

The class struggle in Thailand

Peter Symonds
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Weeks of anti-government demonstrations in Bangkok came to a head last Saturday in street battles as heavily armed troops in riot gear attempted to break up one of two protest camp sites in the Thai capital. The resulting death toll has climbed to 23—18 civilians and 5 soldiers. Hundreds were injured on both sides as thousands of protesters stood their ground and finally forced the troops to retreat.

What has erupted in Thailand is the elemental first stage of class struggles that have broad significance for workers throughout the region and internationally. Bitter political infighting in the Thai ruling elites over the past four years has opened the door for the entry of sections of the rural and urban poor into political life. Along with demands for immediate elections, deeper social concerns over poverty and unemployment have begun to intrude.

So obvious is the class divide that the establishment media in Thailand and internationally have been compelled to comment. The “Red Shirt” protests backed by ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire businessman, are far from homogeneous, but the vast bulk of the protesters come from the country’s poorer rural areas. As the demonstrations have worn on, they have been joined by workers and the urban poor. Particularly troubling for army chiefs have been obvious signs of sympathy among the military’s lower ranks, drawn from the same social layers.

The social divisions are particularly evident in the glitzy Ratchaprasong commercial district where red-shirted villagers are camped out amid the capital’s prestigious shopping malls and five-star hotels. Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Supawadee Khamhaeng, a fruit vendor from the rural north who earns 100 baht or \$US3 a day, said she had tolerated poverty in the past. “It can’t be like that now”, she added. “They [are] always rich, we always poor. That is not democracy”.

Encapsulated in the comment is the resentment and anger of broad layers of working people over the widening chasm between rich and poor. The extravagant riches of a tiny elite have continued to multiply even as the global economic crisis has brought greater hardships for the majority of the population. Moreover, “democracy” for impoverished villagers goes well beyond the formal democratic demand of Thaksin and protest leaders for new elections, to include the basic social right to a decent standard of living.

Thailand is one of the most socially unequal countries in Asia. According to a Bank of Thailand report, the top 20 percent of the population controls 69 percent of the nation’s wealth as compared to just 1 percent for the lowest 20 percent. The average income for the bottom 20 percent is just 1,443 baht or \$US45 a month—the official poverty line. As the economy contracted by 3.5 percent last year and credit dried up, it was the small farmers, businessmen and vendors, along with the working class, that were hardest hit. The resumption of economic growth and booming share prices this year have not alleviated the privations facing working people.

The social tensions that have erupted in Bangkok are a harbinger of class struggles throughout the region and globally. The lavish affluence of the small minority who enriched themselves through speculation and the exploitation of cheap labour is not only on display in Bangkok but in major cities throughout Asia. The social divide in China and India, where a relative handful have grown fabulously wealthy at the expense of hundreds of millions of workers, will inevitably have socially explosive consequences.

At the same time, the protests in Thailand point to longstanding political problems. The amorphous anti-government movement is dominated by the Thaksin-backed United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), which is exploiting the demonstrations to further

the economic and political interests of a section of the Thai elite. When in power between 2001 and 2006, Thaksin was just as prepared to ride roughshod over democratic rights as his opponents. His limited handouts to the poor were primarily aimed at stimulating the economy and reviving Thai businesses after the 1997–1998 Asian economic crisis. However, his economic agenda cut across long-established systems of patronage and alienated the country's traditional elites—the army, state bureaucracy and the monarchy.

The anti-government protesters have fought with determination and courage guided by elementary sense of social injustice. But the stark reality is that if these urban and rural poor remain under UDD leadership, they will be betrayed. It is only necessary to recall the result of the sharp clashes between anti-government protesters and soldiers in Bangkok last April. As soon as the demonstrations appeared to get out of their control, Thaksin and the UDD ended the campaign.

The episode was another confirmation of the basic tenets of Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution—the organic incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development, such as Thailand, to satisfy the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. Only the proletariat is capable of championing genuine democratic rights and agrarian reform that can rouse the rural masses into a struggle for a workers and farmers' government based on socialist policies.

The working class in Thailand has vastly expanded in size and complexity over the past three decades. Thailand is now the world's tenth largest auto exporter and around half a million workers are employed in that industry alone. However, in the current political upheaval, the working class has yet to make its presence felt. Workers have been involved only to the extent that individuals have joined the UDD protests and rallies.

Like its counterparts around the world, the working class in Thailand has no mass political party of its own that represents its class interests on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. The limited trade unions invariably function as tools of government and the corporate elite. The Stalinist Communist Party of Thailand, based on the bankrupt Maoist perspective of rural guerrillaism, dissolved itself two decades ago.

Former student radicals from the political battles of the 1970s have joined up with the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps of the ruling class.

Unless it begins to emerge with its own political voice, independent of all factions of the capitalist class, the working class faces great dangers. In the wake of last Saturday's clashes, there is already open discussion in ruling circles about the necessity of a military coup and the unleashing of tanks and troops to restore order to the streets. This is being driven forward by sharp falls on the share market and potential disaster for the tourist industry, amid a global economic climate of continuing instability and crisis.

The way forward lies in the building of a political party that represents the historic interests of the working class. The necessary socialist and internationalist program and perspective is to be found in the protracted struggle waged by the international Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International—against Stalinism and all forms of opportunism. It is to this that workers and young people should turn to lay the basis for forging a section of the ICFI in Thailand.

Peter Symonds

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