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# **Malaysia: Chinese Anarchists Started Trade Unions**

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K. Baradan's article on "The men who gave all for justice" in *The Star* (National Day Supplement) of August 31, 1993, is extremely interesting.

It is the first time that the public has been informed of the role the British administration played in the shaping of the trade union movement in Malaya. The man directly responsible for grooming trade unionists and founding trade unions was John Brazier. Baradan pointed out that as early as 1949, Sir Henry Gurney (the High Commissioner assassinated near Fraser's Hill in 1951), wanted the trade union movement to be controlled by Indians. This partly answers a question which has long been posed in this country, namely "Why is it that the Indians appear to dominate the trade unions?"

The answer usually given was that the Indians, being more talkative, took more easily to trade unionism. This is almost similar to Harry Miller's answer to the question: "Why was the communist movement in this country dominated initially by the Hainanese?" Miller's answer was that they had an inferiority complex. This is no more than coffee shop talk.

The Indians were not the pioneers of the trade union movement in this country. The Chinese were. Trade union activities began, clandestinely, after World War I.

They were led by a group of Chinese who subscribed to the ideology of anarchism. Not surprisingly, it was brought to this country from China. In China, the person widely acknowledged as the "Father of Anarchism" was Lau Sze Fuk (known in history books as Liu Shih-fu).

In 1912, he founded in Canton an anarchist organisation called the Cock-crow society (Hui-ming hsueh-she) which published the *Min-Sheng* (Voice of the People) magazine, better known in this country as *Man Seang* (in the Cantonese dialect).

Its French edition was given the title *La Voco de la popolo* (in Esperanto, the international language which failed to take off).

In 1914 Lau Sze Fuk founded, in Shanghai, the Comrades for Anarchistic Communism Society also known as the Chinese Anarchist Party which, in Chinese was called *Wu-cheng-fu tang*, (in Cantonese, *Mo Cheng Fu Tong*), literally, "No Government Party". It expressed in a very simplistic way the concept of anarchism.

The Anarchist Party was established in Malaya by 1919 and its objectives were stated to be as follows:

*"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Community of Goods, Co-operation ; each does what he can and takes what he needs : no government, laws or military forces, no landlords, capitalists or leisured class. No money, religion, police, prison or leaders, No representatives, heads of fami-*

*lies, no person uneducated or not working : no rules of marriages, no degrees of high or low, rich or poor, and the method to be adopted is given by organisation of comrades by means of communication centres, by propaganda in pamphlets, speeches and education, by passive resistance to those in power. Do not pay taxes, cease work, cease trade ; by the method of direct action, assassinate and spread disorder. Anarchy is the great revolution.”*

It is clear from the various terms used by the movement in this country that it was spearheaded by the Cantonese. One of the pioneers of this movement in Malaya was Lau Hak Fei, a brother of Lau Sze Fuk. Before coming to Kuala Lumpur where he became editor of Yik Khwan Po newspaper, he was also an editor of a paper in Manila. By 1920, Anarchist societies had existed in Singapore, Penang, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and Seremban. Some of the Chinese schools were important centres of activities.

The Anarchist movement in this country seems to have received its earliest impetus from the May 1<sup>st</sup> (rather May 4<sup>th</sup>) demonstration of 1919. In an account of the movement in Malaya, by one of the leaders, it was stated that:

*“On May 1, 1919, the Peking students started distributing to the inhabitants of the city hundreds of thousands of “Holy Labour” loaves. At the same time in Shanghai, thousands of workers joined the students in a big procession through the streets. And so this enthusiastic movement had a great effect upon the whole nation, and later on the South Seas (Nanyang). Many propertyless men in the South Seas long sunk in slumber were awakened. And for the first time they began to know that there has existed such a thing as Labour Day.”*

Owing to its preponderant interest in the workers, the principal recruiting ground of this movement was, not unexpectedly, the various Chinese trade guilds, which had long existed in this country.

The Anarchists looked upon May 1 as a day of great importance not only because it was symbolic of the labourers' struggle against capitalism but also because it was a significant day in the history of all revolutionary movements in general, being the day on which Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830), founded the Illuminati in Bavaria in 1776. It was, however, a short-lived movement of republican free thought. In this country, May Day was first celebrated, clandestinely but with great enthusiasm, by the Anarchists in Ipoh in 1921. A big meeting was held which was attended by workers and students. The following year it was intended to distribute

tens of thousands of leaflets on Labour Day but the scheme fell through because no printer was prepared to undertake the job.

However, numerous Anarchists publications entered the country that year among which were: Kung Sai Yam (Save the World), Kung Chan Tong (the Communist Party) and Anarchists Morality by Kropotkin. There were also pamphlets printed or published locally such as the Tai Yeung (the Sun) printed at the premises of the Yik Khwan Po in Kuala Lumpur and Yan Kheun (Power of the Proletariat) which was published in the town of Gopeng, about ten miles south of Ipoh.

The Anarchist movement in Malaya entered an even more active phase in 1924 when several new leaders emerged especially in Kuala Lumpur. But there were probably not more than 50 hardcore members in the Peninsula. Their influence was reported to have reached a much wider circle of Chinese, especially among the school teachers.

The last major activity of the Anarchists in Malaya occurred in 1925 when an attempt was made, first to assassinate the High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States and Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Lawrence Guillemard.

When this failed to materialise they turned their attention to Daniel Richards, the Protector of Chinese for Selangor. On January 26, 1925, a Chinese woman (Wong Sau Ying), about 26 years old, with bobbed hair, wearing a white jacket, black shirt, white shoes and white stockings, arrived at the Chinese Protectorate in Kuala Lumpur. She brought with her a small brown attaché case. Finding Daniel Richards and his assistant (W.L. Blythe) seated at a table, she entered the office, placed the case near a corner of the table and spoke softly to Richards.

She then fumbled with the catch of the attaché case pushed it towards Richards. There was an explosion. Both Richards and Blythe were injured but survived.

The assassin was apprehended and subsequently sentenced to 10 year imprisonment. While serving sentence in the Pudu Gaol she committed suicide by hanging herself. After the bomb incident, the Anarchist movement in Malaya fizzled out. The Communists took over the role of inciting workers to oppose their employers and government and government.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Chinese were the active trade unionists, receiving no official sanction though, in Malaya. Their leaders, being mainly leftists, were arrested as soon as they gained influence.

It was only after World War II that the government embarked on a deliberate policy of grooming Indians to take control of workers' unions as a counter to the influence of the radical Chinese.