

Bangkok's bloody events: a warning

Peter Symonds
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The lack of any international condemnation of the Thai army's crackdown on anti-government protesters over the past week is a chilling warning to the working class around the world of the measures that will be used to deal with mounting class tensions.

The suppression of two months of United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) protests culminated on Wednesday in the use of armoured vehicles and heavily armed troops to smash the UDD encampment in Bangkok's commercial district. Soldiers fired on sight at any sign of resistance, killing at least 15 people and injuring nearly 400. Particularly significant was the use of snipers to take out selected targets. A heavy military presence remains in place. The government has imposed a state of emergency and curfew throughout the capital and a third of the country's provinces.

Throughout the protests, the class divisions have been glaring. The Ratchaprasong district is home to plush five-star hotels and huge shopping malls where the well-to-do of Bangkok buy high-priced goods. Nearby, major banks and corporations have their headquarters. Many of the protesters were farmers and petty proprietors from the impoverished north and northeast of the country, and were joined by layers of the urban poor. After the army broke up the protest site, groups of angry demonstrators lashed out at the surrounding symbols of wealth and privilege, setting fire to the stock exchange, the massive CentreWorld mall and other buildings.

Throughout recent weeks, governments around the world have remained largely silent amid escalating military violence and a climbing death toll. Nothing was said last week after an army sniper mortally

wounded a former general in the protest camp. Only after the protesters were crushed did the Obama administration issue a statement generally deploring the violence and loss of life. US State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid did not condemn the Thai government and military, however, but denounced the protesters for burning symbols of affluence and private profit.

Along similar lines, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith "regretted" the violence and loss of life, but said he was pleased that the Thai military had shown "restraint" in dealing with the protesters. European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton declared she was "deeply saddened" by the loss of life, adding that "national reconciliation is now an absolute necessity". She appealed to protesters to work together with the government, "without resorting to violence". No government has condemned Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva or the military for the deaths of more than 80 people—mostly unarmed protesters—over the past six weeks.

Class tensions have erupted in Thailand in a distorted and contradictory form. The Thai working class has largely been absent from the protests. Insofar as workers did participate, it was as part of the politically amorphous "Red Shirt" movement, which included small farmers, traders, vendors and businesspeople from rural areas. Their banner was the UDD, which is aligned with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a right-wing populist and telecom billionaire. He has been engaged in a bitter political battle against his factional rivals in the ruling elite since being ousted in a military coup in 2006.

This is not the first time that cleavages in a country's ruling class have opened the door to a broader social

movement. The worsening economic crisis that has fuelled the rifts in the ruling elites has also been expressed in a deepening gulf between rich and poor. While absolute poverty has declined in Thailand, the country's integration into globalised production processes as a cheap labour platform has exacerbated the social divide.

The 2009 UN Human Development Report released this month reported that Thailand was one of the most unequal societies in Asia. The top 20 percent of the population received 55 percent of national income compared to 4.3 percent for the poorest quintile—that is, a multiple of nearly 13 times, compared to 5-8 times for Europe and North America, and 9-11 times for the rest of South East Asia. While the Thai economy has temporarily rebounded from the global financial turmoil of 2008-09, the recovery has not been evenly spread. The drying up of credit has hit heavily-indebted small farmers and petty proprietors hard.

Resentment over the military's ousting of the Thaksin government has hardened into general hostility to the country's traditional elites, including the monarchy, the courts and the army. As one woman protester told the *New York Times* on Thursday: "We have been poor for hundreds of years, even thousands of years, and they are living in fancy resorts and mansions. They have been doing this to us for a long time."

The tacit support of the US, Australia, EU and other countries for the Abhisit government's military crackdown and police-state measures has a wider significance. Class tensions are rising around the world as the second stage of the global economic crisis unfolds and governments insist that working people pay for the massive bailouts and stimulus packages that were used to rescue the banks and financial speculators. Worsening social inequality fuelled the Thai protests, while in Greece a savage government austerity program carried out at the demand of the EU and IMF has led to widespread protests and strikes.

No one should make the mistake of believing that repressive methods will be confined to so-called Third World countries like Thailand. It has been nearly two

decades since the Thai army last shot down unarmed demonstrators. Since then, the globalisation of production has transformed Bangkok into a modern metropolis, commercial centre and international transport hub like Sydney, London and New York.

The resort to military force in Thailand reflected the exhaustion of all the safety fuses used to contain class tensions—parliament, the courts, the monarchy and even the UDD and opposition parties, which were becoming increasingly discredited. The political mechanisms on which the ruling class relies in Greece and other countries are no less strained and, as class battles begin to emerge, will become stretched to the limit. The universal silence on the Thai regime's gunning down of protesters is a grim warning to the workers everywhere that the ruling elites will not hesitate to use similar methods to maintain the profit system against an insurgent movement of working people.

Peter Symonds



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