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MUNICIPALITY IN THE
WESTERN TARAI

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Labour Unionism in a Post-Conflict Context: Maoists, unionists, and formerly bonded labourers in an urban municipality in the western Tarai¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of how the Nepalese Maoist movement intersects with non-Maoist trade unions. I challenge dominant views of an enduring antagonism between the Nepalese Maoist movement and non-Maoist trade unions. Instead, I contend that for the urban municipality in the western Tarai the Maoist movement and non-Maoist labour unions co-reside within the boundaries of the town in a symbiotic relationship. I highlight how, while Maoists claim to represent labour in town, their actions focus largely on the protection of a specific segment of the town's labour force. Maoists offer political patronage to formerly bonded labourers' neighborhoods but neglect other labour issues. This political vacuum surrounding the representation of labour has instead been filled by two non-Maoist labour unions that emerged in the wake of the insurgency period. I document the development of these groups and look at the various forms of collective action they employ, which include strikes, the mediation of labour disputes, monthly union meetings, and the institutionalisation of collective bargaining procedures. I suggest that an important effect of the new trade unionism in town is the incorporation of formerly bonded labourers into the unions' power structures.

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Introduction

While there is rich historical literature investigating the growth and development of the Indian labour movement (Chakrabarty 1989; Chandavarkar 1994; Joshi 2003; Breman 2004; Bear 2007: 91–107), relatively little attention has been paid so far to its Nepali counterpart. To date, apart from NGO-sponsored reports (Dahal 2005; ICG 2010; GEFONT 2010) on its history or journalistic reports (BBC 2004), it has been subjected to scarcely any critical or ethnographically informed analysis. In particular, no scholarly account exists on how Nepal's labour movement fared in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency between 1996 and 2006. This lack of knowledge makes this matter all the more pressing and a number of issues surrounding the Nepalese labour union movement demand clarification: What are the roots of the Nepali labour movement? How has it changed in character throughout different periods? How does Nepal's Maoist movement intersect with the contemporary labour movement? This article presents an analysis of these questions.

The case in question is the urban municipality Tikapur located in the Kailali district in the far-western Tarai (lowland) region of Nepal. In this remote part of Nepal, the conflict between Maoists and state security forces had been fought bloodily, particularly during the second half of the insurgency period. In the general rush to hold elections in its aftermath, the Maoists were able to gain a large constituency, winning all six electoral units of the district, yet remained unable to form their own labour union in town. How then has the existence of the Maoist movement in the area affected the political mobilisation of labour in town? Do Tikapur's Maoist cadres tolerate new trade unions organising labour in town? If so, is it part of their broader politics, which involve the formation of alliances with other groups advocating on behalf of the poor? And to what extent have specific segments of the town's population, particularly the formerly bonded labourers' community who have squatted strategic sites in the city,³ benefitted from these processes?

In Nepal, labour and human rights activists as well as journalists have highlighted the antagonistic relationship between the Nepalese Maoist movement and other labour unions. Of course, there is a range of perspectives. The dominant view, however, has been that the relationship between the two is often depicted as hostile. For example, in 2009 the International Trade Union Confederation released a study citing an incident where seven GEFONT⁴ leaders were brutally attacked by members of the Maoist All Nepal Federation of Trade Union (ANTUF) at a Pokhara noodle factory after demanding the reinstatement of 12 dismissed workers (International Trade Union Confederation 2009). The same report adds that “[s]imilar cases occurred at Trvinevi Textiles Weaving Unit in Bara (eight workers seriously injured during a strike to demand the payment of their salaries on time) and at Himalayan Snacks and Noodles in Banepa” (ibid: 1). Alternatively, the Maoist movement has been depicted as undermining agents of existing union structures, as in an insightful analysis of Malika Shakiya (2010). Yet, both portrayals rely on the idea of the Maoist movement regarding other labour unions as unwanted competitors.

Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between January 2008 and July 2009 in Tikapur, this paper represents a notable counterpoint to this more general trend showing how

³ The Tharu workers on agricultural farms in the western lowland region often worked as *Kamaiya* (bonded labour) until bonded labour was banned by the state in 2000, when large numbers of the formerly agricultural workers became landless labourers. In the aftermath of their ‘liberation’, a section of these *mukta kamaiya* (free *kamaiya*) began to squat urban terrain in order to put pressure on the state to provide them with land. In the town, the grounds of the local airport and parts of the university campus were squatted. I have written in detail about these processes elsewhere (Hoffmann 2012).

⁴ General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) is one of the largest trade union organisations in Nepal.

Maoists and unions coexist peacefully in Tikapur. I highlight how, while Maoists claim to represent labour in town, their actions focus largely on the protection of a specific segment of Tikapur's labour force; Maoists offer political patronage to freed *Kamaiya* neighbourhoods but neglect other labour issues. This political vacuum surrounding the representation of labour is instead filled by two non-Maoist labour unions that emerged in the wake of the insurgency period. I document the development of these groups and look at the various forms of collective action they employ, which include strikes, the mediation of labour disputes, monthly union meetings and the institutionalisation of collective bargaining procedures. I suggest that an important effect of the new trade unionism in town is the incorporation of freed *Kamaiya* – and Tharu more generally – into the unions' power structures.

At the same time, the article also contributes to three more general strands of literature on the sociology of labour in South Asia. First of all, it complements ethnographic work that documents unionisation processes within the informal economy. De Neve's work in Bhavani Tamil Nadu, India describes how weavers employed in informal workshops have managed to set up a union (De Neve 2005: 137–169). Through repeated, organised union actions they managed to secure yearly bonuses in the form of cash rather than the traditional *veshti* (loincloth) and *tundu* (towel) (ibid.: 146), to increase wages by 15 per cent (ibid.: 148) and, in some cases, to become master weavers (ibid.: 150). Similarly, the situation described below suggests that in recent years freed *Kamaiya* employed in Tikapur's construction and rickshaw 'industries' have managed to better their situation by engaging in union actions.

Second, the history of the trade union movement in Tikapur shows how expressions of class-based solidarity have emerged through the strategic coming together of ethnically homogenous neighbourhoods in labour strikes. Neither the Maoists nor the trade unions represented a homogenous working class, but both benefited from the spatial formation of ethnically homogenous communities and ethnic divisions within local landscapes of labour. In line with Indian revisionist labour historiography (Chandarvarkar 1994; Joshi 2003), this cautions against accepting uncritically the popular myth of the 'making' of a working class. Moreover, it contributes to an emerging, though dispersed literature on the role of ethnicity in trade unionism in South Asia (Parry and Struempell 2008; Parry 2009; Subramanian 2010).

Finally, the ethnographic findings also suggest an absence of women workers' voices in Tikapur's trade union organisations. While this finding might be unsurprising for those familiar with the history of trade unions in neighbouring India (see Fernandez 1997: 109–131; Sarkar and Bhowmick 2005; De Neve 2005: 156–158), it raises serious questions about the extent to which the new trade unionism in Tikapur can be considered representative, given that a significant portion of the workers in the informal economy are women. A corollary is that the CPN (Maoist)'s⁵ agenda to empower women (Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004) has largely failed when it comes to female representation in the local trade union organisations.

⁵ In what follows I will use the term CPN (Maoist) for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). The party changed its name throughout the period of fieldwork into Unified Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (UCPN (Maoist)).

A Short History of Trade Unionism and the Rise of Maoist Unions in Nepal

A strike at the Biratnagar Jute Mills in March 1947 is widely heralded as the beginning of the Nepali labour movement. Historical records written by labour unionists do not stretch back further than this date. Inspired by the success of the Indian trade union movement, some of the Biratnagar Jute Mills workers demanded to have their working day reduced from twelve to eight hours and asked for subsidies for food and clothing and a wage increase (GEFONT 2010). Organising marches to articulate their grievances, the emerging movement was soon “brutally suppressed” (GEFONT 2010) and most of its leaders arrested after the mills’ general manager wrote an appeal to Prime Minister Rana (GEFONT 2010).

While there are no comprehensive accounts of the emergence and transformation of the Nepalese labour movement in the immediate aftermath of the strike at Biratnagar Jute Mills, what little literature exists on the topic suggests that the Nepali state was largely hostile to labour union activism until 1990. Although various labour unions were founded after the end of the Rana Regime in 1950, unions were banned when King Mahindra took power in 1960 (Dahal 2005; GEFONT 2010). Throughout this period, union activists had to operate largely in secret, as all political organisations and forms of activism were prohibited. Nevertheless, union activism continued informally until the 1970s, when the government loosened restrictions regarding trade unionism (GEFONT 2010). For example, Upadhyaya notes that the unionisation of workers in the construction sector

“started in [the] 1970s while the government was constructing the East-West Highway. Some 25,000 workers of the East-West Highway had launched [a] general strike demanding immediate settlement of their grievances, which later helped to strengthen newly launched National Federation-NIWU-Nepal Independent Workers Union.” (Upadhyaya 2006: 10)

However, the Nepali labour movement only gained significant momentum after the People’s Movement (Nepali: *Jana Andolan*) and the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990. The trade union act of 1992 provided the legal basis for the registration of unions, dividing them into three different categories: confederation, federation, and enterprise level. This resulted in the registration of various trade unions from 1993 onwards (Dahal 2005), with two trade union confederations – GEFONT and NTUC⁶ – emerging as major players in Nepal’s labour union landscape. From 2000 onwards, however, “[v]iolent Maoist conflicts, closing of many enterprises, the successive government’s bias towards the capital, declaration of the state of emergency and suspension of civil rights (also workers’ rights)” (Dahal 2005: 2) contributed to the decline of the trade union movement in Nepal. It was only after the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement between Maoists and the state that trade union organisations began to expand their membership base, and new trade unions were registered across the country (ICG 2010: 9).

Against this general backdrop, Maoist-affiliated trade unions have been set up since the late 1990s. By October 2005, the All Nepal Federation of Trade Union (ANTUF) included ten Maoist-affiliated unions. In revolutionary parlance, these organisations are classified as *janvargiya sangathan* (people’s class organisations) and are part of the Maoists’ broader political strategy to build up a united revolutionary front, modelled primarily after the Chinese revolutionary system.

⁶ NTUC = Nepali Trade Union Congress

For the Maoist leaders, as a report by the International Crisis Group highlights, unions with other organisations of the united front are a key “instrument of struggle and embryo of the new power” (ICG 2010: 10) and ought to bring together “anti-feudal and anti-imperialist patriotic, democratic and leftist forces as an instrument of developing class struggles.” As the report further highlights, “[t]he principle function of such a front should be to develop struggles on the basis of people’s problems that would gradually break the [limit of the] system. At the initial stages, the effective form of such a front would be confined to rural areas and the local level” (ibid.: 10).

While the revolutionaries initially focused on organising the rural peasantry, after the second Maoist National Assembly in 2001 they broadened their strategy to include the urban proletariat (Shakiya 2010). Malika Shakiya, who reported on the garment industry in Kathmandu on the basis of fieldwork at the factory Arya Nepal in 2002, observed:

“Maoist cadres entered often pretending to be unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Once in, they easily proselytised the workers against the existing trade unions. Workers took little time to switch sides and the mainstream political parties – Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal – United Marxist Leninist (CPN/UML) – were not able to counter this.” (ibid.: 10)

This resonates with the popular thesis that Maoist unionists have begun to organise entire industries across the country.

Increasing their reach across industries, particularly in areas around Kathmandu, the ANTUF soon acquired a reputation for being violent and militant in character. In 2005 the International Crisis Group gave the following assessment:

“It [the All Nepal Trade Union Federation] was initially said to be behind scattered incidents of extortion, vandalism and bomb explosions but it gained a wider reputation in September 2004 when it forced the shutdown of twelve major businesses over labour conditions and complaints about the foreign capital and exploitive multinational corporations. It enforced its strike with a minor bomb attack on the grounds of the five-star Soaltee Hotel, which hurt the tourism sector and also served as a symbolic attack against the royal family, which is closely linked to the hotel.” (ICG 2005: 11)

The same report suggests that the Maoist trade unions not only aimed to organise the proletariat but also “played an important role in collecting ‘donations’ from industrialists and businessmen in Kathmandu, Biratnagar and Birgunj” (ICG 2005: 11).

While there are too few serious scholarly investigations to assess the validity of such allegations, popular newspapers report further incidents of Maoist union violence and corruption. In a widely reported case from 2008, around 50 members of the Maoist-affiliated All Nepal Hotel and Restaurant Workers’ Union (ANHRWU) entered the premises of Himal Media and physically assaulted its employees after the publishing house had printed stories accusing the Maoist unions of extortion in cases where industrialists had not paid voluntary ‘donations’.

Rimal (2008: 2) notes that by 2006 the Maoists

“declared a new ‘war’ on trade unions in the mainstream with the following libel published in their mouthpiece: ‘A decisive struggle should be waged against those who claim themselves as genuine and amass dollars from foreign NGOs and INGOs in the name of the workers (...) [and] who collaborate with capitalists against the interest of the workers.’”

A short while later, at the meeting of the Special Central Command of the ANTUF held on 11 September 2006, the Maoists “decided that within 1 month, 100,000 memberships will be distributed. (...) The strategic goal and objective is to ‘wipe out’ GEFONT within 4 months” (Rimal 2008: 2). This led to a series of physical attacks on GEFONT members at various sites, clashes that the Nepali media referred to as a power struggle between GEFONT and the Maoists.

Against this historical reconstruction of Nepal’s trade union movement, Tikapur’s history of organised labour presents a striking contrast. Here, Maoists and non-Maoist trade unions coexist in a functional symbiosis. In what follows, I will describe this scenario in more detail, beginning with a discussion of Maoist politics in the town.

The Maoist Labour Politics in Tikapur

Located in the southern parts of Kailali district in the far-western lowland of Nepal, Tikapur was a quiet small town with a population of about 45,000 inhabitants that could roughly be divided between *Pahadis* originally hailing from the hilly areas of Accham and local Tharus. Here, the CPN (Maoist) had a party office in the centre of the town and was generally viewed as the ‘party of the poor’, strong and with a large membership. From here, all Maoist operations – including labour activism – were coordinated, yet due to the lack of financial resources the party had not set up its own local labour union wing. The local Maoists that I knew best emphasised that there is as yet ‘no labour market’ in town and no Maoist-affiliated labour union. Nevertheless, as another informant told me, there had been efforts in the past to establish a union. For this reason, the local party had witnessed internal disputes over whether to open up a separate Maoist-affiliated union. The party ultimately decided not to open up an office, because they lacked the financial funds to set up and maintain a separate union in town. Instead labour issues were delegated to a district-level party member who was ‘in charge’ of issues related to labour for several regions. At the local level, however, Maoists stressed that labourers could visit the Maoist office at any time and file complaints against their employers. As another Maoist, Lalit⁷, told me, the party thus gave preferential treatment to its members (i.e. vis-à-vis outsiders) in labour disputes.

In practice, however, the impact of local Maoists on labour politics within the boundaries of the town was hardly felt. As a local rickshaw driver told me, “we have visited the Maoist office several times and no-one has ever had taken our case seriously or filed an FIR (First Information Report) at the local police station”. Instead, as I was told by non-Maoist informants in town, the party was known to support specific neighbourhoods in town, particularly the five *bastis* (slum-like neighbourhoods) of freed *Kamaiya* (formerly bonded labourers) and some of the neighbourhoods of the *Sukhumbasi*⁸ – whose members were often part of the local informal economy. In exchange, as the same informants claimed, the local cadres of the CPN Maoist expected the ‘poor communities’ to vote for them or support them when needed.

Of course, such claimed allegiances were not plainly obvious at first sight. But the local power structure became visible on a number of occasions: Firstly, there was the gift-giving by the Maoists to freed *Kamaiya* households. The latter lived in poorly equipped mud-huts in five *bastis* throughout the town. In the two largest neighbourhoods, the people living there had set up a school

⁷ All personal names have been changed in this paper.

⁸ *Sukhumbasi* are landless people that squatted in various places both in town and the forests in the rural hinterland.

building. The tin roofs of these school buildings were sponsored by the Maoist party, and five months after the start of my fieldwork I could observe how a local full-time party member came to visit the leader of the neighbourhood as he wanted to have the bill signed for the party donation. Similarly, towards the end of my fieldwork, the party donated six rickshaws to a freed *Kamaiya* settlement. The money for the purchase stemmed from a Constitutional Assembly member of the CPN (Maoist). Her motivation was clear; as she had articulated to me on numerous previous occasions, she was genuinely interested in providing much-needed material support to the freed *Kamaiya* community.

Secondly, the allegiance between the CPN (Maoist) and the freed *Kamaiya* community became obvious in the three weeks prior to the Constitutional Assembly elections in 2008. While representatives of the three largest political parties in town (United Marxist Leninist, Nepali Congress, and the CPN (Maoist)) visited the freed *Kamaiya bastis* several times during the three weeks of electoral campaigning, the day before the election was held one *Kamaiya basti* received a further visit from two young Maoists. They arrived on their motorbikes during the night in order to double-check their voters' list against a register of the *basti*'s inhabitants. By comparing the two lists the young Maoists could ascertain how many people from the *basti* they could expect to vote for them the next day. This illustrates how the Maoist party saw the *Kamaiya bastis* as their voter bank and expected the *Kamaiya* to support them.

Thirdly, when the CPN (Maoist) called for *hartals* (strikes) in town, the allegiance between the Maoists and the freed *Kamaiya* community in town became visible. As Suykens and Islam (2013) have recently noted "Hartal operates as an instrument to allocate patronage and to test allegiance, both at the local level and from the higher echelons of power". For example, in December 2008, one of the Maoist party cadres was attacked by students affiliated with the youth wing of the Nepali Congress. After days of campaigning against the squatting of Tikapur's Multiple Campus, students organised a protest rally through town, during which they threw stones at the house of a Maoist party member. The Maoists reacted without hesitation. The next day several thousand people, mostly *Kamaiya* and *Sukhumbasi*, gathered for a counter protest. This second rally ended in front of the police station, where Maoists demanded the immediate arrest of two members of Tikapur's Multiple Campus who they believed to be the leaders of the student movement. The police, confronted with thousands of (apparently) angry Maoists, had little choice but to arrest the two students.

To sum up, the CPN (Maoist) in Tikapur avoided a serious engagement with labourers' rights but supported the neighbourhoods where many of the informal economy workers of the town were living. It is through the dispensation of favours, such as the provision of rickshaws and community school roofs, that Maoists enact political patronage for Tikapur's *Kamaiya* community. In return, the freed *Kamaiyas* supply the CPN (Maoist) with two much-valued resources: manpower for political rallies and votes during elections. This relationship remains highly asymmetrical and selective, however; not every individual obtains a rickshaw, and not all communities acquire a school roof. The important analytical point, though, is that in their everyday politics in Tikapur the Maoists focus mainly on the control and support of neighbourhoods while neglecting labour rights and refusing to become directly involved in employer-worker relations. This particular politics of labour in turn, however, allowed non-Maoist labour unions to occupy the political vacuum. In the following section, I will describe in more detail how the labour organisation CUPPEC and a local rickshaw organisation have come to fill this political space.

The Rise of CUPPEC and the Emergence of Other Unions

Established by the Bahun electrician and local resident Basu Adhikhari, the local arm of CUPPEC, a Nepal-wide labour organisation, was the only formally registered union in Tikapur. Inspired by the unchecked exploitation and appalling conditions of labour in town, Basu began organising workers in town during the second half of the insurgency period from 2002 onwards. The particular political circumstances at the time made it imperative that it not be caught up between Maoists and state security forces. During CUPPEC's early days, its eight founding members (all work colleagues) would meet in Basu's middle-class home to forge strategic plans for organising different sections of Tikapur's working classes. At this stage, however, CUPPEC was nothing more than a group of self-declared unionists meeting every so often. It was not until 2006 that Basu set up an office in the centre of town and union action gradually became more organised and systematic.

Basu's initial focus was on construction workers, though he also mobilised electricians, plumbers, carpenters, and painters. The former were the most numerous in town and many were from the freed *Kamaiya bastis*. As many of my informants told me, the union's presence became clearly visible following the organisation of several strikes and rallies in the period between 2006 and 2008. Accordingly, the union's protests centred on workers' grievances related to wages. As a result of these strikes, wages in the construction industry are said to have increased substantially. Throughout the time of my fieldwork, employers payed NR 250 for skilled and NR 150⁹ for unskilled male daily labourers respectively. Although, as many informants agreed, this represents a substantial improvement compared to previous wage rates, wage payment between men and women remains uneven, with women often being paid much less than their male counterparts.

In a recent analysis of the historical emergence of the trade union movement in the former Princely State of Baroda, Pravin Patel (2011) mentions some of the difficulties that unionists encounter when attempting to make inroads into working class neighbourhoods. In his description of the formation of the first trade union in Baroda, he describes how Ahmedabad-based Mahajan leaders began to organise the Baroda workers in 1927–1928. To this end, the Ahmedabad unionists sent a full-time organiser, Akhbarkhan, to Baroda. However, the unionists were soon faced with a dilemma: Akhbarkhan “could mix with the Muslim workers, but did not have easy access to the Hindu workers” (Patel 2011: 37). Realising this, they quickly deployed a Hindu labour leader, Chimanlal Shah, to Baroda. Chimanlal then used a combination of strategies, including adult literacy evening classes, defamation of drinking and gambling and the invocation of traditional Hindu symbols through *bhajans* (songs) and *khatas* (stories), in order to mobilise Hindu *mohallas* (neighbourhoods). Together, the two unionists successfully established a union of textile workers in Baroda (ibid.: 38).

Though the story of Akhbarkhan and Chimanlal is not at the centre of Patel's analysis of the emergence of trade unions in Baroda, it poses an important question: Ahmedabad's unionists deployed two unionists of different religious backgrounds to lobby for the establishment of a union in segregated working class neighbourhoods, but how did Basu's CUPPEC unionists make inroads into working class neighbourhoods in Tikapur? Of relevance here is the fact that three out of five *Kamaiya* settlement leaders were also members of CUPPEC, which they all openly admitted.

⁹ The exchange rate in 2008–2009 was approximately 1 Nepali Rupee to £0.008 (€0.0095).

Given this, the union could rely on the *Kamaiya* leaders to provide manpower from the *bastis* in the event of a rally. Thus, by distributing trade union membership cards, the union was able to establish a more personal link with Tikapur's working class neighbourhoods.

But why did the bulk of ordinary freed *Kamaiya* join these CUPPEC rallies? There are several significant factors to consider here. First of all, by joining union rallies and strikes, labourers were able to articulate the sense of injustice that many of them felt in their everyday working lives. Most agreed that in the past, particularly when first settling in Tikapur, the problems they faced were greater than those they now experienced. Many of the freed *Kamaiya* complained about "being treated like *Kamaiya*" and "paid not more than a bowl of rice a day" when they first arrived in Tikapur. The union thus served as a vehicle to mediate grievances. Second, it should be mentioned that it is a general rule within the *Kamaiya bastis* to provide at least one household member as manpower for all *beghari* (collective work). This meant that failing to attend a trade union rally would cost a freed *Kamaiya* household the equivalent of one day's work, to be paid to the management committee running the *basti*. It is thus unsurprising that many women serve as household representatives at union rallies, despite the union having largely failed to establish equal wages for women in town.

Not all labour is organised according to this system of neighbourhood mobilisation. A case in point is the town's rickshaw drivers. Before 2007, Basu had tried to organise them by paying frequent visits to their 'hang-outs' in the bazaar and near the bus station; however, his efforts were largely unsuccessful. As Dill Bahadur, a rickshaw driver with six years' experience, recalled: "Basu from CUPPEC came often and asked us to join CUPPEC. He said that a membership fee of NR 10 a year was enough to form a union. But we were suspicious about him. We thought he would take our money and run away." It was only when Basu convinced a delegation of rickshaw unionists from Dhangadhi to visit Tikapur and lobby for the formation of a union that the local rickshaw driver community was mobilised. A meeting was held in the main bazaar in the town centre to which all members of the rickshaw/tella driver community were invited, and the delegation convinced them to form a rickshaw union.

The outcome of this particular episode of labour unionisation within the boundaries of the town seems to be a functional symbiosis between Maoists and the trade unions. This is to say, more specifically, that the relationship between the Maoists and the unions is mutual but not obligate; while Maoists and unions benefit from each other's labour politics, they do not depend on each other for their existence. The Maoist patronage of the *basti* allowed unions to develop and grow, and the union's labour politics complements a lack of attention to labour issues by the Maoists. But how seriously do the labour unions in Tikapur take their mandate of representing workers and championing their cause? To explore this question further, I now turn my attention to the unions' collective actions, meetings and bargaining procedures. The following section gives an ethnographic description of a union rally that illustrates CUPPEC's tendency towards militant collective action. In order to move to the following section, I turn now to an ethnographic vignette.

A Militant Labour Rally

In the morning of 1 June 2009, Jagdish Prasad Dhanghaura, the leader of the *Kamaiya basti* Ramnagar, told Tullu Chaudhary, the neighbourhood *chowkidar* (watchman), to inform all members of the freed *basti* about a union rally scheduled for that day and to encourage them to participate. This was a common way of mobilising people in the freed *Kamaiya bastis* of Tikapur. Although inhabitants were often tired of participating in these rallies, they rarely refused to do so. By about noon, many of the inhabitants of Ramnagar had come to join the union rally in the town centre, and I was surprised to meet Daniram Chaudhary, the leader of another *Kamaiya basti* and many other inhabitants of freed *Kamaiya bastis*. They too had come to join the rally, and we headed together to CUPPEC's office.

Basu, along with an elder district-level CUPPEC unionist from Dhangadhi, named Damakant, and many other freed *Kamaiya*, met us outside the office building. CUPPEC's senior leadership was easy to spot in the middle of the crowd of a few hundred people; both men were wearing a fine dress shirt and baseball cap and were clearly from an upper caste background. Basu was busy instructing the crowd about the planned route of the rally. Meanwhile, Ramkrishna, an ex-leader of another *Kamaiya basti*, who was very well respected within his *basti*, distributed red CUPPEC flags to the crowd, and Banji Chaudhary, a leader from the occupied *basti* at the local high school compound, handed out prefabricated protest signs. Bhulai Chaudhary from Krishnanagar was busy giving instructions about forming a line.

Finally, the crowd – some 500 people, the vast majority of them women – began to move, chanting “CUPPEC *jindabaad, jindabaad*” (“Long Live CUPPEC”). For the route, we traced a circle through the town. We first passed by the Tikapur Chambers of Commerce and a field, where the weekly market takes place, before crossing the Jamaran Bridge and turning onto the main street towards the northern entrance of the town. Then the rally moved eastwards, passing by several local governance institutions, before heading back south to the bazaar in the centre. I was surprised for two reasons: First the rally's route was more or less the same route as that of the *Kamaiya* Movement rallies (Hoffmann 2012). This implied not only that for most participants the union march was a familiar procedure, but also that the demonstrators did not require much organisation. Everyone knew what to do and where to walk. Second, by walking in two separate lines, the union made the crowd appear larger than if they had walked in a single column. This evoked the idea of a disciplined and committed congregation rather than a wild, disorderly mob.

This, however, was the least of my surprises. What struck me more than the performative aspects of the rally was its manifestly militant character. This became apparent when the procession crossed the town's Jamaran Bridge and came to a sudden stop. I had been walking a short distance ahead in order to take some pictures and was in a good position to see what was happening. Next to the column of demonstrators was a construction site where a new Hero Honda Showroom was being built. Although the march had been publicised throughout the town earlier that day, labourers were busy toiling at the site. Some of the unionists like Ramkrishna Chaudhary were enraged to see people working despite the call for a rally. The procession was stopped, and Ramkrishna together with a group of five rally participants ran over to the construction site shouting at the Indian labour contractor and Tharu workers to stop working immediately. To demonstrate his seriousness, Ramkrishna confiscated a saw and a hammer before returning to the crowd. Following this, two of the workers joined the union rally, while three others ran off. The procession was then resumed,

with the crowd turning right past the area administration office and the entrance gates of the Tikapur Multiple Campus, then crossing a wooden bridge before stopping again. Here, two more construction sites were shut down by Ramkrishna and the unionists, before the march stopped in front of the local municipality building.

At this point, senior leaders Damakant and Hem Raj, as well as the *Kamaiya* leaders Ramkrishna, Daniram, and Bhulai, left the union rally and walked quickly towards the municipality building, where they climbed the stairs and rushed into the office of the chief of the municipality. As the latter was not present, the unionists went straight to one of the office clerks. “What do you want?” he asked. “We demand to be included into the municipality’s annual budget meeting”, explained Basu. “We have the right to take part in the meeting. If not, we will make a *bandh* (strike) and lock out the municipality building. Look we have our unionists outside!” The clerk seemed unimpressed, most likely as he had witnessed many *bandhs* and several lockouts of the municipality building in the last year. Calming his voice, he replied to Basu that the unionists should leave a letter stating this demand with the office and he would pass the letter to the chief of the municipality upon his return. The unionists did so and then left the building.

After the brief pause at the municipality building, the union march proceeded to its finishing point in a field near the bazaar. Here, Basu, Damakant, Daniram, and Ramkrishna each gave a speech of about ten minutes in length. While Basu emphasised his own background as a worker, complained about the gendered wage inequality and accused Indian *thekedars* (contractors) of being cheats, Damakant focused more on the importance of taking part in union rallies, noting that all workers are part of the same working class. The unionists and *Kamaiya* leaders Ramkrishna and Daniram then added their own *Kamaiya*-specific concerns to this union-focused address. Ramkrishna complained about the government not having distributed land to the *Kamaiya*, before Daniram insisted that the *Kamaiyas* also had a right to land as residents of Tikapur, since it was they who built most of the buildings with their own hands. In this way, the *Kamaiya* leaders not only expressed an increased sense of assertiveness among the *Kamaiya* community, but also used the public union assembly to incorporate their own community issues into union politics.

Union Meetings and Collective Bargaining

The everyday practices of CUPPEC were less spectacular than the rally. In fact, most of the time the union office in town remained closed, opening its iron shutters for just two hours each day. As the union secretary, a young female student from Tikapur Campus, told me: “The union is very poor. We only have enough financial resources to keep the office open two hours a day. Apart from my half-day position, there are no more paid employees.” The office is a single room with two benches, a table, an iron cupboard, a fan and a poster on the wall with the slogan ‘Workers of the World Unite’. Located in the town centre, it is a rented first-floor property surrounded by middle-class bungalows in front of which children play, women walk their goats, and buffalos graze.

It is from here that Basu Bhandari runs the union, welcoming workers who come for a range of different reasons: some were fired by their employers; some come to enquire about the union’s insurance funds; and others apply for the limited educational scholarship programme that the union offers to the children of its members. Once a month, Hem Raj organises union meetings that take place outside the main office. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, these meetings were held on

a regular basis, the only lapse being during celebrations for the Tharu Magghi Sanskrit Festival in January 2009.

The union meetings were organised as follows: Workers of different occupations met at different times (for example, the electrical workers meet at 10 am and the construction workers at 11 am). Meetings usually lasted between one and two hours. Each session began with the union's chairman inviting union members to discuss the agenda while the secretary made a record of the attendance. Although I do not have exact data regarding attendance at meetings for each occupation, the meetings of the construction workers were usually attended by about 40 to 50 members. In these meetings, unionists usually sat in a circle on the floor. The topics discussed varied, but the most prominent centred on the issues of how union funds are being spent, the link between rising living costs and wages for one day's labour, and the regular payment of membership fees.

The *rickshawhalla* union met separately on the same day, its members gathering under a large tree in a field near the bazaar. The number of attendees in these meetings was much higher than in those of the construction workers, with around 100 rickshaw drivers taking part. This was a consequence of a specific policy of the union, which holds that if any member did not attend a meeting, he had to pay a fine of about NR 40. Similarly, if a rickshaw driver was working at the time of the union meeting, he had to pay a fine equivalent to one day's wage.

Sometimes, CUPPEC's chairman, Basu, presided over these meetings, but more often than not they were led by a Tharu unionist named Mangal Chaudhary (discussed further below). The most frequently discussed topic in these meetings related to a revision of prices on the rates list. Since the inception of the union, the unionists had instituted a list of fixed rates for transport in town. To publicise this list, the rickshaw drivers put up a large red sign board near the market place. In addition, each rickshaw driver was supposed to carry a fixed rate list featuring the union's stamp in his pocket. In this way, the unionists have succeeded in standardising transport rates in the town centre.

CUPPEC's leader Basu considered the union's role in town to be that of a 'mediator' between the state and the workers. The primary function of CUPPEC, he claimed, was to arbitrate in local labour disputes. The procedure is fairly straightforward: in the event that a union member makes a complaint, the senior leaders meet up with this individual and begin to negotiate with the employer on his or her behalf; in some cases disputes are settled immediately, while in others the CUPPEC members must lodge an appeal at the local police station. According to Hem Raj, most cases were resolved at the local police station. There are two probable reasons for this: on the one hand, dealing with labour disputes at a court in the district capital is expensive, given the costs of travel; on the other hand, police and unionists have a vested interest in resolving the dispute at the police station itself, as the latter usually obtain a percentage of the total sum negotiated, and the same is probably true for the police officers. The following two cases illustrate this clearly.

In 2007, local police arrested five rickshaw drivers, accusing them of smuggling illegal goods across the open border with India. These kinds of allegations are common, and are usually quickly settled between the police and rickshaw drivers. On this occasion, however, the police officer in charge decided to send the five drivers to court in Dhangadhi. When fellow rickshaw drivers heard about this, they informed the rickshaw union *adheje* (chairman), Mangal Chaudhary. He and several other unionists immediately went to the local police station to complain about the arrests. He claimed that his fellow unionists – the rickshaw drivers – had been arrested on wrongful charges and were in fact innocent. When the police officer refused to release the five rickshaw

drivers, the unionists called on all rickshaw and tella drivers to immediately stop working in protest against the arrests. The next day, the unionists stepped up the pressure to free their colleagues by calling for a general *bandh* (strike) in town. They blocked two main streets, preventing access to the main market, and marched through town chanting slogans demanding freedom for their fellow rickshaw drivers. Through kinship and friendship links with Dhangadhi-based rickshaw drivers, they received further support, with this group echoing their calls to free the unionists and combat the arbitrary use of police power. By the following day, the protest had grown even larger. As a result, the local police officer called Mangal to a nearby hotel and demanded an immediate end to the protests. But Mangal and his fellow unionists continued their strike without fear of retaliation. The action culminated on the third day, when the unionists from CUPPEC joined the rally in support of the rickshaw drivers. At this point, all of the unionists gathered at the police station for a final showdown. As Hem Raj recalled, “we were ready to fight with the police officer. One of our members had even intended to throw a stone at him”. Finally, the chief police officer apologised to the rickshaw drivers for arresting them on false pretences, and the five men were released from prison. Compensation equivalent to five days’ wages was paid to each of them, of which CUPPEC’s general fund and the rickshaw drivers’ union both received 6.5 per cent.

A similar situation arose towards the end of my fieldwork, when the union resolved a serious labour dispute between inhabitants of the *Kamaiya basti* Shaktinagar and a *pahadi* labour contractor. The latter had hired 52 male freed *Kamaiya* from the neighbourhood to work with him on a construction site in the far-western hills. Although the contractor had covered the costs of travel and food, he failed to pay the wages as promised at the end of the labour contract. The workers returned angrily to their *basti* in Tikapur and spent the next year trying to claim the money that was owed to them. But when the *thekedar* finally came to settle the grievances over wages, the workers from Krishnanagar decided to take him ‘hostage’. They locked him in the neighbourhood’s assembly house for 12 hours, demanding the immediate payment of the wages. The following day Hem Raj was informed about this by some of the *Kamaiya* from a nearby *basti*. Furious about being side-lined in this issue, he drove to the *Kamaiya basti* and together with some of the freed *Kamaiya* brought the *thekedar* to the local police station. After three days of mediation and arbitration, the union finally managed to settle the case, and the *thekedar* was able to pay the wages with the help of a hotelier friend. A few days later, CUPPEC members organised a small ceremony for the payment of the wages in the local Green Café and invited formerly bonded labourers and their leaders to join them. During the event, several of the workers went up on stage to thank the CUPPEC activists for their help.

While the arbitration of labour disputes undoubtedly provides a sense of empowerment to workers in the informal economy, it is important to highlight that not all cases are mediated. Within the construction sector, for example, I observed how workers of the Indian *thekedar* Krishna sometimes stopped working for a short period of time to force him to increase wages. Many of the construction workers with whom I spoke said that the *thekedars* sometimes tried to cheat them and that by putting down their tools they were able to bargain with them. But when asked why they would not go to the union, an elder female Tharu construction worker claimed: “The union does not help us. The *adheje* [chairman] is a *pahadi* (hill dweller); [he is] corrupt and keeps money for himself.” This suggests that ethnicity and corruption retained a crucial influence on the unionisation of workers in Tikapur, a theme that I wish to investigate further in the following section.

Questions of Class and Ethnicity in Tikapur's Unions

In addition to raising wages, institutionalising collective bargaining procedures, and challenging codes of power and authority in town, an important effect of the growth and development of Tikapur's labour movement was the inclusion of predominantly Tharu freed *Kamaiya* and workers in the unions' political structure. In contrast to the past, when the *Kamaiya*, and the Tharu more generally, did not have easy access to power structures, the unions now allow them to actively participate and make decisions on issues that affect them directly. But did the workers acquire a class identity through this process of inclusion? Or did their communal caste identity and regional ethnicity remain central, shaping the political culture of the new trade unionism in Tikapur?

Raj Chandarvarkar (1999: 209), in his seminal study of the general strikes in Bombay between 1928 and 1929, reminds us that

“[c]lass consciousness did not simply arise from the experience of production relations. Indeed, the social relations of the workplace were shaped by their interaction with the social organisation of the neighbourhood. Workplace disputes were sometimes given a communal construction by employers and trade union leaders, the press and the colonial state. They could also forge nationalist, regional or linguistic alignments. It was primarily in the domain of politics that social conflicts acquired a class character.”

According to Chandarvarkar, class consciousness rarely manifests itself, and if it does it is most likely short-lived. He outlines the specific historical conditions in which it develops, but also sketches the conditions for the dissolution of solidarity in the context of the Bombay strikes of 1928–29. Chandarvarkar highlights how the decline of class solidarities in Bombay was largely related to the emergence of rival union organisations attempting to secure their stake in a developing constituency (Chandarvarkar 1999: 233). In so doing, he alerts us to the possibility that unions may not only contribute to the emergence of class solidarities, but may also be responsible for divisions within the working class.

In line with Chandarvarkar's emphasis on historical context, Parry's (2008) work situated trade unionism at a steel factory in Bhilai within its broader temporal dimensions. He argues that, through its legal framework, the state privileged the Indian 'aristocracy' of labour, namely public sector steel workers with regular employment contracts, at the expense of those who were employed informally in the surrounding mines. Despite these obstacles, in Bhilai the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) emerged as a union vanguard of those employed in the informal economies of the surrounding mines and in construction work at the steel plant. Founded in 1977 and led by the charismatic leader Niyogi, who was murdered by contract killers in Bhilai in 1991, the CMM mobilised around the dominant regional symbols of political mobilisation, particularly issues of ethnicity. Importantly, the political culture of the CMM is focused not only on class but also on issues of cultural identity formation.

In Tikapur, it is clear that CUPPEC's leadership invokes a discourse centred on the notion of 'class struggle' rather than ethnic discrimination, and unions do not engage in cultural activities that reflect distinctive Tharu traditions and rituals. It is not that Tharu customs are totally lacking. As mentioned previously, during the Tharu Magghi Festival no monthly union meetings are held in order to allow workers to participate in the celebrations. But what matters more for the unionists is the yearly excursion to Tikapur Mahindra Park, which usually takes place at the start of the Nepali

New Year around April. During this trip, union funds, gathered through membership fees, are spent on an afternoon of drinking in the park, evoking the image of proletarian binge-drinking more than a revival of Tharu identity.

However, 'regional ethnicity' plays an important role in structuring social relations between union leadership and the bulk of workers, in a similar way as Parry has pointed out for the CMM in Bhilai. This becomes clear when we look at the leadership of CUPPEC's construction and *rickshawwalla* unions. As mentioned before, the construction union is led by Basu Bhandari, a high-caste union man who has had trouble establishing himself as a legitimate vanguard of authority in front of his constituency. This is due to the fact that what really matters to the predominantly Tharu construction workers, regardless of order and rank, is whether one's leader is from the same ethnic group, and whether one's own occupational group does not misuse union funds and has appropriated the local cultural symbols of political mobilisation, in particular the notion of 'sacrifice'. This is why Basu effectively 'outsources' part of the leadership to freed *Kamaiya* leaders like Daniram, Jagdish, and Ramkrishna, as I showed in my description of the rally. This gives labour disputes a communal construction, but it is only in this way that Hem Raj can sustain and organise the construction workers' union.

Ethnicity plays an even more obvious role in the leadership of the *rickshawwalla* union. Since its inception, the union has been led by local Tharu son of the soil Mangal Chaudhary. As all but one of the rickshaw drivers in Tikapur are Tharu, it is important for them to have an *adheje* who is from their own community, and Mangal is ideal for several reasons. First, he comes not only from the same caste and region, but also from a freed *Kamaiya basti*, and he therefore knows about the struggles and hardships of the *Kamaiya* community. Second, in contrast to Hem Raj, he worked alongside other rickshaw and tella drivers and spent much of his day socialising with them; he was thus an insider, which, unlike Ramaswamy's work (1977, 1981) has shown in an Indian context, is an important criterion for trade union leadership.

What mattered much less than ethnicity, however, were gender considerations. Within both unions, women were largely excluded from leadership, and union activism remains an entirely male domain. This is unsurprising for the rickshaw drivers association, as this type of work is only undertaken by men. When I enquired why there were no female rickshaw or tella drivers in town, the drivers would usually burst out laughing, noting that women did not have the physical strength to be part of this profession. It was beyond the imagination of the *rickshawwallas* that a woman could ever drive a rickshaw, let alone be part of their union.

Unlike the *rickshawwallas'* association, CUPPEC's construction union does have female members, a fact that the male leadership is proud of. However, they are excluded from key positions in the union's leadership. None of the women working in the informal economy of Tikapur have ever stood for elections in the local union. Though CUPPEC has added the issue of equal pay to their agenda and most male workers support this initiative, women remain marginal voices within the union.

Conclusion: from harmonic symbiosis to co-optation?

This paper began by presenting a brief overview of the history of Nepal's trade union movement so as to contextualise the growth and development of Tikapur's labour unions. It then historicised the currently heated antagonism between Nepal's Maoist movement and the non-Maoist union GEFONT. The ethnographic sections that followed, however, presented a scenario that contrasts with the wider trends. In Tikapur, the Maoist movement and the GEFONT-affiliated labour union CUPPEC enjoy a peaceful relationship with one another. By focusing on these actors' labour politics I have shown how the relationship between the Maoist movement and CUPPEC can be seen as a functional symbiosis that contributes to increasing wages, standardising collective bargaining procedures, and challenging codes of authority and power for workers in Tikapur's informal economy. However, as the emerging trade unions were organised largely through freed *Kamaiya* neighbourhoods, residents of the latter have gradually gained control of the unions, and communal, caste, and regional identities have become central in determining their political leadership, which remains a masculine domain.

This surge in the democratising forces of industrialisation invites comparison with other settings. In her discussion of the American labour movement, Jancis Fine (2005) highlights the emergence over the last three decades of 'community unions' that have successfully managed to raise wages and improve working conditions among low-wage labourers in the USA. Moreover, Mollona (2009) has recently described how this model of 'community unionism' has diffused from the USA to the UK since the 1990s. As this author notes, a combination of traditional workplace-centred union activism and the broader community unionism was used by local activists in order to counter extensive subcontracting and labour deregulation in Sheffield's steel industries. In a similar vein, Scipes (1992) contemplates how the union activities of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) trade union in the Philippines represent a social movement-like rather than 'pure' traditional labour movement, as it incorporates a variety of other organisations, such as churches and human rights groups. In this light, the ethnographic material presented here suggests that labour union activism in Tikapur can tell us something more of the wider social context in which it takes place. One tentative hypothesis resulting from these considerations is that Tikapur's labour movement may be better understood as a community union rather than a traditional workplace-centred movement, as it relies on the support of social and political forces outside the purview of traditional labour movement.

Analysed from that perspective, we can better understand the complexities of the political mobilisation of labourers in the context of post-conflict Nepal. As such, an analysis focussing on particular unions without considering the political context risks missing the point. As I have demonstrated, the harmonic symbiosis – between the Maoists and non-Maoist labour unions – forms the root of new labour activism in town. Yet, it should be noted that this article deals with a process that is open-ended and dynamic. It describes the situation encountered during the fieldwork period between January 2008 and July 2009; given the Maoists on-going attempts to capture state power by broadening its base, the movement might shift strategies and place their own party members within the non-Maoist unions and begin to infiltrate them. Many actors in the field also expect them to do. Yet, with the recent split of the Maoist movement into UCPN Maoist and CPN Maoist, the co-optation of friendly trade unions might remain a secondary goal in the struggle for state power.

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