

Historical Analysis through a Lefebvrian Perspective: The Spatial Production of Malaysia's Trade Union Movement

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Abstract

The historical trajectory of trade unionism in Malaysia indicates a long-standing struggle in which state power and capital accumulation systematically generates spatial arrangements to disaggregate worker solidarity which has been largely disregarded in the traditional institutionalist analyses. In order to fill this theoretical gap, the current article discusses the development of the Malaysian worker movement by using the theory of the production of space proposed by Henri Lefebvre, with an emphasis on the application of the conceptual triad of conceived, perceived, and lived space. Using a qualitative historical institutional analysis informed by documentary and archival materials, the paper finds important spatial path dependencies at important historical intersections. Results indicate that since the colonial strategies of divide and rule and the New Villages of the Briggs Plan, states and capitalism, since the New Economic Policy and the modern-day restructuring of neoliberalism, have remained busy using conceived spaces to subject labour to discipline. On the other hand, laborers have continued to create other lived spaces of resistance, such as plantation societies and factory strikes to online communities. The paper reveals that spatial dynamics are crucial to modern trade union renewal and proposes the idea that unions need to navigate the conditions of precarious work by using new legislative possibilities to navigate physical and virtual landscapes of struggle.

Keywords: Henri Lefebvre, production of space, spatial theory, workers' movement, historical institutionalism, path dependency

INTRODUCTION

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Trade unionism in Malaysia has had a complicated experience in terms of its historical path due to its interaction with the colonial past, the need to build a country, and the influence of globalisation. Since the militant rudiments of the 1940s to state-managed enterprise unionism of the modern day, this development indicates key turning points that were not only influenced by politics and the economy, but above all spatial politics (Jomo & Todd, 1994; Mohamed Salleh Lamry, 2017). There is a growing understanding amongst scholars that industrial relations is not practiced in a neutral space, but rather exists as a very concrete part of both physical and social space in which space is actively constructed as a tool of power (Lefebvre, 1991). The current paper will use the theory of the production of space presented by Henri Lefebvre to examine these dynamics. Applying his idea of triad (conceived space (representations of space), perceived space (spatial practices), and lived space (representational spaces)) to the issue, it becomes possible to examine the problem of

power relations in forming the landscape of labour resistance and containment in Malaysia in a comprehensive manner.

Although numerous scholarly works have been done on the history of Malaysian labour, an important aspect is still lacking in critical research. Traditional examinations of trade union development of historic institutionalist theories (primarily the landmark of Jomo and Todd, 1994) or the political-economic ones as by Crouch (1992) and Khoo (2006) have given too much attention to the legal-administrative frameworks, ethnic politics, and economic determinism. Although such studies provide the much-needed insights into the regulatory tools of the state, the spatial dimension as an active means of labour containment is mostly overlooked. Even more recent research on union renewal by Ford and Gillan (2020) only briefly mentions spatial issues without incorporating them into a stringent spatial-theoretical framework. In addition, although the recent institutional works by Durrishah Idrus and Abd Rahman Tamuri (2022) broadened the insights into the union aspects in the twenty-first century, they frequently fail to go beyond the dialectical spatial analysis of the role of the physical organisation of the economy to discipline labour.

The implications of this theoretical gap are significant as they lead to a lack of understanding of why Malaysian trade unions have problems building sustained power despite the long periods of mobilisation. With the neglect of the spatiality of labour control, the analysis ignores that the physical organisation of the economy, the seclusion of the colonial plantations, the walling off of the modern export processing zones, and so on, have been structured so that cross-ethnic and cross-occupational solidarity between classes could not form. These spatial strategies are especially clear in the export processing zones and free trade zones which have been in place since the 1970s, where constrained labour policies and secluded worker residential capacities have historically constrained union activities (Kelly, 2002). On the same note, in the electronics industry, mainly composed of women and migrant workers, the accommodation, and especially the dormitories have been imposed as a system of labour regulation, limiting movement and organising (Grace, 1990; Jones et al., 2024). The institutional challenges facing Malaysian trade unions, such as declining density, enterprise-level fragmentation, and limited political influence, cannot be fully explained without spatial analysis. State control strategies have consistently operated through spatial mechanisms such as industrial zoning, housing policies, and urban planning that separate workers and constrain collective action (Ford & Gillan, 2020). Meanwhile, economic restructuring and technological change create new spatial configurations that challenge the traditional union structures' capacity.

This paper fills in this gap by responding to two broad research questions: First, what were the historic production of spatial patterns by the state and capital to contain and discipline the Malaysian trade union movement? Second, how does this spatial production have institutional implications on the long-term bargaining power and path dependency of unions? The main thesis of this work is that the main process of maintaining labour subordination in Malaysia has been through spatial production. The

discussion argues that the state and capital have always exploited conceived space- the abstract, planned space of the technocrat and policymaker- in the imposition of a spatial logic that divides the working people. This paper shows how these hegemonic formations have attempted to systematically attempt to control the lived space of workers which is a covert place of resistance, fantasy, and possible solidarity. In theory, this work brings the spatial structure of Lefebvre to the analysis of labour movements, which is still undeveloped when it comes to labour studies and spatial theory. Empirically, it adds a new twist to the history of the Malaysian labour in that it shows how the spatial elements have been used in a systematic manner to influence worker organisation and how the spatial reconstitution may help workers strengthen themselves in the modern era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the Malaysian labour history and spatial theory is very extensive and encompasses different factors including institutional, geographical and socio-political factors. This review dwells on key themes which are significant to the aspect of the spatial production of the trade union movement and indicates the gaps that the present study aims to address.

Conceptualisation of Space of Labour Studies: Lefebrian

Production of space should not be viewed as an inactive backdrop of social interaction but should be regarded as an active political tool, which essentially determines social relations (Lefebvre, 1991). According to Merrifield (2006), the main point made by Lefebvre is his assertion that space is not just a ready-made geometric vessel but a product and a subject of power relations and struggle. This unitary theory of space is organized based on a spatial triad: conceived space, perceived space and lived space (Anzalone et al., 2021). The representations of space, or conceived space, is the predominant space of any given society, embodying the mental representations and regulations crafted by state planners, architects, and technocrats to bring some order (Milgrom, 2022). This would translate to the abstract space of capitalism in industrial relations in which the homogenisation of difference enables accumulation of capital (Berns, 2021). Perceived space is associated with spatial practice, which includes the tangible material world and everyday life in the form of the physical organisation of production (Schmid, 2022). Lastly, lived space or representational space is the space of the occupant and the consumer; an occupied space, which people strive to occupy symbolically by resisting through everyday practices (Lefebvre, 1991). The socio-spatial dialectic concept also underlines that the social relations and space are mutually constitutive; identity and solidarity are always produced in daily interactions within concrete physical spaces (Munck, 2023). This therefore requires a paradigm shift in the

analysis of the trade union movement: to view space as the active agent of production utilized not only by the capital but also by the state to discipline and control labour and not a context within which labour disputes take place.

Colonial Labour History and the frontiers of Institutional Analysis

Historical institutionalism has been the prevailing approach to explaining the history of Malaysian labour and this approach deeply emphasises on evolution of legal systems and state-managed repression but tends to ignore the spatial aspect of these processes (Jomo & Todd, 1994). The replacement of the radical non-communal militancy of the mid-1940s by the state-moderated responsible unionism of the post-colonial period has been widely recorded by scholars. Nevertheless, this literature has traditionally been biased towards the temporality of change in law rather than the spatiality of its application (Stenson, 2019). Of crucial omission in this story is the cultural division of labour that was established by the colonies to institutionalise the creation of a spatial segregation on the basis of ethnicity to avoid the rise of a single national labour movement (Stenson, 2019; Ikmal Said, 1991). The colonial understood space in physical and an ideological manner that divided the Indian plantation workers, Chinese mine workers and Malay farmers, such that, any act of cross-ethnic unionism would hit the walls of communalism. Although the institutional approach is consistent with the perception that the industrial relations in Malaysia were set up so as to present a statutory floor of rights, it often ignores the manner in which this power operates to create abstract spaces in the industrial enclaves. The position of the Registrar of Trade Unions is mentioned as an important instrument of discretionary authority, but the literature does not examine the way this bureaucratic dominance literally segregates the workers to the wider urban social movements (Jomo & Todd, 1994).

State Control Techniques: Mahathirism, Gender, and Production of Abstract Space

The Mahathirism (1981 to 2003) brought new articulated methods of labour control in the shape of the Look East policy and strategic encouragement of in-house unions (Wad, 1988). This transformation is a conscious production of conceived space in which the state and multi-national capital worked together to produce company (identity) with disregard to class or gender solidarity (Khoo, 2025). Another example of how the spatial aspects of primitive accumulation is expressed is the creation of Free Trade Zones, which is viewed through the perspective of gender and discipline (Grace, 1990). The idealised space within the FTZ was strategically created to take advantage of the rural women labour which was viewed as docile and with nimble fingers. The means employed by the state included the use of factory hostels and the use of strict surveillance to sever the female worker to influence by the male dominated traditional trade unions (Grace, 1990). Nevertheless, the concept of women as passive victims fails

to recognise the agency of women; the history of strikes such as those at mostek in penang and Atlas in 1980s show that workers transformed these oppressed spaces into a space of resistance by relying on the solidarity in class and gender rather than ethnicity (Lochhead, 1986).

The Global Spatial Labour Studies: Relational Agency, GPNs, and Digital Transformation.

New directions in the labour geography and Global Production Network analysis started to reveal the spatial differences between labour and capital and provide an alternative to conventional institutionalism (López, 2023). This literature claims that the geography of capitalism is a disputed space in which workers take their own spatial solutions to social reproduction (Herod, 2001). According to a relational and multi-scale view, the union agency is executed via a space of agency that links symbolic actions on the shop floor to international networks of NGOs (Lopez, 2023; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020). Nonetheless, there is a significant weakness in the face of fresh economic realities. Platform work brings about what is referred to as melting labour whereby processes are subdivided into micro-tasks and are despatialized through algorithms (Lee, 2025). The Malaysian case of despatialization of labour via digital apps like Grab and Foodpanda is an illustration of this shift where the gig economy already has more than three million own-account employees by 2024 (Alauddin et al., 2025). However, Malaysian gig workers have started to seize the digital counter-spaces in the form of WhatsApp groups and Telegram channels, making them the places of representational space where the complaints over the digital control of the world are expressed and organised (Alauddin et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2024).

Research Gaps in Existing Literature

The largest research gap found is that there is no systematic spatial analysis of the Malaysian trade union movement based on Levebriers triad. In contemporary studies, a leap is analytically made over the urban level. The classic scholarly literature of political economy and industrial relations often proceeds directly to the general level of macro planning and state legislation and directly to the individual worker, skipping the urban level of mediation in the process (Lefebvre, 2003). The urban level plays a singularly important role, in that it is the point of contact with the abstract global capital where everyday coherence is achieved and transformed into a lived reality (Kipfer, 2008). Losing this level comes down to not comprehending how the right to the city is methodically stripped by urban arrangement that places greater emphasis on exchange value, over the inhabited space of the people (Butler, 2012; Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, 2023). Moreover, the emphasis on formal state-market relations makes the most precarious aspects of labour invisible, especially those of migrant and informal

workers who occupy ghost spaces or spaces of exception such as the kongsi, created by global capitalism, but regulated by local and informal power geometries (Muniandy, 2021). These gaps should be filled in as the inability to consider space as a political tool has exposed the labour movement to the spatial politics of fragmentation and exclusion by the state. Re-reading the history of the trade unions in Malaysia in a Lefebvrian perspective, this paper reveals how the abstract space was systematically exploited to destroy industrial unionism and substitute this movement with more compliant and localised forms of the movement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The paper will use a qualitative historical institutional analysis approach to examine the role of the spatial dynamics in the development of the trade unions in Malaysia. The use of historical institutionalism was due to the focus on timing, sequencing and path dependency importance in the evolution of institutions by this approach (Pierson, 2004). By so doing, the study establishes the points of discontinuity that were critical in the history of the Malaysian labour in terms of spatial configurations being influenced or altered and consequently leading to the formation of enduring patterns of institutional formation. The analysis of the spaces actually created by the labour movement through Lefebvrian analysis in the current study leads to a greater insight into how the state and capital have utilised spatial strategies to limit the organisation of workers and the response by workers. It intends to examine the spatial experiences and institutional implications in detail in different historical eras. The research design is a tripartite analytical approach that synthesizes three dimensions: chronological analysis of the development of the labour institutions since colonial rule to the modern form of neoliberal restructuring; spatial analysis which uses the conceptual triad of Lefebvre; and institutional analysis which determines the patterns of continuity and change in formal and informal rules of labour regulations. The research design combines three complementary analytical dimensions. First, chronological analysis examines labour institution evolution across various historical periods, from colonial rule to contemporary neoliberal restructuring. Second, spatial analysis applies Lefebvre's conceptual framework to understand how space is produced, perceived, and lived in each period. Third, institutional analysis identifies patterns of continuity and change in formal and informal rules governing labour relations in Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

This paper combines with the theory of spatial production (Henri Lefebvre) and historical institutionalism ideas. The analytical core is made up of the conceptual triad of Lefebvre. Representations of space (conceived space) are space as conceived by authorities and technocrats. Spatial practices (perceived space) include the daily practice, commuting and material environments that influence the experience of workers. Spaces of representation (lived space) describe the meanings of space created by workers which tends to disrupt the dominant spaces. Lefebvre suggests that the three dimensions are in a dialectic tension that continually created and reproduced the social space. In conjunction with the spatial theory by Lefebvre, the analysis uses the concepts of path dependency in historical institutionalism (Mahoney Thelen, 2009) to understand how causes of institutional choice in the past restrict subsequent options, and critical juncture concepts to explain when institutional change takes place and causes a redirection of institutional paths. Illustration 1 and Table 1 below summarises how each dimension of Lefebvre's spatial triad is operationalised in this study, alongside the critical junctures identified through historical institutionalism. This integrated matrix served as the principal analytical lens through which the documentary evidence was examined across the four periodised phases of Malaysian labour history. For data collection, this study relies entirely on comprehensive secondary sources. Academic literature provides in-depth interpretations of Malaysian labour history, industrial relations developments, and spatial dynamics. Government documents and policy reports offer official perspectives on labour policy evolution and spatial planning strategies. Historical analyses and archival studies provide insights into labour relations and spatial dynamics across different periods. Media reports and journalistic accounts offer contemporary perspectives on labour disputes and spatial transformations. The study refers to secondary analyses of union publications and activities to understand trade union perspectives.

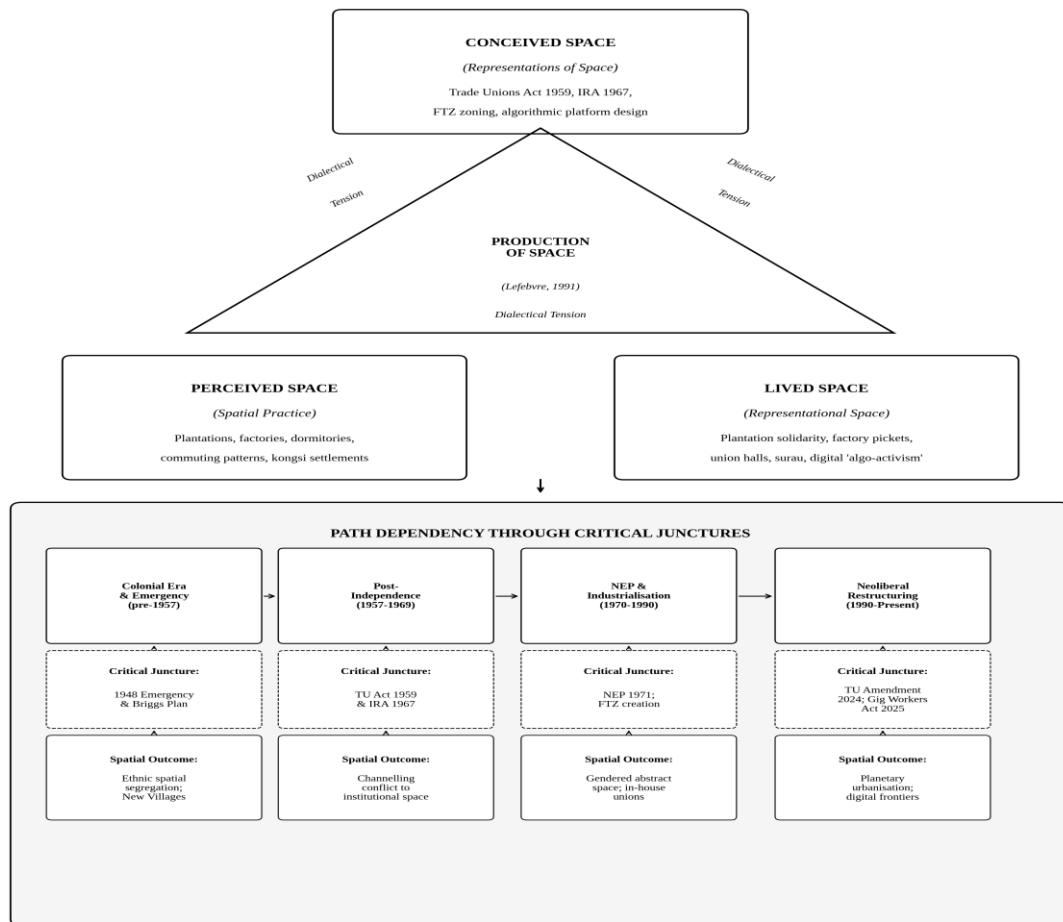


Illustration 1: Integrated Analytical Framework: Lefebvre's Spatial Triad and Path Dependency in the Malaysian Trade Union Movement

Note: Illustration conceptualised by the authors based on the analytical framework discussed in this article.

Table 1:
Integrated Analytical Framework: Spatial Triad of Lefebvre and historical institutionalism applied to Malaysian Labour.

Dimension	Lefebvrian Concept	Application to Malaysian Labour
Conceived Space	Representations of Space	Legal frameworks (Trade Unions Act 1959, IRA 1967), FTZ zoning, algorithmic platform design
Perceived Space	Spatial Practice	Material organisation of plantations, factories, dormitories, commuting

		patterns, kongsi settlements
Lived Space	Representational Space	Plantation solidarity, factory pickets, union halls, surau gatherings, digital 'algo-activism'
Path Dependency	Critical Junctures	1948 Emergency, NEP (1971), Neoliberal restructuring (1990s–present)

Source: Adapted from Lefebvre (1991), Pierson (2004), and Mahoney and Thelen (2009).

Data Collection and Sources

This paper is based on an extensive variety of second-hand sources. Over sixty sources of documentary evidence were methodically examined, such as scholarly literature giving detailed interpretations of the Malaysian labour history, industrial relations processes and developments, and spatial dynamics; government documents and policy reports that give official views on the course of labour policy evolution and spatial planning strategies; historical studies and archival reports that include insights into the labour relations and spatial dynamics at various times; and current legislative texts: the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 20. The method of analysis is a systematic subdivision of the historical period by major political-economic changes and spatial changes into separate periods. The spatial triad of Lefebvre is used to examine the dynamics of space in each period and institutional analysis is then carried to define the rules and norms of labour.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical factors are about the responsible usage of the secondary sources whilst being sensitive to the political essence of labour history. The piece of work endeavours to have equal representation of history players and events. Above all, the research attempts to acknowledge worker and trade union activist agency as opposed to treating them as passive subjects of spatial control and so uphold academic integrity whilst accepting political judgements in historical interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical institutional analysis through qualitative methods identified the dominant themes that are interconnected, and which shed light on how the spatial production has influenced the direction of trade unionism in Malaysia. There were five major themes identified structured around the research aims: (1) the spatial foundations of colonial rule and the 1948 critical juncture, (2) reconfiguration of the post-

independent era, (3) the NEP period and the rise of abstract space, (4) neoliberal restructuring and digital frontiers, and (5) comparative neo-spatial dynamics.

Colonial Spatial Foundations and the 1948 Critical Juncture

The modern terrain of Malaysian trade union movement is an outcome of the colonial conceived space where the British created spatial arrangements to be used as a divide and rule approach in governance. An entrenched division of labour was also created during this period in which the ethnicity was spatially inscribed in occupational sectors, with the Malay becoming channeled to subsistence agriculture and the Indian and Chinese migrants were recruited to plantations and mines, respectively (Stenson, 2019; Jomo & Todd, 1994). The perceived space was that of physical isolation and Lefebvrian terms. The workers of the plantations resided in lines provided by the employer and located in remote places, virtually connected to hierarchic systems of estates (Stenson, 2019). The imagined area of colonial labour law namely the 1940 Trade Unions Ordinance aimed to give sufficient supply of cheap and controlled labour as well as offering wide discretions of powers to the Registrar of Trade Unions (Jomo & Todd, 1994).

The Emergency in 1948 is one moment of crisis that led to institutional lock-in of the movement. Before that there was a wave of militancy in the lived space of the post-war era (1945-1948) in the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions which destabilized colonial logic by establishing cross-ethnic networks (Jomo & Todd, 1994). The reaction of the state was directly spatial: led by the Briggs Plan the officials dissolved the PMFTU and displaced more than 500,000 citizens forcibly into about 450-500 New Villages. These served as strictly controlled zones of exception, which were defined by the fencing of perimeters, checkpoints, curfews, and 24/7 surveillance, which cut off possible cross-ethnic labour solidarity (Baillairegeon, 2021; Tan, 2023). This oppression created a path dependency system in which the state institutionalised space restrictions and did not allow to form general unions and kept it small and segmented along ethnic and sectoral lines (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009).

Post-Independence Reconfiguration (1957-1969): Abstraction of Space of Conflict

The 1957 independence did not lead to a shift in the spatial logic of labour but reformed the colonial provisions, to meet the post-colonial interests of the state. The Alliance government perfected the envisioned space of industrial relationships by the Trade Unions Act 1959 and the Industrial Relations Act 1967 which served as power tools to further divide the movement (Jomo & Todd, 1994). One of the major spatial plans at this time was the displacement of war. The state was re-directing the outings of labour on the streets, the lived space, into formal institutional spaces such as the

Industrial Court. It was a transformation which suppressed collective action in favour of legal expertise and tamed institutions were the result. The perceived worker space turned into a bottleneck of space, with the Registrar of Trade Unions granted wide discretionary rights to either approve or dissent registration, which became a filter through which to make sure the unions were conforming and a limit to militant or multi-ethnic organising (Jomo & Todd, 1994).

The Age of NEP and Industrialization (1970-1990): The Victory of the Abstract Space and Feminized Space

A second critical juncture was the implementation of the NEP in 1971 which radically reconstituted the social and economic space by export-oriented industrialisation. It was a period when abstract space prevailed with state planners creating Free Trade Zones, such as Bayan Lepas in Penang and Sungai Way in Selangor, to enable surveillance, attract foreign investments and promote labour intensive industries such as electronics (Lefebvre, 1991; Grace, 1990).

Gendered conceived space was in the middle of the show. The state encouraged a gender ideology in the electronics industry, in which about eighty per cent of the workers were young women, who were depicted as temporary and docile workers in the workforce. This was used to justify the low wages and the systematic prevention of unions at the national levels and the Mahathir government encouraged the idea of Japanese-style in-house unions which served as a substitute to class or gender identity with company identity and ensured that solidarity was not extended beyond individual establishments (Grace, 1990; Wad, 1988). Although the NEP tried to urbanise the Malay, it ended up creating new spatial fractures whereby corporate identity played out as opposed to class consciousness and in the process, ethnic divisions were further entrenched among the workforce (Khoo, 2025; Jesudason, 1989).

Lived space and dialectical tensions persisted despite these controls. This was the case with the 1985-1986 Mostek and Atlas retrenchment protests since the female workers joined in thirty-two days of picketing, turning factory gates into resistance spaces (Grace, 1990). Prevailing as migrant worker dormitories and plantation lines, which were originally aimed at surveillance, were occasionally turned into informal organising locations.

Neoliberal Restructuring (1990-Present): Planetary Urbanisation, Ghost Labour and Digital Frontiers

This neoliberalism era has generated a planetary urbanisation, which diffuses the rural-urban boundaries. Economic restructuring was moving the imagined space

towards subcontracting, precarious jobs, and platform capitalism, forming a ghost labour force of undocumented and semi-documented migrants who work construction and services without being visible to the official unions (Muniandy, 2021; Brenner, 2013). The perceived space of the kongsi (improvised settlements) or the employer-provided dormitories, often over-crowded, behind metal barriers, and under informal systems of kepala, is negotiated by migrant workers instead of being actively managed. They remain spaces of exception and exclusion, restricting access to formal unions despite the recent policy debates which are advocating centralised labour quarters in industrial areas (Muniandy, 2021; Jones et al., 2024).

The virtual space has shifted to be the lived space of most workers in the digital age. Virtual labour agency Dispersed gig workers and migrants coordinate and deploy algorithmic activism using WhatsApp and social media to transcend spatial atomisation and urban sprawl and create virtual spaces of labour agency. On 15 September 2024, following the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2024 (effective 15 September 2024) partially alleviated historical fragmentation by removing sectoral requirements on union formation, enabling more inclusive, multi-industry organising. Further creating a new institutional space is the Gig Workers Tribunal and Consultative Council added by the passage of the Gig Workers Act 2025 (gazetted as Act 872 on 31 December 2025) which protects against service agreements and payments, anti-discrimination, and PERKESO coverage. The Malaysian Trades Union Congress has been on the frontline, and they propose gig worker unions and enhanced inclusive organising by women and migrants (Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia, 2025; Ford and Gillan, 2020).

Cross-Spatial Comparative Analysis: Rural vs. Urban vs. Informal/Platform

Historical contexts of the development of Malaysian unionism depict clear differences in space contexts of organising. The spatial logic of organising, as shown in Table 2 has changed radically, no longer following the integrated plantation model, but moving to the atomised, algorithmically controlled gig economy. The trade union movement in Malaysia is restricted due to a planned conceptualised political spatial design. On the one hand, the state and capital have refined the use of conceived space, with law, zoning, bureaucratic ordering, and algorithmic management, to divide the solidarity of workers and make accumulation their chief principle, through colonial origins and New Villages as well as FTZs, neoliberal kongsi/dormitories, and digital platforms (Lefebvre, 1991; Baillargeon, 2021; Muniandy, 2021), The 1948 suppression has wrought out historical path dependency that institutional fragmentation has become hard to unravel (Pierson, 2004).

Table 2:

Cross-Spatial Comparison of Union Organising Contexts in Malaysia.

Feature	Rural Unions (Plantations)	Urban Unions (Manufacturing/Services)	Informal/Platform (Kongsi/Gig)
Space	Integrated: Work and life merged on estates	Dispersed: Separate work and residence; affected by urban sprawl	Atomised/Virtual: Melting labour in shadows or on apps
Control	High surveillance: Vulnerable to eviction from housing	Greater autonomy: Access to public spaces beyond employer control	Algorithmic: Electronic panopticon via ratings and apps; dormitories/kongsi as control mechanisms
Mobilisation	High potential: Historically addressed housing and welfare (e.g. NUPW)	Politicised: Benefit from proximity to power centres	Ephemeral but increasingly institutionalised: Algo-activism, digital networks, and new legal avenues via 2024 TU Amendment and 2025 Gig Workers Act

Source: Compiled by the authors from documentary analysis based on Stenson (2019), Jomo & Todd (1994), Muniandy (2021) and Jones et al., (2024)

However, recent changes in legislation may indicate the cracks in this trend by broadening the possibilities of organising and establishing new institutions in which gig and migrant labourers may operate. Symbolic contradictions persist: laborers repossess space by protesting the factory floor, consolidating in dormitories, and online community (Ford and Gillan, 2020; Jones et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that historical development of trade unionism in Malaysia cannot be seen only in the context of time, during which legal development and economic cycles, but rather in the space production of labour relations. This historical institutional analysis has demonstrated that the subordination of Malaysian labour is a product of the conscious spatial designs by the application of the concept of conceived, perceived and lived space as proposed by Henri Lefebvre. Since the divide-and-rule policy of the colonial period which geographically separated workers based on their ethnicity in the plantations and mining locations, and which was later reinforced through the Emergency Regulations of 1948 and the New Villages of the Briggs Plan, through the channelling of conflict to the bureaucratic conceived space through the Trade Unions Act 1959 and the Industrial Relations Act 196 The continuation of this pattern into the modern ghost spaces of migrant hostels and the algorithmic management of gig workers affirm the fact that spatial fragmentation is a primary path dependency in Malaysian industrial relations.

The analysis also highlights an ongoing dialectical struggle between the space of the state and capital as an abstract space and the space of workers as a lived space. As the state and capital dominate understood space technocratically, via planning, be it the zoning of FTZs to proprietary code of ride-hailing apps, workers have always reclaimed lived space to resist. Be it the solidarity of the communal plantation populations, militant picket lines of the 1980s electronic strikes or the nascent algo-activism of the online forums and trans-national networks, the workers turn the surveillance spaces into solidarity spaces. The main contribution of this paper is the focus on the urban scale of mediation within the theory of Lefebvre, and the fact that the rationality of accumulation and ordinary life come into contact most radically in not only the legislative hall or the workplace environment, but also the urban fabric, industrial areas, and digital space.

These results have serious implications to the Malaysian context. Reform of the legislation is not enough to renew the unions in case the spatial approaches of organising are left as they are. The recent passage of the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2024 and the Gig Workers Act 2025 indicates a crucial change in the perceived area of the labour act, eliminating industry-specific boundaries and officially defining platform workers. Nevertheless, unions now need to find their way through the melting labour, in which work is despatialized and atomised by algorithms. Trade unions need to have a dual spatial strategy to reassert their power in the Malaysian industrial relations system: they need to use the new legal spaces to have a physical presence in industrial zones and dormitories to build solidarity, but at the same time to master the digital virtual spaces to organise the dispersed gig economy. This involves going beyond the factory-floor model and adopting scale-jumping, which bridges the local grievances, like a community of PPRs, migrant dorms, and platform delivery riders in the Klang Valley and Penang, with the networks of transnational solidarity in order to combat the mobility of global capital.

To provide a research in future, comparative studies should be conducted to understand the differences or similarities between the spatial production of labour in Malaysia to other countries in ASEAN experiencing similar neoliberal changes. Besides, micro-ethnographies of space, quantitative spatial mapping and intersectional studies that consider gender and ethnicity ought to be directed to the particular spatial resistance practices within the Malaysian invisible economies, e.g., how gendered practices are involved in migrant dormitory or how digital riders are now organised. Another line of research work has to be the way the new crises of climate change and the green transition will further reorganize the spatial geography of work and what new kinds of spatial fixes of labour are possible.

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Author contributions

Shamsul Azri Mohd Radzi conceived the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the historical-institutional analysis, and led the writing of the manuscript. Noor Hanis Zainol Abidin contributed to the literature review, data interpretation, and critical revisions of the manuscript for important intellectual content. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of interest

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