

Fry, S. (2012). The Lao federation of trade unions: a classic dualist union. *International Journal of Employment Studies*, 20, 32 – 55.

In this article, Fry offers a detailed analysis of the Lao Federation of Trade Unions (LFTU). Rather than adopting a simplistic view of the LFTU, he argues that the LFTU is “a form of Leninist classic dualist union” and “a subordinate element of the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party” (p. 32).

Most of previous work make negative, and even disparaging, comments on the role of LFTU in protecting laborers’ rights. The focus point has often times been “what it is not and what it does not do” (p. 32). Fry acknowledges that the LFTU doesn’t meet the standards of western trade unions. However, he underlines “the question of what it is and what it does” and argues against the idea that the LFTU is “just the absence of western-style union” (p. 33).

The term of “the classic dualist model” of trade unions was proposed by Pravda and Ruble (1986), based on their research of unions in some socialist countries. This model assumes that fundamental conflicts in a socialist country are absent. Therefore, the socialist trades unions are different from the defensive trades unions in capitalist countries. There are three characters of “archetypal Classic dualism”: 1) unions are responsible for both “increasing production and protection of their members; interests” (p. 34); 2) the two working principles are “the production principle and democratic centralism” (p. 35); 3) the unions are governed by the party at all levels. In general, trades unions in different communist countries, albeit some variation, can be categorized as the classic dualist model.

In the year of 1956, against the backdrop of the civil war between the Lao Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and the Royal Lao Government (RLG) sponsored by the US government, the LPRP founded the LFTU. After 1975 when the LPRP triumphed, Laos didn’t have strong unions because its predominant industry was the agrarian economy and there was a lack of unionism before the revolution. The LFTU has been the only union body. Between the years of 1975 and 1986, the LFTU was an archetypical dualist union because it “was unambiguously framed within the official unitarist ideology of Marxism-Leninism” (p. 39), subjected to the Party, and conformed to the rule of democratic centralism.

During the reform era after 1986, a transition of planning economy to privatization took place. The LFTU has been adjusted to accommodate to the more privatized economy. Labor laws were released targeting employees in the private sector, and the LFTU has been made to protect employees in private enterprises. The LFTU is considered as “being one of the ‘social partners in the tripartite system’, along with employer organizations and government representatives” (p. 46). In the private sector, the capacity of the LFTU is emphasized, and LFTU has a better balance between production and protection functions. However, the influence of the FLTU on the private sector is limited with only a few private enterprises having a labor union chapter. Despite these changes, Fry argues, the LFTU is still classic dualist. First, it is controlled by the Party as an element of the LPRP’s political regime. Second, the production principle continues to be the basis of the LFTU’s membership. Third, democratic centralism remains the organizational principle.

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