



Workers and Democracy: The Indonesian Labour Movement, 1949–1957

JOHN INGLESON

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The Indonesian labor movement, which was active between the Dutch recognition of Indonesian sovereignty in December 1949 and the nationalization of Dutch business assets in 1957, was complex. It saw competition between unions and union federations for members; between political parties for influence in both federations and individual unions; and between unions and Dutch managers, many of whom seemingly wanted to continue running their businesses as if the 1940s simply had not happened. The political environment within which these struggles took place was marked by a fragile parliamentary democracy over which the military kept watch, and in which it occasionally intervened.

John Ingleson's success in bringing analytical order to this complex, sometimes chaotic scene is a major achievement and a significant contribution to our understanding of industrial movements in Indonesia at this time, and indeed contemporaneous Indonesian politics more broadly.

After the introduction and a context-setting Chapter 1, the main body of *Workers and Democracy* is divided into two sections, the first concentrating on the primary actors in the industrial arena, the second on case studies of industry sectors. Chapter 2 focuses on the relations between unions, union federations, and politics. Of particular significance is the dominant role played by SOBSI, the union federation linked to the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). SOBSI benefited from its PKI connections, and through them its links to the Communist bloc. However, Ingleson makes a convincing case that the reasons for SOBSI's success were primarily local and domestic. Compared with its rivals it attracted better-educated and more committed officials, it made genuine attempts to listen to what grassroots workers wanted, it managed its finances better, and its clear ideological commitment to class struggle against foreign capitalism resonated not only with grassroots workers but also with a broader community sentiment which sought the elimination of Dutch influence from the newly independent Indonesia. Non-Communist unions and federations struggled to compete. Their disparate political and religious orientations were a

major barrier to their forming any effective united front, and their social and political ideologies often thwarted attempts to attract grassroots members.

Chapter 3 focuses on unions and workers at the grassroots level in the immediate post-revolutionary period. Many industrial disputes at this time arose spontaneously, but most were subsequently absorbed by local unions, and occasionally national ones. Amongst the issues workers pursued were the obvious ones such as wage rates, but they also included Lebaran (end of Muslim fasting month) bonuses, canteen facilities, and social wages—payment in rice, textiles, etc. Unions were also keen to show foreign companies that they could no longer treat their employees as they had in the past. Differential wages based on race were a particular target. In the majority of the cases discussed here, workers and their unions were successful in securing greatly improved conditions from their employers—sometimes because of the ad hoc intervention of the government, but more commonly because unions became more adroit in pursuing their causes than employers were in defending theirs.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of government in industrial relations, and especially in the resolution of labor disputes. Governments of all persuasions faced a difficult dilemma. They understood that limiting industrial activity by workers violated their freedoms, hard won in the struggle against colonialism, but they also feared that industrial disputes had the capacity to damage the fragile national economy. They thus aimed to secure negotiated solutions to industrial disputes, recognizing workers' rights but avoiding industrial conflict.

The remaining four substantive chapters are case studies of workers in four industry sectors: the public sector, plantations, dockyards and shipping, and industrial and urban transport. These are finely detailed chapters. Indeed, in places the detail seems almost overwhelming, particularly when there are several different unions involved in a particular dispute, and a complex mix of wage and other demands being made, such as in the discussion of the 1954 strike in the shipping and stevedoring industry (pp. 286–293).

A key issue in the discussion of the public sector is the distinction between *pegawai negeri* and *buruh*—the former being office-based workers, teachers, stationmasters, and the like, and the latter laborers, factory hands, and so forth. Unions seeking to cover both groups found it difficult not only to reconcile their different industrial objectives but also to overcome the very powerful social distinctions between the two.

The chapter on plantations shows that one union—the SOBSI-affiliated Sarbupri—was predominant in both Java and Sumatra for most of the 1950s. Industry workers, led by Sarbupri, took on some of the most powerful Dutch commercial interests in the country. They were not always successful, and the union still had problems recruiting higher-level workers in the industry, but working conditions in 1957 were unarguably better than they had been in 1950, for which Sarbupri deserved credit.

The dockyards and inter-island shipping companies had been the sites of industrial conflict

since the 1920s; this continued into the 1950s. The dominant shipping company, KPM, Ingleson argues was regarded by Indonesians in the 1950s as “an arrogant company that continued to treat Indonesia as if it were still a colony” (p. 266). The extensive references the author makes to documents in the KPM archives in the Hague, in which company management in Indonesia argued for the continuation of racially discriminatory practices on its ships, reinforce this assessment.

Governments were sympathetic to the efforts of unions to improve conditions in Indonesia, and in particular to eliminate the structural racism endemic in the KPM. But at the same time, the country’s archipelagic layout, and its dependence on stevedoring and shipping companies to get crucial exports to market, meant that they were concerned for the potential impact of industrial action on the national economy.

The final case study chapter is more diverse in its industrial coverage than the preceding three, focusing on oil production, textiles, and urban transport. Oil production was still in foreign hands, primarily Dutch but also American and British; the textile industry was dominated by small, Indonesian-owned companies; urban transport was also Indonesian dominated but highly diversified in both its range of work sites—from buses and trucks to horse-drawn carriages and pedicabs—and its geographical dispersion. SOBSI, again, was the dominant union federation operating across these industries; but with the exception of the oil industry, it was not particularly successful in drawing workers into its unions. This chapter is perhaps not as successful as the preceding case studies in developing a single, coherent narrative, except possibly in demonstrating the major difficulties unions faced in seeking to improve working conditions in highly diversified, often cottage, industries.

Ingleson’s final chapter brings together the conclusions he draws from his work, discussed below.

This book is meticulously researched. Apart from contemporary newspapers and other print media, it uses archival material from the Netherlands, Australia, the UK, and the US. Importantly, Ingleson also makes extensive use of post-1949 materials lodged in the Indonesian National Archives, which have rarely been used in the past, and never, I suggest, as effectively as Ingleson uses them here. This latter resource does, however, pose something of a dilemma. SOBSI and its affiliates figure prominently in this book; unions associated with other parties or organizations less so. This may well reflect the situation prevailing at the time. However, there is also much less archival material available on these latter organizations than on SOBSI. In the wave of anti-Communist violence which engulfed Indonesia from the mid-1960s onward, SOBSI’s records were seized by the military and ultimately preserved in the National Archives. It is ironic that the very processes of destruction of the PKI and its affiliates by the military and its allies helped ensure the survival of their records, thus helping preserve the memory of those organizations, including SOBSI, while the records of other organizations were simply lost.

Ingleson’s book makes several important contributions to our understanding of modern

Indonesian history in the period 1950–57. First, Ingleson demonstrates that the achievements of the union movement were real and extensive. Industrial relations in 1957 were very different from what they had been in 1950. Though unions and workers had not won all their battles, and many unions were still structurally and financially weak in 1957, much had been achieved to end colonial-era practices in worker-employer relations. Workers and their unions had learned how best to prosecute their cases when dealing not only with foreign and Indonesian companies but also with the Indonesian state and its agents, including the military, who were by no means uniformly supportive of their objectives. These achievements had, however, been virtually eliminated from the national memory by the anti-Communist, military-led government of Suharto after 1965.

The one caveat which might be entered here is that Ingleson's conclusion that non-unionized workers fared much worse than unionized ones (p. 342) would have been strengthened with more evidence of conditions prevailing in non-unionized industries. There is one citation of a UN report from 1956 saying that the position of unorganized labor, at least in Java, had probably deteriorated since 1950 (p. 151), but little else by way of direct evidence.

Second, Ingleson shows that, contrary to the views of most Dutch employers, most unions and union federations were primarily industrial organizations, not political ones. True, SOBSI and many individual unions were linked to the PKI, and others to other parties including PNI, PSI, and Masyumi. But industrial concerns were informed by political considerations; they were not subservient to them. Workers and their representatives exercised independent agency. Ironically, though, this agency was itself disturbing to many members of the Indonesian political, business, and military elites who were suspicious of mass activism, outside their control.

Parallels might be drawn with other fields where organizations competing for popular support were party affiliated. The women's organization Gerwani, for instance, and the cultural association Lekra, both PKI linked, were subject to the same questioning and suspicions: were these primarily women's or cultural groups, or simply extensions of the PKI?

Third, Ingleson shows the ambivalence of government support for union activities. Government agencies charged with helping resolve industrial disputes, especially the Labour Office and the P4P, played important roles in consolidating workers' gains and changing the industrial landscape. But the influence of these agencies was not entirely benign: they also enabled governments to limit or moderate the impact of union demands on the economy.

However, perhaps the most important contribution Ingleson makes is in illuminating a period of modern Indonesian history often overlooked, a period remembered—when it is remembered at all—more for its failures than for its achievements. This book overturns this myth; it should spark renewed interest in other aspects of this period's history.

Overall, this book is an excellent study of its subject. It deserves a wide readership amongst those with an interest in the Indonesian trade union movement, the evolution of Indonesian politics, and Indonesia's modern history. But it should also appeal to those with broader interests in under-

standing the challenges faced by unions, workers, and governments in newly independent nations in promoting the interests of workers, ensuring that they enjoy the full benefits of hard-won independence, while also maintaining a functioning economy and polity.

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Indes néerlandaises et culture chinoise, deux traductions malaises du Roman des Trois Royaumes (1910–1913)

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Song Ge's *Indes néerlandaises et culture chinoise, deux traductions malaises du Roman des Trois Royaumes (1910–1913)* is a detailed study of the translations of *Sam Kok* (*Sanguo Yanyi* [Romance of the three kingdoms]) by Lie In Eng (c. 1890–1941, b. Padang) and Tjie Tjin Koeij (1890–?, b. Sukabumi) into Chinese Malay during the colonial era of the Netherlands East Indies. Both translators published their works in Batavia in 1910–13, when the Chinese Peranakan in the Netherlands East Indies were rethinking their cultural and political identity. In her study, Song Ge connects classical Chinese literature and culture with the rising modern world of translators and readers in the Netherlands East Indies (p. 13). She extends her analysis with a multidisciplinary approach using literature, philology, history, and sociology to give a comprehensive context to the translated work.

Song Ge has divided her book into three parts. In the first part (three chapters), she provides the basic literary and historical background for studying the two translations of *Sanguo Yanyi*. In Chapter 1 she traces the translation of Chinese works in the Netherlands East Indies before 1910 with a list of 31 translators and their works (pp. 31–34). In the next chapter the author details the origin of *Sanguo Yanyi* and its evolution. Chapter 3 deals with earlier adaptations of the work into Malay and other local languages. This chapter also contains a brief profile of the two translators (pp. 58–68).

Since the role of translators is central to works such as this, Lie In Eng and Tjie Tjin Koeij deserve greater attention; unfortunately, we have little knowledge of their lives.¹⁾ Both translators are remarkable since they started work on *Sam Kok* while in their twenties. Their education—Lie In Eng's in a Chinese school and Tjie Tjin Koeij's with a private tutor—allowed them to gain

1) In 1976, Tjie Tjin Koeij worked as a guardian of a Chinese temple in Surabaya (Salmon 1981, 351).