

After the Thai election: A warning to the working class

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Puea Thai, the party backed by ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, rode to victory in Thailand's elections last Sunday on a slick, populist campaign promising to lift living standards and a wave of anger at last year's murderous army crackdown on anti-government protests in Bangkok that resulted in 91 dead.

No one should be under any illusion, however, that Puea Thai's win has brought to power a government that will act in the interests of the millions of urban and rural poor who voted for it. The incoming administration headed by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, will be no less ruthless than its Democrat Party predecessor in enforcing the dictates of big business and suppressing any political opposition to its policies.

Undoubtedly, the Puea Thai win has generated great expectations, particularly in the rural areas of the country's north and north east that provided the backbone for last year's protests and delivered the election victory. Yingluck had a promise for everyone—large wage rises for workers, guaranteed rice prices for farmers, tablet PCs for students, and a curb on sharply rising prices for essential items such as food and transport.

The vote was just as much a rejection of the traditional elites—the military, the monarchy and state bureaucracy—that ousted Thaksin in a coup in 2006 and engineered the removal of two pro-Thaksin governments and the installation of a Democrat-led coalition in 2008. The anti-government protests last year quickly went beyond the demand of so-called “Red Shirt” leaders for immediate elections to highlight the deep social divide between rich and poor.

Puea Thai, however, is a capitalist party that represents the interests of a dissident faction of the Thai ruling class.

While in power, the billionaire Thaksin alienated the country's traditional elites by further facilitating foreign investment and cutting across longstanding patronage networks to the benefit of his own huge business empire. Having gained a certain hearing among the rural poor by making limited social concessions, he has exploited that social base in the factional infighting of the past five years.

A key role in fostering illusions in Thaksin as pro-poor was played by a layer of former student radicals who had turned to the now defunct Communist Party of Thailand and its strategy of Maoist guerrilla warfare during the political turmoil of the 1970s. Disillusioned, many returned to Bangkok, where some were hired by Thaksin or recruited to his party and drew up its limited rural program that helped win the 2001 election.

Other pseudo-lefts like university academic Giles Ji Ungpakorn keep a distance from Puea Thai, but shamelessly promote the party and the associated “Red Shirt” movement as the only alternative to the Democrats and the military. Prior to Sunday's election, an article by Ungpakorn declared that socialists in Thailand had “no choice but to call for a vote for Puea Thai” even though it was “a thoroughly capitalist party.”

In a classic statement of opportunism, Ungpakorn argued that, while socialists do not normally support capitalist parties, an exception had to be made in the current Thai election. There was, he declared, only the “stark choice between the forces of dictatorship and repression and a party which represents the democratic aspirations of millions.”

Ungpakorn's statement, which was reproduced uncritically on various pseudo-radical web sites

internationally, serves to encourage illusions in Puea Thai and block any independent movement of the working class based on a genuinely socialist perspective.

The strategic experiences of the working class throughout the past century have repeatedly confirmed the fundamental elements of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: firstly, that no section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Thailand is capable of meeting the needs and aspirations of working people; secondly, that the peasantry, despite its size, is incapable of playing an independent political role and will inevitably follow either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat in the cities; and thirdly, that the working class is the only social force capable of ending the social distress of the rural masses by leading them in the revolutionary struggle for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies, as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

These essential truths have immense significance in Thailand today, where the social weight of the working class has grown considerably as a result of the country's integration into the processes of globalised production. In the two decades from 1990 to 2010, the number of manufacturing workers has expanded from 9.9 percent to 13.8 percent of the workforce, or more than 5 million. Over the same period, the proportion of those engaged in agriculture has declined from 64 percent to 38 percent of the workforce.

Yet in the political turmoil of the past five years, what has been completely absent is any intervention by the working class fighting for its own independent class interests. As a result, the business tycoon Thaksin, politically aided and abetted by pseudo-radicals such as Ungpakorn, has been able to corral the growing discontent, particularly among the rural masses, behind Puea Thai, the Red Shirt movement and his own political agenda. Having called for a vote for Puea Thai, Ungpakorn bears political responsibility for the actions of the incoming Yingluck government.

Even before it has taken office, Puea Thai has immediately come under pressure from the financial elite to dump its election promises. Amid the ongoing global economic crisis, growth in the Thai economy is expected to halve this year. The cautious welcoming of Puea Thai's win in business circles in Thailand and

internationally reflects the hope that the election will put an end, at least temporarily, to political instability and enable the government to exploit its pro-poor credentials to impose the austerity agenda being demanded internationally by finance capital.

As the expectations of working people are dashed and turn to criticism and protest, the Yingluck government will not hesitate to employ police-state measures against any political opposition. In his call for a vote for Puea Thai, Ungpakorn failed to mention Thaksin's own record of autocratic rule, including his sanctioning of the extrajudicial killings of thousands of alleged drug dealers by police in 2003, and the imposition of draconian emergency measures enforced by the military to stamp out Muslim separatism in the country's south in 2004.

The working class can defend its democratic rights and class interests only by establishing its political independence from all sections of the ruling class in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and a socialist program. Above all, this requires a thorough assimilation of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution and the lessons of the key strategic experiences of the working class in the course of the twentieth century, and a turn to the construction of a section of the international Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International—in Thailand.

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