

“In Search of a Job—Any Job”

Powerful depiction of the fate of Burmese migrant workers

Paul Mitchell
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“In Search of a Job—Any Job: The Life of Burmese Migrant Workers” is an exhibition of photos by John Hulme at Oxford University’s International Migration Institute showing from February 17. A narrated video with images from the exhibition can be found [here](#).

According to the International Migration Institute, “Since the mid 1980s, over 2 million Burmese migrant workers have entered Thailand in search of a better future. They found dirty, dangerous and difficult jobs. Often undocumented, they risk arrest, extortion and deportation.”

At the launch of the exhibition last Thursday, Hulme explained that the conditions facing Burmese workers were part of a worldwide phenomenon. Similar problems confronted workers around the world—on the border between Mexico and the United States, the seas between North Africa and Europe and between Southeast Asia and Australia. In addition, Hulme said, migrant workers act as a constant downward pressure on the wages and conditions of workers internationally.

He described his seven-year-long photographic project, which had been compiled into the short film at the meeting, to document the lives of Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot and Ranong. Mae Sot is a town in western Thailand that shares a border with Burma, or Myanmar, to the west and is often referred to as the Gateway to Burma. About a fifth of Thailand’s entire trade with neighbouring countries goes through Mae Sot. Ranong is Thailand’s main port on the Indian Ocean.

Burma is a centre for US efforts to counter Chinese influence in Southeast Asia and control the strategic sea lanes linking China with the energy resources of the Middle East and Africa. Although China has assisted Burma with various infrastructure projects, including naval facilities, the country remains a largely shut-in, isolated economy plagued by international sanctions and dominated by military-run enterprises. Decades of economic crisis have forced millions of workers to flee the country and exacerbated tensions with ethnic minorities, particularly the Karen. The Karen National Liberation Army has been engaged in a guerrilla war for decades in what has been called the “world’s longest-running civil war”.

After the meeting, Hulme spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Paul Mitchell: How did you first get involved in photographing Burmese migrant workers?

John Hulme: It was an accident really. I had travelled to Mae Sot to photograph the refugee camp there. There are about nine camps along the border with Burma housing about 180,000 refugees, mainly Karen people. The camps, which have been there for 25 years, are controlled by the Thai Ministry of the Interior. It became increasingly difficult to continue photographing without compromising the people who were helping me and the people in the camps.

At the same time, I noticed that there was a lot of migrant labour in the town employed in garment factories owned by Hong Kong business people and Thai companies. I decided to try and document their lives instead.

PM: Why did Mae Sot develop into the important centre of production that it has?

JH: Mae Sot is only three kilometres from the Burma border. It has been a trading point for many years and geographically a good river crossing point. It is a major gateway between the two countries. Virtually everything in Burma goes over the Thai-Burma Friendship Bridge, which was constructed in 1997, although it has been closed for the last few months [by the Burma authorities, who claim erosion has increased, but the reason is more likely linked to increased tension leading up to last year's elections].

Mae Sot is also on the Asia One highway being built to link southern China through Laos, Thailand and Burma to the Indian Ocean.

Recently, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said that Mae Sot would become a special economic zone with its own laws and regulations. This will mean conditions will only get worse for migrant workers.

PM: What is life like for migrant workers?

JH: They earn about 190 baht (US\$6) a day, less than the minimum wage for Thai workers. Some are able to get legal permits to work, but the majority are undocumented and liable to be picked up by the immigration authorities at one of the many checkpoints in the area. They will be deported back to Burma but will try to swim across the river or paddle across on tyres the next day. Any one who goes on strike will also be deported.

The conditions for workers such as this slaughterhouse man are atrocious. Children work on rubbish dumps in Mae Sot recycling plastics for a few baht a day. Work in the port at Ranong is dangerous and workers producing charcoal, a major fuel in Thailand, are affected by terrible breathing problems. Life for many Thais is not much better. Mr. Kin-Sien, for example, earns just 20 baht a day more than the migrant farm workers he supervises.

PM: In the recent period the US has been attempting to prise Burma away from the influence of China. Have you any experience of that?

JH: China has a long-standing relationship with the Burmese regime, which I think will be difficult to break. I have been to the north of the country and seen how the Chinese are buying up all the old colonial buildings and hotels. All the signs are in Chinese as well as Burmese. It looks just like a province in

southern China.

At the same time, the US is encouraging the so-called democracy movement of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). The programme of the NLD is right-wing, aimed at creating a cheap labour platform for global capitalism. Whenever opposition to the Burmese regime has erupted, as in the 1988 uprising, the NLD has stepped in to call for compromise in return for promises of elections. This allowed the generals to regroup, attack the NLD itself and put Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for the last 12 years. When she was released last year following the elections, Suu Kyi continued in the same manner.

PM: The history of Burma and Thailand are object lessons in Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which demonstrates the incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people.

JH: Yes, of course. This is the case with the Burmese regime, Suu Kyi and the Thai government. It is also the case with the Karen separatists' guerrilla struggle against the Burmese regime. What is needed is the unity of the Burmese and Thai masses as part of the broader struggle for socialism in Southeast Asia and internationally. The huge movement last year, which saw the Red Shirts [supporters of exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra] fighting against the Thai government was, contrary to what everyone said, an expression of the class struggle. The events in Tunisia and Egypt must mean that struggle will develop further in Thailand and the region.

See video link.



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