Reflections on Internationalism

16 May 2026

Capital accumulation blooms across borders, summoning forth class struggles that are, like its progenitor and foe, international in character. In abstract terms, the abolition of space and transgression of borders by the capitalist mode of production provide the material base upon which working class internationalism grows. In concrete terms, transnational connections and points of strategic intervention emerge organically from a thorough analysis that traces the flow of capital, commodities, labor, and migration in any seemingly isolated node of class struggle. Internationalism is, therefore, a weapon of class war; internationalism is a method of struggle that emerges from the economic and political conditions of class struggle.

In this essay, I explain, reflect upon, and critique our efforts at internationalism from below in Singapore and Rempang from 2022 to 2025, involving comrades and organizations from Singapore, Indonesia, and migrant worker comrades throughout South Asia. In choosing to do so, rather than providing a general and historical perspective, I'm hoping to share the devastating enthusiasm for internationalism that pervades the working classes today. Internationalism from below as a core component of revolutionary communism is not a bygone historical relic; it is possible for us, in our regions, in the here-and-now. If anything, given the last decade of descent into protectionism and militarism, given the looming threat of regional war, a working class that is virtually connected across borders, and unprecedented rates of migration, has there ever been a comparable epoch in which internationalism was more necessary and promising? I also hope that focusing on actually existing internationalism today can help us collectively think about how we can work towards a revolution within our turbulent, horrifying, and exciting times.

My introduction to internationalism came from our efforts to organize domestic and migrant workers in Singapore by working with established domestic and migrant worker unions in Indonesia. We identified two key organizers: A had already been living in Singapore for a year and B was going to start working in Singapore within a few months. Both were experienced and capable organizers. We also got in touch with a migrant worker union that had successfully organized an underground domestic worker union in Singapore. Unfortunately, we later discovered that the Singapore state was aware of its existence and financially supported the union as long as it limited itself to advocacy work. B introduced us to yet another organizer, C, who had successfully organized an informal network of domestic workers to study politics, discuss working conditions, and learn about negotiation skills. It is worth mentioning that many migrant worker NGOs threatened C against forming a union, persistently reminding her that it was illegal activity and it would be better to work within the NGO framework instead.

These connections allowed us to learn about the practice of organizing from seasoned organizers and provided existing relationships of trust to further develop in our work. In turn, A, B, and C felt supported by the presence of other students and workers who wanted to struggle and learn with them. None of the domestic and migrant worker unions we contacted were politically aligned with us. Most fought only for immediate economic gains, replicating bourgeois hegemony by following Martov's path of least resistance. A few were under the political leadership of revisionist Marxists who are pursuing parliamentary representation and work under the guidance of a vanguard party. But A, B, and C were all receptive and curious about our politics.

Another point I want to get across on this topic is that the international transmission of organizers follows from the flow of labor across borders, which in turn emerges from regional capital flows. Internationalism is not so much a choice as it is a practical reality that emerges from the transnational flow of capital. Capital is the womb of our internationalism. We did not choose in the abstract the sectors and nationalities we wanted to work with; capital made the choice for us, opened the possibility, and we swam along the river currents.

Singapore is *the* colonial state of Malaya. That is a curse and yet a blessing in disguise, as it has made Singapore into a melting pot for seasoned labor and peasant organizers from across Malaya and South Asia. We ended up with our approach by sincerely throwing things at the wall and working with whatever stuck. A more efficient and thorough approach would've been to start with an analysis of the flow of migration and migrant labor into Singapore; to map the sectors and nationalities per region within Singapore; then to research what existing unions, labor organizations, and informal relationships we could leverage; and finally, to identify seasoned organizers to work with. Internationalism is not a moral choice, but a political possibility built upon our economic condition.

B and C pointed out that we were naive to tunnel vision our efforts on Indonesian domestic workers. While we didn't intend to limit ourselves to domestic workers of a certain nationality, a national myopia emerged from our own accidental condition, namely that the Indonesians among us were the ones who had reached out to unions in Indonesia. At a theoretical level, our limitations were produced by our reliance on organic spontaneity and our

neglect of economic conditions as the foundation of a revolutionary strategy that includes internationalist practice. At an organizational level, we started on the wrong foot. It was not possible to organize with more than Indonesian domestic workers given our lackluster degree of organization. More on questions of organization later.

That said, an economic relationship is not necessary for internationalist practice; such claims are reductively materialist. In Rempang, we once read about the colonial origins of state-coordinated forest conservation in Punjab, which was met with direct action in the form of illegal logging. Our study circle was moved to fury and grief by our reading of that dry academic essay. The next day, I was shocked to find our farmers replicating that exact form of direct action en masse, even though the economic gains were disproportionate to the risk. We could get wood elsewhere for free and many in Rempang had been imprisoned for illegal logging. I felt an uncanny and irrational sense of collective spite in the atmosphere. For better or worse, it was as though we were enacting revenge for the ghosts of a distant past, with whom we unconsciously identified.

Conversely, D — a Punjabi worker who I had organized with in Singapore — called me every day. D provided invaluable advice and comparison from his time organizing in the Punjabi peasant unions. To D, we owed our eventual understanding that productive forces — heavy machinery and industrial production — are also weapons of class war, not just instruments of economic efficiency; ignoring the necessity of developing our productive forces remains one of the most glaring and idealist errors of revolutionary anarchism. After listening to our stories, D would always remark that "in Punjab, like this also", identifying with our struggle despite our glaring differences. D supported me financially so I could drop waged labor and focus on organizing, even though he wasn't making enough money for himself and his family. I felt distressed and touched by his solidarity and friendship. He reminds me of Lacan's remark that "love is giving what you don't have to someone who doesn't want it."

D's story is one of many. Were I to indulge myself in these little stories of what internationalism has been in my life — the domestic workers who paid for my medical bills, the catering workers who surprised me with a birthday cake, the students who cried on the docks of Rempang — there would be too little space in this essay for a discussion of internationalism as a weapon of war.

The theoretical and practical point I want to deliver is that unconscious mechanisms in interpersonal relationships are no less central to internationalist practice than the underlying economic scaffolding. Strategy requires us to start from an abstract analysis of capital and only then move towards the concrete reorganization of social life. But at the level of sense perception and concrete experience, organizing work is entirely dependent on these personal relationships and unconscious drives. Nurturing and developing these relationships across borders is difficult enough. Organizing unconscious identifications, projections, projective identifications, and repressed drives into structured organizational practices and a revolutionary stratagem is the labor of our lifetimes. Letting the unconscious loose without appreciating the conscious analysis and planning required in class war, as in the fetishization of organic and spontaneous resistance, is dangerously naive; in any case, Martov's path of least resistance can only reproduce bourgeois hegemony. On the other end, fantasies of taming the unconscious result in the death of working class resistance under the bureaucratic whip of its supposed leadership. Lenin's oeuvre can be read as the impossible obsessive desire for control over the unconscious, projected into the sphere of revolutionary theory.

Another advantage of Singapore's colonial position was the discrepancy in our currency exchange rates. Fundraising in Singapore dollars had a very large impact; we had sufficient funds to do whatever our organizing work required, with the critical exception of industrializing our collective production, which required an inordinate amount of capital. Instagram fundraising in collaboration with environmental and student organizations in Singapore provided the bulk of our income.

A brief remark on industrialization before we continue with our fundraising discussion. Peasant-led agroecology experiments and research in our study circles proved to be a shocking success; over multiple hectares, we managed to grow challenging crops — like chilies and corn — without synthetic input. The peasant-to-peasant model of agriculture education — we had learned from *campesino a campesino* in Latin America and the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil — spread our discoveries and know-how like wildfire across the farms of Rempang. Yet in pushing the edges of our knowledge, we were limited by our lack of access to research equipment and our unfamiliarity with the literature on agricultural production. Many of the technical and scientific challenges we faced posed an unnecessary and avoidable struggle. During the last few months of our work, we tried contacting scientists and researchers who were interested in working with us. For instance, a researcher visited Rempang and shared very helpful information

about the fermentation process required to turn fishery waste into fertilizer. But these attempts came near the end of our work and were therefore underdeveloped.

Another related challenge was our lack of heavy machinery and mechanization, worsened by the even more labor-intensive processes required by agroecology. Under these conditions, our adoption of agroecology increased working hours, to the bitter dissatisfaction of our peasantry. The question of industrialization is one of the most critical challenges to internationalism from below and revolutionary anarchism. Without a socialist transitional period and a dictatorship of the proletariat, how can we reorganize technology and capital transfers on the scale required to catalyze industrialization in former colonies? Changing the relations of production is insufficient for communism; our productive forces must be developed to reduce working hours, achieve higher living standards, divest from fossil-fuel based energy production, and finance our military needs.

Back to fundraising. At first, nearly all the money went into legal and financial support for our political prisoners. Without a revolutionary program in mind, supporting our political prisoners made humanitarian sense. All the political prisoners received legal support and living necessities, and were eventually released. However, after months of torture, threats to their families, and brutal prison conditions, many chose to collaborate with the state as paid agents. Others were understandably too afraid and disillusioned to continue organizing. Despite the amount of capital allocated and the volume of suffering partially mitigated, the manner in which we supported our political prisoners was a strategic dead end.

What we did was grossly insufficient. In retrospect, organizing the political prisoners could have provided hope and resilience behind bars; creating a medium for expression, something like Serikat Tahanan's journal, should have been a priority; and long-term psychotherapy could have helped the prisoners make sense of their experiences. Caretaker burnout resulted from our underestimation of secondary traumatization among those who cared for our political prisoners and organizers. At a structural level, we didn't have organized practices of collective care among those experiencing immediate violence nor among their caretakers. At the level of strategy, we had no support blueprint to go by and sporadically reinvented the wheel for each crisis; a flexible standard of protocol would've resulted in more thorough support and reduced our technical workload.

At an unconscious level, crisis response became the medium for unconsciously acting out repetitions from past relationships, ranging from rescue fantasies to masochistic sacrifice. These transferences provided a heroic compulsion for arduous organizational labor over a prolonged period. That said, we compulsively repeat in the hopes of breaking our repetitions. Disillusionment emerges from our failure to repeat differently, producing burnout and ruptures in relations of solidarity. Had we thought more carefully about structured collective care and the playing out of these transferences, we could have mitigated interpersonal and organizational ruptures. Going further, healing in psychoanalysis happens precisely by working through transferences enacted with the analyst; perhaps our neglect of the unconscious prevented us from catalyzing a more fundamental shift in our adaptive mechanisms and the interpersonal relationships that comprise our organized resistance. I am reminded of Freud's remark that any theoretical and practical effort which takes transference and resistance as its starting point can call itself psychoanalysis; organizing could be a form of psychoanalysis en masse: the psychoanalysis of the working classes could be integrated into everyday resistance beyond the clinic.

Our underlying theoretical deficiency was the lack of a strategy for organizing the working classes in Rempang as part of a revolutionary program. Without a focus on how we could work towards a revolution, we resorted to prioritizing work on the most severe and urgent violations of our shared moral sense. The material condition behind our theoretical lack was our lack of a revolutionary organization. As a spontaneously organized collective without theoretical unity over strategy and tactics, we were too mired in emergency work to consider our absence of an organizational foundation.

When we began, we compromised politically by working with punk affinity groups and legal support NGOs. We absolutely should not have worked with the legal support NGOs. Our financial support strengthened their organizational capacity. Once we started our attempt to build mass organizations and dual power, the legal support NGOs became an oppositional force against attempts at organizing beyond the confines of the NGO industrial complex and liberal spectacles. Our collaboration with the legal support NGOs was our biggest avoidable mistake. Spending a large portion of our finances to help raise our own eventual enemy was a disastrous blunder.

Afterward, we gave money to ”the people”, clarified its origins and intentions, invited everyone in each kampung into an open discussion over how we should use the money, and democratically decided on its use. This seemingly anarchist, spontaneous, and democratic process was our second biggest avoidable mistake. A democracy that orients itself around ”the people” instead of the working classes will only reproduce the ideology of its immanent conditions, in accordance with Martov's line of least resistance. In practice, poor farmers, farm workers, and fisherfolk were reluctant to express and vote for opinions that conflicted with the interests of rich peasants, middle peasants, landlords, and indigenous elders, who shaped the discourse. For example, a kampung followed a rich peasant's suggestion to spend 500$ on funding trips to NGO events in Jakarta and otherwise on cigarettes. Afterward, an angry grandmother scolded me for even involving the rich peasant in the discussion. Poor peasants and workers criticized us for involving parasites within ”the people” in our democratic process. It was for good reason that the Makhnovschina excluded kulaks and middle peasants from the democratic process; class democracy must be exclusionary, not inclusive without borders.

Likewise, we underestimated the practical extent to which democratic processes were inseparable from sexuality and reproduction. Women felt unsafe to attend meetings, which were typically scheduled at night, and had to self-organize buddy systems to avoid sexual assault on the way to our discussions. Most women were free during the afternoon while most men were only free at night; problematically, most of our decision-making discussions were scheduled at night. Many women wanted to attend, but most were too busy with domestic labor. To varying degrees of success, we promoted movement attendance by organizing childcare at discussion sites and reorganizing domestic labor to be done collectively within each village. Frustratingly, men refused to stop smoking during meetings, even though their habits prevented women with children and the ill from attending. Without fail, men spoke first and last, intellectualized more, rationalized more, and assumed greater authority; we eventually tried technical solutions, such as starting study circle discussions with a woman's contribution. At a theoretical level, the problem was in our view of democracy and decentralization as abstract ideals to be applied, rather than as a method of class struggle that is inseparable from its immanent conditions.

Instead, the key was in reorganizing our production and reproduction to forge anew our immanent conditions from the corpse of the present. Later on, our money went into cooperatives organized around coral reef restoration, agroecology over occupied land, and credit for peasants and petty bourgeois women. These decisions were initially unpopular and unilaterally initiated by our small circle of like-minded peasants, workers, and women. Nonetheless, our goal was to reorganize Rempang's material conditions to make democracy possible in organizations of class struggle and an eventual political body, rather than a bourgeois democracy of ”the people”, open to all and partisan to none. In this regard, we succeeded in building resilient and democratic institutions of class struggle: our land occupations and cooperatives have far outlasted our presence in Rempang.

Through our land occupations, agroecology, peasant cooperatives, coral reef restorations, and study circles, we improved by leaps and bounds the economic and political strength of our workers and peasants. By force, we displaced the police and paramilitary away from important roads and a few kampungs. But this was naively insufficient. Only after our organizers in Rempang were picked off by state repression did our structural error dawn upon us. We had little to no answer to defend against military and paramilitary attacks; our makeshift shields, umbrellas, construction equipment, basic first aid, and escape route maps were insufficient bandages. We wanted to overthrow the state, but we had no idea how to do so. Even though many of us shot arrows, swung swords, got a gun or two, and used transport vehicles as weapons of war, our military capacity was nothing compared to our opposition. Guerrilla warfare would've been suicidal in our thoroughly militarized and mapped out forests.

At a structural level, our lack of a revolutionary anarchist organization with a revolutionary program meant that we had no idea how to struggle towards the revolution we desired from our particular starting point. I do not mean to imply that revolutions emerge from conspiratorial designs. Revolutions do not develop by their own volition, nor are revolutions possible at every historical juncture in every territory. But we need an organization as a weapon of war to wage a prolonged and sustainable struggle, and the organization requires a defined revolutionary program to effectively coordinate our labor in the most fruitful manner. Without an organization, our efforts were plagued by the tyranny of structurelessness. We realized as much in the last few months of our work. Alas, the struggle was lost by then.

However, it does not follow that a revolutionary anarchist organization is a necessary prerequisite to internationalism, although it is necessary for an anarchist revolution. Internationalism is not a goal; internationalism is a method, an everyday component of class struggle by the workers of all nations; internationalism is part and parcel of the contradictions internal to capital accumulation across borders. The question of organizational structure and program, along with our attempts to answer these problems, was produced by internationalist practice, not the other way around. It would be backwards, therefore, to insist that we should have had such an organization or such-and-such practices; conversely, it would be idealist to digest our lessons as pointing toward a universally apt organizational structure and program. That said, I conjecture that the growing interest in organized anarchism represents a historical tide that is emerging from the limitations of unstructured affinity groups as a method of struggle.

Apart from the economic and unconscious foundation of internationalism, culture was yet another primary bedrock that connected the struggles in Singapore and Rempang. During a meeting between an Orang Laut community in Singapore with peasants and women from Rempang, both quickly recognized the glaring similarities between the two communities and declared each other family members undergoing a shared struggle. A sense of mutual belonging over the same jokes, familial bonds, language, foods, histories, and fishing traditions transcended recently established borders. Unconscious identification and subsequent camaraderie were borne by a shared symbolic order. Libidinal investment exploded as Rempang women swooned over one of the Orang Laut men, asking about his marital status and praising his handsome figure throughout the meeting. The unconscious foundation of internationalism is inseparable from how our symbolic order mediates our unconscious; it is also inseparable from our sexual perversions. One corollary is that a shared symbolic order is a catalyst for internationalist practice: a counterhegemonic symbolic order is a weapon of war that encourages unconscious identification and libidinal attachment. Generating that shared symbolic order from our existing one through collective pedagogy involving the working classes is the task of revolutionary art and theory. In this sense, revolutionary art and theory make possible the organizing process from which they necessarily emerge.

Rescue fantasies were at play from both the Singaporean and Indonesian sides of the Rempang equation, emerging from the underlying economic relationship between Singapore and Rempang. As Singapore had more capital and was a significant source of financial support, there was an initial power relation in decision making over funds. On the other hand, given Singapore's politically repressive climate, much was projected onto the Rempang struggle. From Singapore's standpoint, we disowned in ourselves and therefore projected our hope against overwhelming odds, our militant devotion despite intense repression, along with the collective capacity to reorganize our material conditions onto the Rempang struggle. In enthusiastically absorbing these projections and articulating themselves in the guise of these projections, the working classes in Rempang found a fountain of strength to rediscover anew their own hopes and capacities; they derived additional collective confidence and self-esteem from the idealized mirror of their own light. From Rempang's standpoint, many disowned their agency and therefore projected the shadow of an omnipotent parental figure or angelic colonial savior onto our comrades from Singapore. In accepting the projection, we confirmed in turn our collective capacity to impose our will upon the world and were further motivated to continue our work.

Our relationship worked not despite our projective identifications, shared phantasies, and idealized distortions, but precisely through these unconscious mechanisms. Critically, the projective identifications allowed us to metabolize unnamed dread, engage with disowned emotions, and rediscover our capacities through the other's digestion of our projections as we took turns in providing maternal reverie.

As important as working through rather than past our unconscious defensive mechanisms was our shared insistence on the eventual reabsorption of these projections and the flexibility of our projective identifications. During a forum discussion on Singapore's political condition, our comrades spoke about the suffocating limitations on their ability to organize and dissent. To unanimous cheering, a fisherman jumped in to suggest that our comrades from Singapore could do orations in Rempang instead. Many offered to provide housing and protection were our comrades ever to suffer exile. Without fail, workers drew a parallel between Soeharto's fall to our student and labor movement in 1998, and the seeming immortality of the People's Action Party in Singapore. Recently, I was delighted to hear the same encouragement given by factory workers when an anarchist comrade from abroad visited our factory occupation in Jakarta. In effect, these actions encouraged the introjection of projected hope by facilitating the other's agency, empathizing with their grief, and holding the hope for both parties until it can eventually be reabsorbed.

Conversely, as much as possible, we involved the Rempang working classes in fundraising and media work, encouraging them to oversee financial decisions and write about their struggle. By channeling funds into organizing cooperatives and land occupations instead of passively received handouts, we chose to encourage the exercise of their collective agency. But the transference of an idealized parental figure onto our organizers, myself included, posed a trickier and persistent challenge; in this regard, there are significant overlaps between the organizer and the psychoanalyst, and I refer the curious reader to the voluminous literature available elsewhere. I will limit myself to emphasizing that transference is the cornerstone of organizing, without which intimate and transformative work is impossible.

In Rempang, we organized live-in trips to facilitate our comrades from Singapore, who were interested in learning how to organize. Following the practice of going down to the masses, also known as *turba*, our comrades from Singapore enjoyed the same living, working, and organizing conditions as the working classes in Rempang. We ate the same food, worked the same fields, and slept in the same beds. *Turba* itself has a long internationalist history. Going down to the masses originated as part of the mass line strategy employed by the Communist Party of China; Indonesian communists adopted the technique in the 1950s and 60s. After the 1965 genocide against communists in Indonesia, *turba* disappeared from our organizing repertoire. Later in the 1980s and 1990s, *turba* was reabsorbed into the Indonesian left by Indonesian student organizers who studied with Maoist guerrillas in the Philippines, who had adopted the practice. *Turba*'s history is emblematic of how the accumulated strength and capacity of revolutionary struggles trample through borders, even in defeat. History does not wither away and die; the dead and buried speak in their own way. I am reminded of Luxemburg's final essay:

"What does the entire history of socialism and of all modern revolutions show us? The first spark of class struggle in Europe, the revolt of the silk weavers in Lyon in 1831, ended with a heavy defeat; the Chartist movement in Britain ended in defeat; the uprising of the Parisian proletariat in the June days of 1848 ended with a crushing defeat; and the Paris commune ended with a terrible defeat. The whole road of socialism — so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned — is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory! Where would we be today without those "defeats," from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? Today, as we advance into the final battle of the proletarian class war, we stand on the foundation of those very defeats; and we can do without any of them, because each one contributes to our strength and understanding."

Transmitting revolutionary know-how is not only an intellectual process, but an emotional ritual of identifying with the history of revolutionary class struggle across borders and epochs, of mourning its grief and carrying on the torch.

Today, many Indonesian anarchists criticize the implicit pedestal over the working classes implied by going "down" to the so-called masses. While I empathize with the critique, the practice itself promotes identification with the working classes and catalyzes an understanding of the material conditions from the standpoint of our working classes, producing an emotional and intellectual resonance that is impossible to otherwise obtain. Learning how to do revolutionary work is an affective process that requires prolonged and thorough immersion, as much an orally transmitted form of art as a rigorous scientific inquiry. Such learning is impossible to obtain in Singapore alone, was impossible in 1990s Indonesia, and remains impossible for many others, whose memories and traditions of revolutionary work have been severely repressed. But through experiencing immersion in revolutionary work elsewhere, organizers can access the shared international heritage of our struggle and their own alienated national histories, too. Through the other, we discover ourselves.

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As the capitalist mode of production continues its cascade into the decaying jaws of protectionism and militarism, we can realistically hope for the possibility of a revolutionary tide in our times. Unfortunately, anarchism remains poorly equipped to meet the challenges of a revolutionary rupture. For many, the 2025 August protest in Indonesia was a painful reminder of our incompetence in theory and practice. Given our exclusive defeatist focus on everyday resistance, our frozen deadlock within the organizational structure of affinity groups, and our naive romanticization of spontaneity, the possibility of an anarchist revolution in Asia remains a distant mirage. Our neglect of the pressing theoretical and practical questions of a proletarian revolution is a fatal lack.

In the last few years, anarchism in Indonesia has recentered the question of revolutionary organization and the necessity of working class organizations for an anarchist revolution — a collective step in the correct direction. Nonetheless, in practice, internationalism as a method of analysis and struggle remains underutilized. At the theoretical level, there remains little to no contemporary regional literature by anarchists on the questions of revolutionary organization and internationalist practice. Much work remains to be done.

I hope that my readers will have found in this work an operational framework to forge internationalism in practice, and that readers who are theoretically inclined will respond in turn by enriching our collective discourse on these matters. By showing how much was made possible through internationalism in spite of our amateurism, I hope to have sung a prelude to our collective possibilities in the times to come. As the working classes of Asia thunder against its chains in our pregnant epoch, there is much to fight for and oceans to fight with — as those willing to work through the mud will discover.

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https://realjuanlee.wordpress.com/2026/05/16/reflections-on-internationalism-from-below/