

Decolonization and urban labour history in Indonesia, 1930-1965

Research >
Indonesia

Conventional historiography is often regarded as the history of political elites and of large events; Indonesian historiography's dominant narrative features accounts of nationalist fervour and anti-colonialist struggle. This narrative, however, hides contradictions and overlooks different forms of compliance and accommodation to colonial rule, while local responses to decolonisation varied - as is evident in the history of urban labour, 1930-1965.

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The early 1940s to the early 1960s was a period of political unrest, and protests by urban workers were commonplace. Focusing on urban labour in Indonesian cities on Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi reveals how national-level politics was reformulated at the local level, and how government policies to control or deploy labour were related to debates on the creation and maintenance of a social and moral order.

Two factors in particular resulted in differing local urban experiences: their geographical location and the occupational sectors of the labouring groups. Urban areas with regular labour shortages and limited inter-regional transport networks unquestionably differed from areas with a labour surplus, close to ports and closely connected to their hinterlands. Whether there were local rebellions in an area, such as the DI/TII, *Permesta*, or whether an area was part of the Dutch-created East Indonesia Republic in the 1950s, shaped not only local political dynamics, but also political orientations towards the Indonesian nation-state.

Policy makers, whether colonial or national, treated economic sectors differently. Workers in the harbours and railways, for instance, had greater strategic significance than textile and cigarette workers. Access to social networks, and possibilities for supplementary sources of income, provided workers and labouring communities with different social and economic means of survival and struggle.

Historical accounts have often portrayed Japanese rule in Indonesia as more repressive than that of the Dutch.



Makassar Harbour: transporting rattan to Europe, c.1925

Despite this generalized narrative, collective responses and individual experiences varied. In Jakarta, Semarang, Majalaya and Surabaya, Japanese rule was mainly associated with the *romusha* (forced labour) and with economic decline to below-subsistence levels. Dockworkers in Semarang, however, felt they were more privileged than their fellow villagers. They were given clothing (albeit from gunny sacks), and food three times a day. In Balikpapan, the Japanese Army, wanting to retain oil supplies, moved the local labouring population to safer areas away from the oil refineries during Allied bombing sorties. Indicatively, local groups provided contributions to the Japanese army so they could buy fighter planes.

Revolution and nasionalisasi

Unions were politically active in the new Republic. In Tanjung Priok, hundreds of workers were involved in placing stickers with slogans of '*Milik RI*' (RI property) on equipment owned by Dutch companies. Unions also actively participated in dismantling Japanese military installations in Tanjung Priok and Semarang, and helped to take over institutions and companies which the

Japanese had created during their occupation.

However, the revolution occurred simultaneously with the re-establishment of state control by the national government. In the late 1950s, with the nationalization of foreign enterprises, the army swiftly took control of different economic sectors. Workers made redundant as a result of the departure of foreign management were referred to the new collective bargaining procedures established by the Indonesian government during nationalization. When strikes protesting against these procedures occurred, the union leaders in Tanjung Priok harbour were arrested by the local military. The mayor of Semarang placed restrictions on the Dockworkers Union, which had staged a number of strikes in 1948. In Balikpapan tensions among the unions reflected tensions between the Islamic, Nationalist and Communist political parties.

Also in Balikpapan, attacks against the Dutch expatriate community drove Shell to send Dutch personnel and their families back to the Netherlands. They were replaced by British, Americans, French and Italians; the main language used by

expatriates shifted from Dutch to English.

Nationalist rhetoric also became the rhetoric of the trade unions. Graffiti on walls, cars and Shell oil tanks included slogans such as 'the British are bandits', and 'Tengku Abdul Rahman is a puppet of the Imperialists'. As in other areas, the nationalization of foreign companies in Balikpapan was backed by the military; unlike the other areas, however, the military was not prepared to clamp down on workers' political activism since the head of the military command was also head of the workers' National Front.

'History from below' versus 'history from above'

The focus on workers' politics and their place in local histories leads us to ask how we should approach the question of a 'history from below'. Without an

understanding of 'history from above', one cannot have a sense of what influences local responses. At the same time, a history from below is beset with a number of problems. Reports of local uprisings are usually conducted by government officials and thus subject to bias. We have to critically examine colonial and post-colonial regimes' attitudes to local populations.

We also need to look more critically at how different political figures claim to represent 'the masses'. Government officials have tended to look more at political organizations and labour unions than the lives of 'ordinary people' at the margins of these organizations. Organized workers have been considered to be more threatening, particularly within the decolonization process. Because of the imbalance in the nature of written sources, researchers have paid more attention to labour unions than unorganized workers. We need to look for alternative sources to study local histories. Moving away from organized labour to look at those who work in fragmented settings is still not an easy task; researchers need to address these issues sensitively and critically. <

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