

Reconstructing the Historical Tradition Of Twentieth-Century Indonesian Labour

Report >
Southeast Asia

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Indonesia

Apart from bringing Indonesian and non-Indonesian scholars together and stimulating labour research in Indonesia, this conference also sought to inspect Indonesian labour history during different periods of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century. In addition, the conference examined how different interests and political agendas (those of nationalism, liberalization, decentralization, and decolonization) interface with workers' interests, both at national and local levels, and explored the state of theorizing within Indonesian labour studies.

By Ratna Saptari

Opening the workshop, Taufik Abdullah, director of LIPI and one of the leading figures of Indonesian social history, reiterated the need to return to focusing on subordinate groups in the study of Indonesian history. Scholars have much neglected these groups and have left their histories unrecorded, particularly so from the New Order period onwards. Following his appeal, the question was

raised as to how to approach the issue of labour history. As Jan Breman stated, every scholar should raise the questions: "whose history"; "where to find the sources"; "how to look at the evidence"; and "how to write the history". Although these larger questions were not immediately in the forefront of the topics presented by the speakers, they definitely underpinned the questions raised in the discussions. Ample time was devoted to the varied nature, positions, and struggles of different cate-

gories of labour. There was no strict debate on the definition of labour, how labour relations diverged or converged, or how we should link theory and practice. Nevertheless, different labouring groups were identified: workers, coolies, bonded labour, peasantry, government employees, and domestics, working in different sectors: the railway, plantation agriculture, smallholder agriculture, mining, the industry, services, harbours, government, and the private home.

Differing vantage points in studying these labouring groups clearly emerged as well. Some took to, language and rhetoric, to understand how workers are defined, and by whom, the way in which these terms emerge and the multiple meanings that emanate from such definitions. Terms like coolie, bonded labour, *tukang*, *buruh*, and *karyawan*, and the way they were used derived from particular constellations of power. Directly and indirectly, the state was

and is playing a strong role in determining the boundaries for these definitions (Vickers, Breman, and Ford).

Others focused on the dynamics of unions and other workers' organizations, looking at the issues they deal with, the characteristics and ideological inclinations of the leaders, the latter's relationships with the rank-and-file, and the particular historical contexts they operate in (Ingleson, Schwidder, Elliott, Erman, and Saptari). It was argued that compliance, accommodation, and resistance should be seen in the particular context in which such action emerges. In order to gain an understanding of the strategies adopted by organizations, one cannot ignore the various tensions between different ideologies and those between different individuals within the leadership. Escaping present-day studies with foci on language and ideology are the structural (political or economic) underpinnings of labour relations, which may become impediments to workers' organizations (Boomgaard). Quite often, workers could not afford *not* to have work, and were left with little time and energy to be involved in political struggle. Ideological and cognitive schisms between organizers and the worker him or herself were also found to exist and impede workers' organizations. For instance, it was found that in some areas (Medan and Bandung), workers themselves felt alienated from the language that urban intellectuals use in their attempt to mobilize workers. Neither were the organizers themselves free from gender-biases (Anarita and Agustono). By illustrating this situation, one speaker showed how the emergence of non-governmental organizations on the labour scene encouraged political awareness among workers. As organizers often

targeted women workers to join discussion groups, many women became involved. But, as soon as an organization was established the women were often left behind and their issues not taken into account within the general labour demands. These conflicting agendas of workers' organizations were often strengthened or even stimulated by state intervention. Abundantly clear was that the "communist card" was often used to divide unions and organizations (Elliott, Ford, and Saptari). These cases bore witness of a general awareness, although unspoken, that there is no unmediated link between economic circumstances and workers' consciousness and political activism.

The complexity of studying labour becomes much more apparent as we examine the divergent demands of the working population. For peasants, the main question was how to get enough land for subsistence as large corporations and the urban elite attempt to take over land previously used by peasants for their household economies (Noer Fauzi and Dianto). For industrial workers, the demands were for higher wages, more job stability, and the right to organize (Anarita and Elliott). At the moment, unions themselves play a highly ambivalent role, on the one hand domesticating workers' resistance into much more controllable and acceptable terms for the employers; on the other hand acting and being perceived as the only body that can make claims for the improvement of working conditions (Elliott).

Other speakers looked at work relations and the conditions under which the labouring population are controlled and disciplined. Thus in the plantations ethnic, gender, and generation-related hierarchies were manipulated, as

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Editor's note >

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BIORIN: Biotechnological Research Indonesia - the Netherlands

Report >
Southeast Asia

Producing high quality and sufficient quantities of food is one of the challenges faced by both developed and developing countries. To meet this challenge, new varieties of many crops, which can grow with a smaller input of nutrients and pesticides and which are well adapted to local conditions, are needed. New technologies allow fast and targeted breeding and may help develop these new varieties. Obviously implementing the new technologies requires highly educated and specialized personnel.

By Huub Löffler

The BIORIN (Biotechnological Research Indonesia - the Netherlands) programme aims to train six Indonesian specialists in the field of

plant biotechnology by developing new knowledge and sharing present knowledge. BIORIN is co-ordinated by Wageningen-UR in the Netherlands and by the Indonesian Biotechnology Consortium (IBC) in Indonesia.

All projects focus on solving problems involving major Indonesian crops. The largest project concerns rice. In order to allow expansion of rice production to marginal dry land, new varieties are needed that are less sensitive to dehydration stress due to drought or the blast disease (*Pyricularia grisea*). Two strategies are followed: first, genes are identified that confer insensitivity to dehydration. This may lead to genetically modified rice varieties that are better adapted to marginal conditions. Second, molecular markers are identified for genes or gene clusters linked to the desired trait. DNA-fingerprinting of conventionally bred new varieties will reveal the presence or absence of these genes. This allows a fast and easy selection of the desired varieties.

The same principle of rapid selection is used in a second project. Here the need is to develop resistance in the tomato against the devastating *Alternaria*

fungus. However, before any resistance can be identified at a molecular level, good resistance sources must be present. The first challenge in this project is finding such resistance. This is being done both in Indonesia and in the Netherlands by deliberately infecting several tomato varieties and screening their reactions to the fungus.

A third project concerns the cassava, an important crop with sub-optimal starch composition. The starch metabolism is largely known, any many of the genes involved have been identified. Adapting the genes involved in the pathway will change the pathway, resulting in a better starch composition.

Yet another project aims to introduce resistance in cocoa against the pod borer, a significant Indonesian pest. This project takes advantage of the widespread knowledge of the BT-toxin, which is commercially applied in transgenic maize. To be effective in cocoa, the gene must be adapted to the specific cocoa conditions. Furthermore, a protocol is needed for genetically modifying cocoa. The last project focuses on hot pepper. This plant is highly heterozygous, hampering efficient breeding. Homozygous plants are needed,

but it takes many years to produce them. Biotechnology now allows the development of plants from haploid generative cells. This will yield plants with only one set of chromosomes. These plants can be induced to double their chromosome set again, resulting in plants with two sets of identical chromosomes. In this way homozygous plants can be obtained in a relatively short space of time.

Although all projects tackle important problems, the first goal is scientific. The programme was initiated by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and scientific quality is of utmost importance. This will lead not only to the eventual solution of important scientific problems, but also to the development of highly educated Indonesian scientists. In the long term, this may be even more important to Indonesia than the actual outcome of the various projects. <

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KNAW Programme

The "Scientific Programme Netherlands - Indonesia" aims to stimulate the establishment of long-term scientific cooperation between the Netherlands and Indonesia. For the period 2000-2004 the focus of the Programme is on the following themes: "Indonesia in Transition", "Applied Mathematics", "Biotechnology", "Infectious Diseases", "Religious Studies" and "Legal Research Cooperation". Hereunder you will find Huub Löffler's report on the programme "BIORIN: Biotechnological Research in Indonesia". For more information on the Religious Studies project called the "Islam in Indonesia: the Dissemination of Religious Authority in the 20th-Century", partly sponsored by the IIAS please see page 53. <

More info >

For more information on the programme, visit:
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