

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Thai Fast Food Workers Fight for a Fair Share

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Apantree Charoensak, Thai fast food worker campaign

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers, and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast. An interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, for greater equality in the global economy, and for one, just future. Earlier this year, tens of thousands of McDonald's workers across the United States went on a one-day strike. They're demanding a \$15 wage in union rights, and it's not the first time. Fast food workers have been taking these actions for several years and are part of a Fight for 15 campaign at fast-food restaurants here and around the world.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

While fast food corporations make billions in profits each year, the whole business model relies on keeping their costs as low as possible. Workers taking orders and cooking food are paid such low wages. Many are forced to work more than one job just to get by. That's why many fast food workers are forming unions. My guest today, Apantree, worked at Yum Brands, the parent company of Kentucky Fried Chicken, or KFC, in Thailand and has been a union leader and organizer among fast food workers. In 2018, she was honored by Thailand's National Human Rights Commission for her work protecting and promoting human rights. With the help of our interpreter Piya, Apantree will talk with us about how more than 3,000 fast food workers in Thailand organized a union at KFC restaurants and what it took to get a contract with an early retirement program, paid meals and more.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, I want to welcome my sister Apantree from Thailand. Thank you so much for joining us today. I've been really looking forward to meeting you and having this conversation. Please tell us your full name and at the work you do.

Apantree:

So my name is Apantree Charoensak, I was the former union leader. I organized two unions. The first one was the supervisor level union, it was called Cuisine and Service Workers' Union of Thailand. And the other one was the operational labor union, it was called Cook and Serve Workers' Union of Thailand.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And okay, sister, as we get started, people all over the world have heard of KFC, of course, and have been to order food at these restaurants and have an experience in fast food restaurants, all over the world. As we think about Thailand, can you tell us a little bit about who works at KFC and how much do they earn typically each month?

Apantree:

So the people that work there, I divide into two types. The first is the full-time workers. They usually have worked at KFC more than five years and most of them have family, but the second group is the part-time workers. Most of them still then, and of workers are this group, which are about 70 percent at KFC and they make quite low wage. Back 10 years ago, they make about 25 baht an hour, which about

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200 Thai baht per day. Now make roughly 42 baht per hour and a little bit over 300 baht per day, which equals about \$1 per hour. The part-time workers work for six hours and full-time workers work for eight hours.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So, Apantree, I know you have been part of global networks that have worked around the world to improve the lives of low-wage, fast food workers. So you'll know about this. I mean, fast food workers in the United States, often extremely low paid, have been going on strike and campaigning hard all over the United States for better wages and for a union. And many are part of what we have known here as the Fight for 15 Campaign. Whole nationwide movement of workers trying to just get a minimum \$15 an hour pay so they can support themselves and their families. Is there an organizing campaign and drive like that?

Apantree/Pia:

We don't have a nationwide campaign like the U.S., but the campaign did happen at my company. And actually I took lesson, when I went to the IUF event and I saw the campaign Fight for 15. So we came back and we tried to use the example in the U.S. to talk with the company and talk with people in my union and try to push for wage increase, which like Thai fast food workers receive very low wage compared to the U.S. worker. But we try to apply the campaign in the U.S. and try to motivate people in my union to demand more with the company, but it still happens only in my company.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Apantree if I understand it right, there was a period of time that you worked at the company, at Yum Foods, before you became a union organizer. And your experience in the company is part of how you got interested in workers' rights.

Apantree:

So in 2011, when I start the organizing campaign, I was the manager and I saw the inequality between the supervisor level and the operational level. And in 2011, we had new MD from India that he came and he decreased benefits of the worker, and he worsened the working condition of the workers. They no longer gave free uniform. They took out insurance plan, they decreased bonus and they make it harder for wage to increase. However, I also witness that high rank supervisor were doing even better. The company gave them office car, the company cut benefits for operational workers. The turnover was high, many workers resign from the company. So I tried to address the workers complaint to the management until they became unhappy with me. And the management was afraid that I would organize a union.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, honestly, there's nothing more terrifying than workers demanding their rights, right? But I was thinking when you were talking, it's not common for somebody to be in a position you were in before you were organizing where you're working for the company, you're getting a good set salary, but you're noticing this huge pay differential. So the workers at KFC who are making food, selling it to people, working really hard, part-time, for low wages, their wages are getting worse, you're noticing. And so you raise this issue inside the company. And I wonder it's not common that, that happens. It's not often that

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we see that in companies around the world. And I wonder how did other people in management treat you when you started raising your concerns?

Apantree:

When I started organizing, the management was against, and they tried to convince me that whatever the company had were already good enough. They were telling me that the company was not ready for the changes. The company knew that if demands were successful, it would impact 70 percent of the workers, which back then, there were about 18,000 workers. So they pressured and threatened me a lot. They said they would get me out of the company if I still try to help other workers.

Pia:

So 25,000 restaurants around the world, more than 145 countries and a lot of employees and suddenly Apantree you are now the most dangerous woman in KFC, the most dangerous woman in Thailand. You're being monitored by the company with surveillance video, you're being threatened with losing your job and you were fired and had to fight to get that job back. Your picture is being sent all around to stores to make sure that you don't get hired. And you're hearing threats that even involve physical violence. So you're just trying to form a union and support workers in Thailand. All of that and yet you're still persisting and fighting for the rights of workers and helping them form unions. And I understand that you got a union and a contract at KFC. How did that happen?

Apantree:

So it took six years from the union was first organized until we reach the threshold of 20 percent because in Thailand the law requires that you have to reach over 20 percent of all the workforce before you can fight for collective bargaining. And KFC was under Yum restaurant who also owned Pizza Hut in Thailand. So they also count Pizza Hut workers in this threshold that we have to reach, to fight our collective bargaining agreements. So it took us six years to reach this number. And we had workers in all over the countries, in the North, in the Eastern, in the South. And it took lots of patience that we came to meet with workers all over the country, and we had to go quietly, go without employer fighting out. But we start building that until we were successful.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I mean, it's pretty common that facing such anti-union resistance from the company that workers have to organize underground and build their power first secretly and meeting all over the country. And your case took six years to build a union, in addition to patience and talking to workers and getting their stories all over the country. What other strategies worked well to help workers achieve that 20 percent of union membership and the ability to achieve an actual union in KFC?

Apantree:

So, I was the manager in Bangkok and also in the Northeast region of Thailand. I believe that in my past work, I dedicate myself to my staff. So the workers that were my staff, they trust me and they believe that I would try to do the best for them. So when I start explaining to them what union is and what would happen to you, if you don't organize, and they saw it right away because some of them had worked for over 10 years, but they saw no security. They had no savings. And they saw that their benefits are getting decreased every day.

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Apantree:

So it was quite effective in terms of motivating them to become union members and also had the strategy which I call [inaudible], because that was the way to avoid the employers fighting out where I was going to go next. So I tried to be as unpredictable as I could. One day, I might pop up in the North. The next day I might pop up in the Northeast or the South, so the employer, the company, could not predict where I would be. And we also were supported by many domestic and international organizations.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I think an organizing drive on that scale, led by a woman of your persistence, intelligence, your trustworthiness, your great skill and analysis. I can see why workers listened and followed, and also led to create this great campaign after six years of your leadership and the leadership of the workers in these stores. I understand you won a contract, how did workers' lives improve after they formed a union and got collective bargaining and a contract?

Apantree:

Yes, that improved lives of the workers. And I like to go back to how we got the agreements, because I think it took seven months for the negotiation. And back then workers were very upset because it took so long and they wanted to strike. And most of our members were in the south of Thailand, they all want to get the bus to Bangkok, to protest at the company building. So the employer became afraid and the company employer asked me to mediate with the workers. So I explained to them that we could try our best at the negotiation table. So after that we got the agreement which improved the lives of the workers. We got the accident insurance for the delivery workers. We got lunch for the workers. We got free uniforms for the workers. And we got guarantee of one month bonus and three-to-five percent wage increase.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Paid lunches, uniforms provided by the company instead of charged to workers, wage increases, the peace of mind of having safety and security in your job. These are absolutely life-changing, meaningful changes in the workplace, when you form a union and get a contract. And it's an amazing campaign. Congratulations. And I know in Thailand, we've had at least two or three different serious waves of COVID. So we've had lockdowns in Thailand. How has the pandemic affected fast food workers and other low wage workers, KFC workers? Has the contract had to change, have people lost jobs?

Apantree:

So during the pandemic, the most impact happened with the part-time workers, because they need less workforce. And the part-time workers were the first group that the company ordered to stay home and ordered to get the unemployment benefits from the social security instead. And they keep most of the full-time workers. And also there was also an issue that at first, when the COVID-19 first happened, the employer did not let the workers use the hand gel. They only allow the customers to use it. So the union fought and demanded and successfully got the company to agree to let the workers use the hand gel.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, that's definitely something we've seen in a lot of countries—that the union difference during the pandemic has meant the ability to fight for and gain really fundamental health and safety improvements

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for unionized workers. I wonder if that extends to delivery drivers. I wanted to ask you because in so many countries during lockdowns, people are ordering food to be delivered at home, instead of going out. Last season on this podcast, I interviewed George Sandal from Labor Initiatives in Ukraine who talked about organizing efforts of delivery workers in Ukraine and their struggles to achieve decent work and health and safety in the workplace. Is the same thing happening in Thailand? Can you tell us a little bit about platform delivery jobs and what's happening with workers?

Apantree:

So, it also happened with the KFC delivery workers that the company forced them to change into being the riders for applications, such as FoodPanda or GrabFood. And the company had the condition they could choose to transfer those platform companies, or they could resign and not getting any compensation. So most of the delivery worker had to transfer to those platform companies and they lost all their benefits. They only got 500 baht as the daily wage. But there was no bonus, there was no wage increase. There were no social security and they didn't even have any financial document for them to do the business transaction with the bank.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Through intense years-long campaigns, fast food workers in Thailand won huge gains in wages, working conditions, and many benefits like accident insurance. But what happens after COVID when many workers lost pay during lockdowns and employers use the pandemic to cut wages or layoff workers. After the break, Apantree tells us the next steps unions must take to build a better future for all workers.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hi, there it's Shawna again, I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the international labor movement's radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues. And it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out Radio Labor at R-A-D-I-O-L-A-B-O-U-R.net, and find out more about worker right struggles around the world and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities follow and subscribe at radiolabor.net.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So delivery drivers in the pandemic moved from being company employees, to working for jobs they can get off the platform apps and lose all their benefits. That is a classic story in the pandemic. And I wonder, Apantree, with your really strong leadership in this sector, I know that you won an award. I know that you are recognized by the National Human Rights' Council of Thailand and the human rights community of Thailand for fighting for, and improving the lives of Thai workers. And as you've seen, what's happened in COVID with some of the rollbacks on these rights and some of the loss of wages and benefits, I wonder how you think about the future and the role of unions in building a better world again, in Thailand. What role do unions have in helping achieve a change coming out of COVID, better working conditions for all? How do you see the role of the labor movement in the next five years in that fight?

Apantree:

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So most of the drawback deal with the Thailand's non-recognition of international labor rights, such as Thailand still has not ratify ILO Convention 87 and 98 on freedom of association and right to collective bargaining, even though Thai labor movement has campaigned for over 20 years. We also see that there is nothing better at fighting with the employer than the power of the workers. Employers still see workers as the commodity rather than partnership. So we think we have to organize, we have to associate to fight back. And I want to push the government to make the law, which requires that every company has at least one union. Make union the mandatory for all the companies.

Apantree:

And I also think that Thailand need to reform its labor laws, because we have the Labor Relations Act from 1975 and Labor Protection Act from 2000. So the law does not protect the platform workers because, platform come much after that law. And so now we have the platform delivery workers who work at probably one of the most dangerous jobs, their lives are on the line, but they have very low protection, which kind of goes in the opposite way with how much profit, how much income the company makes. But the quality of life for the workers like goes down and down.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So a future in Thailand where all workers have fundamental human rights, you mentioned the rights to organize freedom of association and collective bargaining, the rights to be free from violence and harassment at work. So your vision of the future is worker rights for all. And I wonder if you could let us know a little bit about how you stay motivated for this fight. You've been through a lot, you've achieved a lot and faced a lot of struggle as well. What motivates you to continue working towards that vision?

Apantree:

I think I've see lots of gap between the rich and the poor, and I see lots of inequality, which I see in the company level from the supervisors and the operational level. And I saw that in the society that the corporation is the one who tells the politicians or tell the government what to do. And I see more poverty among people. I see bigger gap, so I want to push and I want to start pushing for myself, even though I may be just one person, but I have hope that if it starts from me and I can expand this fight to others as well. Even though I'm not sure that in the next five years or 10 years, how much obstacles I have to go through, but I want to show and make people understand that there are lots of gaps and there are lots of inequality that we have to fight to get justice.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Sister Apantree, you call yourself one small person fighting for this big fight. And I would say listening to your story today, and from what I know about what you have led in Thailand with workers, you've made enormous change and the struggle against inequality and for full worker rights for everyone is all of our fight. It's all of our struggle. And I really want to thank you so much for taking the time to share these inspiring stories with us today. Thank you so much.

Apantree:

And so thank you. And I think I've been doing it because I'm concerned about the future of my children. And I'm concerned about the security, stability, sustainability of children in the future. And even though with my union at KFC, I wanted to expand to the industry level, try to get workers from either McDonald's, Chef's Grill, Burger King or MK to join with me. I think I try with McDonald workers, but

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McDonald company was very afraid of the union, so they told the workers that they would increase the benefits, but please stay away from the KFC union, which I think even though I could not get them to join, but I was successful in directly helping the McDonald workers to improve their lives. And I think that KFC union is doing okay. And in the future, I hope that we can help work from other companies do as good as we do as well.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

You mentioned McDonald's and I just wanted to ask you, we know in the United States, there's a big campaign about sexual harassment against women in McDonald's. And I just wondered if sexual harassment and discrimination against women is present also in the rest of the fast food industry in Thailand.

Apantree:

Yes, and I have experienced that and I have fought against that myself. So there were two case when I was the union representative that regional manager harassed the part-time workers. So I fought and I got the manager fired within three days. I talked to the HR person and I even went to the hotel that the part-time worker told me that the manager was trying to get her into that hotel, but she successfully ran away. So I got the CCTV from the hotel to use at the evidence, and I got him out within three days, one hour and 10. I want to leave the last words for all my Thai national corporations, wherever you operate your business, please respect human rights, please respect workers' rights. And please respect human dignity.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thank you. Thank so much. And Piya, thank you so much. I really appreciate that. And this was just wonderful to learn more about your work, my sister Apantree, I've heard about you for years. I'm glad to have had this chance to hear from you. I can't wait to share this story on the podcast and Piya really, honestly, forever you've been doing just amazing work, too. I mean, you also help support translating. Your work is fantastic. Thank you so much for everything you've done as well, Piya, for all of the workers of Thailand and all of globally and migration and everything. Just thank you really. And for wearing the hat of my favorite team when I was growing up the LA Dodgers.

Piya:

Okay. I just like cannot let people see my head.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

We heard about some of the challenges. Thailand's fast food workers faced trying to form unions and win basic rights: employer harassment, including the threat of physical violence, surveillance and monitoring and delays in negotiating a contract. But it's not only fast food workers and it doesn't just happen in Thailand. Workers in all types of jobs and countries around the world who seek decent working conditions, often experience the same type of employer resistance. Even from billion dollar corporations that can easily ensure their employees have decent work. Yet, as Apantree has shown, when workers join together to win their rights, they can and will succeed in building a better future for themselves and their families. Our thanks again to Piya for his assistance with interpreting today's interview. And of course, our thanks to Apantree for sharing such an inspiring example of fast food workers across Thailand, who are standing up for the rights they deserve. Rights all workers deserve.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

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