Indonesian Labour Movement in Historical Perspective: A View from Below

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Introduction

The history of labour movement in a Western context is different from that in a non-Western one. If such is the case, insights into the former, or which there is an abundance of studies, cannot be said to unilaterally apply to the latter, on which, on the contrary, there is a dearth of research. The three books under review here – Ingleson’s *Workers, Unions and Politics*; Suryomenggolo’s *Organising under the Revolution* on the history of Indonesian labour movement from the 1920s to 1940s; and Christiansen and Scarlett’s edited volume on new social movements in the third world in the 1960s – provide a much-needed addition to and enrich the field of labour history in the Global South with their emphasis on history from below. While the first two works seek to unravel the history of Indonesian workers as experienced by the workers themselves, the edited volume complements them by highlighting the stories of emerging social movements in post-colonial, developing countries, including Indonesia. By doing

Book review


so, these works make an important contribution to the study of labour history in Asia.

This essay will begin with a discussion of the three books, focusing mainly on the first two that delve into the history of Indonesian labour movement, and then proceed to an analysis of the relevance of all three in understanding contemporary contexts.

**Indonesian Labour Movement in “the Age of Motion”**¹

The works of Ingleson and Suryomenggolo go well with each other, as they cover two important historical and directly linked epochs in the evolution of Indonesian labour movement: the late colonial (1920s-1930s) and early independence eras (1945-1948). Both books show in detail changes and continuities in the labour movement throughout the two periods. More specifically, both books address four main issues that are crucial to understanding the subject at hand: 1) the connection between the workers’ economic concerns and the broader political contexts; 2) the tension between union organizers and rank-and-file members; 3) the relationship between labour movement and nationalist politics; and 4) the issue of political representation for Indonesian labour.

Ingleson’s book, a sequel to his earlier work (1986) which discusses Indonesian labour movement from 1908-1926, focuses on the decades of 1920s and 1930s, periods which coincided with the resurgence of the nationalist movement after the failed communist uprising in 1926.² The main argument of the book is for Indonesian workers, this was a period of rising labour militancy that witnessed modest achievements in terms of wage justice and political representation, even as it was punctuated by the Great Depression, tighter political control, and ultimately, the

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¹ This phrase is adapted from the title of Shiraishi’s (1990) famous book on popular radicalism in late colonial Java, An Age of Motion.

² For one of, if not the most, comprehensive accounts of the 1926 communist uprising in colonial Indonesia, see McVey (1965).
Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia in 1942. Ingleson likewise discusses in the first two chapters the structural context within which Indonesian labour movement developed; in chapters three to five, the strategies of the labour movement vis-à-vis the colonial state and the capitalist class; and the post-depression rebuilding of the movement in chapter six.

At this time, the structural condition within which the labour movement was organised was quite complicated because as in many other colonies, the labour movement in the Indies faced both economic exploitation and racial discrimination. Given this situation, what was considered as an “economic” or trade union issue, such as wage justice for Indonesian workers, was also a political one as it directly challenged the logic of colonial society. Consequently, there were more restrictions on the operation of labour unions in the Dutch East Indies than in the colonial metropole. At the same time, however, this was also the period when there was a liberal shift in Dutch politics, thereby paving the way for some limited political representation in the Indies.3 By this time, the pseudo-parliamentary body of the Indies, the Volksraad or the People’s Council, had been operating for a while, and various nationalist parties of different persuasions had emerged and were organised.

Ingleson notes that “union activists understood that [the labour movement] was part of the broader nationalist movement.” (p. 44). However, they likewise realised that Indonesian workers also had their own aspirations and concerns, and it is the workers themselves who should eventually take charge of the leadership and organisation of their unions. In their attempts to create a politically militant and independent labour movement, both ordinary workers and union activists faced a slew of challenges in many aspects. Racial tension intersecting with class differences

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3 For further discussion on the impact of the liberal shift in Dutch politics on colonial administration in the Indies, see Fasseur (1992).
among Indonesian, Eurasian, Chinese, and Dutch workers was one such challenge, especially because the majority of blue-collar workers were Indonesians. The tension between the leaders of labour unions and political movements and the rank-and-file workers was another. This was particularly challenging because despite the leaders’ good intentions and dedication to the workers’ cause, they were often unable to overcome their patronising attitude toward the workers, something that would become a serious issue for the labour movement in the years to come. In highlighting these tensions, Ingleson gets the job done by discussing not only the general political condition at the time and the written records of the elites, leaders, and activists, but also the records of the ordinary workers. He brings to fore the experience of the working class as chronicled in their articles, diaries, petitions, and social life in general. Researching Indonesian history in the late colonial era might be relatively easy given the availability of documents pertaining to this period. Understanding the plight of the masses, however, still requires some kind of sensitivity to their multi-faceted experiences, something which Ingleson shows in his book.

Of particular interest are the strategies of various unions in three key sites of the struggle – their workplaces, the industry as a whole, and the political arena. Ingleson details the struggle of unionised workers in different industries – from the railway and public sector companies to the communication and education sectors – for wage justice and workplace democracy in their respective fields, and for the establishment of a collective political force that has bargaining power in the face of the colonial state. In this struggle – which was temporarily halt mainly due to the need to form a united alliance against the rising fascism in both Europe and Asia – the role of the railway workers was particularly important due to their significant size, militancy, and strategic function as the operators of a major transportation network,
something that Suryomenggolo also discusses in the context of postcolonial Indonesia.

While Ingleson focuses on union activities in the late colonial era, Suryomenggolo looks at the neglected history of the labour movement in the early years of independence. In his book, Suryomenggolo sheds light on state-labour relations in the context of newly independent Indonesia. Specifically, he analyses the response of the Indonesian state, with all its promises following what was described as hard-earned freedom, to the demand for workers’ control over workplace operation and the economy, as well as to the increasing direct actions of the labour movement. Moreover, he highlights the tension between the state, represented by the leaders of the independence movement and labour unions, on the one hand, and the workers, represented by the unions, on the other. The Indonesian state was grappling with increasing labour militancy, while defending itself against the impending Dutch aggression and while taming the excesses of the national revolution.4

Here, Suryomenggolo shows an interesting side of the history of Indonesian labour movement during this period: its progressive syndicalism.5 Historical records on this “hidden” dimension, including diaries and writings of ordinary workers, are definitely available and accessible, but it is Suryomenggolo’s work that truly reveals the story. For many, including some political and labour leaders, syndicalism was not a positive label – it was associated with left-wing infantilism and adventurism. Even the famous labour activist S.K. Trimurti eschewed such political tendencies

4 Some of the most authoritative accounts of this period of upheaval are those by Anderson (1972), Frederick (1989), Kahin (1952), Lucas (1989), and Smail (1964).
5 In a short review such as this, it is difficult to do justice to the history of syndicalism in the leftist movement. Suffice it to say that albeit marginalized, traces of syndicalism can be found in various leftist movements, from the thoughts of Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek to the direct action of the British workers against Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal onslaught. See Ness and Azzellini (2011) and Scargill (1975) for some of the more recent elaborations on syndicalism.
But for many workers and local union leaders, syndicalism meant the recognition of the workers’ autonomous political action specifically their attempts to promote increased workplace democracy and democratisation of the economy. Such a task was indeed difficult in light of the ongoing political and economic instability of the independent Indonesian state at that time, but the workers did not stay still, as they tried to prove that it was possible to defend the revolution and push forward the workers’ agenda amid such circumstances.

To explore the development of syndicalist tendencies among Indonesian workers, Suryomenggolo focuses on a particular union, the SBKA (Serikat Boeroeh Kereta Api, Railway Workers Union). SBKA, which was founded in 1946, was essentially a reorganisation of the then existing and defunct labour unions in the railway sector, including the once-triumphant VSTP (Vereeniging voor Spoor-en Tramweg Personeel in Nederlandsche-Indie, Union of Rail and Tramway Workers in the Netherlands Indies). SBKA found itself propelled into a strategic role, as competition between Indonesian and Dutch authorities over the control of the railway network gave the organization more room to maneuver and push for its demands. In chapter four (pp. 94-129), Suryomenggolo details how SBKA not only promoted the socioeconomic concerns of its members, but also pushed for a more conducive political environment for organising workers through various ways, from solidarity actions with other labour unions to protests against army violence.

To conclude, Suryomenggolo then discusses Undang-Undang Kerdja 1948 (UUK 1948) or the 1948 labour law, which emphasized the role of the state as the guarantor of labour rights, to illustrate the contested nature of state-labour relations (pp. 130-156). As

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6 The role of VSTP was very important because it was one of, if not the most, militant unions with communist tendencies in the late colonial era, until it was crushed and banned by the colonial government in the aftermath of the failed 1926 communist uprising.
a historian, Suryomenggolo asserts that one has to look at UUK 1948 not only as a legal document but also as a socio-historical phenomenon. In light of this critical perspective, he argues that UUK 1948 was an attempt of the newly independent Indonesian state not merely to correct exploitative and discriminatory colonial labour policies, but to moderate the militancy of the labour movement as well. But it is this paternalistic tendency, despite the law’s good intentions, that was problematic for the other unions that aimed to take a more independent path to labour organising. This tension marked the early years of independence, although in general, Indonesian labour unions enjoyed a much greater degree of political independence compared to their counterparts elsewhere (p. 166). In that sense, the brief period of 1945-1948 can be seen as a critical juncture in the history of state-labour relations in Indonesia.

Both works have made some important contributions to the study of Indonesian labour history. First, they eloquently show the changes and continuities in the history of state-labour relations in Indonesia from 1920 to 1948. Clearly, there were significant changes: the colonial state which was inching toward liberalization eventually collapsed and the independent Indonesian republic emerged. This newfound freedom, however, did not fully “exorcise” the specter of state paternalism of the labour movement, a point that Suryomenggolo stressed in his work. While the Indonesian state was different from the colonial state, the leaders of the republic might have overlooked the fact that the former operated within the historical and structural legacy of the latter. Such a legacy limited the ability of the Indonesian state to promote a more participatory democratic space for workers,

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7 The period continued well until the end of Sukarno’s “Guided Democracy” period in 1965. See Hadiz (1997, pp. 38-58) for a brief yet thorough discussion on organized labour in pre-New Order Indonesia.
and hindered attempts to do away with elitist and exclusionary practices both in the workplace and in the political arena.  

Furthermore, these works also enrich the growing literature on Indonesian “history from below” or “people’s history”. With the lack of a comprehensive monograph on Indonesian history from a subaltern perspective, these books are important additions to works of this genre. What is also notable about these works is that while they focus on the experience of unions and ordinary workers, they do not lose sight of the dynamics at the elite level. This dialectical view of state-labour and elite-labour relations allows them to present a more comprehensive picture of the workers’ struggle.  

The publication of these two books could hardly be more timely: after a lot has been said about Indonesian labour movement during the authoritarian New Order regime (Hadiz, 1997) and after its demise (Ford, 2009), this is perhaps the best time to revisit the past to see whether there are any parallelisms between the current and the past experience of labour struggle. On a more specific note, Suryomenggolo’s book is commendable for presenting an interesting insight into that episode of syndicalist tendencies in the history Indonesian labour movement. This is perhaps the first book to explore this episode and call the workers’ autonomous and direct actions during the early years of independence as such.  

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8 This problem was not exclusive to the issue of state-labour relations. In the case of rice provision, for instance, the Indonesian state also desperately tried to find a balance between its ambitions of order and authority despite its little control over local conditions, and the demand of the masses (Vu, 2003).  

9 As Perry Anderson (1974) rightly puts it, “A ‘history from above’ – of the intricate machinery of class domination – is thus no less essential than a ‘history from below’: indeed, without it the latter in the end becomes one-sided (if the better side)” (p. 11).  

10 Ford (2009, p. 116) puts forth the idea that it is the workers themselves who could improve their situation and should lead their own unions as “social democratic”, but such an idea can be found in many other strands of leftist movements, including the syndicalist ones.
Labour and Social Movements in the Global Context

While the struggle for formal independence for many third world countries culminated in the aftermath of the Second World War, the struggle for comprehensive decolonisation in a post-colonial context carried on well until the 1960s. It is in this context that the rise of social movements in the Third World during that period must be situated. Christiansen and Scarlett precisely seek to examine this issue in their edited volume.

The volume is divided into three parts: the Third World of the 1960s as a site of global social upheavals in chapters one to four; the different modes of expression of social movements in chapters five to eight; and the tension between the state and social movements in chapters nine to twelve. Arif Dirlik and the editors wrote the foreword and the introduction of the volume, which review the chapters in the book and their continuing relevance beyond the 1960s context. Christoph Kalter discusses the history of the term “Third World” in chapter one, while Zachary Scarlett and Avishek Ganguly explore the cultural and intellectual history of two communist movements – the Red Guards of China during the Cultural Revolution and the Naxalites of India – in chapters two and three, respectively. Konrad Kuhn highlights in chapter four the history of the international solidarity with the secessionist movement in Biafra and the protest against the Cabora Bassa dam. In the second part, Colin Snider looks at student movements espousing university and political reforms in Brazil under authoritarian rule in chapter five, and Nicholas Creary analyses student protests at a major Catholic seminary in colonial Zimbabwe in chapter six. Chris Saunders highlights the intersection between race and politics in South Africa under apartheid in chapter seven, and James Bradford shows the role of Walter Rodney’s ideas and reggae music in the struggle against imperialism in Jamaica in chapter eight. In the third and last part,
Pedro Monaville, Julia Sloan, and Stephanie Sapiie discuss the role of student movements in Congo-Zaire, Mexico, and Indonesia in chapters nine to eleven, while Erwin Fernandez elaborates on the role of the Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism (MAN) as a front organisation of the Left in the Philippines in chapter twelve.

The diversity of the types of social movements, their social bases, and their aims reviewed in the volume reflect the complexity of the social movement landscape and the mobilisation of the lower classes in general in a postcolonial context. This phenomenon, however, was not exclusive to the Third World. As the volume points out, its romantic imagery also permeated and influenced popular imagination and political discourses in the First World, the former colonial metropole. Movements in solidarity with the struggle of third world nations sprung up and alongside this, the so-called new social movements started to emerge.

Did this suggest a shift away from the more traditional working class-based movement? If so, should we then bid “farewell to the working class” like André Gorz (1982) did? Rather than signifying a retreat from class analysis in the study of labour history and social movements, the three works under review here actually show the continuing relevance of class perspective and, by extension, labour history. In particular, a number of contributions in the edited volume underline, as major overlapping themes in the study of labour and social movements, the inherent tension in state-society relations, the struggle against state power as the political and repressive apparatus of the ruling class, and the challenge for different marginalized social forces to resolve their coordination dilemma to act collectively. Again, all these demonstrate the analytical relevance and leverage of class analysis in the study of labour and social history.

The volume also helps to situate the Indonesian case in the global context. By doing so, the many parallelisms between Indonesia and
many other countries are made manifest. For example, the chapters by Snider and Bradford on the struggle of student movements for university reform in Brazil and of the marginalised classes for popular empowerment in Jamaica respectively echo the similar kind of struggle experienced by workers and politically conscious members of the middle class in Indonesia.

But collective consciousness and solidarity are not the only story here. The experience of labour and social movements is often marked by tensions between and among different marginalised social forces. This is exactly what Sapiie points out in her chapter on the role of the anti-Communist student movement, KAMI (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia, Student Action Front) during the 1965-1966 political upheaval in Indonesia. Her elaboration shows that KAMI, whose social base was predominantly middle-class, failed to understand the grievances of the lower class, including the workers, and the contribution of the Left to Indonesian society. The group’s concerns were indeed valid and understandable, given the heightened political tension and economic hardship in Indonesia at that time, and its attempt to be a “moral” agent that “stands above politics” might be admirable. Such a moralistic stance, however, was eventually tainted by its de facto collaboration with the army, who used the support of the students to justify their coming to power and led the mass killings against the communists and their alleged sympathisers, many of whom were workers and peasants in 1965. After a protracted period of struggle since the 1920s, the 1965 mass killings and the subsequent rise of the authoritarian New Order regime paved the way for a tighter and more repressive state control over the labour movement in the coming years. It is precisely at this point that we begin see the tension between the middle and the lower classes, that is, between the “new” social movements and “old” labour movement, a pattern which is not uncommon in Indonesian history.
Concluding Remarks
The seventeen-year reign of political democracy that followed collapse of the New Order regime has opened up a wide range of new opportunities for Indonesian workers to further organise and advance their interests. While there is much more political freedom for organising, workers and their unions still face a lot of the similar challenges that their predecessors confronted in the past – the dominance of the powerful political and economic elites and their material interests, the lack of workplace democracy, tensions with the middle class and other social movements, and the prevalence of sectarian and sectoral interests.

At this point, perhaps, it is imperative that the history of Indonesian labour movement as part of the global social movement against capitalist globalisation and arbitrary state power be revisited. The contributions made by the three works reviewed here greatly help in the formulation of a more historically grounded understanding of the history and trajectory of Indonesian labour movement. With the debate rages on about the oligarchy thesis of Indonesian politics\textsuperscript{11} (Ford & Pepinsky, 2014) and the call to move toward a more dialectical view of structure-agency relations in contemporary social sciences, (Sewell, Jr., 2005), re-examining the lived praxis of the Indonesian workers in the past would be a worthy take-off point.

\textsuperscript{11} The oligarchy thesis of Jeffrey Winters (2011) argues that throughout history, oligarchs, the thin stratum of the few super rich also known as the “one percent”, have always dominated politics in defense of their wealth in one way or another. Here, the emphasis is more on the material power of the oligarchs rather than their numerical rarity.
References


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