

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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**Labour in the Time of Corona:
Commoning, caring, and coercion during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Convener:

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Abstract

The world of work in Southeast Asia is being profoundly affected by the global coronavirus pandemic. High levels of integration into global supply chains render the regional economy historically susceptible to global economic shocks. During the Covid-19 pandemic, however, lockdowns, travel restrictions, and other measures designed to contain the spread of the virus have seen the economic impacts of the pandemic spill over employment sectors across factory floors, to tourism and service work, and self-employed vendors and trades. The impacts of Covid-19 on employment across the formal and informal economy have been widely documented. The role and responses of workers and their trade unions in managing, mitigating, and manipulating this disruption, however, are less well understood (Ford and Ward 2021). In this panel, therefore, we invite a recentring of “labour agency” (Herod 2008) to explore how workers and their unions have played a proactive role in shaping Covid-19’s economic and employment impacts.

Across the region, trade unions and labour groups have undoubtedly played a “pivotal role” (ILO 2020) in leading response to the Covid-19 crisis for workers, from participating in social dialogue with governments, to distributing mutual aid to supplement typically “lagging” (UN 2020) investment in social protection programming. Yet Southeast Asia is already renowned for its limited labour rights and shrinking of democratic space under renewed authoritarianism (Morgenbesser 2020). Within these existing constraints, reports of recalcitrant governments and employers exploiting the pandemic to intensify harassment and discrimination against labour groups and their leaders through emergency legislation and illegal dismissals have also been widespread (Patel 2020). In this panel, therefore, we seek to identify and explore the uneven contexts and constraints that workers and their unions have navigated in attempting to provide support and relief to Southeast Asia’s diverse workforces during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Format

Single session paper panel (1 x 90 min.): 3-4 presenters