

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

From 1972 onwards the trade unions in Thailand organised the collective action and participated in movements led by other organisations for a wide spectrum of reasons. In this dissertation, social movement unionism and economic unionism are the two models identified as polar opposites in the analysis of trade unions' characteristics. The concepts of social movement unionism and economic unionism are derived from the economic, the Marxist and the new social movement theories. These two models of unionism have been confined to the trade union movement from 1972- 2002, but to a different degree in the certain periods.

The social movement unionism was developed as the dominant form of the trade union movement from October, 1973, to October, 1976, with the integration of three components: defense of the common interests of the working class, class collective action, and participation in the movements for broad social objectives. The economic unionism developed to replace the social movement unionism in the post- 1976 period, when trade unions turned to emphasize only the defense of the workers' common interests and distanced themselves from the movements for broad social objectives

With the focus on the collective demands of trade unions and the organisation of collective action, the study explains the changes of characteristics of the trade union movement as the consequences of the interaction between the trade union actors and the external factors surrounding the trade unions. These factors include the economic conditions, the political situation, and the development of the other social movements.

#### **6.1 The Collective Demands of Trade Unions**

In the development of the Thai trade union movement, the collective demands of the trade unions could be categorized into three types: i) the demands concerning the common interests of workers; ii) the demands for political purpose and; iii) the demands that represent the interests of the workers as well as of other classes.

### **6.1.1 The Demands Concerning the Common Interests of Workers**

From 1972-1976 the demands concerning the common interests of the workers were mostly related to wage and working condition issues. Since the enforcement of the minimum wage law in 1973, the trade unions in the private enterprises played a key role to pressure the National Wage Committee to increase the minimum wages. In state enterprises, the active role of the trade unions in demanding wage increases resulted in the distinction between the wages of the state enterprise employees and those of the non-unionized government officials.

Up to the mid- 1980s, the wage demand was one of the big incentive issues that could mobilise a large number of workers to participate in collective action. After the minimum wage had increased constantly, the low wage was no longer the most crucial problem of the private enterprise workers in the late 1980s. The workers' collective demands then extended to include other issues on the revision of the labour laws that affected the employment conditions and welfare, such as the employment contract laws and the social security laws. In state enterprises, apart from the wage increase, anti privatisation was the other priority demand of the trade unions in the 1980s.

Since the early 1990s, the trade unions in the private enterprises have placed the demands concerning the non-wage issues on the top of their priority list. After the economic crisis in the mid- 1997, the wage demands have been constrained, as employment security has become of more concern to the workers and the trade unions than the wage increase. Trade unions' collective demands have shifted from the wage to non-wage issues, such as the establishment of the Institution of Occupational Safety, Health and Environmental Protection in the Workplace (IOSH); the revision of the labour protection laws; the enforcement of the Social Security Law on the section of the unemployment benefits; the workers' child care center; and anti-privatisation(FES 2001: 3).

### **6.1.2 The Demands for the Political Purpose and Overlapping Interests of People from Multi - Classes**

From the results of the dissertation, the unions' political oriented demands developed only in the periods of political crisis. The roles of the organised workers and their trade unions in the political movement appeared obviously in 1973-1976, after the October 14, 1973 uprising and in 1991-1992, after the coup d' e tat on February 24, 1991. However, in

the two different periods, the workers and the trade unions were not the independent forces that caused the political movements, but the supportive elements of the other forces. In 1973-1976, they were the participants of the student-led political movements. In 1991-1992, they were the supportive forces of the pro- and anti- democratic movements.

For the final type, the unions' collective demands to defend the overlapping interests of the multi-classes showed the unions' commitment to a wide definition of the interest representative. It was in the general strike of January, 1976, that the trade unions were successful in presenting themselves as the interest representatives of the urban poor and the peasants. During this strike, the unions demanded the government suspend the policy on the increase of the prices of rice and sugar, which benefited the workers and other urban poor. In addition, their demands included the guarantee of the price of the paddy and the implementation of the rural development programs, which directly benefited the peasants.

In the post 1976 period, the trade unions rarely played a role in organising collective action for the demands that represented the interests of people beyond the exclusive interests of the workers. The commodity price and bus-fare campaigns in 1979-1982 were the last events that the trade unions expended their efforts on, in coordination with the students, to mobilise large demonstrations to make demand for the overlapping interests of people from multi-classes.

In summary, the demands concerning the common interests of the workers were the major demands of the Trade unions in the past three decades. The other types of demands for the political purpose and broad social interests could develop only in some specific situations. The differences of the unions' collective demands in certain periods were determined by the external factors and the conditions within the trade union movement. The following discussion is first about the external factors that have influenced how unions defined their objectives when they limited their role to collective bargaining for the common interests of workers and when they expanded their role to collective action for broad social objectives.

## **6.2 The Interaction between the Trade Unions and the External Factors**

In the study of the changes in the characteristics of the trade unions in Thailand from 1972-2002, this dissertation finds that the development of the trade union movement related to three important external factors.

First, the political situation influenced the ideological orientations of the union actors and the forms of the workers' collective actions. Second, the economic conditions of the industrial development provided the opportunities for the growth of the trade unions and affected the determination of the unions' collective demands. Finally, the development of the trade unions was strongly influenced by the other social movements.

### **6.2.1 Political Situations and the Role of the Trade Unions in the Political Movement**

From this study, the dissertation findings show that the unions' broad social objectives were not always present in the union activity but developed only in certain specific situations. The period from October 1973 to October 1976 saw the special conditions that encouraged the radical ideologies and broad social objectives among the activists of the social movements. The political uprising on October 14, 1973 brought about the great change of people's attitude toward their political participation, from a sense of being powerless to a belief in their own power. The emerging democratic climate after the uprising also contributed to the enhancement of workers' political consciousness and the development of their broad social objectives. These specific situations disappeared after the violent coup d' e tat on October 6, 1976, and the role of the trade unions in organising the collective action for political purpose and broad social objectives also declined.

During the period of political stability in the 1980s and after May 1992, the trade unions did not play a role in the political process on the establishment of the formal institutions of the parliamentary system, such as election, political parties and constitution. The involvement of the workers and trade unions in the political movement appeared again in another period of political crisis after the coup d' e tat in February 1991. Contrary to the situation in the post- October, 1973 period, the political situation that encouraged the trade unions to participate in the political movement was not the democratic climate but the strict control of the trade unions under the authoritarian rule and the high tide of the anti-authoritarianism campaign.

However, the role of the trade unions in the political movements in the period after the October 14, 1973, uprising and in the May, 1992, events, indicated that the trade unions have been the supportive elements of other social forces. When the period of high mobilisation ended, the trade unions turned back to concentrate on their own interest issues.

### 6.2.2 Economic Conditions and the Defense of the Workers' Common Interests

The trade unions in Thailand were the product of the modern industrial conflicts between capitalist and labour that came along with the new industrial disciplines. The development of industrialisation in the 1960s was associated with the stagnation of the labour organisations, low wages and poor working conditions. As a result, the formation of the labour organisations in the early 1970s developed from the spontaneous strikes of the workers who demanded wage increase and better working conditions.

The development of industrialisation based on export production in the 1970s led to the increase in the number of employees in both the private sector and the public sector, but the structures of employment were different in the two sectors. In the private sector, small and medium firms were dominant in employment. A large number of women were incorporated into the industry lines that produced the country's major exports, such as textile, garments, secondary steel products and processed food. Trade unions were thus concentrated in these industries and had women as their important power base. In the public sector, the providing of infrastructure to facilitate the operation of the private business resulted in the growth in the number of employees in the state-owned public utilities. The large numbers of employees in these big state enterprises and the importance of their services to the country's economy were the sources of trade unions' bargaining powers.

In 1980s, the emergence of new labour relation conflicts, during the period of high success of export promotion strategy, affected the determination of unions collective demands. Under the rapid growth of the export-led industrialisation, the trade unions in the private enterprises could achieve some degree of success in their demands for minimum wage increases and better working welfare. Subsequently, in the export industries, new forms of employment, subcontracting and short-term employment, were used to reduce the costs of labour through wage and welfare. In addition, the high economic growth rates without a sufficient welfare system for the workers resulted in the unequal share of the fruits of the economic development between the capitalists and the workers. In the state enterprises, the government tried to implement the policy on privatisation of state enterprises, which was associated with the political and economic liberalization policies during the Chatichai Choonhawan government. The state enterprise unions thus concentrated more on their job security and working conditions.

As the problems of the labour conflicts were more complicated, the trade unions could not simply focus on the wage issues, in defense of the workers' interests, but needed to extend their collective demands to the other issues on the employment contract, social security system and anti-privatisation. When the industrialisation further developed, the areas of labour conflicts also expanded more. Since the early 1990s, occupation-related accidents and illnesses have become the other serious problems in the industrial development. In addition, the economic crisis that began in mid-1997 led to the constraint of wage demands, as a result of the increasing unemployment problems. Consequently, the unions have extended their demands to the non-wage issues, particularly the OSH issues, that are more possible to achieve than the wage increase.

### **6.2.3 The Interaction between Trade Unions and the Other Social Movements**

The study on the development of the trade union movement in the past three decades shows that the trade unions often have interacted with two groups of the social actors: the intellectuals and the peasants. The theoretical concepts used to analyse the interaction between the trade unions and these two categories are derived from Lenin's critique of the economic consciousness of trade unions (Lenin 1978: 31.32), Udehn's concepts of critical mass and passive mass (Udehn 1996: 236), and Tarrow's concepts of campaigns and coalitions (Tarrow 1995: 145-146). All of these theoretical concepts have already been discussed in the previous chapters.

From 1973-1976, the student movement was the most important catalyst of the social transformation in Thailand. The workers movement and the peasant movement were the other two important social movements during this period. These three social movements interacted and organised collective action together. In defining their broad social objectives, some groups of trade unions were strongly influenced by the student activists who offered themselves as advisors and organisers of the workers and, at the same time, encouraged the workers to participate in the student-led political demonstrations. In addition, the students stimulated the close cooperation between trade unions and the peasants through the formation of the "Tripartite Alliances" of students, workers and peasants.

During this period, the broad social objectives of the trade unions were also influenced by the widespread socialist ideology, which aimed

at radically transforming the foundations of the entire society. In 1975-1976, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) could disseminate the socialist ideology among the activists of the student, trade union, and peasant movements. The political perspectives of a number of the social movement actors in the mid-1970s were thus not limited within their immediate interests. The final goal of the social movements was not the achievement of their specific demands, but changing the structures of the social relations.

In 1980s, when the student movement declined, a new group of intellectuals that had interacted with the trade unions were the NGO activists, particularly, the labour NGOs. The NGO activists played a similar role to the students in organising and providing necessary resources for mobilising the workers' collective action. From the late 1980s, close relations between the trade unions and the NGOs have been obvious in the labour campaigns to defend the interests of the workers. Apart from the NGOs, the other group of intellectuals that participated in the trade union movement were the academics and medical experts who offered themselves as advisors and leaders of the labour campaign on the OSH issues.

After October 1976, the peasants were absent from the alliances of the trade unions. However, when the peasants could establish their organisations again in the mid-1990s, a coordination between the workers and the peasants was formed again in the late 1990s. This cooperation was facilitated by the NGO activists, who played an important role in the trade unions and the organisations of the peasants. Under the networks of the Assembly of the Poor, some groups of workers could achieve their demands with the strong support of the rural poor.

The students, the NGO activists and the academics are intellectuals who have broader social objectives beyond the immediate interests of the workers when they participated in the labour campaign. They thus usually promoted some types of the unions' demands that benefit the workers in the long-term, such as the social security system, the women workers rights and the protection system of the occupation-related accidents and illnesses. These intellectuals are persons rich in resources for mobilising collective action in terms of organisational and negotiating skill, time, money and social status, while the workers lack these resources. As a result, the unions often needed the resources from those intellectuals.

However, there are also other groups of workers who already have strong organisations and other resources for mobilising collective actions.

They are the state enterprise workers who could organise the autonomous collective action through their own trade unions and do not need resources from the intellectuals and other social movements. They are thus less influenced by the students, the NGOs and the academics in the determination of their collective demands to defend the interests of their members.

### **6.3 Conditions Within the Trade Unions**

Apart from the above external factors, the characteristics of the trade union movement in certain periods were dependent on the changes in the conditions within the trade unions. The demands of the trade unions and the mobilising structures of the workers' collective actions varied in accordance with the ideological orientations and the unity or fragmentation among the union leaders.

In the mid- 1970s, the trade union movement was under the leadership of two organisations, the LCCT and the TUGT. The leaders of these two organisations had different political ideologies but their overlapping aims in mobilising workers' collective action were the defense of the workers' common interests. Serious conflicts among the leaders of the LCCT and the TUGT did not appear and they coordinated to lead the workers' collective actions together. Consequently, the trade union movement could achieve some degree of unity either when the trade unions mobilise collective action to defend the workers' interests or when they participated in the movements for political purpose or broad social interests.

In the post- 1976 period, a new group of union leaders gradually replaced the old one in the leadership structure of the national organisations of the trade unions. Conflicts and competition to serve the political and economic interests of the national labour congress leaders resulted in the fragmentation of the trade union movement. The changes in the ideological orientation of the union leaders from working class representatives to self-serving interests shifted the role of the national organisations of the trade unions from the interest representatives of the working class to organisations that produced collective action for selective interests.

As the national labour congresses were ineffective to represent the interests of the workers, other types of labour coordination centre were formed to organise workers' collective action. The area-based trade union groups and the SERC were the new effective organisations of collective



action in the 1980s. These organisations drew on social networks in which the leaders worked together on the basis of mutual trust and interdependence. The forming of the area-based trade union groups and the SERC enabled the trade unions to have the new leading organisations of collective action in the defense of the workers' common interests, while the national labour congresses could not fulfil this task.

Since the late 1980s, the SERC has developed to be a formal centre of the state enterprise unions, it functioned more and more like a national labour congress of the state enterprise employees. The area-based trade union groups have remained loose coordination centres of the unions in the private sector. They, however, need to cooperate with the national labour congresses and depend on the resources provided by the NGOs in organising collective action

#### **6.4 The Different Characteristics of the Trade Unions**

From the results of the dissertation, the trade union movement in Thailand from 1972-2002 has not been characterised by a unique type of trade unionism, but by the articulation of the social movement and the economic union models. The different characteristics of the trade unions are the consequences of the interaction between the internal conditions of the trade unions, which changed from time to time, and the external conditions, which also changed from time to time. In chapters three, four and five, the dissertation discussed the factors that have shaped or influenced the different characteristics of the trade unions in three phases of its developments.

##### **6.4.1 Social Movement Unionism: A Characteristics of the Trade Unions in Certain Specific Situations**

The social movement unionism is identified as the dominant characteristic of the Thai trade Unions in the period from October 14, 1973 to October 6, 1976. During this period, the trade unionism is defined by the integration of three components, defense of the common interests of workers, mobilisation of the class collective action, and participation in the movements for political purpose and broad social objectives. These three elements are always present in the union activity, but they are often separated. It was only in the specific situations after the October 14, 1973, uprising that the trade unions had been able to reach the state of the social movement unionism, when the three elements appeared in the trade union movement.

The specific situations in the period of 1973-1976 were the several crucial conditions that enabled the trade unions to defend the common interests of the workers simultaneously with the development of their broad social objectives. The first condition was the growth of the working class under the modern industrialisation. The second condition was the emergence of the unprecedentedly democratic climate that provided the opportunities for the radical ideology and militant social movements to develop. The third condition was the union leaders' commitment to defend the interests of the workers.

When these conditions interacted, the trade unions could mobilise class collective action under the leadership of strong organisations to defend the common interests of their members and to participate in the movements for political purpose and broad social objectives.

#### **6.4.2 Transformation of Social Movement Unionism to Economic Unionism**

The economic unionism is identified as the dominant characteristic of the trade unionism in the post-1976 period, in which the trade unions strongly defended the specific interests of their members, but failed to organise class collective action and distanced themselves from the movements for broad social objectives.

The political elements of the mid-1970s that radicalized and broadened the unions' objectives disappeared after the October 6, 1976 coup d' e tat. Socialist ideology and the strong student movement collapsed. The trade unions developed under the new political and economic circumstances of stable parliamentary system, semi democratic system, and the rapid growth of the export-led economy. The new social movements that emerged to replace the students in catalysing the social transformation were led by the NGOs.

When the economy achieved high growth rates in the 1980s, the conditions of economic boom facilitated the success of the unions' collective demands on the increase of wages and the enactment of the social security laws. As there was no effective organisation to mobilise class collective action at the national level, trade unions in the state enterprises and private enterprises acted separately to defend the interests of their members.

The decline of the social movement unionism after 1976 was associated with the decline of the national organisations of the trade

unions. Several national labour congresses in the 1980s obviously showed that they concentrated on providing private benefits for the leaders and some members, rather than providing the collective goods for the workers at large. As the national labour congresses developed to be the self-serving interest organisations, it was easy for the elite to co-opt the leaders of these organisations by forming the patron-client relations in order to control their collective action and used them as political instruments during periods of political crisis.

Interaction between trade unions and the NGOs in the 1980s developed between the labour NGOs and some groups of trade unions. However, Collaboration between trade unions and the NGOs did not lead to the involvement of organised workers in the broad social issues beyond the workers' interests. Since mobilising workers to support the NGOs movements was not the primary goal of the labour NGOs in working with trade unions, the NGO activists made no effort to build up a connection with strong unions that had potential to support the NGO movements. Instead, the NGO activists viewed themselves as a supportive element of trade union movement. Their main target groups were, therefore, those grassroots workers suffered by low wage and poor working conditions, and the unions of these workers. Consequently, the NGOs facilitated the growth of the economic unionism but could not radicalize the trade union movement as the student did in the mid- 1970s.

#### **6.4.3 New Characteristics of the Economic Unionism**

The growth of the economic unionism was interrupted by the sudden change in the political situation after the coup d' e tat on February 24, 1991. The revival of authoritarianism and strict labour control policies caused the trade unions to participate in the movements for political purpose again. However, the situations after the political uprising in May, 1992, did not provide the conditions for the trade unions to develop the social movement characters as did in the post- October 1973. The dominant characteristic of the trade unions remained the economic unionism, but it developed with some new characteristics that were different from the economic unionism in the previous decade.

The first new characteristic of the trade union movement was the extension of the unions' collective demands to the political dimensions. In the May, 1992 events, two groups of trade unions played the contrasting roles as the pro- and anti- democratic forces. However, the trade unions' political activism declined rapidly after the May 1992 events.

The second new characteristic of the trade union movement was that the trade unions are more dependent of their alliances in organising the collective action to defend the workers' interests. In the campaigns on the labour issues, the trade unions did not autonomously mount collective action, but the major demonstrations were organised through the coalitions that formed around particular issues. On the 90 days maternity leave campaign, the coalition was formed between trade unions and the NGO working on women's and labour issues. On the OSH campaign, the activities were organised by the wide spectrum of organisations, including the NGOs, academics, and the rural poor networks. The reasons why the trade unions needed to depend on the coalitions and why they could gain support from their alliances are related to the organisational weakness of the trade unions and the nature of their collective demands.

After the May, 1992, events, the area-based trade union groups and the SERC could not restore their roles as the centres of the trade unions in organising collective action. Consequently, there has been no strong organisation to mobilise workers' collective action. The trade unions thus have to compensate for the weakness of their constituency base by cultivating ties and forming coalitions with the other like-minded groups.

However, the coalitions could be found also because the demands of the trade unions overlapped the aims of the unions' alliances. The demands for the 90 days maternity rights promoted the women's rights, which are the goal of the international women's movement and the local woman NGOs. The trade unions were thus supported by the international and local organisations that deal with women's rights issues.

On the OSH campaign, when the occupation-related sick defined themselves as the victims of the state development projects, they were included in the members of the Assembly of the Poor, and hence, their demands for fair compensation were supported by the rural poor networks. When the trade unions developed the issues of the campaign to the demand for an establishment of the Institution of Occupational Safety, Health and Environmental Protection in the Workplace (IOSH), the scope of the defense of the workers' interests was extended from the workplace level to the reform of an OSH protection at the national level. This type of demand could attract the attentions of the social activists from the NGOs, academics and medical experts more than the demands for the immediate benefits that affected only some particular groups of workers. As a result, these social activists from various groups strongly supported the trade unions and sometimes played more active than the union actors in the OSH campaign.

In the anti-privatisation campaign, the state enterprise also linked the defense of their members' interests to a broader issue concerning the public interests in the protest against privatisation. Within this new agenda, trade unions could gain more sympathy from other like-minded groups than when they focused solely on their members' employment interests in 1989-1990.

As a final conclusion, the development of the trade union movement in Thailand from 1972-2002 reflects the articulation of different characteristics of the trade unionism. From 1972 to 1976, the dominant characteristic of the trade unionism was the social movement unionism, in which the political consciousness and broad social objectives of the trade unions developed within the specific situations. From 1977 to 1990, the social movement unionism transformed into the economic unionism when the trade unions turned to concentrate only on the primary objective of the trade unions, the defense of the common interests of workers. Under the new circumstances in the post-1990 period, the economic unionism has developed towards the new characteristics, in which the trade unions defend the common interests of the workers by organising collective action through the coalitions of trade unions and the other like-minded groups.

The ideological oriented of the union actors, the economic conditions, political situations and the development of the other social movements are the determinants in shaping and influencing the unions' objectives, the forms of organisation of collective action, and hence the different characteristics of the trade unions at different periods of time.

From the recent development of the Thai trade union movement at the present period, I would like to add some remarkable issues that are important to the future of the trade union movement.

First, in order to develop the coordination between the trade unions and the other social movements, the trade unions need to broaden their demands and extend their collective action to include the interests of those social movements. Only when the unions' collective demands are considered as the mutual benefits between the trade unions and the other social movements and when the trade unions show their commitment to a wide definition of interest representative, can the coalitions of the trade unions and the other social movements develop.

Second, according to the changes in the structure of employment, the possibility of the trade unions' continuing their relevant role in the social development also depends on their ability to open up membership beyond those who work in the formal factory system. As a consequence of the economic crisis, a large numbers of trade unions' members were laid off and there have been increasing numbers of the workers who work in the informal industrial sector, such as the home-based workers and the casual workers. The formal- factory workers based type of trade unionism is, indeed, in crisis for the reasons above. The future of the trade union movement thus depends on the ability of the trade unions to extend their agenda to cover the interests of those workers in the informal sector and have them as the power base of trade unions.

The final important point is that the sustainability of collective action is a crucial problem of the labour campaign in the present period. As the major demonstrations were organised through coalitions rather than the labour organisations, the collective action has some constraints on becoming a sustainable movement. When the campaign is not highly mobilised or over, there is no permanent organisation to continue the purpose of the campaign and sustain the result of the campaign.

Given the conditions that the trade unions are weak and relatively powerless, the formation of a coalition could strengthen the bargaining power of the workers. However, the collective action for the workers' interests can be sustained only when the trade unions play the key role in the coalition and have the other parties as their supportive elements in the campaigns for their own interests. If their allies play a more active role in the leadership of the campaigns, the continuing role of the trade unions as representatives of the working class will be in doubt. The trade union movement will thus face a challenging question, according to Croach (Crouch 1990: 359): unions may have a long-term future, but do union movements?

