

“The police are like a mafia”

A Thai radical worker interview

Thalugaz

2021 September 04

A new radical working class faction has emerged in the past month amid the Thai democracy movement. Known as Thalugaz, the group is significantly bolder, more violent and virulently anti-state than the rest of the moment thus far. Gabriel Ernst runs down the current situation in Bangkok and interviews a lead coordinator for Thalugaz.

Street protests have gripped Thailand for the past year, particularly in the capital Bangkok. The movement has been marked by the three finger salute, signifying three demands; the resignation of the Prime Minister, the drafting of a new constitution and the reformation/ abolition of the monarchy. For the most part the protests have been organised by university students or recent graduates from the middle classes.

The Thai state, which is ruled in tandem by the quasi-military dictator Prayut Chan-o-cha and the King Vajiralongkorn have, thus far, given no concessions to the protestors and cracked down violently, with the use of tear gas, riot control vehicles, rubber bullets and more recently live rounds.

For the past few weeks, there have been constant violent protests in the Din Daeng neighbourhood of Bangkok. Din Daeng is an extremely deprived area of the capital, particularly after strict lockdowns in the latest wave of the Covid pandemic were implemented with virtually no economic assistance. Since mid-august, predominantly local working class youths have been fighting the police with improvised weapons like fireworks, small homemade bombs, slingshots and Molotov cocktails. This round of fighting has been notably different from previous protests in the Thai democracy movement as they are distinctly more violent and increasing in frequency.

Until recently the protests have been taking place without a clear group organising them. Liberal mainstays like Thammasat, the rural anarchist group DaoDin and avowed Marxists FreeYouth are all notably absent from the neighbourhood. However, a new group, Thalugaz, has surfaced to represent and attempt to formalise this localised movement. Thalugaz's social media has a distinctly anarchist/anti-capitalist tone and claims to speak for the underrepresented working class of Bangkok.

We spoke to the admin of the Thalugaz social media pages (name withheld).

Who are you and what do you do?

I'm the admin for the Thalugaz social media, I'm like an organiser for Thalugaz, a spokesperson and a coordinator. I'm from the Din Daeng area too. Protesters in Din Daeng have many organising teams on the ground in the protests so if they want to communicate to the public, they connect with me.

What is Thalugaz?

It started because some of the protesters in Bangkok, working-class people, felt excluded by the mainstream protest groups who always promote non-violent means of resistance. For us that's not enough, we can't wait any longer for this confrontation with the state, we need to do something now, different from the mainstream. So we formed this new group, this new movement, it's Thalugaz.

Who's behind Thalugaz?

First, we formed operation teams in the Din Daeng neighbourhood, it was people talking to each other and organising and then I started managing the public page. We made this page because we need to justify our actions to the people more broadly. We also began talking to other local people in the area face to face, because we need them to support and trust us, to understand our actions. It's important that we know how the people in the area feel about us and to maintain a strong relationship. So operation teams sent reports to me and I spread it around, we still do. But a lot of people in the neighbourhood have fought with the government before, many are former redshirts, they're the working class, they're tightly connected with the protests.

To be clear though, this is the new generation, some don't really know about the red shirts, they're too young, some just want to come out to have fun fighting the police, but there are older people there too, the young are learning from the old.

What's been the response of the local people to the protests?

To be honest, they don't like the protests being in their area, but they know it has to happen and they respect it, they don't blame us, they understand why we're doing this.

What's life like in Din Daeng?

It's a slum, it's horrible, we're oppressed people. The police are like a mafia that we have to live under. They take everything we have, they dominate us and we have to totally obey them. They're the main problem in the area, everyone hates them. It's like within the neighbourhood we're living in a totally corrupt mafia-run police state.

Your page has a distinctly Anarchist ideology, why is that?

To be honest, a lot of that comes from me. I've been reading a lot of anarchist books, my favourite is Mutual Aid from Kropotkin, but this connects with our movement, connects with the people.

How are the people in Din Daeng politicised?

A lot of people don't care about who the prime minister is, as long as their lives improve, so a lot of people are very politically transient, like water, they move around a lot. As I said, many of them are former redshirts, a lot of older people support Thaksin because their life was undoubtedly better under Thaksin or Thai Rak Thai (party). Most people, however, don't have time to think or read about politics, they're always working, struggling to survive but they hate Prayut (the prime minister) and hate the police.

How do you connect with wider working-class communities in Thailand?

It's always a struggle because as I said, people don't have time to read theory about anything like that. We try to make posts short and understandable for working-class people, make it different from the mainstream news and we can do that right because we are those people, but of course it's difficult.

In what ways are you not represented by other protest groups?

They are middle-class intellectuals. We are not intellectuals. We're working class, there's a gap there. They have this concept about fighting the police, that they wait for the police to strike first and then they respond. For us, we are being assaulted by the police our whole lives, they have always struck first, they treat us like shit, this is our justification. The whole structure of the police and the state is assaulting. How can you say we have to wait for them to hurt us first? They've been assaulting us our whole lives and nobody cares or listens. For us this is the only way to like, express ourselves, to have our voices heard. We've been completely excluded from society, but people need to know we exist, for us, this is class struggle, there's no other way.

Having said that, everyone is welcome to join us, we're totally open, but other protest groups are hesitant to join. It's not like they've been hostile to us, but they keep saying like "let's wait and see" I think I know why, it's a class thing. Frankly, a lot of middle-class people in the protests just can't understand us, they can't empathise with us, they just don't know.

Is there any plan to move forwards from here?

The short term plan is just to grow and express ourselves, create a leftist space for people like us in the protests. Like we don't use the three fingers, we use the clenched fist. Beyond that, we need to talk, have meetings, organise more deeply, right now we're collecting data and starting to make plans, but it's very early days and we need more support.

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Interview and intro by Gabriel Ernst. For more updates and analysis on the Thai protest movement visit www.dindeng.com. Or follow them on Twitter: @dindength.

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