

# Thai student embraces 1930s U.S. labor play

by Mike Matejka

Fight with us for right! It's war! Working class, unite and fight! Tear down the slaughterhouse of our old lives! Let freedom really ring!

Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty*, 1935.

Waiting for Lefty is a vintage 1935 play, based upon a 1934 New York City taxi drivers' strike. It's performed in seven vignettes on an empty stage. The Great Depression tension, when workers organized unions and fought bloody battles to escape poverty, echoes through this tough slice of American life.

So why is an Illinois State University Master of Fine Arts student from Thailand directing this as his first play?

Sanhawich Meateanuwat arrived in the U.S. last January, to pursue his degree program. Why would a 1930s play, replete with the street vernacular and allegations against Communists, attract him?

Watching military rule in his home country and the brutal repression in neighboring Myanmar awakened Sanhawich to the cour-

age needed to stand for human rights – a message that echoes through Lefty. "The words from the play are like a stick to the heart," he said.

Thailand needs social and constitutional reform, plus human development programs, the young man stated. "In my country they fight so hard in the street; they face water cannons, rubber bullets, kidnappings, arrests. No one should live like that."

The risk that union organizers and those fighting for democracy and human rights around the world resonates with Sanhawich. "There is a risk to change the world. Why do we have to lose our life to change the world?"

Sanhawich said he had two goals in choosing this play. His first is to "provoke empathy and understanding of these people. I want people to see this reality." His second goal is the realization that "if you have to live under injustice you have to speak up. You have to gather people around you for support."



Illinois State University Master of Fine Arts student Sanhawich Meateanuwat is producing a 1935 labor play at ISU this month.

The low wages, hunger and threat of homelessness looms in Lefty. Sanhawich remembers stories from his mother's childhood, when she was up at 4 a.m. daily to start water boiling for the family's small coffeehouse. One of ten siblings, she went to school daily with candy in her backpack, trying to sell it to other children to support the household. The struggling family emphasized education and she and half her siblings became schoolteachers. He sees many families facing the same struggles and efforts to survive today.

"I'm so proud to be doing this play, it speaks for labor, it speaks for myself," he shared. "No one man standing can do it. That's the idea of a union, we have to do it together, that's why we need comradeship."

Waiting for Lefty was highly controversial. The play opened at New York's Civic Theater on January 6, 1935, as a benefit performance. It cost eight dollars to produce. It moved to Broadway that March, running for 144 performances. During its Boston opening, four performers were arrested for violating that city's censorship laws. Playwright Odet was hauled before the 1950s House Un-American Activities Committee and questioned about the play and its inspiration.

The ISU performance is September 23-26 at Illinois State University's Center for the Performing Arts, 351 South School Street. Friday and Saturday there is a 7:30 p.m. performance, Saturday and Sunday a matinee at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$12-\$17 and available online at [shorturl.at/rsRY5](http://shorturl.at/rsRY5), at the door, or by calling for will call at 309-438-2535.

## Book Review

by Mike Matejka

Peoria story in controversial new book

America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s

By Elizabeth Hinton, W.W. Norton Publisher

On Monday night and in the early morning of Tuesday, July 30, Peoria Police and residents of the south side Taft Homes fought a running battle, with bottles, rocks and even a shotgun aimed at police, injuring rookie officer Al Misener.

The tension erupted after neighborhood youths were bombing a tavern with bricks, bottles and firebombs. When the police arrived the approximately 50 resi-

neighborhoods, stores and public facilities were being ravaged and burnt. Were not people destroying their own neighborhood?

In her new book, *America on Fire*, Elizabeth Hinton claims the violence was not a "riot," but a "rebellion," against poor housing, inadequate schools and few jobs. A police confrontation was often the trigger igniting violence. The civil rights movement created opportunities for some who gained an education or better jobs, leaving the older, segregated neighborhoods and housing behind for poorer residents. Resentment grew against non-Black owned businesses, financially strapped housing authorities and especially against police tactics.

coming nation. Yet there are Americans who feel trapped, with police action and high incarceration rates often leading to a violent reaction.

After George Floyd's 2020 death, Black Lives Matter emerged as a powerful movement. What most struck Hinton was how inter-racial that movement was, centered on systemic change, and in 95 percent of the demonstration, non-violent.

"The 2020 demonstrations revealed that racial justice champions, environmental activists, LGBTQ-rights advocates and labor unions appear to be stitching together a new coalition," Hinton writes. "Another even more recent shift is that ... some public of-

