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Rethinking exploitation and control in migrant labour regimes: The case of Filipino workers in a Malaysian oil palm plantation

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Abstract

The expansion of oil palm farming in Southeast Asia has been premised on the mobilisation of both internal and transborder migrant labour. This paper examines labour relations on an oil palm plantation in Sabah, Malaysia, with a focus on the underexplored case of undocumented Filipino migrant workers from Palawan. Drawing on field-based research, we analyse the evolution of a migrant labour regime in light of debates on labour exploitation. We find that this labour regime is structured around three interrelated mechanisms: the mobilisation of a labour force primarily composed of undocumented migrant workers, the casualisation of labour relations, and the adoption of piece rate payments. Together, these mechanisms facilitate the extraction of surplus value by transferring risks and costs to workers, while undermining class-based solidarity through self-discipline, peer surveillance, and labour fragmentation. In response to debates about 'free' and 'unfree' labour, we argue that outsourcing, casualisation, and piece rate systems are not only markers of precarity but are deliberately structured to extract surplus value and inhibit migrant worker mobilisation. By situating Filipino migrants within the broader oil palm labour regime, this paper highlights the relational nature of labour regimes, demonstrating how undocumented migration and transnational mobility are central to sustaining contemporary agricultural production.

Keywords Labour regime · Migrant workers · Oil palm · Exploitation · Labour control

Introduction

The rapid expansion of oil palm production in Southeast Asia has relied on the large-scale migration of workers into areas with a limited supply of agro-industrial workers (Li 2017b). In Malaysia, for example, an estimated 80% of the total of 451,000 workers employed on oil palm plantations are documented migrants, of which an estimated 80–90% are from Indonesia (Fair Labour Association, 2022). Poverty, violent authoritarianism, and the reproductive squeeze have driven people to engage in labour migration, participating in Indonesia's internal transmigration programme or migrating across the border to Malaysia.

Although oil palm is less labour-intensive than other globally traded agricultural commodities, its limited mechanisation means that its labour regime relies on the continuous mobilisation of a flexible, low-cost labour force to sustain the valorisation of capital in the sector. The defining features of the oil palm labour regime relate to the fragmentation and segmentation of labour along the lines of age, gender, legal status, ethnolinguistic identity, and region of origin (Li 2017a; Li and Semedi 2021; Pye 2017). These divisions are reinforced by task specialisation and labour segmentation on the basis of contract types (formal, informal, permanent or seasonal) in ways that are discriminatory and often reinforce inequalities among the workforce (Li 2017a; Pye 2017). The mobilisation of both internal and transnational migrant labour is central to the reproduction of these labour regimes, structuring the organisation of work, dynamics of exploitation, control, and resistance in contemporary oil palm production in Southeast Asia (Kaur 2014; Sanderson 2016; Li 2016).

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Existing research has largely focused on Indonesian migrants in the Malaysian oil palm sector, particularly in Sabah, with labour access regulated by formal work permits (Kaur 2014). As in other migrant-dependent supply chains, employers in the oil palm sector reduce their labour costs by setting wages below the local reservation wage. While this might deter local workers who cannot sustain household reproduction, it creates demand for extraterritorial workers, whose precarity renders them more exploitable. Migrant workers, particularly those undocumented, are attractive because they are more reliant on the employer, less likely to unionise, switch or exit employment, as well as easier to control due to their limited rights, social networks, and language skills.

Plantations often reinforce migrant labour control through the provision of company housing, stores, and credit systems to bind workers with debt and spatial dependency, while the remoteness of the plantation further isolates workers, enhancing the employer's ability to discipline them (Kaur 2014). Undocumented labour migrants find themselves in a "denationalised and desocialised space" that constrains their agency, organising, and mobility to seek improved employment (Kelly 2002:404). In principle, these arrangements are for unaccompanied workers or work gangs, and it is assumed that workers are emotionally rooted elsewhere and that their broader costs of social reproduction are duly outsourced to their communities and countries of origin (Pye 2017; Kelly 2002).

This paper draws from the labour regimes literature to argue that any analysis of migrant labour exploitation must move beyond low wages and poor working conditions (Azmeh 2014; Strauss and McGrath 2017) to develop a broader understanding of the transnational landscape, including the political economies and labour markets of both the destination and the origin countries. We focus on three interrelated mechanisms influencing surplus value extraction: the mobilisation of a labour force primarily composed of undocumented migrant workers, the prevalence of casualised labour relations, and the adoption of piece rate payments. Our analysis extends beyond the plantation to consider the power dynamics faced by migrant workers in the context of broader life trajectories and the pressures of social reproduction. We illustrate this through the case of Filipino migrant workers from Palawan[1], who have only started migrating to Malaysian oil palm plantations for work in the past decade, typically entering the country as undocumented migrants (Montefrio et al. 2018). This paper addresses this gap by examining the emergence of a migrant labour regime involving undocumented Filipino migrants in the oil palm frontier of Sabah, Malaysia. By situating the migrant labour regime at the intersection of labour mobilisation and agricultural commodification in border regions between the Philippines and Malaysia, we trace how the labour regime adapts to the constraints, opportunities and the limited bargaining power of casualised, undocumented migrant workers in their struggle to sustain their livelihoods across borders.

This paper contributes to debates on migrant labour regimes and labour exploitation. While there are important continuities with colonial-era systems of forced labour and corporate organisation on Southeast Asian oil palm plantations (Kaur 2014; Giacomin 2018), we argue that focusing solely on coercion can obscure the more subtle and diffuse forms of control that sustain migrant labour exploitation in contemporary oil palm labour regimes. Rather than 'unfree labour' (Li 2017b), we find that processes of mobilising undocumented migrants, casualisation of work, and payments through piece rates sustain a relatively stable migrant labour regime, in which forms of direct labour control, coercion and disciplining by the employer are replaced by labour self-disciplining and peer-control, diffusing class-based solidarity and collective organization.[2] Undocumented labour migration and transnational mobility thus emerge as core dimensions of oil palm labour regimes. Migration can be understood as a strategy for workers to sustain their livelihoods across borders but this paper draws attention to migration as a key determinant of power dynamics within localised labour regimes.

This paper is based on on-site research conducted by all authors in migrant-sending districts in southern Palawan in 2024 and 2025, and by the first author on a Malaysian oil palm plantation (referred to here as the 'NW Plantation') in Sabah, Malaysia, in 2023, 2024, and 2025. The first author undertook community immersion, conducting unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and process observations with prospective migrants, migrant workers, returned migrants, intermediaries, company managers, and officials in both countries. Our analysis is further based on nine in-depth interviews with returning migrant workers conducted in Palawan, and 41 in-depth interviews with Filipino migrant workers at the NW Plantation. Permission for the research was obtained from all relevant authorities, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. All identifying information has been anonymised.

[1] There is no data on the number of undocumented migrants working in Malaysia's palm oil industry. However, reports suggest that the largest group of undocumented migrant workers in the palm oil industry in Sabah are from Indonesia, followed by migrants from the Philippines, who make up a much smaller proportion (Fair Labor Association 2022; Solidar Suisse 2019).

[2] Strauss and McGrath (2017) introduce the useful idea of 'mundane forms of exploitation' to reconceptualise the continuum of exploitation away from focusing on unfreedom alone.

The paper is structured as follows: Sect. "Theoretical debates: labour regimes, plantations and migrant labour" outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the labour regime approach and extends it to analyse labour migration systems relationally. Sect. "The emergence of a migrant labour regime in oil palm production" presents the case of Filipino migrant workers, highlighting the labour regime dynamics underpinning exploitation in contemporary agro-industrial plantations and tracing migrant workers' trajectories across time and space. Sect. "The migrant labour regime in motion" consolidates the analysis and advances a relational contribution to the study of migrant labour regimes.

Theoretical debates: labour regimes, plantations and migrant labour

Labour regimes and plantation labour regimes

This paper contributes to drawing together contributions from labour regimes theory and labour migration studies. Contemporary theorizations of labour start from recognising labour processes based on a Marxist understanding of the organisation and nature of work under capitalism, and examining the social and technical organisation of work in plantation agriculture (Peck 2022). Within this approach, Braverman (1974) traced how capitalist managers exert control over the organisation of production, and how this translates into demanding increased levels of intensity from workers performing tasks. An important contribution to labour process theory has been the forging of the broader category of labour regimes, which moves beyond discrete workplaces by instead looking at the "the combination of social relations and institutions that bind capital and labour in a form of antagonistic relative stability in particular times and places" (Baglioni 2022:12). Understanding labour regimes as interrelated social processes that operate in conjunction to shape the production and utilisation of labour (Taylor and Rioux 2018), makes it necessary to analyse the local specificities that shape the construction of space where labour operates and is controlled, with important implications for labour organisation, bargaining power, and unionisation (Kelly 2002).

Within this framework, two key concepts are central to the analysis of labour regimes, namely labour control and labour agency. Labour control refers to the diversity of mechanisms, practices and relationships within labour regimes that ensure that labour power is transformed into realised work. Labour control is defined as the interplay between the dynamics of labour exploitation (i.e., workers' capacity to produce value above their wage) and disciplining (i.e., mechanisms to subordinate workers in the labour process, to mediate conflicts and restrain labour agency) (Baglioni 2018). Labour control is essential in creating a workforce that is disciplined and efficient to maximise productivity for capital (Taylor and Rioux 2018). Baglioni et al. (2022) argue that dynamics external to the production sphere, such as the reproductive sphere or household indebtedness, can function as disciplining measures, deterring workers from contesting their own exploitation.

In contrast, labour agency is understood as the capacity of workers to actively influence the geographical dynamics of capitalism (Herod 2001), the leveraging of collective action that disrupts and transforms relations of production and exchange. In labour geography, labour agency is understood to be both enabled and constrained by specific global value chain dynamics, as well as local and national labour regimes (Selwyn 2012; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2023; Baglioni, Campling, Coe, et al., 2022). In other words, this perspective highlights the embeddedness of workers into the structural dynamics of global commodity production.

The manifestations of labour agency range from overt strikes initiated by organised unions to more covert forms of resistance, including foot-dragging. Selwyn (2012) offers a useful categorisation of different forms of labour agency, drawing on Wright (2000) and Silver (2003), which distinguishes between structural and associational power. Workers derive structural power from their position in the production process and their ability to disrupt it. Selwyn (2012) posits that the diverse material requirements of commodity production give rise to distinct labour processes and labour regimes. This, in turn, has important implications for the nature and extent of workers' structural power. Conversely, workers can mobilise associational power through collective organisation, such as through trade unions (Wright 2000). It is precisely the analysis of the interplay between labour control and labour agency that reveals how capital's strategies shape uneven patterns of labour conditions and influence the scope and forms of labour agency (Baglioni et al. 2022).

These insights are particularly relevant to plantation agriculture. Like in other tropical agro-industrial crops, oil palm is predominantly produced intensively and at scale in plantations, characterised by hierarchical organisation, heavy reliance on migrant and casualised labour, and segmented labour forces (Cramb and McCarthy 2016; Li 2016).

In relation to this, debates on the (un)freedom of labour have been useful in illuminating the historical trajectory of labour regimes largely recruiting migrant workers. While colonial plantations made extensive use of forced labour and were characterised by direct coercion and violence, in contemporary plantation labour regimes there has been a transformation of labour relations whereby direct coercion and overt violence are less prevalent (Li 2017b; Barral

2014). This was a response to broader changes in global market dynamics, industrial relations and state policies. These newer forms of dependency and unfreedom can be taken advantage of by employers and have been related to the increasing casualisation of workers, reliance on short-term contracts, self-exploitation through piece rate systems, debt dependence, and mobility constraints that prevent workers without sufficient savings from leaving the plantation (Li 2017b; Barral 2014). While workers' autonomy has increased when compared with colonial labour regimes (Barral 2014), it has been noted that this freedom (from violence and direct control) also results in workers being exposed to the unabated effects of market dynamics and other forms of exploitation, such as wages below subsistence level, inability to secure constant employment and imposed flexibility. Li cautioned that in this process people became subjected to the dull compulsion of having to work under 'dismal conditions because labour is abundant, but work is scarce' (2016, 355).

It has been argued that plantation labour regimes share important commonalities across crops. Plantations are highly disciplined and typically organised in a hierarchical way with field workers at the bottom of the labour regime, overseen by supervisors and managers, often subcontracted by intermediaries (Li 2017b:247). Variation in labour regimes comes from the material requirements of different crops and technologies used; the practices by employers to source and select workers; the methods of remuneration and forms of disciplining; responsibilities over social reproduction between workers, employers and other actors; and the specific economic and political contexts shaping the agency of both capital and labour (Selwyn 2012).

Contemporary labour control in plantations can involve direct methods, such as supervision, surveillance, and the coercive regulation of workers' activities. These forms of control are exacerbated by the segmentation of the workforce, for example along gender and ethnic lines, which often suppresses the mobilisation of workers' associational power (Pye 2017). The objective of basic control measures is to discipline workers in such a way that they work more intensively. Moreover, the management of labour on plantations is often characterised by paternalism[3]. This involves controlling not only the labour process in terms of tasks, productivity, and discipline, but also the private lives of workers and their families. This includes the implementation of a set of rules and regulations detailing what is permitted and prohibited in the productive and reproductive spheres. On the other hand, dependencies are created and maintained by providing social infrastructure to ensure the security of workers and their families, such as living compounds and access to social infrastructure (e.g., schools, healthcare services, and sports facilities) (Barral 2014).

Approaches to labour migration

The study of contemporary labour migration in globalised intensive agriculture is our second axis of analysis. Beyond agriculture, labour regimes in globalised sectors like construction and care, also rely on the mobilization of migrant labour. Attempts at theorising the contribution of labour migration to structuring labour control and work practices encounter an obstacle widely recognised in the literature: there is no broad consensus or big theory concerning the role, drivers and consequences of labour migration in contemporary supply chains (see Castles 2010). Different understandings on labour migration stem not only from contrastive conceptualizations of contemporary capitalist development and crisis, but notably from the heterogeneous and multi-faceted character of the subject study. While labour migration involves domestic and transborder movement motivated by employment conditions, and is reported to account for around 60% of all migratory flows and around 5% of the global workforce (Mishra 2025; Shrover, 2017), researchers recognise that migration has multiple, inextricable drivers that militate against clear categorizations. Moreover, labour migration encompasses legal, documented, illegal and clandestine mobilities; is present in an array of industries, links countries with similar or different economic structures, labour markets, labour policy and regulations; engages workers with different levels of experience and skills; and has workers exerting different degrees of freedom or unfreedom, both as an expression of agency and resistance or mobilised through coercion (Strauss and McGrath 2017).

A simple categorization of the literature could differentiate between the study of the drivers (Oso et al. 2022) and the study of the effects of labour migration for receiving and sending economies, for migrants themselves and for their families and communities (Mishra 2025; Portes 2010). Here, we aim for a slight inversion as we trace how production is organised around the recruitment of migrant workers and how the labour process optimises surplus value extraction, specifically from migrant workers. While we recognise the need to explain micro and meso-level causal drivers of migration and the contribution of microeconomic and institutionalist approaches to labour migration as an individual livelihood strategy; as an equalising mechanism between diverse labour markets; as a form of household risk diversification or as a mechanism to adjust to shortages experienced in labour sending regions (See the Harris-Todaro model; Portes 2010), these approaches often abstract from political processes and social structures.

[3] For an extensive discussion on paternalism in large-scale agriculture see Gibbon et al. (2014).

We draw instead from approaches to labour migration that analyse how migrant worker recruitment interacts with segmented labour markets, that is, jurisdictions where local workers have access to better jobs and working conditions, while employers appeal to comparatively precarious migrant workers to lower costs (Burawoy 1976). Moreover, we combine the contributions of labour regimes and world systems theory to analyse labour migration by attending to the systemic unevenness introduced by colonialism and sustaining globalised capitalism (Delgado Wise and Veltmeyer 2016). In the case of migrant workers, this unevenness entails both the penetration of capitalism in the periphery, through dispossession and distressed retreat from farming-based livelihoods (in the Philippines) and capital accumulation based on the mobilization of precarious migrant labour (in Malaysia).

Building on this broader perspective, it is important to examine how these structural conditions are reproduced within specific labour systems. Migrant labour systems have been characterised as distinctive in the ability of employers to benefit from the spatial separation between the site of production and the site of labour reproduction, as the separation makes the workers especially dependent on employers whilst allowing employers to externalise part of the costs of labour reproduction (Burawoy 1976). Particularly when migrant workers are undocumented or experience restrictions to their mobility, their isolation and dependence create a specific type of precarity that can be functional to methods of labour control.

Towards a synthesis: migrant labour regimes

Migrant labour regimes in oil palm plantations specifically are characterised by unstable demand for workers, limited worker benefits, and contractual precarity as workers are usually hired as daily workers paid on a piece rate basis (Li 2017b; Pye et al. 2012). Managers typically enforce the fragmentation of the labour force along ethnic, gender, and age lines, contractual categories (formal, informal, direct, outsourced), contract length (daily, seasonal, permanent), remuneration structures (daily, piece rate, group-based), and tasks (harvesters, weeders, loose fruit collectors, etc.). Further fragmentation occurs according to the status of documentation of workers (i.e., local workers, migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, internal or transborder). Moreover, workers can become fragmented into dispersed production blocks or separated simply because they do not speak the same language (Li 2017b; Pye et al. 2012; Kaur 2014; Pye 2017). The casualisation of work in oil palm plantations, in conjunction with the relatively lax enforcement of labour laws and the limited associational power of workers, results in oil palm companies exerting considerable power over workers and avoiding the costs associated with the daily and intergenerational reproduction of workers (Li 2017b).

The recruitment of migrant labour has historically served as a strategy of labour control, premised on the mobilisation of workers who find themselves in unfamiliar environments with limited social networks and limited local knowledge (Barral 2014; Curtin 1998). Originally developed in the electronics sector in post-socialist China (Pun and Smith 2007), the concept of the "dormitory labour regime" can be extended to migrant workers in plantation agriculture. In this context, processes of production and reproduction occur within the workplace through the provision and control of housing for workers (Caxaj and Cohen 2019), enabling employers to increase surveillance and control of the migrant workforce (Jones et al. 2024). Central to migrant labour regimes are labour intermediaries. Rai's (2020) analysis of cane harvesters in India reveals a complex network of interdependencies based on kinship, credit, and the transfer of risks and financial pressures from the sugar company to labour intermediaries and migrant workers. Migrant labour regimes often rely on the recruitment of 'surplus population', such as Indonesian or Filipino workers in the Malaysian oil palm sector (Li 2009; Montefrio et al. 2018).

In the context of this paper's analysis of Filipino migrant workers in Malaysia, Burawoy's (1979) concept of "manufacturing consent" proves particularly relevant. Labour regimes imply an inherent class conflict between capital and labour, involving important dynamics of coercion, consent, and compromise (Selwyn 2012; Taylor and Rioux 2018). Burawoy (1979) has demonstrated how managers can organise the labour process in such a way that workers consent to, rather than resist, exploitative working conditions. If employers can make workers accept the conditions of production and the associated regulations, capitalists can extract surplus value without costly and overt labour conflicts.[4] Furthermore, this process conceals or "masks" the relations of production that enabled it in the first place (Burawoy 1979:82).

This paper integrates insights from the migration literature and the labour regimes literature into a proposed analysis of how agricultural production is organised around migrant labour. Such regimes allow capitalist firms to: (a) rely predominantly on migrant workers; (b) leverage social and spatial relations to casualise and control this workforce;

[4] Two significant points require emphasis, as demonstrated by Wright and Burawoy (1994). First, it is important to note that manufacturing consent does not imply the absence of coercion in the generation of consent, but rather signifies that the consistent application of coercion to enhance labour productivity is not an essential prerequisite. Second, in order to preserve consent over time, employers may nonetheless appeal to coercive interventions to discipline unruly workers.

and (c) shape the production process to optimise surplus value extraction from migrant workers. Building on the labour regime literature's call to look beyond the workplace, this approach highlights how migration dynamics, such as mobility constraints, indebtedness, and precarity, intersect with workplace disciplining and control. Labour process theory provides a framework to analyse how these mechanisms operate within production, while more recent developments in labour regime literature underscore how spatial relations, legal frameworks and governance coproduce the precarity that sustains profitability in migrant labour-dependent sectors.

The emergence of a migrant labour regime in oil palm production

Kudat exemplifies the intersection of two spatial dynamics. Firstly, Kudat's geographical proximity to the Island of Palawan in the Philippines facilitates labour outmigration from this area, characterised by limited employment and livelihood opportunities through petty production or trade. Filipinos cross into Malaysia looking for jobs, among others, in the oil palm sector. Secondly, investment in the Northwest part of Sabah, Malaysia, is a more recent development in the expansion of oil palm production. Northwestern plantations face less competition for labour than the more established production zones in the east of Sabah. This dynamic is shaped by a double 'frontier' effect: the expansion of the oil palm frontier towards northern Sabah, and the deepening of migrant labour recruitment circuits into new labour-sending regions such as Palawan. In the subsequent section, we will examine the key dynamics that contribute to the migration of individuals from Palawan to Sabah for employment in oil palm plantations. Secondly, the labour recruitment process is described.

Land, livelihoods, and migration in Southern Palawan's oil palm frontier

Indigenous livelihoods in southern Palawan were rooted in upland swidden agriculture, fishing, and forest foraging. With the advent of economic migrants from other islands in the Philippines, the commodification of land and the expansion of the agricultural frontier, land-based livelihoods experienced the pressure of the creation of conservation zones (Dressler and Pulhin 2010), agribusiness expansion (Josol and Montefrio 2013), and mining (Dressler et al. 2018; Novellino 2019). The expansion of oil palm in Palawan was fueled by the arrival of transnational investors from Singapore and Malaysia and by the availability of a workforce that was partly reproduced with remittances by Filipino emigrants working in Sabah and beyond (Montefrio et al. 2018). In turn, the oil palm expansion involved smallholder cooperatives in contract farming arrangement that soon led to indebtedness and productive collapse. Oil palm adoption has accelerated the productive squeeze of Filipino and indigenous smallholders, furthering precarity and inequality (Montefrio and Dressler 2018). Over the past three decades, these dynamics have had a profound impact on rural households that struggle to subsist from own-account agriculture and do not have many options for wage work.[5] Among those most affected are indigenous and migrant communities of southern Palawan, who most acutely experience a reproductive squeeze and pressures to outmigrate. As one return migrant indicates: *"There's no job here in Palawan, especially if you do not have any education. If I do not leave, my family will be hungry"* (Interview, June 20, 2023). In this period, cross-border migration to seek employment opportunities in Malaysia has become a livelihood strategy of rural households in Palawan.

While job scarcity and labour precarity are acute in southern Palawan, the region is embedded in the broader dynamic of labour outmigration that sustains the Philippine economy. State-supported formal out-migration and remittances from overseas destinations are a cornerstone of the national development strategy (Rodriguez 2010:23–49). This paper examines instead the short-distance, informal cross-border migration from Palawan to Sabah, which constitutes a less regulated, yet deeply embedded livelihood strategy among rural communities. These flows are further shaped by ASEAN's regulatory frameworks that are sympathetic to capital mobility within the region while severely restricting labour mobility and tolerating labour precarity (Nesadurai 2013; Jurje and Lavenex 2015).

The interplay between contrasting political economies in southern Palawan and Sabah lies at the heart of our case study. On the one hand, the internal dynamics of the accumulation and frontier expansion of Malaysian oil palm investments drove the integration of Kudat (especially after 2000) and Southern Palawan (after 2007) into the global oil palm production complex. Conversely, high reservation wages in Malaysia, long-standing reliance on precarious migrant labour in Sabah, and the reproductive squeeze in southern Palawan's precarious labour market have jointly

[5] According to interviews conducted in southern Palawan, finding employment in the province's nickel mines requires secondary education and having the right connections; while employment in the comparatively modest oil palm sector is comparatively limited, precarious and still sought after. Furthermore, the mechanisation of rice farming in the 2000s displaced agricultural labour. In contrast, according to our interviews with current and former labour migrants from Palawan, who identified as ethnic Palaw'ans, Molbogs and migrants from other islands, Filipinos can find employment in Malaysia even when they have only a few years of schooling.

contributed to 'pushing' Filipinos into labour outmigration to Malaysia. In this context, two spatial frontiers intersect: an investment frontier characterised by significant land use change, deforestation, and oil palm monocropping in both Kudat and Palawan; and a labour frontier shaped by the declining viability of own-account farming and the increasing dependence on precarious and irregular sources wage labour (Dressler and Pulhin 2010; Montefrio and Dressler 2016). This development has been characterised by the segmentation of labour markets and the pervasiveness of forms of unfreedom (Panayiotopoulos 2005).

Recruiting migrant workers in the oil palm sector in Sabah, Malaysia

Sabah has, along with Sarawak, the largest share of land under palm oil in Malaysia and accounted for 27% of the area under cultivation in 2023 (MPOB, 2024) and 23% of Crude Palm Oil produced in 2022, being the country's largest producer (MPC, 2023; Ng et al. 2022). Oil palm was introduced in the 1990s as part of agricultural development strategies and as a replacement for the extraction of timber from the region's forests. Area under oil palm trees went from 840,000 ha in 1998 to 1,500,000 ha in 2023 (MPOB, 2024). It is estimated that private and state-owned plantations cover 85% of this area, with the remainder accounted for by small producers, both independent and associated. At present, the estate sector is estimated to rely on 157,502 workers, by far the largest contingent registered of all states in Malaysia (MPOB, 2024). Given the prevalent hiring of undocumented migrant labour, it is expected that the actual figure will be higher.

Historically, oil palm plantations had been concentrated in eastern Sabah. The expansion to the north and northwest of Sabah was made possible by the availability of migrants, given the geographical proximity of Palawan and Mindanao in the southern Philippines. With the exception of Indonesian workers, the majority of labour migrants in Kudat are undocumented and enter Malaysia via irregular routes across the straits and islets of the Sulu and Celebes seas (Crinis 2005; Montefrio et al. 2018). According to an interview with a plantation manager, most of the Filipino workers recruited in the Kudat area are from Palawan, whilst those from Mindanao and the Sulu islands are more frequently employed in the large oil palm hubs of Eastern Sabah.

The NW Plantation in Kudat relies on a steady supply of workers to carry out core production and maintenance tasks. Notably, Filipino migrant workers are not hired directly by the estate. Instead, the plantation employs supervisors (*mandors*[6]), who are responsible for recruitment through informal arrangements in Palawan and for setting up working groups on the plantation. Filipinos are recruited in groups, often from the same village in Palawan, or as relatives of people already working in Sabah. Local networks of kinship, friendship, and acquaintances play an important role in promoting migration and guiding prospective migrants through the process (Montefrio et al. 2018). Some have their travel arranged by *mandors*; others arrange their travel separately at their own expense. Workers are expected to stay on the plantation for at least six months, but they are free to leave if they wish. Those who had their travel expenses to Malaysia paid for need to repay this debt before leaving. Importantly, there is no direct contractual arrangement between the workers and the plantation.

Although migrant workers perform core tasks on the plantation (i.e., harvesting and maintenance), they are recruited and supervised by *mandors*. While workers receive their pay from *mandors*, the plantation issues individual payslips, suggesting that the company may have a payroll for these undocumented workers. This creates the appearance of outsourced contract labour selling harvesting services to the plantation. However, closer examination reveals a casualisation strategy instead, i.e., a process by which the employer-employee relationship holds, but jobs are low quality because of low pay, limited benefits, and little to no job security. We base our analysis on three interrelated observations. First, migrant workers handle all core production activities on the plantation, rather than specialised or peripheral activities. Second, the plantation does not directly hire any other fieldworkers. Third, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, the plantation monitors individual workers' output, calculates wages, issues payslips, and provides housing. These observations suggest that these workers are the plantation's sole field labour force. The practice of indirect hiring through the fixers and *mandors* facilitates the operation of a labour regime that relies on undocumented migrants, thereby shifting the costs and risks of production onto the workers.

The migrant labour regime in motion

The following section examines the labour regime dynamics on the NW Plantation. First, we look at the plantation's hierarchical organisation, followed by an analysis of task specialisation and labour segmentation. Next, we discuss how seasonality and the piece rate payment system shape the organisation of work, and the associated working conditions.

[6] We have anglicised the plural of the Malay word *mandor* to improve readability.

Hierarchical organisation of production

In an oil palm plantation, it is imperative to coordinate the ripening of fruit bunches so that they can be harvested on time across the entire estate. Tasks are time-sensitive and labour demand is variable, so a high degree of planning, coordination, and authority is needed to operate profitably. The NW Plantation is a highly hierarchical organisation, with layers of managers, supervisors, and foremen that act as intermediaries between management and field workers. Top office and managerial positions are reserved for Malaysian and long-standing Indonesian employees. In a comparatively small estate such as the NW Plantation, management is composed of *tuans*, *misters*, and administrative personnel who oversee the production process. Below them are the *mandors besar*, who are responsible for recruitment and allocating workers to different groups within the plantation. They are paid on commission based on performance criteria. Below them are *mandors kecil*, who oversee the day-to-day activities of a group of field workers and earn a fixed daily wage. Neither the *mandor besar* nor the *mandor kecil* are formally employed by the plantation; they operate under an oral agreement. Some *mandors* own *kedai*, stores where workers can purchase food and basic necessities on credit, and where workers receive their monthly wages. *Mandors* also operate rotating savings associations (ROSCAs), which are available to workers.

Task specialisation and labour segmentation

Undocumented labourers make up the majority of the approximately 500 workers at the NW Plantation. Migrants, particularly women and the elderly, experience the most precarious conditions and lowest positions in the plantation's labour hierarchy, which involves considerable job specialisation and labour segmentation. All field workers are hired by *mandors* and paid by the piece. According to the managers interviewed, it is estimated that 80% of the workforce comprises undocumented Filipino migrants, with the remainder being regular and undocumented Indonesian workers. Approximately 75% of workers are male and 25% female. Women may have migrated alone, but more often they come with their husbands or other relatives. They typically take up roles in plantation maintenance and cleaning.

Harvesters, who are all male and migrant, account for over half of all workers. This is the most strenuous work, and harvesters receive the highest pay of all fieldworkers. Their main task is to harvest fresh fruit bunches (FFBs) from oil palm trees using tools such as long sickles and spades. Harvesters are paid by the piece according to a formula that converts the number of FFBs they collect into metric tonnes. If a newly recruited worker cannot match the pace of the other harvesters, they may be demoted to maintenance work.

The rest of the workforce comprises maintenance and auxiliary workers, including truck drivers and loaders. Maintenance work includes tasks such as applying fertiliser, circle weeding, slashing, and spraying herbicides. There is no systematic oversight; *mister* and *mandors* perform occasional spot checks instead. As their tasks are more variable, workers do not keep their own records and instead rely on the *mandor's* records to calculate their pay. As some of these tasks are procyclical, maintenance workers only carry them out if harvesters are busy with their core tasks. During the lean season, harvesters have priority for tasks such as weeding and slashing, so the more precarious maintenance workers tend to absorb the losses associated with seasonality. In a plantation where fieldwork is paid on a piece rate basis, different groups of workers end up competing for the limited tasks available during lean periods.

Auxiliary workers include truck drivers and loaders, who form a special category of workers. Their core tasks include transporting workers between living compounds and blocks, and taking harvested FFBs to the weighbridge and collection point. They also register and double-check the number and weight of FFBs harvested. While these tasks may appear technical, auxiliary workers are responsible for overseeing the work of harvesters, evaluating the quantity and quality of FFBs harvested, and notifying management of unripe fruit or inflated FFB numbers. In a piece rate payment system, the recording, conversion, and valuation of work form the basis for calculating labour compensation and is also the focal point of conflict between workers and employers regarding the distribution of surplus value. As employees responsible for appraising output and reporting problems, auxiliary workers enforce labour control. Consequently, they do not fall under the jurisdiction of *blok mandors*, but report directly to managers. They are also the only employees hired directly by the estate, receiving a fixed daily wage that reflects their position in the production process. They are not affected by fluctuations in production and thus have no incentive to inflate the amount harvested.

The spatial organisation of production and the challenge of seasonality

NW Plantation is divided into 13 *bloks*, each measuring between 200 and 400 hectares. Each *blok* is divided into sub-*bloks* with groups of 11 to 15 harvesters tending to approximately 200 trees each. FFBs mature approximately every 10 days. Groups of specialist harvesting workers circulate within the sub-*bloks* following the staggered maturation pattern. This ensures that each sub-*blok* is harvested every 10 to 11 days. Throughout the day, harvesters pile

Table 1 Pay for different categories of workers in the NW plantation

Category of workers	Type of payment	Task	Unit	Pay
Harvesters	piece rate	Harvesting	Metric tonne	MYR 42–45
		Special Pruning (once a year)	Per tree	MYR 1.20
		Progressive Pruning (every three months)	Per hectare	MYR 16.50
Harvesters /Maintenance workers	piece rate	Applying fertilizer	Per sack of fertilizer	MYR 6
		Spraying/ Circle weeding	Per hectare	MYR 18
		Slashing	Per hectare	MYR 40.14
		Loose fruit collection	Per sack collected	MYR 2.80
Truck drivers/ loaders	Flat daily wage		Per day worked	MYR 57

Source: Own data

their FFBs in various places at the side of the road in their assigned task area.

The physical development of the oil palm introduces a complex set of agronomic variables. Oil palm harvesting follows seasonal patterns that are largely dependent on rainfall. Substantially more work is required during peak production periods, which can last up to three months, and considerably less work is needed during the lean period, which lasts roughly two months. However, rainfall is not necessarily regular, and yields are sensitive to flooding and drought. Furthermore, peak seasons are not necessarily synchronous across blocks, and FFB yields fluctuate over the life of the individual palm tree. The older the tree, the taller it grows, the heavier its FFBs become, and the slower and more physically demanding harvesting becomes. As one harvester indicates: *"It is challenging to harvest the mature trees because they are already tall and the bunches are heavy. Apart from that, I need to balance the handle, it makes harvesting slower"* (Interview, April 20, 2025). For reference, a sub-*blok* that would take two days to harvest in the peak season could be finished in half a day in the lean season. According to interviews, a harvester can expect to collect 100 FFBs in the lean season and over 200 in the peak season.

However, workers cannot simply be mobilised and made redundant to match this seasonal variation. During the lean season, harvesters perform maintenance tasks to compensate for lost income due to the slower turnaround, but these tasks are poorly paid and sporadically available. Their allocation to harvesters is uncertain, and when it does occur, it displaces comparatively precarious maintenance workers who have the lowest earnings of all.

As a result, one of the core conflicts, whether overt or implicit, in the relationship between workers and the plantation concerns who should absorb the impact of fixed costs during the lean season. The company does not want to pay for periods of inactivity, and the workers cannot simply fill this time with other jobs, as this irregular seasonality affects all other plantations in this monoculture area. Unlike other crops, oil palm farming cannot rely on specialised seasonal harvesters, yet it still experiences strong fluctuations in labour demand. The adoption of a piece rate system by the plantations is a response to this conundrum (further discussed below). From the perspective of migrant workers, 'staying put' during the lean season is, in a sense, the price they pay to secure a job during the peak season.

The piece rate system as a mechanism of labour control

The segmentation of tasks and roles means that workers have different piece rates for specific tasks (see Table 1). The key component of the system is the rate paid for harvesting FFBs, which was MYR 42–45 per metric tonne in 2025. Although the pay is by piece rate, implying that workers do not have set working hours, harvesters are expected to collect an average of at least one tonne, or 100 FFBs, per day. They can be demoted if they regularly fail to meet this target. Importantly, harvesters do not have access to scales and can only count the *number* of bunches (FFBs) that they harvest. Instead, they rely on the plantation to weigh the total FFBs produced by their *blok*, estimate the monthly 'average bunch weight' or ABW, and convert the number of FFBs harvested into metric tonnes, so that they can calculate the amount payable by the company through the *mandors*.

Despite the fact that harvesters are not formally employed by the plantation company, their pay is calculated by the company and disbursed by *mandors*. The management prepares payslips showing how much the *mandor* should pay each worker. However, this amount is neither broken down into the different tasks, each of which has a different piece rate, nor does it register the amount harvested. For many non-harvesting tasks, it is impossible to work out how the tasks were translated into wages. This creates a layer of obfuscation that is specific to the NW Plantation. According to interviews with workers, other plantations in the region provide details of how monthly payments are calculated. Interviews with workers and managers suggest that the average pay for harvesters is MYR 900–1,000 during the lean season and MYR 2,200–3,000 during the peak harvesting period. Maintenance workers earn much less at around MYR 400–500 per month.

According to the *mandors* interviewed, workers can harvest between 65 and 300 FFBs per day, depending on agronomic, seasonal, and biomechanical factors, as well as the manager's logistics and coordination, and the workers' motivation and fatigue levels. *Mandors* oversee the work of harvesters, but they are not expected to supervise or encourage workers to speed up. Harvesters report their daily output to their *mandor* and maintain their own records. After harvesting, FFBs are transported from the *bloks* to the collection point by drivers and loaders (mostly Indonesian workers). Unlike harvesters, drivers and loaders are directly employed and supervised by the managers and are the only ones to be paid fixed daily wages.

Drivers and loaders record the amount of harvested FFB in a ticket. All collected FFBs are loaded onto trucks and taken to a weighbridge to be weighed and thereafter transferred for offsite processing. Thus, the truck driver collects two sets of data: the *number* of bunches harvested by each worker in a *blok* and the total weight of the *blok*'s output. Management uses this data to calculate the monthly average bunch weight (ABW) for a given *blok*. This is the key variable used to convert the number of FFBs harvested into metric tonnes and calculate piece rate pay:

$$\begin{aligned} &Worker's\, monthly\, pay \\ &= (Number\, of\, FFBs\, harvested \times ABW)\ ^{*} \\ &\quad Pay - rate\, per\, metric\, tonne \end{aligned}$$

This conversion formula is the basis of the piece rate payment system, acting as a key lever of control and value extraction within this labour regime. The monthly ABW effectively obscures the relationship between the labour input of individual harvesters and the income received because the number of FFBs per tonne can range from 100 to 120, depending on factors such as ripeness, tree maturity, terrain, and season. However, despite being an imprecise measure of individual labour input, the ABW is an effective mechanism for preventing cheating: Any inflation of individual FFB counts ('*kira angin*' or 'adding air to the weight') only works to lower the ABW, reducing the payout per bunch for *all* workers and benefitting the infractor only marginally. In effect, thanks to the use of ABW in the conversion formula, cheating only results in the redistribution of income from other workers in the *blok* to the overreporting worker, without affecting the total paid by the company (which is based on the actual tonnage). In this way, the costs of overreporting are collectively borne by the workers. As in a casino, the house never loses! The system enforces compliance through peer surveillance and self-regulation, fracturing worker solidarity and undermining collective action, even among workers connected by kinship, shared village origins, or nationality.[7]

According to our interviewees, the theft of FFBs and working tools is widespread among workers. While this may be a survival strategy for those in desperate circumstances, it creates an important dynamic: although workers are paid by the piece, no one wants to leave the *bloks* too early and risk their FFBs being stolen and placed in someone else's pile. Conversely, no one would want to leave the blocks too late and risk being suspected of theft. Peer surveillance emerges as a key labour control mechanism, reinforced by self-discipline and driven by labour casualisation and the externalisation of work. Former migrant workers, speaking freely back in their villages in Palawan, also reported knowing of abusive *mandors* who would distort harvest accounts, underpay workers, or charge them for non-existent debt in the *kedai* stores for their own benefit.

Upon joining the estate, new harvesters must purchase their work tools from the company (sickles, metal poles, safety boots, and wheelbarrows). The company only provides maintenance workers with personal protective equipment (helmets, aprons, and goggles). By outsourcing the ownership of working tools, the company creates another layer of externalisation and avoids the costs of theft and loss. Now it is workers policing each other.

To conclude, the piece rate system enables the company to avoid costs related to fluctuations in the weight of FFBs caused by the material conditions of oil palm production, such as ripeness, tree maturity, terrain, and season. In this context, it would be impossible to standardise the amount of labour required for a given volume of output. The pay system allows the company to pass on losses incurred during droughts directly to workers, forcing them to absorb the costs of irregular yields and fluctuating output. This establishes a specific 'production function' for harvesters, shaping how labour is mobilised, coordinated and managed, and how workers navigate the regime through strategies of compliance, resistance and shirking. While there is space and opportunity for workers' collective action, the labour regime is based on mechanisms that enhance exploitation (such as the use of legally precarious migrant labour, arithmetic obfuscation, variable pay), while preventing and defusing the full manifestation of workers' unrest.

[7] As workers are recruited in groups from villages and kinship networks, the prospect of personal gain through exploiting the system is weighed against other considerations, such as loyalty and solidarity to the group, which are sometimes of a higher order (Interviews in Kudat).

Work conditions

Field workers are exposed to severe weather conditions, sometimes working in extreme heat or pouring rain. Common occupational health hazards include injuries from strenuous repetitive movement and impact injuries from felling and handling heavy, thorny vegetation; exposure to toxic fumes from pesticides; insect bites; and other interactions with wildlife. Despite the harsh realities of working in oil palm fields, migrant Filipino workers reported being aware that working on Malaysian plantations provides income and job stability levels that are simply unavailable in their region of origin.

As undocumented, outsourced, piece-rate workers, there is no social protection in case of sickness. In the piece rate payment system, workers are only paid for the work they complete. Health facilities are unavailable to Filipino migrant workers, who therefore seek informal health practitioners. Workers at the NW Plantation have access to housing provided by the company in compounds located within the estate. The housing conditions are perceived by migrant workers as an improvement on their previous accommodation in Palawan: they have regular access to drinking water and electricity, which is provided by a generator for various periods throughout the day, free of charge. However, restricted in their mobility, workers must buy food and other necessities on credit from the *kedai* stores. These credit debts are deducted directly by the *mandor* from the workers' monthly wages. The *kedai* serves as a payout point.

Making sense of the migrant labour regime

As demonstrated in the preceding section, empirical findings have shown that migrant Filipino workers experience income instability and spatial immobility, which in turn enables their exploitation. It is important to note that remaining on the plantation during the lean season is not a matter of choice, but a structural imperative. The lack of comparable employment opportunities in Palawan, pushes workers to seek employment in Sabah's oil palm plantations, despite their undocumented status. Once in Sabah, legal and spatial constraints on mobility serve to reinforce this dependence, compelling Filipino migrant workers to endure periods of lower income during lean seasons in order to retain access to work during peak harvests. In this way, the dynamics of labour mobility establish a link between Palawan's agrarian political economy with Sabah's plantation labour regime, embedding workers into transnational circuits of precarity and exploitation.

The structural spatial immobility of migrant workers is reinforced and managed through a system of indirect labour control. The plantation's labour regime is characterised by the outsourcing of both work organisation and labour control onto the *mandor* and workers via the *mandor* system. The responsibility for harvesting and supervision is entrusted to the *mandor*, while the piece rate system fosters self-discipline and peer surveillance among the workforce. Misreporting or the theft of harvested FFBs is policed not by plantation managers but through the piece rate system itself, supported through verbal warnings issued by the *mandor* and the threat of redundancy after three consecutive warnings. The present system effectively redistributes managerial oversight from the employer to the workers themselves. This redistribution results in the fragmentation of labour into hierarchical groups of workers who compete against each other to avoid risks and shocks. This process, in turn, undermines the basis for collective action.

These outsourced labour control mechanisms are integral to the transfer of risks and costs from the plantation to the workers. The company's operational and legal separation from its workforce is facilitated by the outsourcing structure. The employment of piece rate pay and task segmentation serves to convert the variability of output into fluctuating incomes for workers, as opposed to variable costs for the plantation. The risks associated with lean season underemployment, disputes over pay, or yield shortfalls are thus absorbed by labour. In this manner, the plantation company circumvents the costs associated with direct supervision, redundancy payments, and wage guarantees by administratively removing itself from the direct employment relationship, while maintaining indirect yet effective labour control.

The consequences of this labour regime extend beyond the workplace into the realm of social reproduction. In Sabah's plantation labour regime, *kedai* play a central role in mediating workers' survival, often extending credit to workers but in turn reinforcing cycles of dependency. As Montefrio and Dressler (2018) argue, these food-for-credit institutions become embedded as well in Palawan's plantation labour regime, linking everyday food access to wages, debt, and precarious agrarian relations. Moreover, households are frequently constituted of male harvesters and female maintenance workers. Consequently, conflicts arising in the production sphere have the potential to permeate the domestic sphere of social reproduction. However, concurrently, such circumstances can also give rise to instances of cooperation and solidarity, particularly when income loss impacts the survival of the household.

In conclusion, it is evident that the organisation of production reflects the relationship between capitalist and labour and the nature of exploitation within the prevailing social structure. This process entails the selection of a payment system, that is, the piece rate system, in conjunction with the degree of contractual flexibility and redundancy. These elements serve to adapt labour mobilisation to the

variable demands of harvesting. It is evident that the piece rate system functions not only as a technical instrument for measuring and remunerating labour, but also as a political instrument. The utilisation of this system has the capacity to discipline and exploit labour, thereby enabling the redirection and allocation of costs and risks to the workforce. Consequently, this renders the necessity for direct control and supervision over labour redundant.

Conclusion: nested regimes of exploitation and disciplining

The labour regime described in the previous sections is structured around three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: the mobilisation of a labour force primarily composed of undocumented migrant workers, the prevalence of casualised labour relations, and the adoption of piece rate payments. Together, these mechanisms, which are shared with other oil palm plantations in the region, enable surplus value extraction while fragmenting labour solidarity and diffusing collective organizing. Our on-site evidence sheds light on how these mechanisms operate across places of origin and destination, stabilizing contemporary migrant labour regimes.

First, migration is not only a market response to the dynamics of supply and demand, but it also functions strategically to produce socio-spatial conditions, such as precarity and dependence, that facilitate the streamlined extraction of labour. The recruitment of migrant workers from Palawan is intricately linked to the few viable local employment options in the region. Despite the low pay and strenuous work conditions in the Malaysian oil palm plantations, migrant workers often prefer this over employment options in their region of origin. This comparative precarity undermines migrant workers' bargaining power and reduces labour costs for employers in Malaysia. Following the recruitment of undocumented migrants, a network of layered dependencies is produced. The threat of immigration law enforcement, including the prospect of detention or deportation, and migrant workers' dependence on employers for part of their social reproduction restricts their ability to switch employers and pursue alternative sources of income during the lean season.

Our case study contributes to the literature by offering a detailed understanding of the intersection of conditions in the areas of origin and destination that shape the experiences of migrant workers and the structuring of migrant labour regimes. Rather than evaluating migrant labour experiences solely in vertical terms, such as comparative job quality or against 'decent work' criteria, analysis should adopt a horizontal perspective that captures the conditions available to migrant workers as a function of their mobility, i.e., the prevailing work conditions in the places of origin or alternative migration destinations.

Second, we argue that casualisation of labour is a central mechanism of surplus value extraction. By inserting layers of separation between capitalists and workers, by not directly employing migrant workers but having them work under *mandors*, plantations minimise supervision costs, evade employer liability, and eventually fragment workers' solidarity and defuse class conflict. As a result, although workers appear to be formally dissociated from the estate, this separation is fictitious. In practice, it amplifies employer control, enforces a flexibility that suits the plantation, and thereby facilitates surplus value extraction.

The process of casualisation of workers is closely associated with the segmentation of the labour force, producing worker groups with divergent interests, thereby dissipating collective organising. Task allocation and contract types create distinct interests. Harvesters may benefit from additional maintenance tasks when yields are low, which has a negative impact on the income of maintenance workers. Moreover, harvesters have an incentive to inflate their output, yet loaders are remunerated to prevent miscounting and the delivery of low-quality FFBs. These tensions and conflicting interests channel conflicts horizontally, i.e., between harvesters, loaders, and maintenance workers, rather than vertically against company management, obscuring shared class interests and hindering collective action.

Finally, the piece rate payment system consolidates the nested effects of the recruitment and casualisation of migrant workers. In instances where the specificities of the crops and its processing are associated with limited mechanisation and costly direct supervision, it can be argued that workers possess a degree of structural power. The piece rate payment system is the plantations' way of offsetting this power. At face value, piece rate payments could be understood as a mechanism to adjust labour costs in response to seasonal fluctuations in labour demand. However, we argue that the piece rate system has at least three other functions. To begin with, by delinking labour costs from tree maturation and yield variability, the piece rate system enables plantation management to transfer agronomic and climatic risks onto workers. As output fluctuates, workers' income automatically adjusts, allowing the company to smooth labour inputs to demand without resorting to layoffs.

In addition, the piece rate system creates information asymmetries and incentives for peer monitoring that undermine collective organisation and class consciousness. Workers must monitor each other to ensure their individual output is accurately recorded. The company retains exclusive control over measurement methods, i.e., aggregating weighing of FFB, conversion factors, and allocation

of pay to workers, while workers lack access to the data and procedures to retrace the calculation of their pay, limiting their ability to contest it. This asymmetry of information and power renders the payment system opaque. The company had the ability to adjust the data to its advantage, while workers cannot independently verify and challenge under-payments.

Attempts by workers to inflate their individual output only affect other workers and do not result in any loss to the company. As a result, the piece rate system pits workers against each other and minimises the company's risks and losses.

Finally, since individual output is not weighed separately, the piece rate system renders individual pay only an approximation of the work effort, which in reality varies widely. Effort per tonne harvested is heterogenous, depending on terrain, weather conditions, distance to the collection points, and tree age and productivity. By aggregating output and paying according to block-wide averages, the piece rate system eliminates the need for direct supervision, turning the numerical calculation itself into a mechanism of labour disciplining. In other words, the piece rate system introduces a form of management by numbers - an arithmetic despotism - whereby the 'dull compulsion of survival', compounded by the lack of transparency and accuracy in measuring work effort, becomes another site of surplus value extraction.

We have argued for the importance of unpacking the mechanisms of migrant labour exploitation in systems that do not rely on forced labour, extra-economic coercion, or intensive supervision and monitoring. Our analysis shows how exploitation, as defined by the extraction of surplus value by employers from workers, operates in a system where workers are 'free' and external control mechanisms have been superseded (unlike colonial plantations). Even though these jobs are demonstratively exploitative, undocumented Filipino migrants consider them the best available option given the lack of opportunities in their areas of origin, which do not offer jobs with similar conditions and remuneration. Indeed, many respondents agreed that these were the best jobs they had ever had! This paper has shown that there is no inherent incompatibility between high levels of job acceptance and of surplus value extraction. Our case study reveals how exploitation is operationalised through a casualised labour regime that often does not provide workers with sufficient opportunity to increase their output. In the piece rate system, harvesters and maintenance workers strive for 'more', not 'less' work (Li 2017b), while simultaneously allowing for the routine shifting of risks, costs, and monitoring onto the workers themselves. Thus, we found that the mobilisation of a labour force primarily composed of undocumented migrant workers, the casualisation of labour relations, and the piece rate system are instrumental in preventing the emergence of shared class interest and thereby defusing class conflict between workers and employers.

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Declarations

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