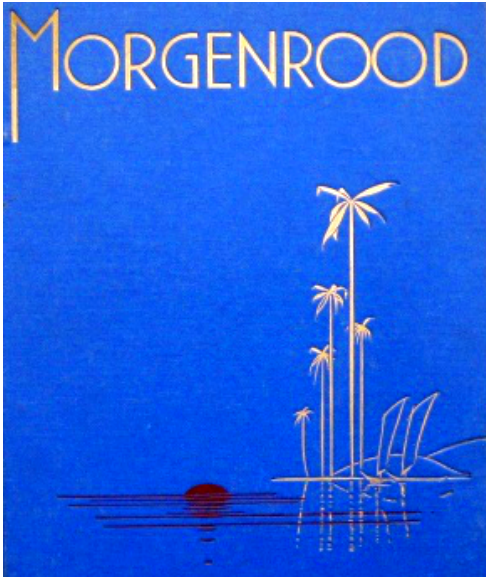


Trade Unionism



The trade-union movement in Indonesia could only develop after the large plantation industry and other western capitalist enterprises had pried at least some of the Indonesian peasants loose from their villages.¹ Therefore trade-unionism did not appear until after 1910. Although the trade-union movement was doomed to remain small in a colonial environment, it played an important role in the radical movement in Indonesia between 1910 and 1930, because union members were among the most militant in Indonesia. Mainly urban, employed either as lower government clerks, as wage earners on sugar and other plantations, or as transportation workers, they came into daily contact with the European entrepreneurs, and learned at first hand what it meant to be under colonial rule. Many of them had some education and several spoke Dutch. The fact that they lived in urban centres facilitated organisation.

The trade-union movement in Indonesia can be divided into three main groups. First those unions whose members came from the civil service, professions, or administrative personnel in the private sector. Second, those unions who found their members among the urban low-status salaried personnel, such as the train and tramway workers. Third, those unions whose members came from the plantations.²

The first trade-union in Indonesia was the *Vereeniging van Spoor-en Tramweg Personeel*, the *V.S.T.P.* (Union of Rail and Tramway Personnel). It was founded in 1908 and was one of the more militant unions.³ The various white collar unions were usually associated politically with the Budi Utomo or the moderate wing of the Sarekat Islam.⁴

The stability of the unions left much to be desired. The white collar unions were the most stable but also the least active. The unions of the urban workers were often unstable. Except for the *V.S.T.P.*, unions were formed for strike purposes only, rather than as permanent labour organisations. Among the plantation workers, union stability was even less. Only the sugar workers' unions, the *Personeel Fabriek Bond*, *P.F.B.* (Union of Factory Workers), organized by the Sarekat Islam leader Soerjopranoto,

¹ R.M.A. Djoyoadhiningrat. "Over de Indonesische Vakbeweging" (The Indonesian Trade-Union Movement). *Indonesia*, December 1938, p. 221. This was a special edition to celebrate the thirty year existence of the *Perhimpunan Indonesia*. Djoyoadhiningrat was correspondent for the *Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen*, *N.V.V.* (Dutch Association of Trade-Unions), which was and still is affiliated with the Dutch Social Democratic Party.

² McVey. *Indonesia*. Everett D. Hawkins. "Labor in Transition" p. 257.

³ *ibid*, p. 257.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 257.

achieved some success and was able to develop rapidly during the so-called *Ethical* period. But this union too lost many members when wages increased and strikes failed.⁵

In general, the 1920's were not very successful for the young trade-unions. The various wage conflicts were too much a *tour de force* rather than well planned labour disputes, and were, on the whole, far beyond the capabilities of the inexperienced union leaders. Members, too often, thought that after receiving their wage increases, the work of the union was over and quit the organisation. Employers, of course, took immediate advantage of such conditions and much of what was gained with difficulty was rapidly undone.⁶ Furthermore, organisation on a wider scale failed. The *Persatuan Perserikatan Kaum Buruh* (Central Labour Federation), which was founded in 1920, and was sponsored by the Sarekat Islam, collapsed in 1922 due to a conflict between the leaders.⁷ A new trade union federation, called the *Persatuan Vakbonden Hindia* (Federation of Indonesian Trade Unions), was formed but it was much smaller than the *P.P.K.B.* and was only able to salvage some 23.000 members of the federation.⁸ The strike of the railroad and tramway workers, which had been called without consultation with the *P.V.H.* failed badly and wrecked the *P.V.H.* A third federation, the *Persatuan Vakbonden Pekawai Negeri*, was only representative of the civil servant unions. It started with some 35.000 associated members, but this dropped during the Depression. The role of the *P.V.P.N.* was extremely limited and it was not very militant.⁹

The reasons for the poor showing of the trade unions were many. Several have already been mentioned such as inexperienced leadership and the lack of consistent support by the workers. The members did not really understand the long-term aims of a trade-union and thought in short-term goals only. Furthermore, a strong employers group, backed by the Colonial Government, was not willing to give in to anything. Java was over-crowded, there was much unemployment and strike breakers could easily be found, specially in the plantation industry where few skills were required. The workers in the infrastructure also found out quickly that the Colonial Government did not hesitate to pass stringent labour laws, including severe anti-strike measures, and was willing to back it up with immediate police and army actions¹⁰

This does not mean that the workers were not ready for trade unionism in the 1920's, as some historians have claimed. Such a statement falls into the same category as the issue of *readiness for self government*. The character of the trade-union movement in Indonesia in the 1920 was simply a reflection of conditions in the country at that time. The process of economic change caused a spontaneous development of trade-unions. By the yard-stick of the trade-union movement in Europe at that time, the union movement in Indonesia was indeed poorly organised and rather ineffective. But in

⁵ *ibid*, p. 258.

⁶ *Indonesia*. R.P. Soeroso. "De Indonesische Vakbeweging". (The Indonesian Trade-Union Movement), p. 212.

⁷ McVey. *Indonesia*, Hawkins, p. 258.

⁸ *Indonesia*, Soeroso, p. 212.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 213.

¹⁰ McVey. *Indonesia*. Hawkins, p. 258.

Europe the union movement was the result of powerful changes brought on by the industrialisation of Europe, which created a new social order and saw the rise of a modern working class. In contrast, Indonesia was a colony, mainly agricultural, with few modern industries. Ninety-four percent of the population was illiterate as late as 1938. The right of organisation was constantly challenged by the Colonial Government.¹¹ As a result of all this, the Indonesian trade-union movement was doomed to remain weak. It is surprising that it developed at all.

The weakness of the unions was the greatest handicap for the political activists because it became very difficult to translate political agitation into real economic pressure, and the Indonesian political movement during the 1920's remained, as a result, stuck in the morass of moral resistance.

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¹¹ *Indonesia*, Djoyoadhiningrat, p. 219. After 1930, the Depression was an effective check on all trade-union activity.