

Prologue: A series of printed newspaper reports includes 9 articles (*Shirts faded from pandemic* - 5 articles; *Invisible labor* - 2 articles; *The reporter perspective*– 2 articles) written by **Reporter Pham Thu Ngan** (supported by Reporter Song Mai) on Thanh Nien (Youth) Newspaper from 10.2020 to explore the lives and listen to the voices of workers, young people, and freelance workers in the context of Covid-19.

The Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the lives of the working class. Workers are subjected to reduced working hours, loss of paid overtime, and reduced income, while most of their accumulated cash has been sent back home to support their families. Young people suffer from disruptions to their studies or are affected in their transition from school to work environment or in participation in the labor market. Freelance workers are even more affected by their lack of contractual employment and of many social security benefits.

The reporters interviewed dozens of these disadvantaged subjects, in hopes of reflecting part of the full picture: these subjects are being left behind, despite still surviving and being most affected by the inequalities of Covid-19 pandemic, with the primary reasons being (1) they do not know who they can reach out for help; (2) they regard their life as an investment until retirement – as they consider their profession an investment, they have difficulty thinking their profession deserves full benefits; (3) economic burden during migration. As young reporters, we want to raise the voice of these subjects, within our limits, and call on policymakers on inequality not to ignore them.

This is also the series of articles we are most devoted to and perhaps the first series in the Vietnamese press that fully systematizes the impacts disadvantaged workers have to bear in the Covid-19 pandemic (especially young people - Article 2 in *Shirts faded from pandemic*), while simultaneously receiving consultation from professional agencies and experts such as International Labor Organization (ILO), Ministry of Labor - Invalids - Social Affairs, General Confederation of Labour, Department of Labor - Invalids - Social Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City... to facilitate a liberal direction for social policies and security.

Related articles:

Shirts faded from pandemic (5 Articles)

Article 1: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-gian-nan-viec-lam-1299816.html>

Article 2: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-quay-cuong-truoc-bao-1300021.html>

Article 3: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-sa-bay-lua-viec-lam-1300681.html>

Article 4: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-noi-lo-can-tet-1300978.html>

Article 5: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-khong-de-nguoi-lao-dong-khong-co-tet-1301554.html>

Invisible labor (2 Articles)

Article 6: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/lao-dong-tang-hinh-1324130.html>

Article 7: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/lao-dong-tang-hinh-nhung-bong-hong-thep-trong-dem-1324587.html>

The reporter perspective (2 Articles)

Article 8: <https://thanhnien.vn/blog-phong-vien/doanh-nghiep-cung-can-the-hien-su-se chia-1319812.html>

Article 9: <https://thanhnien.vn/blog-phong-vien/de-lao-dong-tu-do-khong-bi-bo-lai-1325759.html>

Article 1: Shirts faded from pandemic: The employment dilemma

Published on November 3, Link TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-gian-nan-viec-lam-1299816.html>

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused many migrant workers in Ho Chi Minh City to struggle with long-lasting consequences...



Workers during end of afternoon shift at Linh Trung Export Processing Zone 1. ~~Photo:~~CREDITS: SONG MAI

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, many workers at Linh Trung 1 Export Processing Zone (Linh Trung Ward) and Linh Trung 2 Export Processing Zone (Binh Chieu Ward, Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City) have lost their jobs due to company downsizing... For many months, they had to "tighten their belts" to get by and wait for jobs to return.

2 million VND/month to feed a family of 6

The family of Mr. Le Thanh Don (42 years old) and Ms. Du Thi Truc (34 years old), both originally from An Giang Province, were going through an extremely difficult and turbulent year. Living at the boardinghouse at 12th Road, 3rd Quarter (Binh Chieu Ward, Thu Duc District) since the beginning of 2020, the whole family relied on Truc's meager salary.

When we arrive, Mr. Don was sitting at the doorstep of the boardinghouse, struggling to fix some appliances the neighbor asked him to help on. Ms. Truc, with her short figure, was trudging home after the afternoon shift. Truc had been working at a bag manufacturing - exporting company in Linh Trung 2 Export Processing Zone for several years.

The family had 4 children, the 2 youngest sent back to their hometown to their maternal grandmother, while the 2 older children stayed in Ho Chi Minh City for school. Before the pandemic, every month, with more than 7 million VND/month earned from overtime work, Truc would set aside 2-3 million to send back to her hometown. The remainder plus the money Don earned had been enough to cover daily expenses.

Mr. Don used to work as a bridges and sewers construction worker, earning 250,000 VND/day ... Since the outbreak, he had lost his job. “Due to my illiteracy, I cannot find a factory job. I mostly stay at home to take my children to school and do whatever is required of me. Now, I am looking for a new job, I cannot let my wife carry the burden alone”, Mr. Don shared.

Truc's job was equally precarious, but fortunately the company still kept her working.

Last year, she said, the company had 3 factories, but now only 1 remained in operation. With the Covid-19 pandemic, her working hours got cut and she occasionally had to take breaks of 2 weeks to 1 month. For the remaining months, she worked about 10 days, totaling to a salary of about 2 million VND without any additional benefits.

Truc confided: “With 2 million VND/month, we just barely manage to get by, frequently run short on necessities, have to borrow from one person after another, and sometimes have to live on charity. Now we are still 2 months behind on rent”.

Since the beginning of October, Truc worked 5 days a week and had still not received overtime. Sometimes, wanting to return to her hometown, but thinking that she has no land nor career, she convinced her family to stick around and wait for the pandemic to run its course.



For nearly the entirety this year, Ms. Tran Thuy Oanh only stayed at home to look after her children, work part-time jobs, and repair clothes. **PHOTO-CREDITS:** SONG MAI

Making ends meet

The majority of workers who lost their jobs returned to their respective hometown. Some stayed in Ho Chi Minh City, relying on the income of their husband or wife. Others that stayed tried to find different jobs to sustain themselves.

Ms. Tran Thuy Oanh (38 years old, from Ca Mau) worked in electronic components and machinery manufacturing in Linh Trung Export Processing Zone 2. At the end of 2019, Oanh lost her job. Since then, she had not succeeded in joining any other company in the export processing zone and spent most of 2020 in her home doing housework and taking care of her children. Her husband had been lucky enough to keep his job, which somewhat eased the family's financial woes.

Wanting to ease the burden on her husband, Oanh took up clothes fixing. The pay for one shirt was only about 250 VND, and she gets 25,000 - 50,000 VND for an average day of fixing roughly over a hundred pieces. "But I have only been able to work for about 2 months and only whenever my child is in kindergarten or not at home. The boy has asthma, so he cannot stand the dust", she added sadly: "I am currently looking for a job. But if I do not have enough money from now until the end of the year, I will call home to notify I am not coming back for Tet...".



Truc's two children wearing torn school bags to school. ~~Photo:~~CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

Other workers not preoccupied with their children looked for extra jobs to make up for their lost income, like Mr. Nguyen Ky Nhi (27 years old, from Bac Lieu, living in 3rd Quarter, Ward Linh Xuan, District Thu. Germany) a moped taxi driver during the pandemic season.

Nhi moved to Ho Chi Minh City for work at the age of 20. As breadwinner of the family, he had to take care of his elderly parents and a disabled brother back in the countryside. Beneath a cheerful appearance, but like many other workers with reduced working hours, this young man struggled to find a temporary job to get by. His immediate hope was that the epidemic would pass quickly so that he had the opportunity to work overtime and have more money to send home to his family.

Temporary income

In the first days of October, throngs of workers streamed in and out of the HCMC Job Service Center (Ward 17, Binh Thanh District; under the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City). They were all filing for unemployment insurance benefits.

On the morning of October 9, it rained early, the sidewalk waterstand owner in front of the central gate was elated because of the high volume of customers. Yet, the workers here were not happy, being forced to cling to unemployment insurance to make ends meet.

Ms. Vo Thi Ngoc Thao (living in District 7) brought her 3-year-old son with her to file for unemployment insurance. Previously, she worked in Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone (District 7) with a monthly salary of nearly 10 million VND including overtime, of which she saved more than 3 million to send her children to kindergarten. “Since the outbreak, however,

my salary has been cut by more than half. So I decided to quit and apply for temporary unemployment benefits to stay home and take care of my children. Now, my family depends on my husband's taxi fare,” she said.

The staff at the center had to work at a constant pace. However, due to the large number of applications, many people still had to wait until afternoon for their turn to arrive.

A man who waited until early afternoon to finish the procedure, said hastily: “Before, I worked in a furniture shop, but since the outbreak, the company had no customers, and I lost my job. Now I work as a transporter, driving a motorized tricycle to make a living”. Standing close by, Mrs. TTKB (28 years old, from Ben Tre), holding a stack of documents in her hand, patiently waited in the lobby at mid-noon, claimed she had nothing to complain about the procedures and process of receiving unemployment insurance benefits, but that there were too many people that morning, and it still was not her turn.

There were also many other sorrowful souls present there. For example, Mrs. N.T.D (57 years old, living in Thu Duc district) had to leave before she was able to register for unemployment benefits. “Initially, the company wanted to cancel my labor contract before it expired to switch to a form of labor cooperation, which meant I would receive hourly wage for however long I work. I decided to quit my job to receive benefits, but only when I came here did I find out that the company has not paid insurance for the past 4 months, even though they deducted fees from my salary every month. Now the staff of the center instructed me to meet with the company, the union...to resolve the issue”, Mrs. D. confided.

Many professions continue to be affected by Covid-19

Mr. Le Minh Tan, Director of Ho Chi Minh City Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, said: According to results of the survey on human resource needs in Quarter 3/2020 of 16,778 businesses operating in the city, conducted by the Center of forecasting demand for human resources and labor market information in Ho Chi Minh City, 69.61% of enterprises, mainly in areas such as clothing production, textiles, food processing..., were being affected by Covid-19. Among these, 63.73% of enterprises ensure ordinary hours for workers; 26.47% reduced working hours and cancelled overtime work; 4.9% enterprises were underemployed; and 4.9% downsized their workers.

Mr. Tan said, due to the good pandemic control measures in Ho Chi Minh City, the state of enterprises improved in the last months of this year, especially in the time of the Lunar New Year. However, the service (accommodation, food and beverage, tourism), and industry (textiles, footwear, wood and furniture) sectors continued to be affected as import and export activities were discontinued.

According to statistics from the Job Service Center of Ho Chi Minh City, in the first 9 months of this year, the Center had received applications for unemployment benefits from 158,431 people and made decisions for 149,795 people. Compared to the same period in last year, the number of received applications increased by 31,076 (up by 24.4%), and the number of decisions to provide unemployment benefits increased by 28,702 (up by 23.7%). In addition, the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs stated that, from June to now, it had created jobs for 133,722 people...

(to be continued)

Article 2: Shirts faded from pandemic: Reeling before the ‘storm’

Published on 4.11.2020, Link TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-quay-cuong-truoc-bao-1300021.html>

Many young people had been severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. For them, Covid-19 was a shock that not only affected their career prospects but also their morale.



Many young workers come to Ho Chi Minh City Job Service Center to file a claim for unemployment benefits. ~~Photo:~~CREDITS: SONG MAI

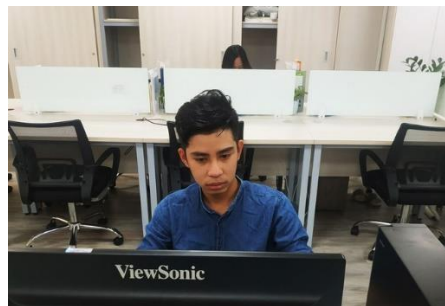
A turbulent “dead” time

Pham Khai Ai (20 years old, from Bac Lieu) worked in Linh Trung 1 Export Processing Zone (Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City). In the young girl's memory, she hardly ever hung out in the city center, or worried about her beauty. Instead, she continually worked and waited for her next month's salary to send back to support her family. Having come to Ho Chi Minh City all by herself to find a job 2 years ago, Ai had a tumultuous year caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Having her work interrupted time after time for the last several months, Ai applied to work at a coffee shop near her boarding house. By now, Ai had gone back to work, but the company had not yet allowed her overtime to supplement her income.

Ai's boardinghouse consisted of 24 rooms, with its tenants all roughly around Ai's age. Since the outbreak, nearly half of the rooms had been vacated, as many returned to their hometown. When asked why she decided against going back home to take "temporary shelter", Ai shook her head, saying it would not serve any purpose because she didn't have a job. Ai's parents were farmers who suffered from recent crop failures. Ai explained: "My parents in the countryside sometimes

telephoned me to vent. I love them lots, but this year I don't have enough money set aside to send to them".

Many recent graduates had only started working before having their employment delayed. Nguyen Huu Nhan (23 years old, living in Can Gio District, Ho Chi Minh City) was an office worker. The job helped Nhan take care of his monthly expenses. "But since the beginning of this year, I have had reduced working hours, and the extra free time is not enough for me to find a new job, so it becomes dead time," Nhan said and added: "From the beginning of the pandemic, I had to ask family to send more money and food". Covid-19 planted in Nhan great fear for his future, of whether his temporary unemployment situation was recurring or how much longer he would depend on his parents...



Duong Duc Duy left his primary industry due to job loss during the pandemic season.

Photo:CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

Further, many college graduates working in the hospitality and tourism industry had gone through a difficult period because of job loss. Duong Duc Duy (23 years old, from An Giang), who has been working in the tourism industry for less than a year, lost his job during the social distancing period. Duy said: "During that difficult time, I spent all the money I saved, there was no other way..." Struggling to find a new job, Duy claimed Covid-19 had broken his prior naive ambitions of career advancement and wealth. Many times had Duy faced severe psychological crisis from work stoppage or from work not suiting his passion. "Businesses seem to have gone through an illness, and now they have just recovered and are not recruiting much. The tourism industry is still affected, and now I work in a job different from my original industry, one that is against my hobby; but what's important is that it helps me temporarily live through this difficult time ", Duy said.

Study interruptions

The Covid-19 pandemic made many students in Ho Chi Minh City miss out on their graduation, internships, or study abroad program. A female student of Communications at University of Social Sciences and Humanities (National University Ho Chi Minh City) shared that, because of the pandemic, she had to delay her studies and reschedule her internship this year from June to October. She finished her school program through online study but was unable to graduate as she waited for her internship to finish. For most of her free time, she returned to her family for 2-3 weeks or collaborated with some information sites to cover her expenses.



Pham Khai Ai (left) chats with her flatmates. ~~Photo:~~CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

For many who were about to start their study abroad, they had their time vacant, as foreign schools delayed their admission. N.H.M.L (25 years old) had received full scholarship to begin her PhD program in biotechnology in Australia, after much effort. L. completed the procedures and documents in March and had planned to go to Australia in June to enroll. But she did not expect the situation to become so complicated, with the Australian school rescheduling until the end of 2020. Recently, they rescheduled her program again until March 2021.

L. said her studies had been moved continuously for nearly a year, interruptions that made L. unable to find a stable job. Even then, she did not know whether the school would reschedule again in the near future.

L. also mentioned many of her friends who were about to study abroad suffered the same conundrum. Some schools in the US have let international students start their studies in September. Other schools in Europe are offering online teaching, but as many chose to study abroad not only for academic studies but also for cultural immersion and foreign employment,

most students agreed to wait until the epidemic had subsided. L. said: "My industry revolves around laboratory work, which does not translate to online study well, so now I have to settle with staying at home." (*to be continue*)

ILO warns young workers can become "quarantined generation"

Responding to *Thanh Nien*, Ms. Valentina Barcucci, a labor economist, International Labor Organization (ILO) in Vietnam, said that young workers were vulnerable to economic recession and were often "last to be recruited and first to be fired". They often work in less stable jobs with lower wages than older adults. Hundreds of millions of young workers (15-24 years old) are particularly vulnerable due to lack of seniority in their fields or to employment in sectors most severely affected. A recent ILO study found that, among young people around the world, more than 70% of those who had been learning or working when the outbreak began suffered from school closures; about 17% used to have jobs (most were 18-24, who worked as secretaries, services, sales ...) before the pandemic and were then made unemployed.

According to Ms. Valentina Barcucci, the negative impact of the pandemic on young people goes three-way: job disruption; learning interruption; and difficulties in school-to-employment transition.

In Vietnam, labor market participation rate among adults fell sharply in the second quarter and began to recover in the third quarter of 2020, but such was not the case for rate among young workers. As proportion of NEET (young workers not employed and without essential training) remains at pre-crisis level, the majority of trained young people had already left the workforce in the second quarter.

The ILO calls for urgent, large-scale and employment-focused policies, one that combines with economic support policies, to prevent youth from becoming a "quarantined generation". The government should introduce comprehensive measures such as education support, vocational training and skills development; salary subsidies for young people; encourage business start-ups; involve youth in policy formulation and social dialogue...

Pham Thu Ngan

Article 3: Shirts faded from pandemic: Employment trap

Published on 5.11.2020, Link TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-sa-bay-lua-viec-lam-1300681.html>

'They dare me to report to the police. Every time I went away, I had to carry the baby, but the money was sweat and tears, so I did not bother to care... ', said Mrs. G. exasperated.



Ms. N.T.G made 4 attempts before finally being able to claim the down payment to V.A Company that did not secure her a job. **Photo: CREDITS:** Nhat Linh

After each wave of the pandemic, throngs of unemployed workers began looking for jobs. This presents an opportunity for “quack” job brokers to cheat and scam across Ho Chi Minh City, causing workers to fall into their "trap" and end up losing both money and time.

Quest for stolen money

“We are poor. Why are you still trying to scam us?” Those were the haunting cries of a woman who were asking for her money back at Thong Nhat Investment Service Company Limited (Thong Nhat Company for short; Road 13, Phong Phu Residential Area, Phong Phu Commune, Binh Chanh District) in May 2020, after the social distancing period. Sweating profusely, she was close to pleading with the staff on-site to pay her.

Around this time, through the series of investigative articles titled *Fraudulent job alert*, *Thanh Nien* Newspaper frequently reflected on job brokerage fraud in Thong Nhat Company; International Development Company Limited Saigon Group (Tan Tao Ward, Binh Tan District); Hung Thinh International Development Services Company Limited (Hung Thinh Company for short, Ward 4, District 8; all now defunct). These companies would take advantage of the

prestige of supermarkets and chain stores like Big C, Co.opmart, The Coffee House... to set up hundreds of virtual recruitment sites, luring workers to give them cash, but in actuality there were no jobs at all; when the victim came to reclaim the money, the staff would reason and make promises to avoid repayment. A lot of workers, regardless of age, expertise... fell into the trap.

H.P.L (19 years old, living in District 3, Ho Chi Minh City) lived with his maternal grandmother from a young age after his parents separated. Due to his difficult situation, L. quit school at the age of 12. Not even 20 years old yet, L. had worked many jobs such as construction, stevedoring, lottery salesman... to make a living. On May 1, when registering for a job at Thong Nhat Company, L. borrowed 500,000 VND from his grandmother, plus his own money, to pay a total of 800,000 VND, and waited for the job date. Yet "all was for naught". Too dejected from the lack of a real job and the frequent reschedules, on May 13, L. came to the company, determined that if he did not get his money back, he would not leave. Finally, after reporting to the Phong Phu Commune police, L. got back only 500,000 VND from the company. Nonetheless, L. happily shouted: "That's enough for me. I can now go back to my grandmother".



Mrs. L.T.N tearfully counted the newly reclaimed money. Photo:CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

It was equally arduous for Mrs. L.T.N (60 years old, from Vinh Long) to claim her money back. From the early morning of May 13, she and her nephew drove from District 12 to Thong Nhat Company. Mrs. N. said that her daughter and nephew were factory workers made unemployed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Around that time, they followed the instructions of a new supermarket recruitment page to Thong Nhat Company and paid a total of 1.6 million VND. She

wanted to save money for food until the end of the month, but, wanting employment for her children and grandchildren, she resigned herself to borrowing 600,000 VND from acquaintances. But after all that there was no job, and she was unable to contact the company.

Also on the same May 13, Ms. N. waited in the sun, frustrated: "This morning I came to call at the door, a man came out, who not only did not solve my problem but also cursed me for disturbing his sleep and then held a cane threatening to beat me". By the afternoon, after much intense exchanges, she was able to receive the money. As she spread the notes out to count, Mrs. N. teared up.

But not everyone was lucky enough to get their money back, such as L.T.K.H (from Ben Tre, a college student). H. was only 19 years old. She lived with his mother and younger brother at a boardinghouse in Binh Chanh. H.'s mother was a worker, but her work hours had been reduced due to the epidemic. Wanting to help her mother, H. found a job on Facebook and fell into a trap. On November 11, H. secretly took two buses to Hung Thinh Company (Ward 4, District 8) to register for the job. Here, H. took all 700,000 VND of her savings to pay and was scheduled on December 12 to accept her new job. H. did not expect, however, when coming to Thong Nhat Company on the date, to see a crowd of people who, scammed of their money, returned to the headquarters of Hung Thinh Company and fought this company closed, the staff out of contact...

Recently, H. told us that the money was still "elusive." H.'s mother had gone back to work, and H. worked at a bubble tea shop. "It is important that I give my mother some help through this pandemic, but I do not expect to get back the lost money," said H.

More sophisticated tricks

By the middle of September 2020, we continued to receive many reports that V.A Security Services Company Limited (V.A Company, headquartered in Thu Duc District) conducted similar scams against workers. When we infiltrated this company, we were met with many "familiar faces" from the previous 3 companies.

With more sophisticated tricks, established in the form of supplying supervising and security guard personnel, VA Company created many virtual recruitment sites, recruiting positions such as cashiers and salespeople for workers to apply for, and then tricked them into signing the job

placement protection agreement. Not until they accepted the job did the new workers realize they had been deceived.

“People with less education like us did not expect those agreements were only for security guard recruitments. I applied to be a salesman, but they also conveniently recruited me to be a security guard, and did they even bother to give me any notice?” a worker complained.

The process of reclaiming money was also incredibly arduous. Ms. N.T.G (30 years old) lost her job in a garment factory in Xuan Thoi Thuong Hamlet (Hoc Mon District). In early September, when she saw the job posting on Facebook to arrange and stack goods, she reached out and was scheduled to interview to accept a job at the company V.A.

“My sister also lost her job, so we two sisters drove here from Hoc Mon and paid this company 1.8 million VND... In the end they tricked me into being a security guard, with very low salary, unlike the initial job I applied for,” said Ms. G.

The day we met the two G. sisters in front of V.A Company, they had to run up and down 4 times to reclaim the amount they paid, because this company continuously rebuffed, claiming Ms. G. had signed the agreement to become a security guard!

“They dare me to report to the police. Every time I go away, I have to carry the baby, but the money is sweat and tears, so I do not bother to care. Fortunately, the day we came there were many people who joined me in protest, then there were police involved, so I got the money ’, said Ms. G. exasperated.

Ms. G. was not alone. N.T.T (living in District 11) registered to be an employee of The Coffee House through a recruitment page on Facebook, went to V.A Company on August 22, paid 900,000 VND, and waited for the job date. When that date came, T. went to the branch shop where he was scheduled to learn that they were not hiring staff. “I could not contact the company, and the staff made frequent promises whenever I came to the office. On the afternoon of September 24, when I came to the company protesting loudly, I finally got my money back,” said T. and warned everyone not to put money into this company.

Be careful with recruitment intermediaries for supermarket jobs

Responding to *Thanh Nien*, representatives of Saigon Co.op, Big C repeatedly reaffirmed they did not sign cooperation, did not authorize, and did not use any intermediary recruitment services.

Regarding the issue of job brokerage collecting fees, lawyer Bui Quoc Tuan (Ho Chi Minh City Bar Association) said that workers looking for jobs should only pay fees to the brokerage company when they and the employer signed a contract. If the contract was not signed and there was no prior agreement with the broker, the employee did not have to pay any amount. Under the provisions of Article 153 of the 2005 Commercial Law on the right to brokerage remuneration, that centers collect money from their brokerage is lawful. At the same time, in Circular 72 2016 of the Ministry of Finance, employment services enterprises are only allowed to collect no more than 10,000 VND for consulting activities and no more than 200,000 VND for employment services...

According to lawyer Tuan, workers should avoid places that solicit them to pay large sums of money, collect payment without receipts or without legal agreements; need to report to agencies such as the district Labor - War Invalids - Social Affairs office and local police where the fraudulent companies are located; and prepare documents as evidence of illegal money collection, lack of job recommendation... to have a basis for inspection and prosecution. Violating agencies will be deprived of their license and subject to regulations. In addition, workers should look to state employment counseling centers to register for jobs.

Lawyer Tuan also said that local government should increase regular inspection of brokerage agencies in their area, requiring such offices publicize their job placement service prices...; have books carefully and specifically recorded; ensure commitment to local authorities that their activities do not violate the law. Upon detection of violations, authorities need to have tough measures and withdraw business license. Upon violations of criminal laws, competent police offices shall be referred to for handling.

Article 4: Shirts faded from pandemic: Pre-New Year worries

Published on 6.11.2020, Link TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-noi-lo-can-tet-1300978.html>

"I worked the entire year with the sole hope of a 13th month bonus to go back to my hometown for Tet holiday, but now I only hope that the company operates stably and increases its revenue every month", Ms. Dang Thi Kim Yen (An Giang hometown) confides.



Ms. Trinh Thi Le Hang hopes for future paid overtime. ~~Photo:~~CREDITS: PHAM THU NGAN

Since the beginning of October, when the Covid-19 epidemic had subsided, many businesses have been operating in a “new normal” state. The mood of many workers in Linh Trung I Export Processing Zone (Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City) is a mixture of two extremes: overjoy and anxiety as Tet is approaching.

It was dusk when we got out of the traffic jam in Highway 1 in the drizzling rain, finally arriving at the boardinghouses in the Alley 525, HW1, Ward 3 (Linh Xuan Ward, Thu Duc District, HCMC) near Linh Xuan underground tunnel – in which many workers in Linh Trung I Export Processing Zone had lived for decades. Around that time, the workers were driving back in droves on a small, muddy road.

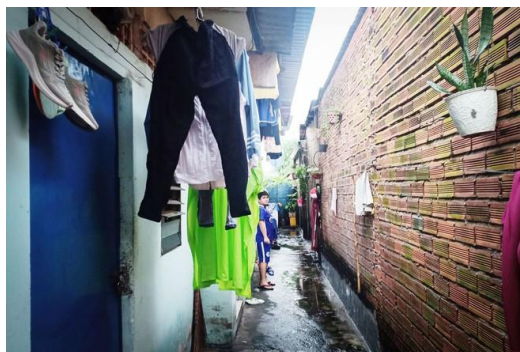
“Now they have just finished the afternoon shift. Some people have not come back because they are picking up their children. Some have started “extra work” (*overtime - Reporter*). Before the

pandemic, they bought meat sandwiches to go to work every morning, now they buy plain bread to eat”, said a woman in the alleyway entrance.

Persevere till retirement

The room of Ms. Trinh Thi Le Hang (45 years old, from Binh Dinh) had a strong smell of herbal medicine. She said that a few months ago, at the peak of the pandemic, upon persistent pain when walking, she went to the doctor only to find out that she had sciatica. Massaging her arms and legs to relieve the pain, she shared that since the first wave of the pandemic, the company kept her working for 2-3 days/week, each day paying 300,000 VND, and on holidays she is given 200,000 VND/day for support. She calculated that the monthly wage during the pandemic season was about 5-6 million VND. By that point, with the company situation flourishing, she worked 4 days a week, but still had not earned overtime.

Like many other female workers, Ms. Hang hung around and tried to find joy in the narrow space of the boardinghouse she had lived in for about ten years. She rarely went out anywhere, except when she brought her shampoo to a nearby barber shop for free haircare. “I am a single mother. When my child was 7 months old, I had to leave the baby in the care of his grandmother. For several years now, I asked my mother to take him to school, while I moved to Ho Chi Minh City to make a living. My home in the countryside has a small piece of land for my mother to grow vegetables for daily sale, but she is also constantly sick”, Ms. Hang said.



Boardinghouse where many workers in Linh Trung I Export Processing Zone live.

Photo:CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

Ms. Hang’s father was about to turn 70 years old. Before, he worked as a watchmaker. Later, when he got older, he went to Dong Nai to work as a house security guard, helping Ms. Hang

send money back home. "For the few days when I could not work at the company, I stayed in the house and thought of my father who had to care for his wife and children all his life. I feel sorry for myself because my salary is not enough to have him rest in his old age..." Ms. Hang teared up.

Every month, Ms. Hang sent 3 million VND to her hometown. With the pandemic persisting, sometimes she could only scrape more than half the usual amount. "I call home every day. Right now there are floods out there, I am very worried for my mother and my child", she continued sadly: "I miss my child dearly when I work away, many times I wanted him to come here with me, but thinking of the economic burden and temporary housing, I dropped the idea".

Ms. Hang and many other workers depended on the opportunities and benefits at their respective factories. Therefore, they most desired to return to normal work and increase their income from overtime pay.

From the calculations of the 22-year veteran female worker in Ho Chi Minh City, the small savings plus pension should give her family a more relaxing life.

In hopes of "13th month" bonus

The lyrics "Venturing out is to find a future happy day..." by musicians Anh Bang and Le Dinh is fitting for the case of workers living away from home. Thoughts of elderly parents in the countryside, children being away from their arms, or hope for the future helped these workers persevere. Whenever they relaxed behind the factory fences, the workers would think of their homeland, of future reunions.

"But the pandemic is not over yet, and the money earned is not enough to buy diapers for my children, how dare I go back to my hometown for Tet holiday", Nguyen Thanh Vu (32 years old), who had a daughter of a few months, shook his head. Mr. Vu, his wife - Ms. Le Thi Tuyet Nhung (30 years old, from Hau Giang), and their 2 children had been living in this boardinghouse on Street 3 for the last 5 years. The room was about ten square meters wide, barely enough to spread a mattress and install a small kitchen shelf. Mr. Vu worked as a mason; Ms. Nhung was a worker at a footwear manufacturing company in Linh Trung I Export Processing Zone.



Because of the pandemic, Vu and Nhung's family had to rent smaller rooms to save money.

Photo:CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

“Before, we lived in a bigger room. Earlier this year, I went back to my hometown to give birth to our second child. My husband and son stayed in the city and rented a smaller room, because for every week he could only managed 1-2 gigs, "Ms. Nhung added: "It was early October when I applied to work in the company again. Now my basic salary is 4.7 million VND. With much overtime, the salary is more than 7 million, with little overtime less than 6 million, but this year there is no 13th month bonus, and now the whole family live day by day through charity gifts”.

Mr. Vu worked as a mason with a wage of about 250,000 VND / day, but this work is precarious and sporadic. “In the days where I have to work far away and manage my own transportation, the earnings minus all expenses amount to only a few hundred thousand. This year with the pandemic, we struggled for a whole month to earn enough to take care of our 2 children, and so did not have money to send to our parents in the countryside. Without extra earning, how can we dare come back this Tet holiday..." said a worried Mr. Vu.

As Lunar New Year drew closer, the "fear of Tet" loomed over many families of workers in the boardinghouse, with the desire to have a 13th month bonus to return home for Tet appearing somewhat unrealistic at this point.

The family of Mr. Huynh Thanh Ca (from Can Tho) and Ms. Dang Thi Kim Yen (from An Giang), both of whom worked in the footwear industry, were also hoping to "hoard" enough money to return home for Tet. Their room hung a large photo of their 11-year-old daughter. The

baby had lived with her grandmother, far from her parents since the age of 2. Last year, the couple's salary was an excess of 12 million VND/month, more than enough to care for their child and to sometimes send home to their parents. This year, the earning was about 7 million VND/month and, after all expenses were covered, amounted to little to nothing. Since the pandemic, Mr. Ca only worked 2 days/week with unpaid holidays. He had only started working again since October and had 2 hours of overtime.

"Having worked for the whole year, I used to look forward to a 13th month bonus to go back to the hometown for Tet holiday. But now, I only hope that the company operates stably, and am satisfied with earning an income every month", Mrs. Yen confided. (*to be continue*)

Empathetic boardinghouse owners

During the pandemic season, it is impossible not to mention the "golden hearts" of many boardinghouse owners across Ho Chi Minh City. During the social distancing period especially, many landlords in Thu Duc district reduced or exempted rent; or even provided assistance in different ways to poor workers. Mrs. Vo Thi Ha (owner of a boarding house in Alley 525, Highway 1, Street 3, Linh Xuan Ward, Thu Duc District) is well loved by her tenants. During the peak of the pandemic, she bought tens of kilograms of rice, instant noodles, cooking oil... and distributed these directly to workers, as per her words, "to motivate workers and together overcome the pandemic".

Looking forward to finishing my son's wedding

Ms. Nguyen Thi Nga (50 years old, from Dong Nai), who lived alone in her boardinghouse, was sick and had to take care of herself, only occasionally having visitors. During the pandemic, she only worked 3 days a week. In her free time, she went to diners to wait and wash dishes. As of now, her job was stable but had no overtime.

Ms. Nga said her family life was not very good. Her husband used to be a drunkard, often harassing and beating her when drunk, so she fled to Ho Chi Minh City to work.

"Throughout my 11 years here, I worked all the time and saved money to help my children find future spouses. Now, I just want to have my youngest son get married, and even earn a little extra to go home for Tet," Ms. Nga shared.

Article 5: Shirts faded from pandemic: Workers must be able to celebrate Tet

Published on 7.11.2020, Link TNO: <https://thanhvien.vn/thoi-su/manh-ao-bac-vi-dich-khong-de-nguoi-lao-dong-khong-co-tet-1301554.html>

The Vietnam General Confederation of Labor has actively developed a plan to 'ensure all union members and workers have Tet celebration'.



The Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (Labor Confederation) has actively developed and will soon issue a plan to organize end-of-the-year activities for union members and workers, upon the Lunar New Year of the Buffalo of 2021, with the motto: "All union members, all workers shall have Tet celebration".

This is the statement of Mr. Ngo Duy Hieu, Vice President of Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, responding to the series of reports *Shirts faded from pandemic* on Thanh Nien.

Mr. Ngo Duy Hieu said that, in addition to government support, the Labor Confederation was researching and proposing a support package estimated at hundreds of billion VND to support union members and workers during the end of the year period, especially before Tet. This year, Mr. Hieu said, the "Tet Reunion" activity shall be held mainly at the grassroots level and its direct superior level, especially in communities with many workers facing difficulties.

Temporarily suspension of contribution to the retirement and survivorship allowance fund

According to Deputy Minister of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs Le Van Thanh, implementation of the welfare support package under the Government's Resolution 42/NQ-CP and the Prime Minister's Decision No. 15/2020/QĐ-TTg still encountered a number of difficulties and problems such as: restrictive and unrealistic conditions placed on businesses wanting to borrow money for payment of worker salaries; many workers facing difficulties not receiving support...

Key moment for stimulus



Photo: **CREDITS:** Ms. Valentina Barcucci

Responding to *Thanh Nien*, Ms. Valentina Barcucci, labor economics expert of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Vietnam, said that, at the end of September, the ILO announced the Global Quick Report on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the labor market, highlighting some points such as:

Worldwide working hours have dropped dramatically. Closed workplaces have affected about 94% of workers worldwide. Vietnam is also facing decrease in working hours, especially in the second quarter of this year when hours decreased by about 10% compared to the fourth quarter of last year - right before the pandemic. In the third quarter, the situation improved when individuals tried to find additional jobs to supplement their income.

According to data released by the General Statistics Office, by the end of the third quarter this year, an additional 148,000 people were made unemployed. Unemployment increased, but the rate of workers not participating in the labor market was even higher. In particular, when the whole country implemented social distancing, the percentage of workers not participating in economic activities increased by 4.7 percent compared to the second quarter of 2019, an equivalent to 3.3 million people leaving the labor market, of which nearly 2 million were women.

Finally, there is a loss of income. The ILO estimates that global employment income went down 10.7% in the third quarter of 2019. The income of Vietnamese workers

especially decreased in the second quarter of 2020, average income of the service sector decreased by 6.5%, and income of industry and construction decreased by 3.9%, compared to the same period last year.

Assessing the labor economy situation in Vietnam in the fourth quarter, Ms. Valentina Barcucci said that, because Vietnam's economy and labor market were highly seasonal, the fourth quarter should be the most economically active time of the year. Whatever happened in the fourth quarter would prove a decisive factor in Vietnam's socio-economic prospects. If no restrictive pandemic control measures were implemented in the fourth quarter, the economy would be in a better position to recover.

“Vietnam has entered the fourth quarter without recording any community Covid-19 infection and with better economic prospects. However, it does not mean that workers and businesses do not need support. The fourth quarter is the economically active of the year. Therefore, there is a need to give a necessary boost to the economy before Tet during this quarter,” said Ms. Valentina Barcucci.

Pham Thu Ngan

Faced with the above shortcomings and problems, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs coordinated with relevant agencies to submit to the Government and the Prime Minister to issue Resolution 154/NQ-CP on October 19 amending and supplementing Resolution No. 42 / NQ-CP, and Decision No. 32/2020/ QD-TTg amending and supplementing a number of articles of Decision No. 15/2020/QD-TTg. These Resolutions expanded the scope of support for workers who had to postpone labor contracts and suffered from unpaid leaves at private, private educational institutions, and ensured regular expenditures from public institutions at the preschool, primary school, secondary school, high school levels. In addition, the Resolution and Decision amended and cut conditions and simplified processes to confirm eligibility of enterprises to borrow at the Bank for Social Policies and pay the work stoppage salary, creating favorable conditions for workers and businesses to access the 16,000 billion VND support package.

According to Deputy Minister Le Van Thanh, the employer was responsible for honest declaration of necessary information and content, was responsible before the law for the

accuracy of declared information, was responsible for sending documents to the Bank for Social Policies for approval of their loan applications; in order to create the most favorable conditions for enterprises to access loans to pay work stoppage wages to workers according to the Prime Minister's conclusions.

Regarding suspension of contributions to the retirement and survivorship allowance fund, Mr. Thanh said that, having received the Prime Minister directives, the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs proposed to amend regulations and reduce conditions for qualification of the policies. Accordingly, employers, those participating in social insurance program, whose income was reduced 20% or more by the Covid-19 pandemic compared to the time when competent authority announced the pandemic, may suspend their payment to the retirement and survivorship allowance fund for no more than 3 months from the time of dossier submission for consideration (instead of the regulation of reducing 50% of work or more in Resolution No. 42/NQ-CP).

With this regulation, according to a recent report of Vietnam Social Security, about 120,000 - 200,000 enterprises with about 3.2 to 5.4 million workers were forecasted to suspend their payment to the retirement and survivorship allowance fund, with the total amount of one month's suspension amounting to about 3,969 - 6,618 billion VND. Therefore, the 3-month implementation period of temporary suspension of contributions to the retirement and survivorship allowance would ensure a balance between income for pension payment, loss of labor subsidy, and monthly social insurance benefits.

Labor market expected to shift

Responding to Thanh Nien about plans to help workers who lost their jobs or had reduced working hours... due to Covid-19 complications, Mr. Le Minh Tan, Director of HCMC Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, said that HCMC labor market was expected to have many positive changes. Demand for human resources in quarter 4/2020 was about 62,000 - 65,000 jobs for occupation groups such as business - commerce; service; food processing, food service...

According to Mr. Le Minh Tan, the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs of Ho Chi Minh City had expanded the labor market information system, supported job counseling and job placement through the system of employment service centers, with special priority given to workers who lost their jobs; supported workers to borrow capital from the National Employment Fund, the CEP Microfinance Organization...; shortened administrative procedures for registering for unemployment benefits; continued to support businesses that were retaining workers, focusing on social dialogue between workers and businesses...

At the same time, the Department of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs had proposed Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Planning and Investment install a package of credit support policies for businesses facing difficulties to pay worker salaries, maintain and gradually restore business and production activities. In addition, the department submitted proposal to the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City to implement a direct support package of 27 billion VND for about 27,000 people, expecting these integrated measures to help workers overcome the difficulties of the pandemic.

Article 6: “Invisible” labor

Published on 2.1.2020, Link TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/lao-dong-tang-hinh-1324130.html>

Many freelance workers at the Thu Duc agricultural wholesale market (Ho Chi Minh City) refer to themselves as 'invisible' people, because at a time when the city lights up and many retreats to their homes, they are at the hardest hours of their labor...



Stevedoring workers sleeping on tow trucks. **Photo:** CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

“Nighttime ecosystem”

The darker the night, the brighter the Thu Duc wholesale market. The market was built in 2002, located at the eastern gateway of HCMC, in Tam Binh Ward, Thu Duc District. It is one of the largest wholesale markets in Ho Chi Minh City. Commodities such as fruits, vegetables, fresh flowers... are transported from all over the provinces to the market and then distributed to smaller markets in the city.

With more than 1,300 stalls, the amount of goods imported into the market is more than 3,000 tons/night. According to a market security guard, the time the trucks arrive to unload depend on the location of the sources. For example, at about 20:00, cars from Vinh Long, Dong Thap were loaded and unloaded. This year, with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, market activities have also been affected. Over the past few months, the amount of people in the market have decreased by more than one third compared to prior to the pandemic.

22pm to 12am and 1am to 3am were "peak" times for workers. At 23:00, the market was flocked in all corners with vehicles and stevedoring workers. The tow trucks were working at full capacity, the rush sometimes blocked the market paths. Callouts such as "The orange barrels?", "Hurry up!", "Step aside, step aside"... were so jumbled up together that it seemed only the sounds of traffic, goods colliding, or foam boxes being taped were audible in the market... Occasionally one might overheard some porter singing the Old purple flower song: "Cai Thia Canal flows to Tac Cau, a starling flies across the river, a starling perches on the porch".

Working days on end, the security team at the Thu Duc wholesale market consisted of hundreds of people, divided into many teams - squads, taking turns on shifts, the radio constantly buzzing by their ears. They had to pay particularly close monitoring the fire safety situation and examination of the power sources in the stalls.

In this market of more than 20 hectares, from 0 o'clock, people would be sitting on cartons, trailers or on the street, eating loaves of bread or a handful of sticky rice bought from street vendors. A couple rental truck drivers fastened hammocks on their ride to sleep on. But on days of full moon or of holidays... with a lot of goods flowing around, having time to sit down to eat late or sleep was a bit of a luxury.



A young porter loads and unloads boxes of fruit over a hundred kilograms.

Photo:CREDITS: Pham Thu Ngan

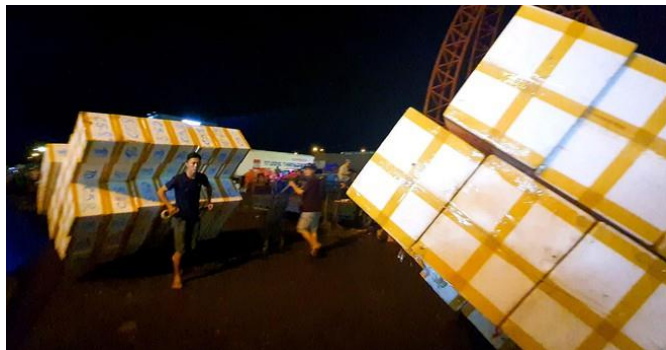
Mr. THS (33 years old, from Hau Giang province), who ran a small pineapple business, talked about a night's work: "Around 20 o'clock, the delivery truck arrives from Long An, I take the goods down, spread out the canvas to classify them. I then take the opportunity to eat a little and then starts cutting pineapples until 2 o'clock. After finishing, I put the pineapple into large bags,

ready to deliver to customers. The rest of the products I would sell in the market after 3 o'clock, by then the market would be teeming with customers”.

“Even iron wears out...”

Thu Duc wholesale market mainly operates in the service of market management, driving of market goods, stevedoring of goods... Therefore, the majority of the workforce are porters, who themselves are divided into groups, ranging from 20 - 40 people per team.

19 o'clock marked the start of warm-up and gear preparation; 22 o'clock began the "cogwheel" of work; 6 o'clock next morning ended the shift. That was the timetable of the porters at the Thu Duc wholesale market. Only when it was around 0 o'clock did the workers rest their hands. At this time, it was not difficult to see the porters taking advantage of their handcarts to “load” themselves up for some quick resting. Many continuously stood rubbing their temples, saying that the job, if one carried too many goods, their head would be as heavy as a stone mill, your breathing would turn heavy, and your limbs would start freezing.



Loading and unloading foam boxes in Thu Duc wholesale market. **Photo: CREDITS:**

Pham Thu Ngan

Mr. Nguyen Hong An (55 years old, from An Giang) sat resting among the noise of back and forth moving of goods. Decades had passed since he arrived in Sài Gòn alone to work as a freelance porter. Having moved to Thu Duc wholesale market after the Fire of Cau Ong Lanh market (1999), every 19 o'clock, Mr. An would be busy preparing, picking up a handcart, and starting his shift at Market A. On average, he towed several hundreds kilograms of goods everyday, earning 5 – 6 million VND/month, of which Mr. An would send around 2 million to his wife in the home village.

“My two daughters have been living in Saigon for 2 - 3 years. The first one already has a job and helps send money to support her sister’s study. I usually eat at a 10,000 VND vegetarian diner, go to work at night, and then head back home to sleep, so my daily living expenses are not much,” Mr. An shared. Eyes tired after staying up all night, Mr. An sighed when we reminded us of Tet holiday: “Whenever Tet arrives, we can rest for a few days and light incense for our ancestors, but during these times when work is few and far between, my heart feels on fire. I know that I do not make a lot of money, so I try my best to save and have some extra to send my daughter and support her.”

Mr. Dung (54 years old), a "veteran" porter of 18 years at the market, did not hesitate in calling his profession "human horse" work. Panting behind a rumpled mask, he rolled up the hems of his pants, exposing his muddy feet, and said that porters as old as him were hard to find. At that point, he only worked 8-9 days/month, every day until 2 o’clock, or 6 o’clock only when goods were plenty. “I remember the old days when I was young and strong enough to pull hundreds of kilos, and then some. Now that I am getting old, I do not have that energy anymore. I am only human, not made of iron or stone. But even iron wears out, and now I suffer from much pains. So long as I persevere, I can still care for my wife and children and live properly as I have for many years”, Mr. Dung smiled.

The wholesale market had not only male porters, and we witnessed many female workers loading and unloading boxes weighing nearly a hundred kilos. The men called them "iron maidens"...

(to be continue)

Over 1.000 stevedoring workers

Mr. Nguyen Thanh Dung, Deputy Director of Thu Duc wholesale market stevedore management division, said that the term "stevedore" is rarely heard in the market, and people often just referred to the profession as "porter". The market has more than 1,000 stevedoring workers, most of them from the Mekong Delta provinces. “These workers perform manual labor through the night, work that can detrimentally affect their health in the long run. Not to mention that the work is seasonal, mainly depending on the source of goods and customer demand, so income is insecure and unstable. Only on days of full

moon, holidays, or Tet, with an abundance of goods, are there many jobs for porters. This line of work is particularly taxing, requiring much strength...” Mr. Dung said.

Article 7: Invisible labor: “Iron maidens” in the night

Published on 3.1.2020, Link TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/thoi-su/lao-dong-tang-hinh-nhung-bong-hong-thep-trong-dem-1324587.html>

Thu Duc agricultural wholesale market (Tam Binh Ward, Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City) has not only male porters but also female workers loading and unloading goods. The men call them "iron maidens" in the night.



A female porter loads and unloads hundreds of kilograms at Thu Duc wholesale market.

Photo: CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

Leaving their respective village, far away from their ancestral land, the women with salt and pepper still came to the city to work as porters, taking on much trial and tribulation in the process.

“I have not earned the right to long breaks”

The clock at the Thu Duc wholesale market struck 2 o'clock, among the workers at Market A, it was easy to spot many women wearing cotton suits, with thin, stitched, or torn jackets on the outside, towing the heavy carts that overshadowed them. Cotton suits are lifestyle features of Mekong Delta women. They carry the outfit with them to the city and wear it for the sake of convenience.

Mr. Nguyen Thanh Dung, Deputy Director of Thu Duc wholesale market stevedore management division, said that there were about 7 female porters under official market management, most arriving after the Fire of the Cau Ong Lanh market, as the office no longer recruited women stevedores. There were also a few female workers from a stevedore unit linked to the market and about 30 female freelance porters. They work freelance because of their high age, and receive wages upon full completion of the quantity and quality of their assigned work... Today, market porters mainly consisted of young men who migrated from the Southwestern provinces.

Ms. Nguyen Thi Hang (55 years old, from Hau Giang province) stood looking around to see who needed their goods moved. She forgot how many years she had spent in the city, but she recalled that before that time, her family had lost their income from harvesting rice for others. Machines had replaced people, so she and her three children packed some clothes and moved to the city to find work. These days, Ms. Hang lived alone and worked as porter at the market, her 3 children workers in Tan Phu District (HCMC).

This year, Thu Duc market operation faltered due to the pandemic, and Ms. Hang earned 100,000 VND/night as the main source of income to pay for her accommodation and living expenses. With a “preset” schedule: at 22:00 hop on the "cogwheel", upon morning come home to sleep, Ms. Hang was used to working overnight. She said that, in this non-contractual, “invisible” work, anyone with the money would buy a tow cart to send to the market overnight for a few thousands, and the rest will rent it for more than a little above ten thousand a night.

“I prefer buying medicine to have ready in my room, so that whenever I am tired I have them on hand to drink. Now I cannot handle the full load of work, and thus earn only 3 million VND/month, but I only ask my children for help in the months when I cannot afford medicine”, Ms. Hang wiped the sweat off her face with the sleeves of her cotton shirt , then continued: “I appreciate however much I can work. Now I have to go around to see if anyone needs work. I do not have the right to take long breaks, for I may lose possible work”.



Ms. Mai Thi Bon makes a living at Thu Duc wholesale market. **Photo:**CREDITS: PHẠM THU NGAN

“... Money hanging in the night”

Standing opposite the corner of the street, Ms. Nguyen Thi Hong (55 years old, from An Giang) lit one cigarette after another. Ms. Hong has worked as porter in the city for little over a year. When asked why she decided to venture from her hometown at this later stage of life, Ms. Hong shared that everyone in her neighborhood were doing the same, and that by now the fields needed machinery, not people.

“I earn 200,000 VND a day, sometimes a bonus if I work extra. My children are now spread out all over, all busy with their own families,” Ms. Hong said and added: “My husband is constantly

sick. He has a cervical disc herniation, sciatica... We could not afford surgery, so now we are trying to get by with medication. And I also have a mitral valve regurgitation and spinal spine".

Mrs. Hong's boarding was about a kilometer from the market. Every 19 o'clock, Ms. Hong would walk to the market and, when the sun came up, back home. Asked how she got used to staying up late, she said: "I try to imagine a piece of money hanging in the night. My life is tied to the market so I must learn to get used to it. Sometimes when work is too hard, I no longer feel my hand is mine anymore, and I just hope to win the lottery. On nights when I earned only 100,000 VND, when I went home, I got to bed and just wanted to sleep forever".

When asked if she missed her hometown, Mrs. Hong clicked her tongue, saying she was like a bird missing forest leaves. She missed her village, missed the fields she used to water, and missed her ancestors' graves... In the countryside, she had a small house, and sometimes her husband would come back to clean and then immediately return to HCMC. Ms. Hong said, with tears in her eyes: "Because we are poor, we had to press our luck and joined the urban crowd to try to make a living. The countryside had fish and vegetables of all kinds, so we were not afraid of going hungry. But we had no money. Now that we are here in the city, we dare not to stop working, however tired we get".

The nighttime porters said that they were not sick of the amount of goods, but rather of the rainy nights. "In the rain, I have nowhere to lie down and rest, I have to wear a raincoat to work, have to try to catch some sleep while sitting, have to wade through the water carrying goods, which give blisters to my hands and feet," Ms. Hong said.



Ms. Nguyen Thi Hong often wears a dark-needle coat, torn in the armpits, to pull goods.

PHOTO-CREDITS: SONG MAI

U.80 female porters

At 3 o'clock, the skinny figure of Mrs. Mai Thi Bon (76 years old) seemingly disappeared behind the crates. Ms. Bon was a porter of 47 years and was the oldest female porter of the wholesale

market. Originally from Hoi An (Quang Nam), she entered Saigon by herself before she even turned twenty.

In her memory, images of the peaceful Thu Bon River, of the silkworm weaving villages, and of her impoverished family situation were still clear. "I got here in search of a better future," she said: "At first, I worked as a housekeeper for a person working in Saigon railway station, and after a while got married and gave birth. But due to tumultuous times, my husband died, and I had to make a living as a porter to raise my 3 children. Back then, I worked at Cau Ong Lanh market. After the 1999 fire, I moved here".

Ms. Mai (64 years old), who had worked with Mrs. Bon since she was still at Cau Ong Lanh market, regretted: "In those days when I was young, I carried so many goods that my shoulders grew calluses. Bon and I worked in the same place, me carrying goods while pregnant, Bon taking care of 3 children by herself. Be it sunny or rainy, I would see her hard at work, hunched over pulling the cart... Construction of this market was not finished at that point, and every time it rained, water flooded over the knee".

For decades, Mrs. Bon went to work every night. She said: "Back when I was strong, I pulled hundreds of kilograms every night, I even portered goods on trucks, but now people only call me for work out of pity. They worry I might sprain my arms and legs. Each box of goods, ten kilos give or take, is worth 2,000 - 4,000 VND, and I earn 30,000 VND every haul. A night of labor earned me about 120,000 - 200,000 VND, holidays and full moon nights more".

When asked if she often returned to her hometown to celebrate Tet, she grew wistful: "When my father passed away, I did not fulfill my duties as his daughter. Later, I returned to my hometown, but seeing myself as having emigrated yet still poor, I dared not go back. I set up an altar to my father at my current home here. I even work during Tet holiday: on December 30, I would stay at home to perform the worshipping rites, and then return to the market on the 1st day of New Year. Tet at the market is also fun, people here gift me with a lot of goods".

A storm of migrants

According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the Southeast region continues to be the most attractive destination for migrants, with 1.3 million immigrants. Most migrants to the Southeast come from the Mekong Delta (about 710,000 people, accounting for 53.2%). Statistics show that there are significant differences in the level of wealth between migrants and non-migrants, with inter-provincial migrants having the lowest living standards, as nearly half live in the "poor" and "extremely poor" levels.

Article 8: The reporter perspective: Businesses need to show more empathy

(Pham Thu Ngan) – Published on 22.12.2020, Link: TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/blog-phong-vien/doanh-nghiep-cung-can-the-hien-su-se chia-1319812.html>

The Government and other authorities have been very active in supporting businesses to overcome difficulties. Thus, in turns, businesses also need to empathize with the trials facing workers at the end of the year...

These businesses have been severely affected by the interruption of import-export trading activities; many had to shrink production or suspend their operation...

In order to accompany businesses through this difficult period, early on in the pandemic, the Government issued Directive No. 11 / CT-TTg on 4.3.2020 regarding the urgent tasks and solutions to business and production setbacks as well as assurance of social security to combat pandemic fallouts. Since then, many policies have been implemented in support of enterprises ... There are also policies of other agencies, such as: Vietnam General Confederation of Labor's delaying of trade union fee payment for enterprises; Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs' guide on temporary suspension of contributions to the retirement and survivorship allowance fund...

Conducting dozens of interviews with workers in Ho Chi Minh City, we saw that, despite being one of the key components of the production cycle, workers depended entirely on the benefits and opportunities given by their employer. In fact, workers have severely been affected by Covid-19. Having had their overtime cut and most of their monthly salaries sent home to families, they do not have any accumulated savings during the social distancing period. For many workers today, the approaching Tet holiday – traditionally an occasion for reunions – has suddenly turned into a source of worry because of their financial burden.

However, as mentioned above, the Government and other authorities have been active in supporting businesses to overcome difficulties. Thus, in turn, businesses also need to empathize with the trials facing workers at the end of the year period, a time for which Lunar New Year rewards and support are most practical. In addition, authorities also need to implement synchronous and strong measures such as: enhancing supervision of enterprises' salary payments, preventing late payment or non-payment of wages...

Article 9: The reporter perspective: No freelance worker shall be left behind

(Pham Thu Ngan) – Published on 6.12.2020, Link: TNO: <https://thanhnien.vn/blog-phong-vien/de-lao-dong-tu-do-khong-bi-bo-lai-1325759.html>

Through a series of reports titled *Shirts faded from pandemic* and *Invisible labor*, in which worker interviews were conducted, we find that most laborers and freelance workers in Ho Chi Minh City are migrant workers.

These people consist of not only impoverished individuals from remote areas but also the urban poor. The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected workers, but informal workers (meaning freelance, non-contracted, low-income workers - Reporter) and young people fresh from entering the economic market are those more disadvantaged.

Of further note are the contexts of rich-poor inequality or limited access to foundations of social security (including employment, minimum income guarantee, and poverty reduction; social insurance; social assistance for specific payments; social service opportunities).

We witnessed many workers "tighten their belt" in damp boardinghouses, many freelance workers stay up all night for a daily income of about 100,000 VND (or about 3 million VND / month, equivalent to the city's near-poor standards in the 2019 – 2020 period).

It is worth mentioning that the freelance workforce - a valuable workforce in society - have no “guarantees” due to lack of access to healthcare, social insurance, social subsidies, and social security...

In October 2020, Oxfam published a global report on the commitment index to reduce inequality in 2020. According to the statistics, Vietnam ranks second in the ASEAN region and 77th out of 158 countries on inequality reduction. At the same time, Vietnam is highly regarded for its successes in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, implementing relief packages, and taking measures to limit the rise of poverty and inequality...

Regardless, the situation ahead requires much effort, and policies to reduce inequality needs to be people centered. The essential questions to consider are how to have a fair tax policy and free health care; how to develop the labor market and reduce informal workforce; and how to ensure

informal workers can easily access policies of basic salary increase, welfare, social security...

Only when these issues are resolved can a new society arise, without anyone being left behind.