodia**

---

*In 2022, which workers' struggle would you like to highlight?*

Nagaworld casino workers' strike in Cambodia is worth highlighting for its length, increasing solidarity action, national and international campaigns, and the variety of tactics employed to win the battle by workers.

*What is one labor issue that is not given enough attention?*

Occupational health and safety of workers. Workers in many countries during and after the pandemic have been at the forefront to service the society, yet they have not been properly recognized and supported.

*Is there any interesting insight you would like share?*

Hard work has rewarded workers with political strength.

In light of challenges at all fronts, there have been some positive developments. In some parts of the world, pro-labour governments have returned to power, giving some hope for change and betterment of workers' lives and status in those countries and beyond. This return to power resulted from various efforts, including most importantly the solidarity and participation of workers who have been marginalized in various parts of the world.

# MONISHANKAR PRASAD

**Independent Labour Researcher**

---

*In 2022, which workers' struggle in Asia would you like to highlight?*

That would be the struggle of the platform riders who would switch off using the tactic of the 'weapon of the weak' to resist the tech companies. Creative ways to resist tech companies or platform operators have been seen in all parts of the world.

Platform workers in Telangana in India managed to unionize, and that for me is the highlight of the year and a radical moment that gives us hope. There were unprecedented protests by Deliveroo riders in Dubai, which I feel is quite seminal.

*What is one labor issue that is not given enough attention?*

There is nothing digital about the labor. It is hard labor itself.

And, while platform workers in Singapore were able to form an association to express their opinions, it is only for Singaporeans or permanent residents. Migrant workers are excluded.

*What is one book you have read this year that stuck with you?*

Natasha Iskandar's book on migrant labor in Qatar, Does Skill Make Us Human, stands out. It shows how the racial politics of labor intersects with skills to form a hierarchy where skill is used as a bargaining chip to make us human. A highlight in the book are the anecdotes of protest by the workers.

*What should we be paying attention to in 2023?*

I would like to pay attention to platform workers' resistance, and labour reforms in Qatar after the World Cup.

# AIDAN CHAU & CAITLIN E. SCHULTZ

**China Labour Bulletin, Hong Kong**

*In 2022, which workers' struggle in Asia would you like to highlight?*

In terms of potential for cross-regional worker solidarity in China, we are keeping an eye on the recent strikes by Lalamove drivers. Lalamove is a platform economy company that offers cargo and freight services.

The company recently made changes to how rates were calculated. From 16 November, Lalamove drivers staged a three-day strike with sixteen distinct demands, including opposing a reduction on drivers' commissions and a new mileage calculation method.

The strike quickly resonated with drivers from other cities. Workers in Wuhan, Changsha, Zhengzhou, and Quanzhou staged their own protests. The speed of the strike spread is impressive, and it quickly caught the government's attention. After the first day of the strike, Lalamove and other logistics companies were summoned by the authorities and asked to change their cost-cutting policies in favor of workers.

It has often been thought that the platform economy dispersed workers and therefore inhibited organizing, compared to traditional sectors like manufacturing. But the Lalamove strikes in 2022 – and similar strikes in 2018 – show that the platform model actually has the potential to unite a greater number of workers, not limited to a single workplace or region.

Another factor is that drivers travel between provinces, so they have greater access to information about what is happening in other cities. And, they self-identify as "fellow truck drivers," indicating that they view themselves as a sectoral group with united interests.

*What is one labor issue that you have been focusing on?*

We are interested in the reform of China's official trade union, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), to better represent workers' actual needs. Workers in China continuously raise their voices and find creative ways to assert their labor rights, but they face many barriers to independently organizing, including criminalization.

It is easy to assume that the ACFTU is largely ineffective and will not be able to meaningfully change. With over one million officials dispersed at the national, provincial, municipal, and local levels, it is frustrating that the union has not fulfilled its role in representing workers. But we find that the official union is in the process of reform, with some local branches of the union willing to step up to represent workers.

So far, the results of the union reform have been mixed. The union has paid more attention to specific categories of vulnerable workers, increased its provision of legal aid in cases related to wage arrears and work injuries, and even negotiated for collective contracts in some industries and jurisdictions.

However, more often than not, the union turns workers away, resorts to sending workers through complicated legal channels rather than fulfilling its role of protecting workers' interests before rights violations occur, and many of its initiatives are in name only and fail to address root causes of worker grievances.

*continue on next page*

# AIDAN CHAU & CAITLIN E. SCHULTZ

---

*What is one book that you read and would recommend?*

We appreciated Eli Friedman's *Urbanization of People*, which brought a very human approach to policy making and implementation challenges in China.

Friedman studies urban schools for migrant worker children in Beijing, looking at a granular level at the challenges faced by those excluded from urban residency. For migrant workers to gain urban residency, it is exceedingly difficult, and working around the issue to access public services including education for their children is also an unfair game. By intentionally restricting the movement of the population into cities where there are more diverse labor needs, inequality is exacerbated for generations.

In addition to lacking residence permits that grant them access to social services, migrant workers often lack labor contracts, and, because they are a mobile population, their pay and benefits may not always follow them. These administrative barriers have a cascading effect when trying to legally enforce their labor rights, and workers face dead-ends no matter what they do.

*What should we be paying attention to in 2023?*

This coming year, we will focus on the challenges workers face in the gig economy in China. Our focus has been on food delivery drivers and ride-hailing drivers, because these sectors have seen a massive influx of workers, and their labor is most typical of the platform model.

We plan to map out the sector in China to better understand the fragmentation of labor relations. Platforms have contracted out various elements of employment, with a third party paying the workers' wages, another entity paying their social security, and other complicated corporate structures, making it difficult for workers to assert their labor rights vis-a-vis any of them. We believe these legal relations should be legally streamlined.

# ELAINE LU

**Solidar Suisse, Asia**

---

*What is one labour issue that isn't given enough attention?*

There has been an overwhelming interest and focus on the platform economy, especially in relation to ride hailing and food delivery. But other types of platform jobs are overlooked. For instance, in China there are extremely precarious forms of platform employment such as live streaming and "click farming".

For live streamers, women dance, sing or flirt with the audience, and they earn income from the audience who may donate or send money to them. "Click farming" is based on essentially manipulating the algorithms in social media, as workers are employed to like, share and comment on social media accounts and posts to boost the popularity of influencers.

It will be interesting to see more research in these areas of work, which are jobs taken up predominantly by women but are generally less known not only in China but across the region and understand concretely the impact of the work on women's rights.

*Interesting trend for 2023?*

The #metoo movement gained a lot of steam in recent years in Asia.

As in previous years, more and more individuals are coming forward. At the same time, this year, there have been revisions and the passing of laws prohibiting sexual harassment: China revised its law regarding sexual harassment and gender discrimination; and, Malaysia also passed an anti-sexual harassment bill this year.

And perhaps we'll see even more changes to the legal framework related to sexual harassment in countries across the region in the coming year. But unfortunately, many of these laws are not without criticisms, as they do not go far enough to ensure that women are adequately protected, and women still face a number of hurdles in coming forward and claiming damages.

The question is what's next? How do we understand the barriers to preventing sexual harassment, and how do we overcome them to ensure systemic change for women at the workplace so that they are protected more effectively against sexual harassment?

# FAHMI PANIMBANG

**Solidar Suisse, Asia**

---

*In 2022, which workers' struggle in Asia would you like to highlight?*

I would like to highlight the struggles by Indonesia's Coalition of Sovereign Migrants or KBMB to expose forced labour and inhumane conditions of detained Indonesian migrant workers in East Malaysia's palm oil plantations. We need collective action to tackle this issue.

This is long overdue. The exploitation has been decades in the making, but few are paying attention. KBMB is reviving the legacy of the past attempts to address this issue. More actions and collaboration of civic groups in Asia are very much needed to change the fate of migrant exploitation.

*What is one labor issue that you have worked on this year?*

I've been researching new ways of labour organising by communities of informal workers such as platform workers, but also migrant workers who are largely excluded from and not represented by labour unions.

My focus is to develop alternative organising strategies for these marginalised groups of workers. It's not a new topic but it's important to continue the critiques against established labour unions that maintain a narrow definition of labour movements.

My recent finding shows how successful organising methods by platform workers hold important lessons for the established labour unions about solidarity building.

*What is one book you want to recommend?*

I have to mention two books since they are related: Labour Regimes and Global Production edited by Elena Baglioni, Liam Campling, Neil M. Coe, Adrian Smith, and Value Chains: The New Economic Imperialism by Intan Suwandi, which I have reviewed.

They are important analytical tools with which we can best understand the changing organisation of work in globalised production, providing a better understanding of the global economic system and how labour movements should envision a change.

*What should we be paying attention to in 2023?*

For the first time in decades of Indonesian history, Partai Buruh (Labour Party), a political party with the backing of the largest labour unions has been formed and is eligible to contest in the five-yearly general election, to be held in February 2024.

The year 2023 will be interesting to witness this new development. Although not all the civic and labour groups support it due to different views, I think it is still a major breakthrough in exploring new experiments. There will be learnings of Realpolitik or practical politics, both good and evil, not only for the Indonesian labour movement, but also for the labour movements in the region.

# YANG KYUNG KYU

**Former Vice President of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).**

---

*Which labour struggle in Asia would you like to highlight?*

The general strike in Korea's public sector since November 2022 is important enough to attract our attention.

The government of President Yoon Seok-yeol, who came into power in March 2022, announced that reducing workers' rights and taming the labour movement are the primary goals of the government's labour policy. The major components of Yoon's labour policy include 1) relaxing regulation over the employment of fixed-term and dispatched workers, 2) allowing primary contractors to avoid taking responsibility for major industrial accidents, 3) revising the minimum wage system in favour of employers, 4) removing criminal punishment provisions from laws regulating employers' unfair labour practices, and 5) allowing substitute workers in the event of a strike.

In addition, the government is taking measures to increase labour intensity and deteriorate working conditions in the public sector by limiting new recruitment and abandoning the policy to regularise public sector irregular workers, which became a trend despite sluggish development in the last few years.

In response, the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers Union (KPTU) prepared a general strike. Railway workers, subway workers and cargo truckers went on strike in November 2022. Among them, the Cargo Truckers Solidarity Division's strike could significantly impact the entire Korean society as the workers take care of logistics across Korea.

Despite their importance to the national economy, cargo truckers have suffered from the low-fare policy and multi-level subcontracting structure, which exposed them to excessive working hours and, therefore, a high level of industrial accidents. To change it, they fought for the "freight charge system for safe operation" and have reached an agreement with the industry and the previous government for the initial three-year implementation of the system until the end of 2022.

Against truckers' anticipation for the new freight charge system to be a permanent establishment, Yoon's government proposed conditional renewal or termination of the deal. Refusing to accept the proposal that threatens road safety and deteriorates truckers' livelihood, the Cargo Truckers Solidarity Union went into a general strike with a demand for a full-scale implementation of the freight charge system for safe operation.

As soon as cargo truckers went on strike, they had to face the government seeking to resolve the conflict through nothing but suppression by issuing back-to-work orders to the striking drivers and threatening penal sanctions. The response of the government is, at best, contradictory. The government treats them as self-employed and deprives them of the right to strike, on the one hand. But it gives them back-to-work orders as if they are workers, on the other hand, effectively forcing them to work against their will.

The strike of cargo truckers has a significant implication. First, it is a struggle of workers in "special employment" whose dubious legal status, despite the intrinsic nature of their work to the national economy, does not allow them to enjoy fundamental labour rights, including the right to strike.

Second, it has also become a protest against forced labour prohibited by the International Labour Organization (ILO). That is why the ILO has shown speedy intervention in this matter, expressing its concern about the possible violation of core ILO conventions ratified by the Korean government.

*continue on next page*

# YANG KYUNG KYU

Third, this struggle of cargo truckers has an important implication for the labour rights of platform workers, who are, amid the so-called fourth industrial revolution and the blooming AI industry, quickly increasing in number but becoming a large blind spot of labour rights protection.

Last but not least, this strike is critical as it calls for a fundamental solution to fatal industrial accidents in Korea, which have been dwarfing all other industrialised economies for decades. The regime strives to turn this strike into an excuse for a full-scale attack on the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

In this sense, this strike can be a decisive moment for the future of the Korean labour movement.

*Which labour issue is not given enough attention?*

The greatest wish of all workers in all countries is to have their right to collective action and strike fully guaranteed. In particular, securing the right to strike cannot be more important in Asia, where the living conditions of workers are poor.

The most powerful weapon used by capital to limit the right to strike is to file damage lawsuits after workers' strike action. These lawsuits often involve an astronomical amount of monetary compensation no workers can afford. The government or judicial authorities use the rule of law as an excuse to legitimise such damages litigations, which causes unspeakable suffering to workers and efficiently incapacitates trade unions.

Filing a lawsuit against financial damage 'done' by strike action became a routine practice in Korea. It left many workers and unionists no choice but to commit suicide after years of suffering. Korea's labour movement has been attempting to address it through public petitions and protests, but so far, without success.

Recently, the labour movement has resumed its battle to legislate a law to prevent such lawsuits against strike participants after observing a series of litigations, such as the US$ 2.5 million claim against strikers in Ssanyong Motors. The new law pursued by the labour movement is called the "Yellow Envelope Act", the name of which originated from the yellow-coloured envelopes that supporters used to deliver their donations to striking workers in the past.

Trade unions, progressive civic groups, and progressive political parties are concentrating their efforts on the Yellow Envelope Act. To this end, they are submitting petitions to revise the legal regulations (Article 2, Article 3 of the Trade Union Act) that arbitrarily determine the illegality of strikes, proposing legislation through political parties and promoting a nationwide campaign by organising sit-ins in front of the National Assembly.

The struggle for the Yellow Envelope Act to prevent damages lawsuits that thoroughly destroy the right to strike is not simply a struggle in Korea but a necessary struggle for all workers in Asia.

*continue on next page*

# YANG KYUNG KYU

---

I*s there any insight you would like to share?*

It was a year in which I realised that international solidarity for the labour movement was more urgent than ever. The need for international solidarity of labour movements against the global unfolding of labour flexibility and oppression of labour movements by authoritarian states is not new to us.

However, in places like Asia, where the intensification of such trends is creating new norms, the need for international solidarity acquires urgency. In particular, the oppression of labour activists and the disbanding of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) after the introduction of the National Security Law reaffirmed that we need to build much stronger intra-Asia solidarity.

The deteriorating political situation in Hong Kong also hit Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) hard in Hong Kong. The AMRC has been instrumental for the last 46 years to many Asian organisations fighting for improved labour rights, gender equality, and democratic and independent labour movements. Solidarity among Asian labour movements could rebuild AMRC, and we managed to relocate to Seoul in September 2022.

I believe this is a small but precious victory to remember. Many of us here in South Korea anticipate that it can offer a firmer stepping stone for labour solidarity across Asia, and we will make an effort to turn this anticipation into reality so that it can shine in our journey to improve living and working conditions in this continent of labour where more than half of global workers are living.

*What should we be watching in 2023?*

The most noteworthy thing in 2023 will be how to overcome the control over Asian workers and labour movements, which will be reshaped in various ways amidst the fluctuating world order. The world order is changing. Politically, the US-centred unipolar system has created many cracks within it, intensifying the US-China confrontation and increasing the possibility of a new Cold War to emerge.

The economic downturn will continue with supply chain disruptions and energy and commodity crises. The climate crisis will be accelerated, offsetting piecemeal changes made by efforts for carbon neutrality.

The so-called Taiwan-strait crisis and North Korea's nuclear armament will build a more contentious relationship between the US and China. As security and the economy are increasingly tied together, these security threats will also amplify the size and width of the economic crisis in every economy in Asia. Domestically, these changes will likely lead to the rise of authoritarian governments, the retreat of democracy, and the introduction of more restrictive control over workers and labour movements in all countries.

It is time to build broader solidarity for peace among trade unions, concerned civic organisations, and progressive political parties in Asian countries in response to the deteriorating international environment.

The year 2023 will be a moment when neoliberalism and protectionism intersect, which increasingly threatens workers' right to live. It is time to think about how to create lively international solidarity among the people of Asia instead of leaving the fate of Asia to the violent transformation driven by the state and capital.

If you like what we publish, please write for us.

We welcome submissions between 1,500 and 3,000 words, and accept feature articles, interviews, field notes and book reviews. Imagine your readers as informed about labour in general but may not be familiar with your topic.

We especially encourage writers who are on the frontline of labour organising or conducting field research to write up your analysis and observations.

If you would like to pitch an idea or submit an article, please reach us at: editor@labourreview.org