

Thailand expels thousands of Burmese immigrant workers

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Last month Thai authorities began to accelerate the expulsion of thousands of Burmese immigrant workers, particularly in the Mae Sot district on the Thai-Burma border. In the mid-1990s the area became a centre for clothing manufacture, fruit orchards and associated canneries, with investment attracted by a supply of ample cheap labour from Burma. Some 100 factories, previously employing about 70,000 "illegal" Burmese workers, were in operation.

The Thai government deployed around 2,000 personnel, including policemen, soldiers, immigration and labour officials, to round up and drive out Burmese "illegals" from Mae Sot. Workers were herded onto large trucks, driven to unguarded border crossings and ordered to leave. According to a Reuters report in mid-November, "Their departure has left factories, nearby farms and streets of a town where the Burmese language was as commonly heard as Thai, all but deserted."

Hundreds of Burmese workers reportedly fled into the jungle, without adequate food, shelter or protection, in order to avoid being deported. At least two instances have been recorded of Thai farmers killing workers after mistaking them for thieves.

Workers, many of them young women, found themselves pawns in the tensions between Thailand and Burma that led to the Burmese military junta closing the border on October 1. On November 3, three Thai passenger boats were turned back after they attempted to unload hundreds of workers at the Burmese border town of Myawaddy, opposite Mae Sot. Burmese troops threatened to shoot anyone who stepped out of the craft, on the grounds that anti-government groups might be among them.

In spite of this, the Thai attempts at repatriation continued. Hundreds of workers were left stranded on

sandbars and islets in the middle of the Moei River, which forms the border of the two countries. At least eight people, including a child, drowned while trying to swim back to Thailand.

Kachadpai Burusapatana, the secretary-general of the Thai National Security Council, dismissed media reports that young women forced over the border had been raped by Burmese troops with the callous declaration that, as the incidents were occurring on Burmese territory, the matter was out of Thailand's hands.

The Thai government's declared aim is to expel some one million foreign workers, of which an estimated 600,000 are Burmese. During the Asian economic boom, Thailand allowed employers in 18 industries to hire immigrant workers, to offset labour shortages. These industries included fisheries, garments, rubber plantations and orchards, rice mills and construction. Employers were permitted to pay "foreign workers" wages as low as 50-90 baht per day, far less than the minimum wage of around 130 baht per day. The immigrants were not entitled to welfare or medical benefits. Employers actively encouraged hundreds of thousands of workers from neighbouring countries to come into Thailand, while authorities turned a blind eye to that fact large numbers did so without official permits or visas.

The situation changed rapidly in 1997. The value of the Thai currency fell 42.9 percent against the US dollar in less than six months. According to *Asian Development Outlook 1999*, the Thai economy, which enjoyed a 5.5 percent growth in 1996, contracted by 0.4 percent in 1997 and 8.0 percent in 1998. Official unemployment soared to close to two million as thousands of small and medium-sized firms went bankrupt and larger corporations carried out heavy

layoffs.

Foreign workers have been one of the first sections of the working class to pay for the crisis. Both the government and the media have sought to divert anger at the growth of unemployment into a campaign against immigrants. Articles in the press attributed the spread of drugs, AIDS and other diseases like elephantiasis to Burmese workers. Police spokesmen claim that illegal immigrants are responsible for rising crime levels. The campaign to drive out foreign workers was backed by an array of draconian punishments, with “illegals” and their employers facing massive fines and possible imprisonment. Around 300,000 workers from Burma, Laos and Cambodia were forced out of Thailand last year.

The only opposition to the mass deportations has come from Thai businesses whose operations have been disrupted by the loss of cheap labour. Speaking on their behalf, the *Bangkok Post*, in an editorial on November 5, wrote: “Thailand in all likelihood will continue to need foreign labour for some time yet... industries along the border, in particular construction, fisheries, transport and manufacturing, are now dependent on Burmese labour. And even though the economic crisis has thrown thousands of Thais out of work, it seems there are not the local people to replace the foreign labour. Most of the work is labour intensive and low paying... The authorities simply will not be able to replace the illegal labour.”

Chinese businessmen from Taiwan and Hong Kong, who have combined investment of more than one billion baht in Thailand, were major employers of Burmese workers. Investors are said to be considering shifting their production to countries like Indonesia, South Africa, Madagascar and even to Burma itself to take advantage of even cheaper sources of labour.



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