Decolonization and urban labour history in Indonesia, 1930-1965

Conventional historiography is often regarded as the history of political elites and of large events; Indonesian historiography’s dominant narrative features accounts of national 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.

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/TNI, Permenta, 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 railroads, 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. Despite this generalized narrative, collective responses and individual experiences varied. In Jakarta, Semarang, Majayala and Surabaya, Japanese rule was mainly associated with the rombuhka (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 participated in dismantling Japanese military installations in Tanjung Priok and Semarang, and helped to take over major companies. Revolutions local responses. At the same time, one cannot have a sense of what influenced 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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