

**The Politics of Obedience:
Bangladeshi Construction Workers and the Migrant Labour
Regime in Singapore**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research. It contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Among advanced capitalist states, there is an increasing trend towards the use of low-wage temporary migrant workers with limited political rights. Singapore is a prime example. In this country, migrant workers' ability to agitate for better working conditions is greatly compromised by the repression and co-option of the trade union movement; their inability to access political rights guaranteed by citizenship; their occupational immobility and deportability; as well as the amount of debt accrued from high recruitment fees. Despite these tight controls, the stability of the migrant labour regime has been called into question in recent years by sporadic public episodes of migrant labour unrest and nascent NGO advocacy on behalf of these workers. There is a need to trace the origins of these tensions and examine how they impact upon the existing regime.

Using the case of transient Bangladeshi migrant construction workers, I identify workplace struggles – the production politics – between these workers and their employers as the source of these tensions. I argue that the extent to which the migrant labour regime can be contested is contingent on the form and outcomes of these production politics. Within this context, the latter tend to take the form of a tense and precarious politics of obedience. It is the collapse of this obedience politics, rather than its continued coherence, which provides the political impetus for contestation through NGO advocacy. The prevalence of obedience-based politics among these workers thus cannot be explained by their powerlessness or the inhibitions of their migration projects alone but by the manner in which they are situated within the dynamics of control in the labour process. Similarly, the limitations of NGO advocacy cannot be solely attributed to state repression. It needs to be considered that these dynamics of control tend to depoliticise worker grievances and provide workers with opportunities for tactical accommodation.

This thesis contributes to the migrant labour politics literature by emphasising the salience of labour process dynamics in understanding challenges to the migrant labour regime. The outcomes of production politics carry significant implications for the nature and extent of civil society contention within an authoritarian political environment. Political impediments facing contract migrant workers, therefore, need to be examined for the precise way in which they engender resistance and conflict. While structural coercion and migration projects may constrain political agitation, they compel workers to accommodate or resist control in other ways.

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Abbreviations

AWARE	Association of Women for Action and Research
BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BMET	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, Bangladesh
COE	Change-Of-Employer
EFMA	Employment of Foreign Manpower Act
FMMD	Foreign Manpower Management Division
GFC	Global Financial Crisis 2008
GONGO	Government Organised Nongovernmental Organisation
HOME	Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics
LPT	Labour Process Theory
MD	Managing Director
MISAF	Migrant Sanctuary Foundation Bangladesh
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment
MOM	Ministry of Manpower Singapore
MWC	Migrant Workers Centre
MYE	Man-Year Entitlement
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
PAP	People's Action Party
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCAL	Singapore Contractors Association Ltd

TJS	Temporary Job Scheme
TWC2	Transient Workers Count Too
UN	United Nations
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
US	United States
VWO	Voluntary Welfare Organisations
WARBE	The Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants

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Introduction

Context

Among the advanced capitalist countries, there is an increasing trend towards the use of short-term contract migrant labour with limited political rights (Bauder, 2006; Cohen, 2006; Young, 2006). Singapore is a prime example. In 2006, contract migrant workers constituted almost 30% of the country's total workforce (Yeoh, 2007). Over 85% of these migrants were semi- or unskilled workers employed within key industries¹ which are highly dependent on the use of migrant labour to maintain their growth and profitability (ibid). Migrant workers are hence integral to the way Singaporean society and its economy function – they build the country's homes, roads and offices; they ensure that these places remain sanitary and functional; they produce commodities that are traded abroad. Yet they enter the country on one- or two-year contracts with little or no opportunity for subsequently settling down in Singapore. Based on this, the dynamics and transformations of Singapore's migrant labour regime are integral to the shape of the country's political economy.

Industrial relations in Singapore are often characterised as being under tight state control – the repression and co-option of trade union movements and the successful enforcement of pro-business labour laws being well known. This allows the People's Action Party (PAP)-state to discipline labour in the interest of a particular model of economic growth and the preservation of one-party rule (Rodan, 1989; Vasil, 1989; Deyo, 1991; Hing, 1997). However, contract migrant workers are additionally subject to even stiffer and coercive regulations governing their employment. In particular, the work permit system severely restricts the occupational mobility of migrant workers and seeks to ensure they do not integrate within Singapore society. Above all, it ensures the deportability of migrant workers, where the right to terminate employment and repatriate migrant workers – even forcibly – is at the complete discretion of their employers. The vulnerability of contract migrant labour is further compounded by the fact that almost all migrant workers are in debt by the time they arrive in Singapore due to large recruitment fees commanded by labour-hire agents (TWC2, 2012). The ability

¹ Industries such as construction, shipbuilding, cleaning/conservancy, manufacturing and even services are highly dependent on the use of migrant workers.

of migrant workers to agitate for better working conditions is thus greatly compromised by these factors.

Yet, over the last five years, the stability of the repressive migrant labour regime as well as the tight hand of the state have been challenged by a number of sporadic public episodes of migrant worker unrest and nascent NGO advocacy on behalf of such workers. These acts of collective defiance, reported on locally and internationally around the time of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008/09, involved contract migrant workers of various nationalities rallying outside the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) building to demand unpaid wages as well as to protest their under-deployment and consequent threats of forced repatriation (Reuters, 27-02-2009; The Straits Times, 17-05-2009). Many of these workers had brought their work-related grievances to, and sought assistance from, locally-based migrant worker NGOs who lobbied on their behalf to MOM and called for labour reform (Reuters, 27-02-2009; The Online Citizen, 15-01-2009; The Straits Times, 17-05-2009). While Ministry officials initially sought the immediate repatriation of laid-off workers, concessions outside the provisions of existing labour legislation were soon made to appease these workers. Also, Ministry officials and PAP ministers have since attempted to change their public stance towards a few of the salient issues facing migrant workers such as occupational immobility, employer kickbacks for recruitment and the forceful repatriation of migrant workers (e.g. Ministry of Manpower, 01-07-2008, 21-11-2011; Channel NewsAsia, 22-07-2013), all issues that they had previously ignored. There then followed small-scale, but significant, amendments to the country's migrant worker laws, such as the criminalisation of employer kickbacks and the institution of "no-work-pay" provisions as well as moves towards possible reform of the Change-Of-Employer (COE) framework (Ministry of Manpower, 2011, 13-08-2012, 11-09-2012; Channel NewsAsia, 22-07-2013).

Beyond the highly visible, but only occasional, acts of public defiance by migrant workers lies the site where these grievances arise – the workplace. In his account of Bangladeshi migrant workers in a building construction site in Singapore, Noorman Abdullah (2005) paints a picture of the worksite as riddled with tensions between migrant workers and employers where the former engage in forms of informal or "everyday resistances" of gossip, thefts and slow-downs. Migrant worker NGO reports and case-files document various instances of migrant workers defying the authority of

their employers to demand better working conditions and actively resisting their forced repatriation². These accounts point towards less public, but more regular, forms of conflict within the workplace. The challenge this thesis takes on is to show in what ways these do or do not transform into more organised and overt forms of struggle.

Research problem

In this thesis, I uncover the dynamics of struggles between migrant workers and their employers in the workplace and, in doing so, I address questions as to how these struggles come about and what consequences their outcomes hold for the migrant labour regime in Singapore. This is done by interrogating the nature, origins and implications of these informal migrant worker struggles in the workplace. Through a case-study of Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore, I explain the sources, dynamics and consequences of these workplace struggles, or production politics (Burawoy, 1985; Hart, 1991), by posing the following questions:

- (i) How do these struggles come about and assume their particular form?
- (ii) What is the impact of these struggles upon the existing migrant labour regime?

The tensions within the migrant labour regime outlined earlier indicate potential challenges for the strategies and techniques required to ensure its stability. A closer examination of the origins, nature and implications of these tensions is, therefore, very timely. The precise manner in which workplace struggles come about, as well as the implications they hold for how the regime operates has not been analysed previously. But as this thesis shows, the charting of these struggles is significant because it reveals tensions within the migrant labour regime in Singapore, which in turn, sheds light on the dynamics through which this regime operates as well as the extent to which contestation can take place. What is it about Singapore's system of using migrant labour and the backgrounds of migrant workers themselves which leads to such tensions? What are these struggles over? There is a need to understand the extent to which these workplace struggles create an impetus for more organised struggles involving NGO

² One particular NGO, the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), records between 40 and over 100 new work-related complaints a month from migrant workers employed in the construction, shipbuilding, cleaning/conservancy and service sectors. Another NGO, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), have documented a number of their recent cases on their website (www.twc2.org.sg). Various anecdotes of migrant worker resistance in the workplace can be found here: <http://twc2.org.sg/category/articles/stories/>

advocacy and activism. To what extent do informal migrant worker struggles in the workplace provide the impetus for NGOs to lobby the Singapore authorities to reform the latter's migrant worker laws? What was it that made the Manpower Ministry change its position on particular migrant worker issues?

While questions about the form and implications of production politics have been well-addressed in various ways within historical and ethnographic accounts of labour and peasant politics (e.g. Thompson, 1966; Sewell, 1980; Burawoy, 1985; Scott, 1985, 1990; Ong, 1987; Metcalfe, 1988; Hart, 1991; Ibrahim, 1998; Koo, 2001), they are treated in only a limited way within the migrant labour literature. The bulk of scholars tend to be concerned with the causes and effects of migration itself (see: Massey et. al., 1993). Scholars have tended to focus on what factors cause workers to migrate and what kinds of benefits or losses migration brings to sending and receiving communities.

Political economy scholarship on migrant labour politics, on the other hand, offer a vital contribution in addressing these questions by highlighting the political powerlessness of migrant workers as a defining characteristic of migrant labour regimes (Castles and Kosack, 1973; Castells, 1975; Burawoy, 1976; Zoldberg, 1979; Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Hewison and Young, 2006; Munck, 2008; Binford, 2009). Political powerlessness involves the absence of legal-political rights for migrant workers, otherwise accessible through citizenship, obstacles migrant workers face in accessing trade union movements in host countries, and the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers. But within this literature, powerlessness is often understood as an impediment – rather than a constituent – to the political struggles of migrant workers.

Otherwise, an increasing number of works have emphasised the role of migrant worker agency in shaping labour regimes in Asia and beyond (Cohen, 1987, 1991, 2006; Mitchell, 1996; Ball and Piper, 2006; Constable, 2007, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007; Munck, 2008; Hsia, 2009; Leung and Pun, 2009; Lyons, 2009; Taylor, 2009). In examining the development of and barriers to migrant-labour self-organisation and NGO advocacy on behalf of migrant workers, the scholarship has been largely focused on overt, organised and collective aspects of migrant labour struggles. Here, political powerlessness is again a crucial factor in that it hinders collective mobilisation (Binford, 2009). At the same time, scholars such as Constable (2007, 2009), Ford and Piper

(2007) and Hsia (2009) demonstrate that in certain contexts transnational migrant workers – most notably migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong – are still able to mobilise – either through self-organisation or in alliance with faith-based and NGO groups – despite the political impediments. The relative quiescence of migrant labour activism in Singapore, in contrast to Hong Kong, is often explained in terms of the authoritarian nature of the Singapore state (Piper, 2006; Lyons, 2005, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007). This, however, does not account for the recent emergence of migrant labour unrest and NGO advocacy in Singapore nor does it sufficiently explain the small steps towards reform taken by the state. More importantly, by focusing largely on the means of contention, these authors do not address the underlying social conflicts which give rise to contention.

With the exception of Constable's (2007) ethnography, none of the above works go into great depth about how these struggles come about. As a result, the workplace – the site where the grievances of migrant workers arise – and its attendant conflicts are often not analysed with the same rigour as demonstrations, protests and NGO advocacy. The observations made earlier on Singapore, together with Abdullah's (2005) account and the NGO case-files, indicate that tensions in the regime – in the form of worker grievances – originate in the workplace. These tensions need to be interrogated in order to reveal how they come about and how they impact upon the migrant labour regime. This has not been sufficiently addressed by the literature so far.

While a few studies draw out the dynamics of workplace struggles (Sargeson, 1999; Pinches, 2001; de Genova, 2005, 2006; Bauder, 2006; Constable, 2007; Buckley, 2013), only Sargeson's (1999) account of rural-to-urban migrants in China provides a systematic analysis of the workplace migrant workers occupy to illustrate the sources, dynamics and consequences of these struggles. In attempting to draw causal links between China's transition to market capitalism and the economic situation, culture and politics of the emerging rural-to-urban migrant working class, Sargeson devotes significant attention to worker struggles in the workplace. What also sets her account apart from the rest is that it conceptualises the workplace as a labour process in capitalist society where the organisation of production shapes the experiences of workers and influences the form conflict takes. Aspects of political powerlessness

evident in China's *hukou* system³ - the segmented nature of recruitment; patronage networks and controls exercised by local government officials – structured how management controlled workers as well as how workers resisted managerial control. The powerlessness of migrant workers, even when it proves to be harsher for transnational migrants, is not only significant as an impediment to worker resistance, but also in the manner in which it engenders particular forms of struggle.

Approach

To account for the form and impact of these workplace struggles, I combine a political economy analysis of Singapore's migrant labour regime with an in-depth analysis of the production politics of Bangladeshi construction workers. A migrant labour regime is defined as a set of legal-political structures constructed by the state which attempts to regulate the contradictions of capital by rendering migrant workers politically powerless. This is done by denying these workers citizenship rights, ensuring their deportability and occupational immobility and constructing impediments to their political mobilisation.

The concept of production politics – largely informed by Labour Process Theory (LPT) (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Friedman, 1977; Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Edwards, 1979; S. Cohen, 1987) as well as other studies in labour politics (Ong, 1987; Hart, 1991; Sargeson, 1999) – refers to struggles between workers and owners/management over the effort-reward bargain. This entails understanding the workplace as a labour process in capitalist society where capital attempts to fulfil its objective of valorisation by setting workers to work using various strategies of control (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Friedman, 1977; Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Edwards, 1979; S. Cohen, 1987). The labour process is, therefore, not just any scene of conflict; it is a site of class conflict – between labour and capital – evidenced by struggles over the effort-reward bargain (S. Cohen, 1987: 43-46; Sargeson, 1999: 170-184).

The research questions of the thesis will be addressed by establishing causal links between Singapore's migrant labour regime and the production politics of Bangladeshi

³戸口 – a form of registered residence system first enforced in 1958 and still in place today which effectively restricts the geographical mobility of rural-to-urban migrant workers. See Chan and Buckingham (2008) on contemporary measures to reform this system and subsequent implications.

construction workers. Firstly, I examine how the political economy of Singapore's migrant labour regime shapes the form of production politics in the construction site. This involves investigating how migrant labour laws and policies – as well as the manner in which they have been enforced – shapes the kind of control strategies used by construction contractors in the workplace. This also involves demonstrating how the particular form of migrant labour powerlessness constructed by the regime shapes the way in which migrant workers may challenge these control strategies.

At the same time, there is a need to consider the immediate interests of Bangladeshi migrants when they enter the labour process as another factor that shapes the form of production politics. What do these temporary labour emigrants seek and how do they try to attain it? What kinds of compulsions or vulnerabilities do they bring with them into the labour process? Using Ortner's (2003) reading of Sartre (1963) as a starting point, the objectives and circumstances of temporary labour emigration are conceptualised as a "migration project" which shapes the way these workers respond to control strategies in the labour process. Then, in order to explain the prevalent form of production politics between these workers and their employers, I show how powerlessness and migration projects intersect with and within the dynamics of control at construction sites. These dynamics of control, which include the technical organisation of production and specific contractor control and supervision strategies, intersect with these factors to produce both impediments and opportunities for workers to act upon their grievances. The end result is a form of struggle that I call "the politics of obedience" – the tactical use of obedience by workers to accommodate contractor control whilst informally renegotiating the effort-reward bargain.

Secondly, I investigate how such production politics impact upon the migrant labour regime. This necessarily involves paying attention to the variable and contingent outcomes of workers' obedience-based politics. By focusing on the inherent tensions within the politics of obedience, I explain the different ways in which these tensions play out as well as the political implications of these outcomes. Two particular outcomes – the continuation of tactical accommodation through obedience-based politics and the collapse of this politics evidenced through worker flight – are highlighted and elaborated upon to reveal their practical logic and significance for regime contestation. I then go on to examine the most concerted challenge to the migrant labour regime in recent years – NGO advocacy and activism. The substantive

form of migrant labour advocacy is situated within Jayasuria and Rodan (2007) and Rodan's (2013) mode of political participation framework in order to understand the "underlying social foundations" and impact of activism. This allows for an examination of the extent to which outcomes of production politics enhance or restrict the capacity for these NGOs to advocate for reform to migrant labour laws.

The central argument of the thesis is that the extent to which the migrant labour regime can be contested is contingent on the outcomes of this politics of obedience. Contentious outcomes of production politics – reflected in worker flight – rather than the reproduction of the politics of obedience, provide the primary political impetus for NGOs to launch challenges to the migrant labour regime. The prevalence of obedience-based politics among Bangladeshi migrant workers cannot be explained solely in terms of their political powerlessness or the constraints of their migration projects, but in the particular manner in which these are situated within the dynamics of control in the labour process. Similarly, the limitations of advocacy cannot be attributed to state repression alone. It needs to be considered that these dynamics of control serve to reinforce and restore the politics of obedience in spite of its inherent tensions.

Navigation guide

In Chapter One, the existing literature on migrant labour politics is discussed in relation to the research questions and a conceptual approach – based on examining causal links between the migrant labour regime and production politics – is distilled from this discussion. The rest of the thesis is divided into two parts – the first explores the factors that account for the prevalent form of production politics among Bangladeshi construction workers; while the second explores links between the outcomes of production politics and challenges to Singapore's migrant labour regime. Chapter Two tackles the political economy of Singapore's migrant labour regime. I focus on tensions between state objectives and the interests of construction contractors over two aspects of migrant labour policy – the levy system and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA). I demonstrate how government policies to push contractors to adopt more capital-intensive production methods ended up creating a tendency among contractors to protect profitability in production through the use of wage-pressure strategies on politically powerless migrant workers. In Chapter Three, I evaluate what is at stake for Bangladeshi workers as they enter the wage-labour nexus in Singapore. I do this by

examining the material and ideological circumstances under which they undertake temporary labour migration – or their migration projects. Chapter Four analyses the form of production politics between these workers and their employers and explains why it takes this particular form. By showing how political powerlessness and migration projects intersect with and within the dynamics of control, I explain how and why the politics of obedience comes about.

In Chapters Five and Six, I focus on the variable and contingent outcomes of workplace struggles by examining how the politics of obedience plays out within different workplace circumstances in the face of enduring worker grievances over employer wage-pressures. Chapter Five examines how a crisis of obedience comes about, how obedience is restored and the political implications of its restoration. Using a case-study of a single construction firm, I illustrate how the introduction of new wage-pressures disrupts existing forms of worker accommodation such as work-pacing. I highlight the significance of supervisory, rather than managerial, strategies used in the restoration of obedience and the depoliticisation of worker grievances. Chapter Six is concerned with the circumstances under which the politics of obedience unravels. Here, I explain how tactical accommodation transforms into contentious struggles in the workplace. By focusing on a common form of overt resistance among Bangladeshi workers – flight – which involves workers deserting the workplace to seek outside assistance, I explain why their resistance takes this form and the political significance of this. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I connect these outcomes of production politics to recent NGO calls for migrant labour regime reform. By examining the way in which these NGOs carve out spaces of advocacy within an illiberal political regime, I argue that outcomes of flight, rather than the perpetuation of obedience politics, provide the political impetus for small-scale reforms to the country's migrant labour laws.

Overall, two significant points on the study of migrant labour politics are stressed in this thesis. Firstly, the various political impediments facing migrant labour need to be examined for the precise way in which they engender resistance and conflict. While political powerlessness and migration projects may preclude certain worker responses and constrain them in many ways, they may also compel workers to accommodate or resist control in other ways. Secondly, the findings of this thesis emphasise the analysis of labour process dynamics as key to understanding challenges to migrant labour

regimes. The outcomes of production politics have significant ramifications for the way labour regimes operate and the extent to which they can be challenged.