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THE POLITICAL CHARACTER OF THE  
INDONESIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

ISKANDAR TEDJASUKMANA



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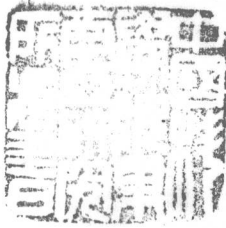
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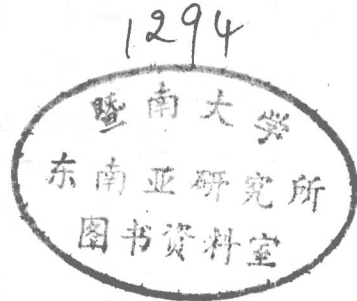
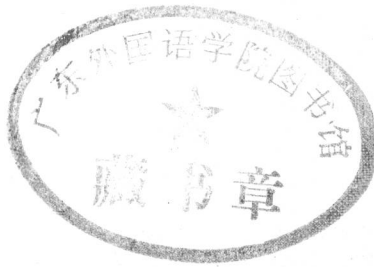


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## PREFACE

In few Asian countries is organized labor so important an economic and political factor as in contemporary Indonesia, and in few countries of the world has it been so politicized. Yet, thus far very little serious research and writing has been concerned with the Indonesian trade unions. Consequently the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project is pleased to publish this pioneering study by Iskandar Tedjasukmana. It would be difficult to find anyone better qualified to undertake it, for he served as Minister of Labor in three different Indonesian cabinets: the Sukiman Cabinet (April 27, 1951 - April 2, 1952); the Wilopo Cabinet (April 3, 1952 - July 31, 1953); and the Burhanudin Harahap Cabinet (August 12, 1955 - March 27, 1956). In addition, he was from 1951 to 1956 Chairman of the Political Bureau of the Labor Party. From 1946 to 1956, except while Cabinet Minister, he was a member of the Indonesian Parliament, serving from March, 1947, to August, 1949, as Vice-Chairman of its Working Committee.

Currently, Mr. Tedjasukmana is enrolled as a candidate for the PhD. degree in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

Ithaca, New York  
October 31, 1958

George McT. Kahin  
Director



## INTRODUCTION

### The Problem and Its Significance

In Indonesia, the trade union movement has always been subject to ideological influences, especially communist and socialist influences. At the same time, nationalism and the Indonesian national revolution have aroused the imagination of all trade unionists.

The result is that unionism of a non-political nature is unknown to the Indonesian workers. The administration of the unions is not always businesslike and is often determined or affected by the circumstance that the unions are a sort of political association and fighting organization, although they are also very busy in presenting economic demands to the employers, in conducting collective bargaining negotiations, and in handling labor disputes. However, in their approach to labor-management relations and to the handling of labor disputes, many union leaders are often inspired and guided by political sentiments, rather than by cool economic calculations. The means employed and the phrases used during labor disputes remind us more of a political arena than of a business conference room.

Many unions are frequently engaged in pure political activities and cherish political aims. Their primary basic underlying concern also centers in the field of political economy. The economic reconstruction of the country along socialist lines is a constant subject for study, discussion and agitation among the trade unionists.

In the months following the Proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia on August 17, 1945, it was the workers who seized Government offices, establishments, factories, plantation estates, and commercial houses from the Japanese military managements. And, in December 1957, it was the workers again, led by trade unions, who seized Dutch enterprises in order to force the Government to assume control over these vital economic objects.

This state of mind among trade unions dates back to the early beginnings of the movement in Indonesia fifty

years ago. It is the result of the circumstance that the birth, development, and experiences of the trade union movement coincided and went hand-in-hand with the vicissitudes of the nationalist political movement for independence. In fact, the Indonesian trade union movement has been always a part, an important one, of the Indonesian nationalist movement at large.

The process of development was as follows:

The first pure Indonesian trade union--a union under the leadership of Indonesians--was organized in 1908, the same year that the first Indonesian political association was founded. (1) Before 1908 there were already organizations of salaried workers, but these were associations of Dutchmen employed in Indonesia, or of Dutchmen and Indonesians, but with only Dutchmen as leaders.

During the whole period of the nationalist struggle against the Dutch colonial regime, up to 1942, the trade union movement was continuously in close contact with the political movement. Many trade unionists were members of political parties, and many functionaries of political parties held positions in trade unions.

During the Japanese occupation the trade unions were suppressed. But many union leaders joined the underground movement together with political elements of communist, socialist, and nationalist convictions.

Immediately after the Proclamation of Independence, the trade unions resumed their activities, most of them with new names, new structure, and new programs, while at the same time, entirely new unions were formed.

When, soon after the establishment of the Republic, the Dutch came back to Indonesia under the protection of the Allied Forces, the workers, inspired by union leaders, fought the Dutch colonial troops, side by side with the regular Republican army and several other private military organizations. (2)

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(1) The Budi Utomo (Noble Endeavor), founded in 1908, was a nationalist association which later on became an official political party.

(2) Units of especially trained workers were also charged with the carrying out of the so-called earth-scored policy, namely the demolition or destruction of buildings, factories, bridges, and other establishments.

The hostilities with the Dutch ended--at least officially--at the end of 1949. On December 27, 1949, the Kingdom of the Netherlands conferred its recognition upon the Indonesian Republic, the then Republic of the United States of Indonesia.

The trade unions now faced a new situation and new problems. First of all they insisted that they had to share responsibility for the future of the Republic. Since they had had an active part in the early struggle for independence and in the defense of the Republic, the unions were of the opinion that they were also responsible for the future course of events in the Republic and for the realization of the goals and ideals attached to Independence.

The purpose of this study is to trace and identify the ideological influences which have made fighting organizations of the Indonesian trade unions which pursue long-range political aims in addition to immediate economic gains. Special attention will be paid to Marxist and Leninist influences. To identify them, we have to refer to the indoctrination of the trade unions in the mother-country of communism--the Soviet Union. The reference to the Chinese communist trade union movement will show the importance of the communist victory in mainland China for other Asian countries, including Indonesia.

In order to deepen our understanding of the Indonesian trade union movement, it is necessary to comprehend its political character, as manifested by the relationship of the trade unions to political parties and their propensity for political action. This understanding is required to explain the attitudes of Indonesian organized labor today. An understanding of the attitudes of the trade union movement will serve to unravel the confusing complexity of current labor relations in the country, and to explain the labor policy of the Indonesian Government.

The unravelling of this complexity serves not only understanding but is also the first step:

- a. in paving the way for a more sound development of the Indonesian trade union movement and for the preservation of democracy in the movement and in the community at large;
- b. towards the improvement of labor-management relationships and the lessening of industrial strife;

- c. in simplifying the groupings in the trade union movement; in restoring and adapting the labor movement's connections with political parties to more logical and sound proportions; and, by so doing, easing partisan rivalry among the various political factions which divide the country, and thus helping to promote national unity, harmony and stability;
- d. towards the abolition of paternalism and the institution of a more liberal labor policy based on voluntarism.



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## CHAPTER I

### SHORT HISTORY

#### OF THE INDONESIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

The history of the Indonesian trade union movement can be divided into two main periods, namely the period during the Dutch Colonial Regime, and the period after the Proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia, on August 17, 1945. The three and one-half years of Japanese military occupation, from February, 1942, to August, 1945, can be reckoned to the Colonial Period.

Dating only from 1905, the Indonesian trade union movement can be considered as very young. Yet, it is older than its counterparts in the other Southeast Asian countries. (1) In the Colonial Period, if one takes into account the magnitude of the population and the number of the gainfully employed persons, the movement was rather small. As a matter of fact, the pre-Independence trade union movement was on the whole not very strong. But, making its appearance as it did in that calm period of a colonial environment and under a complacent but rigid rule, and then soon becoming involved in a series of spectacular experiences, the young movement caused quite a sensation.

(1) a. "Malaya's first trade union movement appeared at the end of World War II ...." J. Norman Parmer, Trade Unions in Malaya, p. 142.

b. "Shortly after these disturbances (after 1932), the Government permitted the organization of the first labor union." International Cooperation Administration, Summary of the Labor Situation in Thailand, p. 5.

c. "It was not until 1938, when the Thakin Party began to organize labor as a part of its anti-British campaign, ...." International Cooperation Administration, Summary of the Labor Situation in Burma, p. 10.

d. "Organizations of Vietnamese workers have existed since 1930 ...." International Cooperation Administration, Summary of the Labor Situation in the Republic of Vietnam, p. 6.

## The Colonial Period (2)

This space of time, running from 1905 to February, 1942, and followed by three and one-half years of the Japanese interregnum, can be sub-divided into three shorter periods; namely: the time from 1905 to 1926-1927, then from 1927 to 1942, and finally, the Japanese period.

### The Period from 1905 to 1926-1927

This was the period of early organization, characterized by circumspection, some hesitation and sedateness. However, after a few years, the new-born movement became conscious of its strength and capabilities; its cautiousness and sedateness made way for recklessness and radicalism. The change was mainly the result of socialist and communist propaganda; but it was also generated by the rigid attitude on the one hand of the Dutch employers who ran the whole economy of the country, and on the other hand, of the Colonial Government which was not prepared to deal with such a movement.

Although wage labor was introduced in Indonesia as early as 1870, (3) it was only in the beginning of the twen-

(2) For this part of the history of the Indonesian trade union movement the author has made use of the information given in the following works:

1. J.Th. Petrus Blumberger, De Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indië, 1931, pp. 129-150 and pp. 360-374.
2. J.M. Pluvier, Overzicht van de Ontwikkeling der Nationalistische Beweging in Indonesië in de Jaren 1930 tot 1942, 1953, pp. 155-161.
3. A.K. Pringgodigdo, Sedjarah Pergerakan Rakjat Indonesia, 1950, pp. 27-29, 98-106 and 172-183.
4. D.N. Aidit, Sedjarah Gerakan Buruh Indonesia, 1952, pp. 36-64.
5. The articles by Chronos in Tindjauan Masalah Perburuhan of July 1948, No. 4, pp. 56-60; and by Sandra in the issues of July 1954, pp. 7-13, and of August 1954, pp. 3-10.
6. The preambles of the constitutions of the SOBSI, SARBUPRI, SBG, PERBUM, SBPP and SBKA.

(3) Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the exploitation of the natural resources of Indonesia was the monopoly of the Dutch Government. According to the so-called "Cultuurstelsel" (Cultivation System), the In-



tieth century that the Indonesian laborers arrived at the position where they were able to give birth to an organized movement, aimed at the advancement of their living standards, and, in general, at the emancipation of the Indonesian working class at large.

This was apparently due to the widespread illiteracy and low level of education among the workers, the scarcity of craftsmen and other skilled workers, and the lack of potential trade union leaders. But, the late arrival of the movement was certainly also caused by the hostile attitude of the then prevailing colonial policy towards all kinds of concerted activities which might be initiated by the native population. As a matter of fact, it was only in the beginning of the present century that the law which put a ban on freedom of association and assembly was repealed. (4)

Indonesian population was forced to cultivate coffee, tea, tobacco and other crops on their lands or on other lands designated by the Government, and then to surrender the entire harvest to the Government. In the second half of the century, due to unsatisfactory results in the production, to mounting criticism against the system, and to pressure from the business world in Holland, the Dutch Government went over to the gradual abolition of the Cultuurstelsel. In 1870, the so-called Agrarian Law was passed, followed by other laws which opened the doors of the Netherlands Indies for foreign private investors. The era of the "open door policy" began, and Dutch, British, Belgian, American and other foreign private capital poured into the country. "After the whole area ... was opened to Western capital in 1870, ... the number of Western enterprises increased by leaps and bounds ...." (A.D.A. de Kat Angelino, Colonial Policy, Vol. II, p. 498). Plantations, sugar estates, sugar mills, petroleum refineries, mines, factories, railroads, etc., started to operate, employing hundreds of thousands of native laborers. Thus, for the first time, a large number of Indonesians was withdrawn from village life to become acquainted with the benefits and hardships of a new experience as wage earners, and "the labour question acquired urgency" (De Kat Angelino, Ibid.).

- (4) Article 111 of the Regeeringsreglement (Law on the Regulation of the Government of the Netherlands Indies) of 1854 prohibited associations and meetings of a political character and those which were considered as dangerous for the public order. In 1915 the provision was made less rigid, but it was as late as 1919 that the law granted

The first organization of salaried workers known in Indonesia was formed in 1894 by Dutch teachers of primary and secondary schools. This association of teachers--the Dutch name was Nederlandsch-Indisch Onderwijzers Genootschap, abbreviated as NIOG--maintained its exclusive Dutch character, and as such, has never played an important role in the workers' movement in Indonesia. With the removal of Dutch teachers from public schools after the establishment of the Republic, the NIOG became a small union of teachers in a number of Dutch private schools. It still exists now. In 1956 it was registered at the Ministry of Labor as having six branches and a total membership of 320 individuals. (5)

In 1905, employees of the State Railways founded the SS Bond, which meant: Union of State Railway Personnel. (6) The union counted both Dutch and Indonesian employees among its members, but the leaders were all Dutchmen. The union was strong and well organized; it had a rather conservative outlook, although now and then it ran into trouble with the even more conservative management of the State Railways. (7) The SS Bond never developed into a militant workers' organization, and ended its unsensational career in 1912, unable to maintain the competition with another newer union of railway workers.

The situation was that many railway employees looked with indifference or even resentment upon the SS Bond, because of its confinement to the State Railways and the fact that most of the members consisted of higher personnel and the leadership was entirely Dutch. In 1908, representatives of workers employed both in the State Railways and in the various privately owned railroad and tram companies, assembled in Semarang (Central Java) and proclaimed the

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freedom to Indonesian inhabitants to establish associations without requiring a special permission in advance. Vide Indische Staatsregeling (Regulation of the Government of the Netherlands Indies) Article 165 juncto Staatsblad (Statutes Book) 1919 No. 27.

- (5) Djawatan Hubungan Perburuhan, Kementerian Perburuhan, Serikat Buruh Jaŋg Terdaftar, p. 67.
- (6) SS was the abbreviation of Staatsspoorwegen (State Railways).
- (7) The original excellent relations between the SS Bond and the management of the State Railways changed after 1908. In 1909 the management severed all relations with the union.

birth of a new union, the Vereeniging van Spoor-en Tramweg Personeel in Nederlandsch-Indië (VSTP). The new union was built on a broader basis; not only because it comprised both State-owned and privately operated railways, but also because it was determined to organize all railroad workers without distinction of race, type of work, position in the State service or in the companies. Apparently, it was the intention of the designers of the organization to put the emphasis and the centre of strength more on the "operative", manual and technical workers rather than on the "non-ops", white collars and higher employees. Thus, the way was paved for a militant mass organization.

The VSTP became a militant and aggressive union, indeed; especially after 1913, when socialists got the upper hand in the leadership. The militant character of the Union did not appear from its Statutes (Constitution). This Constitution, (8) consisting of only seven articles, stated in Article 2 the purpose of the VSTP as: the promotion of the material and spiritual interests of its members. Nothing appeared in this Constitution about principles, about political aspirations and that sort of thing, matters so characteristic of present-day Indonesian unions. But, of course, it was not possible for the founders of the VSTP to draft a "political" or socialistic constitution, because the statutes had to be presented to the Governor-General for approval. (9) Even these "innocent" Statutes of the VSTP had first to be studied thoroughly by the appropriate authorities before approval could be granted by the Governor-General.

At the time of its formation, the President and the Secretary of the VSTP were two Dutch socialists, namely

(8) The Statutes of the VSTP appeared in the Javasche Courant (Official Gazette of the Government of the Netherlands Indies) of February 19, 1909, No. 14.

(9) Although it was not strictly required by law, at that time newly established associations usually applied for approval by the Governor-General. The effect of such approval was that the association acquired the status of a legal person with the advantages attached to that position. The disadvantage was that the statutes of the association, before being approved, became subject to the scrutiny of the suspicious colonial civil servants. This approval by the Governor-General for the purpose of the mentioned legal effect had nothing to do with the "permission" required for the establishment of associations (see pages 3-4, footnote 4).

C.J. Hulshoff and H.W. Dekker, (10) while some other positions in the executive committee were held by Indonesians. After 1913, left-wing socialists (communists) dominated the leadership of the Union. The Dutch communist Sneevliet (11) became President of the VSTP with Semaun, a young Indonesian revolutionary, as his disciple and right-hand man. (12) Later on, Semaun became President and Sneevliet Secretary of the Union.

Thus, the VSTP, founded on November 14, 1908, was the first trade union with Indonesians in the leadership and with Indonesian workers as the overwhelming majority of the membership.

Indonesian employees of other Government services and of Government-owned enterprises soon followed the example of the railroad workers in seeking improvement of their working conditions through unity and organization.

(10) These two names appeared in the mentioned Javasche Courant of February 19, 1909, No. 14 (p. 5, footnote 8).

(11) H.J.F.M. Sneevliet came to Java in 1913 as the secretary of an association of merchants in Semarang. Prior to his immigration to Indonesia he was a leader of the Revolutionary Socialist Party in Holland and later of the Dutch Social-Democratic Party (SDAP). After his expulsion from Indonesia in December 1918, Sneevliet went to Russia and China where he was engaged in several revolutionary activities under a pseudonym. Later he went back to Holland, became active in the Dutch Communist Party and represented this Party in Parliament. He was also chairman of the (Dutch) National Labor Secretariat. Because of his leftist deviations the Dutch Communist Party later severed connections with Sneevliet. When the Nazis invaded the Low Countries in 1940, Sneevliet was soon arrested and executed by the Germans. Sneevliet's name will be forever connected with Indonesian history as the man who introduced revolutionary socialism and communism, as the man who "started to bring socialist consciousness to Indonesian leaders" (D.N. Aidit, Sedjarah Gerakan Buruh Indonesia, p. 38). Mr. Aidit is the present Secretary-General of the Indonesian Communist Party. More information about Sneevliet can be found in D.M.G. Koch, Verantwoording (an auto-biography), pp. 76, 87, 89-90.

(12) Semaun became later Indonesia's Number One Communist.



On November 1, 1910, employees of the Customs Service announced the foundation of the Bond van Ambtenaren bij de In- en Uitvoerrechten en Accijnzen in Nederlandsch-Indië, also referred to as the Douanebond. In the beginning, the name was Dutch and the President a Dutchman. But later on the Union adopted an Indonesian name, viz. Perhimpunan Bumiputera Pabean. According to its Statutes, (13) the Douanebond had as its objectives: the improvement of the interests of the corps of the Customs Service employees and of the interests of the Service itself; the establishment of a strong bond among the members; the dissemination of knowledge about the Customs among the members.

In 1912, Indonesian teachers of the public schools formed the Perserikatan Guru Hindia Belanda (PGHB), (14) soon followed by the Association of Teachers of the Village Schools, namely the Perhimpunan Guru Bantu or PGB.

In 1915, the Opiumregiebond was formed by the employees of the Opium factory in Djakarta (the then Batavia) and of the opium distribution offices throughout the country. (15)

The well-known Perserikatan Pegawai Pegadaian Bumi-putera (PPPB), namely the Union of Indonesian employees of the pawn shops, was founded in 1916. From the beginning, this union was entirely in Indonesian hands. The President was the militant R. Sosrokardono. (16)

Also in 1916 was founded the Vereeniging Inlandsch Personeel Burgerlijke Openbare Werken (VIP-BOW), the Association of Indonesian Employees of the Civil Public Works. (17)

(13) Statutes published in the Javasche Courant of April 28, 1911, No. 34.

(14) Javasche Courant, December 31, 1912.

(15) Javasche Courant, January 21, 1916. The production and distribution of opium were the business and monopoly of the Colonial Government.

(16) Javasche Courant, November 17, 1916. The pawn shops, a monopoly of the Netherlands Indian Government, were institutions for giving small loans to the population. Pawn shops were found in every city and town throughout the country.

(17) Javasche Courant, February 23, 1917.