

History of Anarchism in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia

Transcript from Red Star Videos video

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South East Asia has been ravaged by all of the world's colonial powers. There is no country that's been left untouched by capitalist Europe. Imperialism is grinding out cell phones, clothes, etc with the world's most impoverished, including children working in slave conditions. Yet, here we find the people fighting back with great intensity, from within anti-colonial, communist, and anarchist movements. Today we are looking at the history of anarchism from not just one, but three countries.

Malaysia & Singapore

Malaysia was a colony of the British Empire for 300 years. Anti-colonial struggles have been going on for a long time before the arrival of Chinese immigrants in Malaysia, which brought with them anarchism. They began forming worker's organizations, most notably the "Heart Society" and "Society of Anarcho-communist comrades. These were first formed in Shanghai in 1914, mostly organized by Liu Shifu. Liang Bixiang, a friend of Shifu, went to Singapore to publish the Heart Society's paper "The Voice of Truth", which spread throughout many parts of Malaya. He and other anarchists also headed Chinese schools that were used for spreading anarchist ideas and practices. Eventually, anarchism became so influential with the Malaysian working class that through the 1910s, many strikes were carried out at several sea ports from Shanghai to Singapore. British intelligence noted much of these dock worker's unions had close ties to anarchists and other socialist organizations. Near the end of the First World War, the Society of Truth was established in Singapore. Hu Duchu and Fan Chag-pu took up the responsibility of dissemination of anarchist works in the Malay language. They were able to distribute 10,000 copies of their work. From May 4th, 1919 to June, protests erupted after the Paris peace conference of the transfer of German territory in Shandong to Japan, and this evolved into street riots and anti-Japanese boycotts. Hu and Fan were arrested by the British authorities for orchestrating the events, and were put in prison for life, destroying the Society of Truth. This didn't stop the anarchists, as one famous Goh Tun-ban, an anarcho-communist, created the publication "For the Benefit of the People" which helped further anti-imperialist sentiments among the Malay people. He advocated for national liberation from the European empires and Japanese influence, and that to create a revolution required the help of the intelligentsia to enlighten the people and to set up a system of Soviets just like the Russian revolution. British authorities arrested him and 5 other of his comrades and deported them to China, where he advocated reform and uniting of the Chinese elite to drive out foreign influence. In the mid-1920s the largest Malaysian anarchist group, the Anarchist Federation started to become more active as it increased its agitation within public schools and unions, and further production of materials. Then on January 3rd, 1925, two anarchists attempted to assassinate the Governor of Straits Settlements and High Commissioner of the Federated Malay States, Laurence Guilliernard during an inspection tour in Penang. But it failed, so they planned another assassination attempt on the 25th, when anarchist Wong Sung attempted to kill the British official for the Chinese affairs in Selangor, Daniel Richards. She entered the Chinese protectorate building with a briefcase while Daniel Richards was on the phone. She opened the briefcase in front of him and a bomb went off. Richards, Wong, and several other people were injured, and Wong was sent to prison. This led to British authorities routing out the anarchist movement, mostly arresting and deporting anarchists to China, ending anarchist activity in 1927, which was replaced by Leninist workers.

Anarchism did not reappear until the 1990s, which primarily came from the younger generation as well as the punk counterculture. Organizations like Anti-racist action, food not bombs, and the anarcho-punks federation distributed zines, funds for assistance for residents, charity punk concerts, distribution of old clothes, and free laundry. The Black cross helped assist persecuted people in jails and in prisons. Lack of translated anarchist literature and the high cost of books was a big issue. Websites are heavily monitored by the government, printing of seditious literature is illegal, and anyone deemed "dangerous could be imprisoned without trial. Most anarchist literature and zines came from outside of the country, usually from Indonesia. Infoshops distributed them, and around 2010 zines in Malay began to be published. Around 2011, anarchists attempted to attract students into participating in International Worker's Day demonstrations. Each year since, more and more people joined May Day marches. On May 1st, 2015, 30 anarchists and other demonstrators protested the rise in the cost of living, cutting of social payments and the rise of taxes in Kuala Lumpur, in which protestors clashed with the police. Anarchists used colored smoke bombs and firecrackers, while police used water cannons and tear gas. 30 people were arrested. On August 28, policemen

armed with automatic weapons stormed the Rumah Api during a concert and detained 160 people for several days, including guests from the US, Germany, Spain, the Philippines and Indonesia. Further repression is still carried out against anarchists today, particularly in Singapore where any kind of speech that is considered “seditious” can make one subject to arrest. In spite of such restrictions, anarchists pushed forward into the 2010s, like the Kuam Babi was an anarchosyndacalist group who have been agitating in factories all over Malaysia and Singapore. The intend to create a network of workers unions that can become a federation. Many of these anarchist organizations remain active today.

Indonesia

Indonesia was a colony of the Dutch. Anarchism emerged in the early 1900s, and was baked in with anti-colonial ideology. There was no organized group of anarchists in Indonesia during the early 1900s, but there were some individuals who were active in socialist trade unions, sailor’s unions, and the Social Democratic party. We’re not totally sure who made up the anarchist part of the groups, but some were Indian and Chinese anarchists. Throughout the 1920s many anarchist organizations were popping up, such as the Union of Religious Anarcho-Communists, Worker’s Party of the South Seas, and the Society of Truth, founded by Liu Shifu’s brother, Liu Shixin. They mostly published newspapers as well as the Worker’s Party agitated in unions. According to intelligence documents, they had connections in Singapore and China, and influenced uprisings on plantations on several islands. The Society of Truth was repressed by the police, deporting Liu Shixin to China, and the rest of his comrades to Hong Kong. This dealt a significant blow to the anarchist movement, but it was still kicking throughout the 1920s. From 1920-1921, a series of strikes from 15,000 workers of the Deli Railway Company was enacted due to low wages. The peasantry sympathized with the strikes sending in food. The government sent 100 workers to prison, who on the way chanted “in prison we will be better fed than in our enterprises.” The authorities believed Chinese anarcho-communist Zhang Shimei was one of the people who organized the strike. He was deported to New Guinea. Anarchists had publications throughout the 1920s, but even after independence in 1945, anarchism wouldn’t reappear until the early 90s. Anarchism really kicked into gear in the late 90s through the punk rock scene, in which anarchists became more active in trade unions, zine publishing, and online publishing. Translations of Western anarchist works into Indonesian languages also became more widespread. Organizations like Food not Bombs and the Bandung Antifascist Front oriented themselves to participating in strikes alongside worker’s unions. However, many anarchist organizations came and went throughout the early 2000s, and some flat out refused to work on joint projects simply because one anarchist group had a different ideological stance than the other. Yet, the anarchists would have their watershed moment on May 1st 2007, when they organized 1000 activists for an international worker day demonstration, which would help facilitate more stable relationships across all the islands and cities as anarchists participated in numerous protests together. On May 1st 2008 in Jakarta, 200 anarchists clashed with police, all were arrested. This dealt a blow to the presence of anarchists, but slowly more anarchists popped up on neighboring islands, and May Day protests were becoming a regular occurrence. In 2016, with the help of Australian anarchists, the Brotherhood of Anarcho-syndacalist workers was formed. They participated with unions at protests against low wages, and a strike with taxi-drivers of Uber to demand better pay and better conditions.

Information on anarchists in South East Asia is relatively sparse, with new works still being discovered and translated. We can still learn much about how they attempted to fight back against colonialism. One lesson is the ways in which many of them were integrated in working class struggles. All throughout history up to now, anarchists in these countries are going into unions and helping out however they can while pushing for more anarchist positions. The May Day demonstrations have also clearly struck a chord with the young working class as each year the protests become more numerous, and so does the number of anarchists. Agitation in less traditional areas like within alternative public schools was also effective in spreading anarchist ideas. Most valiantly, in spite of the iron discipline their islamic fundamentalist governments try to impose, the anarchists are still finding ways to get their voices heard, and that would not be possible without international support. Here in the west we must take the lesson of creating solidarity networks amongst each other so we can assist in each other’s projects as that clearly makes their organi-

zations more effective. The struggle continues, but the anarchists of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia are on the right track and we should work alongside them in the West.

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