

BOOK REVIEW

John Ingleson. *Workers and Democracy: The Indonesian Labour Movement, 1949–1957*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

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Since the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, scholarly interest in the studies of political history in the 1950s and 1960s has continued to increase. The era was characterised by intense ideological competition between the nationalists and communists on one end of the spectrum and the Islamists and military influence on the other end. These competitions encircled the unstable political dynamics of Indonesia during the period of the parliamentary liberal democracy after full sovereignty was gained in 1949. Although the political situation of that time has been well recorded in seminal works such as George McTurnan Kahin's *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (1952) and Herbert Feith's *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (1962), a major gap remains due to the actions of the New Order regime (1966–1998) in creating a grand narrative of the past as the basis of its anti-communist ideology. The goal of this grand narrative was to forbid, ban, and censor everything related to communism in Indonesia. This creation was an attempt to clean up traces of history and collective memory by rewriting postcolonial history and controlling its teaching in schools. Views other than this official narrative were silenced; the official narrative was not to be debated, doubted, or interpreted. The genocide against the communists between the years of 1965–1969 created a long-lasting fear and trauma that worked effectively in maintaining and preserving the New Order regime. At the same time, the New Order glorified the military's role in saving the country from the communist threat. In this narrative, the New Order brought stability, development, and prosperity, in contrast to the Old Order which was in chaos and under the influence of communism.

This situation contributed to the shortfall in the study of political history that contested the main narrative of the New Order. The 1950s were a period

when Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI; Indonesian Communist Party) became one of the fastest-growing political parties. About a decade later, it was the third-largest communist party in the world after China and the Soviet Union. It became more influential by playing a role in Sukarno's government. Hence, the New Order had to control the historical narrative of this era for the sake of its anti-communist ideology. Ruth McVey (1994) describes the 1950s as a lost decade. Daniel S. Lev (2005) contends that the history of Indonesia at that time was lost, badly distorted, misremembered, or surrounded by a mythology that renders it inaccessible to those most committed to change. The two scholars' views have been quoted in the Introduction chapter of the book, *Workers and Democracy: The Indonesian Labour Movement, 1949–1957*, written by the prolific historian John Ingleson, and the subject of the review here. The introductory chapter is titled *Lost Year, Forgotten History*, with an averment that the story of workers' activism and labour unions is an important part of Indonesia's forgotten history. This claim is not exaggerated because the most prominent and influential labour union at that time was Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia (SOBSI; All Indonesia Central Workers Organization), which was affiliated with PKI. As stated by the author, the historians of the Indonesian labour movement have been confronted by the absence of union archives not just from the last decades of colonial rule, but also from the first two decades after gaining independence. Union archives were seized in police and military raids in the 1950s and 1960s, and destroyed after the traumatic events of 1965, or simply perceived as lost. This loss has since become a challenge for historians who rely on archives as the primary source of their research. As a historian who has written extensively about the colonial and postcolonial history of Indonesia, Ingleson has made another valuable contribution by presenting primary data from resources in multiple languages such as Indonesian, English, and Dutch. All of the documents and archives are derived from libraries and research institutions in Indonesia, the Netherlands, Australia, the U.K. and the U.S. This book serves as Ingleson's latest work under the theme of the politics of labour unions in Indonesia, which complements his previous works, namely *In Search of Justice: Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908–1926* (1986) and *Workers, Unions, and Politics: Indonesia in the 1920s and 1930s* (2014). Ingleson has also published dozens of journal articles and book chapters under the same theme.

The book under review here, *Workers and Democracy*, studies the workers' activism and labour unions over the period of eight years, that is, between the recognition of Indonesian sovereignty by the Netherlands at the end of December 1949, and the period of nationalisation of Dutch assets

in December 1957. It focuses on the agency of workers and its structures, strategies, and industrial campaigns of unions in the context of ideological conflict, competing labour union federations, the opposition of employers to collective action, and the state's efforts to manage industrial conflict. While most unions were created by, or closely aligned to, political parties and many union leaders were deeply involved in the highly contested politics of the 1950s, the politics of unions is only part of their history.

This book is organised into two parts and consists of eight chapters, excluding the Introduction and Conclusion. The first four chapters mainly discuss the Indonesian context in the 1950s, the relationship of the labour union federation with political parties, the analysis of labour activism, and also the government's policy for labourers. The second part of the book consists of four case studies of worker activism and labour unions in different sectors of the economy. In the introductory chapter, the author provides an overview of the historical studies in the 1950s, which focuses on Jakarta politics, the collapse of parliamentary democracy, the growth of the Communist Party, and the increased hostility of the army towards the party and mass organisations linked to it. The fall of the Suharto regime and restoration of democracy in 1998, as well as the improved access to archives and library resources, has enabled the history of the postcolonial labour movement to be revisited. Several published studies on workers and unions during the Old Order, including essays by young Indonesian scholars, have begun challenging the New Order narrative.

The first part of this book begins with a chapter that discusses the political, economic, and social context of Indonesia in the 1950s, the structure of work, and the mentality of foreign managers that influenced their attitudes towards Indonesian workers. Soon after Indonesia gained its full sovereignty as an independent country in 1949, the government faced many challenges from the separatist movements. As the safety and security of the nation were affected by these challenges, the government of Republik Indonesia Serikat (RIS; Republic of United States of Indonesia) had to declare martial law to combat the separatist Darul Islam Movement in West Java. Martial law remained in place until the dissolution of RIS and the inauguration of a unitary state in August 1950. The "Indonesian State is a Unitary State in the form of a Republic" [Article 1 act (1) of the 1945 Constitution]. The formation of the unitary republic of Indonesia was based on the secular state and parliamentary democracy. However, these changes did not solve issues arising from political instability since six cabinet changes occurred in the seven-year period. The implementation of nationalist economic policies in the mid-

1950s did not prevent foreign companies from operating and gaining profit in Indonesia. The author argues that the recognition of Indonesian sovereignty by the Netherlands did little to change the attitude of Dutch managers towards Indonesian workers. Foreign companies had yet to learn that Indonesia was no longer a colony. The continuation of the colonial mentality among European managers reflected a lack of understanding of workers' lives, and racial discrimination was still maintained in a free Indonesia. Despite the 1984 labour laws being a significant advance for workers' rights, their enforcement was an ongoing source of conflict between unions and employers. The author carefully narrated the impact of this situation on workers' conditions as well as gave a detailed discussion of the wage structure of Indonesian workers and the gender division of labour in the private and public sectors.

Chapter 2 introduces the labour federations linked to the four major political parties and the failure of anti-communist federations to challenge the dominance of SOBSI, which was affiliated with PKI. This failure led to bureaucratic and military elites becoming less sympathetic towards organised labour. This chapter starts with some background on the labour movement after gaining independence in 1949. The background of SOBSI as the largest and most influential labour organisation is one of the key discussions here. The growth of SOBSI was astonishing, especially in terms of its membership, leadership, influence, and international networking. SOBSI was in competition with Serikat Buruh Islam Indonesia (SBII; the Union of Indonesian Muslim Workers) and Serikat Buruh Muslim Indonesia (SARBUMUSI; Indonesia Muslim Workers Union). These two organisations were associated with the Masyumi and the Nahdatul Ulama respectively, both of which were the most prominent Islamic political parties. Two other labour organisations trying to compete with SOBSI's influence were Kongres Buruh Seluruh Indonesia (KBSI; All Indonesia Workers Congress), which was affiliated with the Partai Sosialis Indonesia (PSI; Indonesian Socialist Party), and Konsentrasi Buruh Kerakyatan Indonesia (KBKI; Indonesian Democratic Labour Concentration), which was affiliated with Partai Nasionalis Indonesia (PNI; Indonesian Nationalist Party). After meticulously explaining the dynamics of these organisations, the author concludes that the ideological competition amongst these organisations made it difficult to establish a federation that could represent all the interests of the workers.

Chapter 3 focuses on a detailed analysis of worker activism in 1950, the first year after the Netherlands recognised Indonesia's sovereignty. Workers took advantage of their freedom to challenge colonial methods of labour control and colonial-era wages and conditions. The reluctance of

foreign companies to engage with the unions resulted in continuous strikes throughout the year in several cities. There are no reliable statistics on the number of labour disputes in the first half of the 1950s, yet newspaper reports show hundreds of cases, most of which began with spontaneous actions by workers. The author discusses important events that took place in Belawan, Palembang, Medan, Jakarta, and Surabaya. The series of strikes and labour unrest led to the increased intervention of regional military commanders in industrial disputes. This situation convinced the Indonesian government to create a formal mechanism to mediate and resolve industrial disputes.

Chapter 4 discusses the labour policies of the government and the structure of the dispute resolution system and its evolution into an effective instrument that supported union efforts to reform many of the worst aspects of colonial-era methods of labour management. The initial action taken by the government was to establish Panitia Penyelesaian Pertikaian Perburuhan Pusat (P4P; Central Committee for the Settlement of Labour Dispute), chaired by the Ministry of Labour. The major flaw in the new industrial relations system was that P4P was not an independent body, and employers and unions exploited this flaw. With the increasing number of industrial disputes, P4P became overloaded. The police, local authorities, and public prosecutors were encouraged to take a stricter stance against workers and unions. This resulted in the increased surveillance of unions, rallies, and demonstrations, more military intervention in industrial disputes, and even a considerable increase in the number of union activists arrested and prosecuted.

The second part of this book, which covers Chapters 5–8, contains case studies about labour and union activism in four different sectors. Chapter 5 focuses on unions in the public sector, particularly those representing casual and day-wage labourers employed by government departments and agencies. These labourers had no access to the dispute resolution system, lacked the economic leverage of private sector unions, and were forced to rely more on political than industrial leverage to improve workers' wages and conditions. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the unions in the plantation and shipping industries, respectively. Both sectors were dominated by foreign-owned companies that had long been targeted for the nationalist and labour movements due to the exploitation of Indonesian workers for huge profits. Companies in both sectors were resistant to changing the colonial ways of managing Indonesian labour or increasing the low wages. Their labour management policies and reluctance to engage with the unions were the major causes of continuous industrial conflict. Chapter 8 focuses on unions in the industrial and transport sectors, especially in the oil, textile, and urban transport sectors. As with

the other sectors, SOBSI unions also dominated the oil industry, gas, and electricity companies. John Ingleson also highlights challenges confronting unions in sectors of the economy with very different ownership patterns.

As a form of historical study, this book offers rich empirical data derived from official documents, archives, and trade union newspapers—thanks also to the step taken by the Indonesian National Archives to enable access to the archives of PKI and SOBSI. Although these rich data have become one of the key strengths of this book, they also present a weakness. Based on the footnote references, it seems that the author has relied too much on the archives and official documents and does not sufficiently refer to previous studies on the labour movement or political situation. In the introductory chapter, the author states that several studies have been published on labour movements and trade unions in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s. However, these studies are only mentioned in footnotes and not discussed as part of the literature review. The main title of this book, *Workers and Democracy*, should also be theoretically discussed, especially the term “democracy”, which is subject to multiple interpretations. Moreover, the author does not question the status of democracy or how it was implemented in Indonesia. In fact, the word “democracy” is not found in the index of this book. Nevertheless, these shortcomings do not diminish the value and contributions of this book, which are very important to the understanding of the politics of labour and labour unions at a very unique time in Indonesian history.

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