Migrant workers in suburban HCMC: towards an emergent autonomous activism?

In HCMC's metropolitan area, suburban areas are home to a significant concentration of population and industrial estates. Essentially funded by foreign companies, HCMC's industrial parks are hubs for export activities and flows of internal migrant workers.[1] This concentration leads to various social and economic issues, including the temporary and incomplete integration of migrant workers into the community. Mostly coming from rural areas, Vietnamese migrant workers suffer various social and economic difficulties essentially due to a restrictive and obsolete internal residency permit system known as the *hộ khẩu* system. In response to such a precarious situation, Vietnamese migrant workers establish multiple individual and collective adaptation strategies. Furthermore, the dynamics linking the suburban areas, industrial estates and worker dormitories, create a new dominated social class eager to claim social rights and seek recognition from the authorities.

Trần Khắc Minh

From economic insecurity and social stigmatisation to adaptation strategies

Migrant workers' integration into the city is complicated for several reasons, both material and immaterial. Firstly, the majority of migrant workers live in poorly equipped dormitories, sharing small rooms of 15-18 square metres.[2] Migrant workers' consumption patterns and lifestyles are also characterised by the rationalisation of essential expenses, leaving aside leisure expenses. Their working lives are monotonous and exhausting, yet they are poorly paid, with monthly wages ranging from 100 to 200 euros per month.

Alongside the economic insecurity, migrant workers in HCMC also suffer from social stigmas, reflected clearly in a restrictive residential registration system and a widely held anti-migrant mentality in the Vietnamese urban society. The majority of migrant workers in HCMC only own short-term residency permits (KT3 or KT4), which have many administrative constraints: owners of these residency permits are unable to access the housing market, to send their children to public schools or to benefit from the local healthcare system. Furthermore, the administrative process to obtain permanent residency permits for migrant workers is particularly slow or even deliberately delayed by local authorities.[3] The anti-migrant mentality pervasive in the Vietnamese society leads to inferiorisation of the migrants.[4] Finally, the relationship between migrant workers and the local suburban population could be described as an identity conflict between a young and dynamic urban world, inspired by modernity, and a declining ancient rural world.[5] Industrial zones in Vietnamese metropolises are a perfect theatre for these oppositions to flourish, and in doing so, they contribute to the production of 'unequal cities' in Vietnam.

Spatially segregated and socially stigmatised, migrant workers in HCMC suburban areas develop a large range of adaptation strategies to facilitate their integration into the city. Community support networks, tightly linked to worker dormitories, represent the most primitive form of these adaptation strategies. They are strictly based on regional affiliations of migrant workers. They are also characterised by their omnipresence and versatility: community networks are able to disseminate information and to provide daily and financial support to migrants. Despite their unquestionable importance, these networks have many structural weaknesses. As they rely mainly on workers' dormitories and regional affiliations, they create a new communitarianism that aggravates the segregation between local population and migrant workers, and also between different migrant communities.

Emergence of a new, autonomous, decentralised and spontaneous worker activism

The collective dimension of migrant workers' adaptation strategies relies less on community support networks than on the development of an autonomous, spontaneous and decentralised worker activism. The *đổi mới* reforms marked the beginning of an important liberal turn of the State on labour questions with a withdrawal from the negotiations between workers and employers. Consequently, tensions between workers and companies have progressively increased, leading to intense worker mobilisations from 2006 to 2008. Since then, a new worker activism has emerged.

Struggle and opposition methods are sophisticated. Based on local migrant communities, workers' mobilisations are spontaneous and decentralised; waves of actions are organised from one industrial zone to another. The leaders of these movements are usually kept anonymous,[6] as their organisational roles are essential for these mobilisations.

A typical worker dormitory in a suburban area of HCMC (district Binh Tân) (Photo by Marie Gibert).

Ways of resisting are particularly diverse, combining soft methods such as collective petitions, and hard methods such as collective resignations or abandonment of work to paralyse the production line. The degree of intensity of these strategies depends on the employer's reaction; without meaningful results from soft methods, hard strategies will be initiated to force employers to engage in negotiations.

State withdrawal from labour issues and the crisis of the Vietnamese trade union

Before the *đổi mới* reforms, labour issues were entirely in the hands of the State. To protect workers' interests, the Vietnamese government established its own executive organism – the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) had also created a unique national trade union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), to take charge of labour issues.

After the *đổi mới* reforms commenced, the role of the State in labour protection issues became more and more obsolete. Today, the VGCL and the MOLISA are particularly weak in protecting workers. The slow legal procedures when organising a strike and the inefficiency of VGCL's local cells cannot provide a strong framework for workers' mobilisations. Essentially remaining under the control of the CPV, the VGCL appears to be a simple propaganda tool.

The diminishing role of the State in labour protection issues has led to the emergence of worker activism. The development of a new worker activism is essentially based on the emergence of a new political actor, 'the informal workers' leaders', who coordinate the movement at a local level. The relation between this new political actor and the State is particularly conflictual. For example, the VGCL and the MOLISA exclude all informal workers' leaders from labour issues negotiations. According to the State, the informal workers' leaders are considered to be reactionary and politically incompatible with the communist party.

Confronted with the erosion of its legitimacy, the State has recently undertaken a set of policies aiming to improve workers' living conditions and to reform the VGCL. In 2005, a new household registration procedure was created with a simplification of the criteria for obtaining permanent residency permits.[7] In 2007, a new residence law was enacted that allowed 230,000 migrants in HCMC to obtain their permanent residency permit.[8] As a consequence, the household registration system is becoming less and less of an administrative constraint for migrants trying to settle in the cities. The State has also established policies to improve migrant workers' living conditions through new bank loan systems, to encourage the construction of affordable low-income housing and micro-credit systems, with the help from NGOs and international institutions.

To better protect migrant workers, multiple stakeholders are involved: media, provincial authorities, informal workers' leaders, the State, etc. Henceforth, provincial authorities manage worker issues by conducting negotiations between companies and workers. In 2007, a revision of the Labour Law defined a solid framework for workers' mobilisations. Consequently, the VCGL has been attached to provincial authorities, while its local cells have been involved in companies' management. In HCMC, different initiatives have been conducted to integrate informal leaders into the protection of workers: the number of labour inspectors has increased from 7 to 100 since 2006, and self-managed worker groups have also been organised.[9] Nevertheless, under the supervision of the VCP, the VCGL is categorically opposed to this change, as it considers informal workers' leaders to be reactionary agents. In 2014, the anti-China worker riots in Binh Duong province threatened the involvement of the State. The government decided to oppress worker activism, condemning anti-China riots as a reactionary movement. In conclusion, the relationship between the State and worker activism is extremely ambiguous and fragile. By tackling political issues, contemporary activism appears to be directly opposing the VCP hegemony.

Despite the State's attempts to pacify the situation, the recent policies present several weaknesses. Firstly, the majority of migrant workers are still excluded from permanent residency because companies commonly refuse to sign long-term contracts, which is one of the most important criteria to obtain permanent residency permits.[10] Secondly, microcredit and social housing are scarce and hardly accessible to migrant workers. Finally, migrant workers do not show a strong will to integrate. Migrant workers' careers are unstable, temporary and unsustainable, which does not encourage hope for permanent settlement in HCMC. The intention to return to their native provinces is rooted in many migrant workers' mentality.

In conclusion, the integration of migrant workers to HCMC is essentially characterised by a fundamental economic and social insecurity, despite various individual and collective adaptation strategies. Migrants remain second-class city-dwellers who cannot afford, and are not given the opportunity, to integrate – spatially, economically or socially. On top of this exclusion, their citizen's rights are denied as they cannot participate in the local agora, councils and branches of mass organisations included, while their representation in the work sphere is limited. In order to challenge this situation, workers have started to organise, progressively constituting a new 'class' of workers, but also of inhabitants. The State clearly needs to encourage migrant integration and to tackle the issues of worker protection. A radical reform of the VGCL would be essential to better embed the contemporary informal worker activism that is arising. A balanced power relationship between workers, companies and authorities is a prerequisite for the integration of migrants in the suburbs of HCMC, and society at large.

Trần Khắc Minh is a PhD student at Prodig research unit (UMR 8586) and Pantheon-Sorbonne University (France).

References

1 See Đỗ, Quỳnh Chi. 2008. *The challenge from below: wildcat strikes and the pressure for Union reform in Vietnam.* Hong Kong City University Southeast Asian Research Center

2 This paper is based on results collected by the author from surveys, interviews (150) and fieldwork observations conducted in eastern suburban districts of HCMC, from February to April 2015, for a master thesis dissertation entitled: "Les ouvriers migrants en périphérie de HCMV: Entre intégration à la ville et exclusion sociale. Etude de la situation précaire des migrants ouvriers d'une zone périurbaine dans une métropole d'Asie du Sud-Est".

3 See Gibert, M. 2014. "Le carnet résidentiel au Vietnam: un instrument de peuplement entre contrainte et contournement". In Desage, F., C. Morel-Journel & V. Sala-Pala (eds.) 2014. *Le peuplement comme politiques.* Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 221-238.

4 See Pulliat, G. 2013. "Les migrants à Hanoï : Construction politique d'un groupe social dominé", *Revue Espaces et sociétés* 154(154).

5 See Ngô, Thị Thu Trang. 2014. *Périurbanisation et Modernité à Hô Chi Minh-Ville. Etude du cas de l'arrondissement Binh Tân.* PhD Thesis, Université de Pau, France.

6 See Đỗ, Quỳnh Chi. 2012. *Employee participation in Vietnam.* International Labour Office, Industrial and Employment Relations Department.

7 See General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO). 2011. *"Di cư và đô thị hóa ở Việt Nam: thực trạng, xu hướng và những khác biệt"* [Migration and urbanisation in Vietnam: situation, trends and differences].

8 Ibid.

9 See Đỗ, Quỳnh Chi. 2012. *Employee participation in Vietnam.* International Labour Office, Industrial and Employment Relations Department.

10 See Henaff, N. 2006. "Investissements directs étrangers, mondialisation et emploi au Viêt-Nam", *Revue Autrepart* 37(1).