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## **Workplace and community: workers' politics of representation in Semarang and Pekalongan, Central Java**

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### **Citation**

Nugroho, H. (2024, October 18). *Workplace and community: workers' politics of representation in Semarang and Pekalongan, Central Java*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4103785>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Chapter 4

## In Search of Representation

### Introduction

For nearly two decades, since the fall of authoritarian regime, workplace-oriented unionism has remained as the dominant character of trade unions in Indonesia. However, the membership of these unions has recently been eroded by the increasing flexibilisation of labour both at the central and peripheral layers of production. The increase of such labour fragmentation deprives unions from controlling effectively the existing categories of labour and undermines the normative unions' representation roles in the workplace.

The workers and the unions in Semarang are no exception to this problem. Under a global market-driven labour regime, capital controls over various categories of labour, some of which are outside the traditional workplaces and dispersed into communities, pose a significant challenge to unions in sustaining workplace-based struggle strategies. Focusing solely on members' welfare has made unions being trapped into corporates' divisive strategies in managing labour since a large section of workers have been excluded from union representation. Even when opportunities to build an inclusive movement came to unite workplace and community activism, unionists still found difficulties to escape from the hegemonic orientation of workplace struggle.

This chapter describes how the Semarang unionists, who maintained a workplace orientation, deal with heterogeneous labour forces under the existing labour regime. I argue that corporate labour control has been the primary explanatory element of this context. The preference of workplace orientation has put the union caught into an increasingly powerful regime of labour control, extending from the workplace to the broader community – including households. This chapter focuses primarily on the experiences of local unionists who were organised under SPN (National Workers Union), the second largest local union but the most active one in the region as I also described in the previous chapter.

The first section of this chapter illustrates the historical background of the emergence of this union in Semarang following the national political transitions.

It illustrates how the union leaders established the new independent union and how they reproduced new leaderships while also dealing with workers' fragmentation due to the split in the union.<sup>89</sup> The second section explains the social processes by which the culture of workplace unionism had been maintained, continuing the past legacies and adjusting to current industrial-relations system. This section shows how the preference of such union orientation confined the interest in sustained political experiments and community activism, despite the available opportunities and supporting networks. The third section describes how workers and unionists dealt with the everyday challenges within the factory. A particular case is presented for exemplifying the actual workers experiences in the factory. This section illustrates that the failure to preserve workers' militancy has opened wider ways for hegemonic corporate power to maintain the control over union activism, which continuously disrupted the potential development of union representative roles particularly in dealing with the fragmented labour created by corporate strategies. The last section shows how the decentralisation of production had separated a particular segment of labour from their fellows in the factories. This section explains how the workers and the unionists were equally subdued by the corporate hegemonic divisive strategies.

#### 4.1. The Emergence of Local Unions and Workers Leadership

The trajectory of modern trade unionism in Semarang today is disconnected from the emergence of notable early radical labour movements (see Chapter 2 and 3). Until the early postcolonial period in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, unions in this region remained strong, playing representative roles not only in workplace economic issues, but also in political struggles (see Chapter 2). However, during the 1960s-70s, the New Order regime wiped out all of the militant, left-wing union movements (see Chapter 2). The following 30 years was marked by state control of the working class. Semarang, as happened elsewhere in Indonesia during the New Order era saw the de-politicisation of the working classes, and the restructuring of industrial relations through the streamlining

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<sup>89</sup> This split took place in the midst of my fieldwork period. Therefore, even though SPN remains the primary unit of analysis in my research, the existing development of the new union (KSPN) is inevitable in the whole discussion of the Semarang case. This is particularly represented by the facts which appeared during the course of this research: confusions swept the workers at the grassroots level as to which organisation they affiliated. Some of them were aware of the change, but many others were not, and they still regarded themselves as the SPN members. This transitional period illustrates the confusion of identity and the chaos of organisational representation among them. I argue that such an empirical situation has been an important methodological consideration in my study.

of workers' representative system into a single state-controlled trade unionism: the SPSI. The subjugation of the working class bred a submissive generation of union activists through hegemonic culture of Pancasila Industrial Relations) and institutionalised control of workers' representative system. This systematic and deep subjugation begat a significant legacy to the subsequent generation of present-day trade unionists as some structural and cultural elements remain in practices, and some of this old generation also still exist, at least, within the first decades of the new democratic labour regime. This picture represents how the unionists of SPN in Semarang were dealing such dynamics of unionism and labour condition in the region.

#### 4.1.1. From the founders to the new generation of unionists

The genealogy of SPN in Semarang can be traced back to the schism of SPSI in 1999, following the end of the New Order era. The major split began at the national level, as described in Chapter 2, and extended to branches across different regions throughout Indonesia. In Semarang, with tens of thousands of members, SPSI also broke up into various new independent unions. According to Semarang Labour Statistics (BPS), at least seven new local unions were established by former SPSI members between 1999 and 2004 which became affiliated to new national trade unions.<sup>90</sup> Until early 2003, the SPTSK (Serikat Pekerja Tekstil Sandang Kulit; Leather-Garment-Textile Workers Union) was the largest new fragment, which subsequently became the seed of the birth of SPN in the same year.

Although the 'need to break away from employer-leaning unions' was the most common reason for seceding from the SPSI, the emergence of new unions in Semarang in the early years did not yet indicate the presence of a significant new face of unionism. The SPTSK itself was characterised by unchanged leadership patterns: dominant old-fashion elites and a failure to promote union transformation. Huda<sup>91</sup>, a senior unionist of SPN, admitted that it was not easy for the new unions to abandon long-established traditions shaped by the past strong political regime.<sup>92</sup> This orientation of the movement and the practices still reflected the historical background of many union leaders.

90 The unions are SP-BUN, SP-KEP, SP-Farkes, SP-Kahutindo, SBI, and SPTSK which in the following years turned into SPN, although, SPSI itself still exist until today. See table 3.3

91 A pseudonym.

92 Interview with the former chair of SPN branch of Semarang, 8 May 2015.

Huda is arguably emblematic of a New Order era union leader. On one hand, he played a central role in the exodus of workers from SPSI and was one of the key founders of SPTSK which then became SPN in Semarang in 2003. However, unlike most employer's hostile views on union leaders, Huda represents a leadership style strongly shaped by past corporatist-union culture. His fellow described, "[his leadership] style was similar to the former regional SPSI leader. He was not hot-tempered (*berangasan*)."<sup>93</sup> Huda appeared as a corporate-friendly union leader who also maintained pacifying relationships with local government officials. In the New Order era, he was awarded as an exemplary employee by the company where he was employed. Huda admitted that, as a unionist, he was very active in attending numerous company-provided trainings.<sup>94</sup> However, participating in company trainings does not only generate skill transfers, but also internalises corporate values. Corporate language was inherently embedded in his performance, marginalising the language of movements that most militant unionists would normally adopt. To him, a union was the organisation of workers' social activities and the institution by which workers learned about corporate mission, rather than an organisational instrument of the working-class struggle. Hence, the union under his leadership was characterised by programs that contained such a mission. Instead of providing intensive training on standard labour rights, he encouraged educational programs to increase union members' production skills in employment. He initiated wider networks by signing cooperation between the union and the Faculty of Economy of a local Islamic University in Semarang in 2000 to upgrade the productive managerial skills of employees. Thus, his era of leadership was widely recognised for its lack of militancy.

A change in union leadership marked a shift for the SPTSK unionists in Semarang when they switched their affiliation to another union, the SPN. This change mirrored a similar shift at the national level (see Chapter 2). The new face of this union, as indicated by its name, signalled the unionists' intention to completely abandon the old form of unionism, aiming to broaden and diversify its membership, while members from the garment and textile sectors remained the majority. In Semarang, the signs of transformation became evident with the election of Abdi as the new leader, replacing Huda as the chair of this new union.

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93 Interview with Abdi, the leader of SPN Branch of Semarang, 5 May 2015.

94 Interview with the former chair of SPN branch of Semarang, 8 May 2015

Abdi, unlike his predecessor Huda, was from an older generation of leaders with a strong will to reform the union. His motivation for change stemmed from his own experiences working at the largest textile factory in Semarang, a national company, where he led a factory union.<sup>95</sup> Six years with SPSI in a textile factory during the New Order era provided him with valuable experience in organising workers' resistance in a union-hostile environment. His unwavering resistance against management ultimately led to the risk of exclusion from employment, prompting his full retirement. Unlike Huda's friendly perception of company management, Abdi held an opposing attitude. Since then, he dedicated himself entirely to union organisation without any formal jobs in the industry, assuming a branch leader position from the early foundation of SPN in Semarang.

Abdi was a transitional generation of trade unionists. For him, the workplace was the primary social environment where he gained experience in organising people. Despite studying at a prestigious private university in Jakarta during New Order era, he had no involvement in student activism against the authoritarian state's political control of campus life. Abdi's experiences in labour conflicts, such as the ones at the textile factory during 1990s, served as his main reference for early leadership in the workers' movement, alongside the changing atmosphere of the labour regime during the Reformation Era. Abdi could not fully escape conformist values in industrial relations as he was indoctrinated with the ideology of corporatist unionism from the past regime. Even though, he was deemed "too vocal" by his SPSI senior leaders compared to many local unionists in the past period, his militancy was still confined by the values of corporate conformity induced by seniors. According to him, thereby, workers and employers engage in relationships that were constantly combined by strife and harmony.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, unionism is a workers' organisation with a combination of resistance and accommodation against employers. Thus, while Abdi inherited inevitably some old corporatist values, his evolving perspective on industrial relations and labour movement was becoming more pluralist. This asserts that common typologies of the nature of labour movements and industrial relations, as many theoretical literatures show (Salamon 1922, 30-38; Watson 2012, 286-289), are basically an

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95 The factory, owned by a consortium led by one of the sons of Indonesia's second president, Suharto, emerged as a prominent entity in the country's textile industry. Under the managerial leadership of a distinguished figure in textile production, the company experienced rapid growth. This figure also held influential positions in the Indonesian Textile Association (API), the national employer association (APINDO), and the national business chamber (KADIN). The leadership and ownership structure of the company illustrate its connections to national elites and business circles. (Interview with Abdi, the leader of SPN branch of Semarang, March 22, 2015).

96 Interview with Sumanta, 22 March 2015.

analytical categorisation rather than an empirical perspective conceptualisation (Blyton and Turnbull 1998, 23). Activists and labour organisations in reality, especially in a transitional phase, are likely to adopt a combination of values.



Photo 3: A regular meeting of union-officials in Semarang attended by a young generation of unionists.

Abdi became a symbol of local union reforms and embodied a transformational perspective. Utilising the opportunities of the new democratic labour regime, he actively recruited younger generation of worker activists from various local companies, encouraging their participation in union activities. He initiated discussions on current employment issues, and promoted active engagement in tripartite institutions, particularly for securing local annual minimum wage increases. His leadership strategies were characterised by dialogues with local government officials, collective actions, and direct involvement in dispute settlements at the factory level. Together with other unionists he initiated some dialogues with local government officials, but also organised several collective actions and engaged directly in dispute settlement at the factory level, including established local networks and alliances. The change in leadership opened avenues for younger unionists to participate with more worker-centric orientations while accommodating some old leaders and their perspectives.

The new generation, disconnected from the past labour regime, brought a different atmosphere to the SPN in Semarang. Joining unions during the

Reformation era, they were more familiar with the discourse of current labour system. Standard collective bargaining was a predominant theme in union activities and discourse. Through formal and informal meetings, these union officials learned about labour laws, viewing them not only as legal knowledge, but also as essential tools for defending workers' interests (see Photo 3). Union organisation became a substantial subject of conversation, drawing experiences from daily life in factories and external sources such as fellow unionists from different regions and NGO-provided training.

The emergence of the younger generation in union leadership marked an orientation shift shaped by struggles and tensions in their respective factories. They played a central role in developing union activism at the regional level, with workers from major companies becoming key union leaders. Younger unionists like Catur and some other fellows, mainstays on whom Abdi relied, were instrumental in establishing networks with other union activists, participating in labour trainings, and fostering new collective values. By 2014, SPN in Semarang had successfully recruited 30,412 members from fourteen large companies in districts of Ungaran, Bawen, Pringapus, and surrounding areas, making it one of the largest and most notable unions in Central Java.

#### 4.1.2. Union Split and Elite Conflicts

The heyday of SPN in Semarang lasted about a decade (2003-2013). In 2014, another split fractured this organised labour once again. Surprisingly, Abdi and several elite members of the SPN branch decided to leave SPN, establishing a new union with a nearly identical name: K-SPN (The Unity of National Workers Union). This departure created some tension within SPN and its bases. Other unionists, local employers, and local governments were surprised by the developments. The move of SPN key leaders to KSPN triggered internal conflicts between those who joined KSPN against those who remained in SPN.

The split ignited fierce debates, particularly between Catur and Abdi, unfolding in various settings from face-to-face meetings to quarrels on social media. Catur, ironically Abdi's closest disciple for the past few years, chose to stay with SPN, alongside a few other less militant leaders. Catur strongly criticised Abdi's decision, labelling it as unreasonable and a betrayal. Abdi defended his move, terming it a *hijrah* (emigration) instead of a split.<sup>97</sup> He argued that his

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<sup>97</sup> *Hijrah* is an Arabic word frequently associated with Islamic faith, signifying transformation or, literally, emigration. It originally refers to the emigration of Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca

disappointment with the slow development of SPN was the major reason for the *hijrah*. However, Catur and his colleagues strongly objected, contending that the organisation was not as vulnerable as Abdi portrayed. They argued that if it was indeed vulnerable, it reflected the failure of Abdi's leadership itself. Catur claimed that Abdi had been warned multiple times about organisational constraints within SPN and strongly advised to make decisive changes, but no concrete corrective measures were taken. Thus, for Catur and his colleagues, the *hijrah* was implausible.

The split within the SPN of Semarang, despite the polemics surrounding its motives, was primarily driven by elite contestation rather than substantial organisational issues as claimed by those forming the new union. This split originated from the strong patronage of the SPN key leaders in Semarang to Bambang Wirahyoso, the SPN national leader.<sup>98</sup> The split was triggered by elite contestation at the National Congress of SPN in January 2014, where Wirahyoso lost his position as the incumbent to Iwan Kusmawan from Bandung SPN branch. This failure prompted Wirahyoso's decision to leave SPN, establishing another new union: KSPN, followed by a number of unionists in Semarang.

Wirahyoso was a prominent national SPN leader who had significant support from the large SPN membership in Central Java, particularly in Semarang, for both his union leadership and political activities. Wirahsoyo was viewed as a symbol of success for regional activists reaching the highest national position. He also maintained close and longstanding connections with local SPN leaders. His successes were strategic sources of political capital, as demonstrated by the substantial support he received from Central Java in union elections and political cooperation with Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS; the Prosperous Justice Party). During the chaotic 2014 National Congress, in which Wirahyoso lost control of several Central Java branches, he retained the support of eleven key union branches in order to move to the new union. This highlighted the influence of

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to Medina in 622 AD, symbolising a shift from chaotic communities to a favourable environment for the development of Islam (Ali and Leaman 2008, 52-53). The migration symbolises the transformation from the bad to the good. Indonesians have adopted this term to describe such a shift or transformation, particularly amidst the growing influence of Islamic practices in communities (Inayah, Liestyasari and Pranawa 2020, 92-23). Abdi employed this term to describe the move of unionists from SPN, an organisation he deemed difficult to grow, to KSPN, which he viewed as more conducive to facilitating change (Interview with Abdi, 22 March 2015; Catur 27 March 2015).

98 Catur recounted in a conversation with me on 31 May 2013 that Abdi confessed to Catur that one of the reasons of the split was his loyalty to Wirahyoso.

regional identity on strategic ties between national elites and local unionists.<sup>99</sup> This regional identity played a significant role in the rapid replication of the split in Central Java, causing severe damage to the SPN's base in the region compared to other branches in Indonesia.

The exodus of the leaders of the Semarang branch compromised the local SPN at multiple layers from branch level to factory level and impacted both formal leadership and informal groups in everyday activities. This organisation suffered the loss of key figures who played crucial roles in SPN's development in Semarang. The majority of frontline activists and strategic thinkers involved in organisational growth moved to KSPN. Additionally, nine out of fifteen factory-level organisations, previously vital for workers mobilisation, shifted affiliation to the KSPN.<sup>100</sup>

This situation is relevant to the remaining official leadership within the SPN body. Most leaders who stayed lacked experience in negotiating with companies. Amidst the chaos, Huda, a former corporate-leaning leader deeply in traditional union culture, was reinstated as the SPN branch leader replacing Abdi, reflecting a union leadership crisis. Following the split, Catur was also hit by two labour upheavals in the same year, leading to his withdrawal from most union activities, as will be explained in the next section. Despite calls from fellow unionists to take charge the day-to-day operations at the abandoned SPN branch, Catur focused more on his own small-scale entrepreneurship. Only occasionally, he engaged in informal dialogues with dissatisfied factory workers regarding the union leadership changes.

The unionists' powerlessness was exacerbated by the loss of supporting infrastructure. The hierarchical structure almost collapsed, with national and provincial SPN leadership unable to function due to many leaders leaving the organisation.<sup>101</sup> This left the abandoned SPN leaders grappling with legal

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99 While some key unionists of Semarang chose to follow Wirahyoso and joined the new union, all unionists from Pekalongan were among those who defended the SPN (Interview with Catur 27 March 2015; and it was also confirmed in my conversations with the SPN unionists of Pekalongan on 26 March 2014).

100 SPN's membership in the USG Garment Factory is the largest, with over eleven thousand members. SPN also had sizable members in both the Batamtex textile factory and the Golden Flower garment factory. Meanwhile, of the nine organisations affiliated to KSPN in the factories, only two are the largest. One of these is Tapak Company, having more than 2500 members. The rest only numbered less than a thousand.

101 Bowo, the union leader from Pekalongan City, was elected immediately as the new chair of SPN Central Java provincial branch following the emergency situation. However, he and his new administrators

uncertainties resulting from the split. Catur and colleagues accused the new union of illegality due to a lack of collective consent among union representatives and a violation of SPN statutes. They also protested against the local government's acceptance of the new union without scrutinising carefully its formation process. However, the absence of structural support within SPN hindered leaders from advancing their protests continuously.

The second setback involved the loss of financial and material resources. Union funds and organisational equipment, including the office building, were redirected to KSPN-management. This transition of resources occurred smoothly, as Abdi, the former SPN branch leader, had control over them during his tenure. Catur and colleagues attempted to reclaim the properties, but lacked negotiating power, legal recourses, and even solidarity among the new SPN leaders.

The loss of control over material resources had profound symbolic and psychological effects for both SPN leaders and its members. A particularly noteworthy aspect was their forced acceptance of an offer from the local Manpower Office (Disnaker) to use a space under the same building, known as the Tripartite Joint Secretariat (Sekber Tripartit), shared with the SPSI and the local Apindo (employer association). A loyal SPN union leader at USG company, acknowledged that losing an independent office reflected a loss of pride and the material symbols that once represented their existence and collective strength. The relocation to shared premises with employers and another union was seen as a compromising position that could impact their image and independence within the labour movement.<sup>102</sup>

For the union officials, the loss of the material symbols and the material resources had a major impact in eroding their capacity to defend their base. This crisis, according to the new SPN leaders, led to a substantial loss of the access to their members in certain factories where KSPN promptly claimed workers as its own. This was particularly evident in Tapak Company<sup>103</sup>, a European shoe-making corporation, where the emergence of KSPN caused fragmentation among the workers.

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were not in powerful position to tackle the effect of splits. Although the split did not plague the SPN of Pekalongan, Bowo himself was facing turmoil within the union he led following their defeat in the legislative elections (see further chapter 6).

102 Interview with the SPN representative at the USG, the largest garment factory in Semarang, on 15 May 2015.

103 Tapak Company is a pseudonym for the mentioned factory. It is only applied in my study.

Although it remained the second-largest union after SPSI, SPN's membership faced challenges due to the chaos at the grassroots level regarding representation. While Abdi, a key figure in KSPN, claimed that they wouldn't seize membership from other unions,<sup>104</sup> SPN unionists accused KSPN for lacking transparency, leading to confusion among workers at the shop-floor about the union change and their actual affiliation. A women worker from Tapak Company expressed her perplexity to me in Javanese language:

After the union has been turning to be KSPN, I texted Eri [the new union leader]: what is going on with the SPN? What is the difference between KSPN and SPN? And, what is the difference between the dues I pay now and the previous one? If, they are the same, why should it change to be KSPN? But he kept silent, leaving me in confusion.<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, a former SPN unionist at the same factory, shared the overwhelming questions from fellow workers regarding the uncertain situation.<sup>106</sup> Workers discovered flyers distributed by new KSPN leaders about the union change, but there was no explanation provided for the reasons behind this shift. It was not until rumours gradually spread and visible conflicts erupted on the union's Facebook account that workers began to realise the extent of the situation. The disputes were evident between old union officials defending the SPN and new union officials representing KSPN. Workers also noticed changes in the way the new union officials interacted with management, shifting from a previously hostile relationship to a more accommodative stance. This lack of clear communication and understanding left workers perplexed and uncertain about the direction of their union affiliation and the implications for their collective representation.

The splits and the emergence of new unions have been a recurring theme in the SPN's development over the past fifteen years. This pattern, not unique to SPN, characterises many unions in Indonesia (Juliawan 2011, 352). Many splits are driven by leadership contestation rather than fundamental organisational issues or broader movement concerns. In the case of Semarang and SPN, it reflects particular union elites' intentions to preserve their power. Catur explained to me that there seemed to be no reasonable ground for some union leaders to establish the new union, except to maintain their existing power. This elite contestation,

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104 Interview with Abdi on 22 March 2015

105 Interview with the ordinary workers and the former SPN member at a European shoe-making factory, on 18 May 2015.

106 Interview with the former SPN member at a European shoe-making factory, 18 May 2015.

without resulting in fundamental organisational changes, has only led to organisational breakdowns, with both sides losing significant human resources, wasting energy, and materials. This contrasts with the transformation of SPPI to SPN in the past, where there was a more substantial shift in organisational characteristics.

## 4.2. Building Interests, Constituency and Union Values

### 4.2.1. Mainstreaming wages as workers' economic interest

Despite the split between SPN and KSPN, there is no significant difference in their orientation of interests. Both unions prioritise the fight for workers' welfare through industrial relations institutions as their primary goals. Workplace-based issues take centre stage in what is commonly known among unionists and workers as a *normative* struggle.<sup>107</sup> The term *normative* refers to labour rights stipulated under state labour regulations. Unions, including those with their origins in the SPPI, typically focus their activism on welfare issues as regulated by labour law. This characteristic persists even among independent unions like SPN/KSPN in Semarang.

Among various *normative* welfare issues, wages were a major concern, preceding other critical issues such as precarious employment status, health and safety, corporate hostility towards unions, and the development of union organisation. Wage mainstreaming is evident not only in union official goals but also in everyday workers' discourses, collective actions, and political moves. Unionists in Semarang intensify their activities in wage issues particularly during the annual determination of minimum wages, engaging in calculations, internal discussions, consultations with other union leaders, negotiations with government officials and employers, and preparing for actions involving workers from local factories.

During my visits to local SPN/KSPN offices and meetings with leaders of a range of local unions, wage issues dominated conversations. Discussions often revolved around the gap between the sixty components of local Decent Living Needs (Kebutuhan Hidup Layak; KHL) and the Government Regulation PP-78 enacted in 2015. This regulation was deemed undermining the opportunity for negotiations on minimum wages under the collective bargaining system (see

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<sup>107</sup> The term of *normative rights* was frequently mentioned by almost all union leaders I interviewed, as well as in their conversations among themselves.

chapter 2). It was indeed a hot issue among unionists across regions, leading to national strikes (*Mogok Nasional*) at the end of 2015 for protesting the regulation.

Despite constraints, the wage issue remained the central focus driving workers' struggle in the workplace, consistently extending into the political realm from year to year. Every end of the year, the determination of the minimum wage stands out as the most blatant battleground for wage struggle. In this arena, workers advocate for minimum wage increases, the employers resist; and the state, represented by local government officials, hold political power that influence both sides. This dynamic often stimulates disputes and political interplays between these tripartite actors.

Since its inception, the SPN of Semarang has regularly mobilised its members at the end of almost every year for demonstrations in front of either the local labour office or regent office. These actions are aimed at putting pressure on the local government to decide on a higher minimum wage, particularly when the determined minimum wage falls below the recommendations issued by the local wage council (see Chapter 3). Workers interpreted such a decision as defeats against employers, making collective actions as an attempt to build political legitimacy for their struggles to secure better wages. In essence, workers intentionally involve the state in the field of production relations to improve their wages. Generally, local governments often restrain high minimum-wage increases to enhance economic attractiveness for capital investments, contributing to greater regional revenue.<sup>108</sup> However, favourable decisions on minimum wages sometimes arise in exchange for political support that the local government leader, especially the incumbent, needs to secure victory in Regional-head Elections (Pilkada), as witnessed in Semarang in 2015.<sup>109</sup> This intricate interplay between workers, employers, and the state underscores the complexity of wage struggles within the broader political and economic landscape. The question may arise: if labour wages have provided political spaces for labour movements, why did the development of workers' struggle in Semarang never lead significantly into broader class politics, retaining persistently its workplace-based economic orientation instead?

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108 Interview with the woman leader of KSPN/SPN at a shoemaking-factory, on 7 April 2015; Abdi, on 22 March 2015; and with Bondan and Bambang Kasianto, the members of DPRD of Semarang Regency, on 19 May 2015.

109 Interview with the woman unionist at a shoemaking-factory, on 7 April 2015; and a union leader from Health and Pharmacy Union (SP-Farkes Reformasi) on 22 March 2015.

For workers in Semarang and elsewhere, wages have always been a political struggle. However, the struggle was often relatively isolated from other forms of resistances within the context of production relations. The struggle over wages became separated from other equally problematic issues – such as precarious employment, bad occupational health and safety, and layoffs and inappropriate severance pay – instead of locating them together under a set of integrated frameworks that connected one issue to another. All these issues, in fact, were embedded in the overall structure of production relations in which the capital controls the labour for maximising the production with minimising the costs. Thus, workers' struggles actually had been compartmentalised into several separate labour issues.

These fragmented actions were obviously evident in a number of labour cases. For example, when workers at the Morich Company, a local garment producer for Nike, went on strike to protest violence perpetrated by a Korean manager against workers, the workers perceived it as a single problem, separate from grievances about the absence of transportation benefits and poor meal allowances that burdened the overall wages. The workers framed their narratives around the specific despotic behaviour of the manager, detached from broader issues of precariousness they faced daily. A migrant worker of this company, revealed clearly that they only received two thousand Rupiah (about 12 euro cents) per day for their meal allowance, while the Statistical Agency of Semarang Regency (2014, 315) recorded that food consumption and transportation contributed significantly to the regional inflation rate, respectively 5.5% and 8.75%.<sup>110</sup> The shop steward at this company, argued that the union had urged the management to address the needs of these precarious workers, but these requests were refused, and the unionists failed to set an effective strategy to tackle the issues.<sup>111</sup>

The workers' struggle on wages was also often detached from the varying degrees of precariousness of the heterogeneous workforce. A local SPN leader employed in a leather glove-making company, admitted that precarious short-term contract workers constituted more than 80% of the total workforce in his company. Additionally, hundreds of home-based female workers were also involved in the production chains. These workers, according to him, received their wages without additional benefits like transportation fees and a premium

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110 Interview on 2 April 2015.

111 Interview on 6 April 2015. For a comparison, see also chapter 6 on how female workers in Pekalongan managed to extend their demands from one issue to many others which eventually unveiled a wider scope of labour problems in the workplace.

pay for attendance, while they were engaged in the same labour process. However, the unionist simply suggested that these workers, particularly the homeworkers, should independently urge the management to meet their demands without receiving significant direct support from the union. He emphasised, “They should demand on their own. Don’t ask us [the union] to fight for them”. His argument rested on the notion that it was the homeworkers who sought the jobs. “The company never offered these positions”, he said. Throughout our conversation, he consistently used the term *us* and *them* to distinguish permanent workers from these precarious workers. Similar to this was the situation of the female homeworkers of seven hundred households who worked at Tapak Company in Semarang that exported its products to the European market. Having a long working hours, low wages, and other form of precarious working conditions, they were excluded from union memberships and their voices were underrepresented in the company (see further Section 4.4 of this chapter).

These illustrations highlight gaps in the workers’ wage struggles in Semarang. The framing of wage mainstreaming tends to be narrow, focused on formal institutions periodically, without addressing the extensive challenges faced by the heterogeneous working class and the broader issues of precariousness. While wage increases may benefit the majority of industrial workers, they often do not alleviate the overall precariousness of the working class.

#### 4.2.2. Wages Beyond the Workplace: networks, communities, and electoral politics

The way the unionists and workers in Semarang perceived the meaning of their movements which narrowly focused on wage increases, rather than political interest, is evident in how they responded to the opportunities and resources available outside the workplace. The character of this approach can be examined by looking at how they developed their networks and how they engaged with the electoral politics and broader community issues.

Networking is a strategic element for the development of labour movements. The networks typically involve partnership among various entities including labour unions, NGOs, local intellectuals, students, community leaders, politicians, and occasionally government officials. In Indonesia, labour alliances stand out as the most strategic form of networks that most unions use for consolidating them as a movement. This serves several purposes. It acts as a source for circulating information, knowledge, and constructing awareness of the movements. Similar to patterns observed elsewhere, alliance also provides a platform for defining

constituencies, understanding oppositions and mobilising participants for larger collective actions (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). It is important, however, to note that alliances serve as informal strategic groups rather than formal institutions, with some enduring despite changes in membership, while others are short-lived due to internal conflicts (Brooker and Meyer 2019, 263).

In Semarang, various alliances where SPN and KSPN unionists also join, such as GERBANG, GEMPUR, and FPBN, were formed as vehicles for wage-related struggles.<sup>112</sup> These alliances contributed to reproducing issues of wages and workers' welfare as dominant discourse. The discourse in these alliances touched on broader topics, linking wages to the state's economic interests, political forces, and capitalism's influence on labour policies. However, discussions on such broader perspectives often remained confined to a small circle of unionists within the alliances, not effectively reaching lower-level unionists within the organisational structure.

Consequently, the transfer of those ideas to union representatives at lower levels in factory hierarchies was also limited. In meetings at branch-level offices and annual plant-level unionist gatherings, discussions often focused on technical aspects of internal union management, labour laws, and negotiations with management, overlooking the complex realities of labour problems both within and beyond the workplace. For instance, discussions at a Tapak Company's annual plant-level meeting, attended by a union facilitator from GERBANG, primarily concentrated on the welfare of permanent workers, ignoring the hundreds of home-based workers within the same factory. The discourse tended to reproduce the dominant language used by management, as evidenced by the exclusionary terminology *mitra* (partner) used to designate home-based workers (see Section 4 of Chapter 4). Hence, the alliances established thus far have primarily served as instruments for mobilisation rather than functioning as equal sources for the reproduction of knowledge across different workers and unionists at various hierarchies. This limitation prevents the development of a comprehensive understanding of the labour relations they engaged with every day.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have also been a crucial element in union networking in industrial regions of Indonesia. They provide supporting

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112 GERBANG (Struggle Labour Movements) of Central Java was the largest workers' alliance in Central Java, while GEMPUR (Ungaran Workers Community Movement – a local alliance of Semarang) is only established for workers in Semarang. FPBN (National Labour Advocacy Forum) is an alliance of workers in Semarang and Yogyakarta.

resources for movement participants. Unlike union alliances, NGOs are typically organised by activists who are not part of workers communities (see cChapter 2). NGOs primarily focus on providing information, advocacy, research data, network expansion channels, training, and both political and financial support (Ford 2009 , 86-87). SPN/KSPN unionists claimed to have established relationships with regional NGOs working on various issues with diverse constituents, such as LBH, Yasanti, Laskar Merah Putih, local Pattiro, and Perisai.<sup>113</sup>

Despite these relationships, some local unionists in Semarang were criticised by some NGO activists for their excessively narrow focus on labour policy issues, and lack of engagement in the advocacies for diverse local marginalised communities such as peasants, fisher communities, the urban poor, and those affected by government development projects. A local activist of LBH cited the example of farmers' protest in Rembang, the neighbouring region, against the establishment of a cement factory during 2014-2017, emphasising the local unionists' limited attention to such significant cases drawing national concerns.<sup>114</sup>

The difficulty in embracing broader constituents was also attributed to unionists' general attitude toward NGOs. Many factory-level unionists were unfamiliar with the relevance of NGOs in labour movements. Some union representatives even expressed scepticism, influenced by management's discourse discrediting the roles of NGOs in labour relations, suggesting that unions should focus solely on the interests of workers.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, unlike the branch level unionists, ordinary union members on the shop floor had minimal interaction with NGO activists, creating a gap in concerns and discourses between the two groups. Face-to-face meetings between local unionists and NGO activists were rare, with any information exchanged often limited to a small circle of union elites at the branch level.

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113 LBH is an NGO with a vast network across regions in Indonesia, working in legal advocacy for the marginalised. Laskar Merah Putih and Pattiro are both NGOs focus on advocating local public policies, while Perisai in domestic labour. Yasanti is an NGO for informal women workers, based in Yogyakarta, with branch in Semarang Regency. The discussion about Yasanti will be elaborated further in a separate section of this chapter.

114 Interview with the activist of LBH of Semarang City, on 22 May 2015; See also the case of the protests of peasants' of Rembang. Accessed January 29, 2022. <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/845199/penyebab-petani-rembang-blokir-pabrik-pt-semen-indonesia>

115 Interview with the SPN/KSPN unionist at a local garment factory, on 6 April 2015

Other experiences of unionists also affirm such tendencies as is shown by the engagement of SPN unionists of Semarang in a cross-regional program initiated by ACILS (American Center for International Labour Solidarity), an American-based NGO.<sup>116</sup> This program aimed to broaden the role of local trade unions beyond the workplace in order to strengthen the grass-root's participation during a time of political transition. The SPN of Semarang, as one of major targets due to its rapid union membership growth in Central Java, received financial assistance, mentoring, and training from this program. In this activity, the unionists identified equal access to education and healthcare for workers' families as key priorities, backed by an internal survey indicating these were significant components of workers' expenditures, constituting 30-40% of their wages.<sup>117</sup> During the program, SPN leaders collaborated with local unions and NGOs, engaging in dialogues with local governments regarding the utilisation of regional budgets. The union succeeded in influencing changes in regional policies, such as removing building fees from students' tuition fees, making education more affordable for workers' families, and advocating for equal access to local Social Health Insurance (Jamkesda).

Despite these achievements, this non-conventional union activism came to an abrupt end after five years, coinciding with the program's closure. A unionist from the local SPN contended that the discontinuity in union activities resulted from an over-reliance on NGO funds for activities.<sup>118</sup> However, the root causes extended beyond funding issues and external dependence. The concept of expanding union activism into the community was not firmly ingrained in the SPN leaders' understanding of labour movements. The focus remained confined within the program framework, leading to a loss of orientation in a broader labour movement.

While union leaders broadened their welfare concerns from wages to include education and healthcare, this expansion was primarily directed at a limited beneficiary—union members. The local home-based workers confirmed that they never even heard this program.<sup>119</sup> The cessation of discussions on community-

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116 ACILS, also known as the Solidarity Centre, is an NGO based in the United States, founded by the AFL-CIO in 1997. Originating as a workers' organisation in the U.S., it has since evolved into having the largest international network among such organisations. See further: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org>

117 Interview with SPN/KSPN branch official, 28 May 2015.

118 Interview with SPN/KSPN branch official, 28 May 2015.

119 The exclusion of the home-based workers from this program was re-confirmed by local NGO activists from Yasanti; in separated conversations with Rima and Karyanto, a few years after my fieldwork in 2022.

based activism further also underscored the discontinuity. In conversations with union officials during the fieldwork, these ideas and discourses did not resurface significantly as future alternatives. The primary focus and discourse persisted on wage struggles, affirming what LBH activists had disclosed about the exclusionary nature of labour movements in Semarang. The excessively narrow focus on the wage struggles of union members not only excluded other diverse marginalised groups in communities, but also neglected other precarious labourers who were increasingly becoming part of the local workforce.

Another similar pattern is evident in the involvement of unionists in electoral politics, specifically during the 2009 and 2014 National Elections. The unionists' participation in these elections did not reflect a strong and well-organised political motivation among local unionists. The decision to compete for legislative seats in the 2009 elections was not genuinely a local initiative, but rather a national directive from the Central Executive Board of SPN, which had agreed to collaborate politically with PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), an Islamic Political Party (see Chapter 2).<sup>120</sup>

This directive triggered a sense of unpreparedness among SPN branch-level union leaders in Semarang, resulting in disorganised political moves.<sup>121</sup> The appointment of Abdi and another unionist to participate in the election did not run as smoothly as expected. The PKS branch in Semarang refused to act as the supporting political machinery for the union candidates, providing no financial or technical support for their campaigns.

At the grassroots level, confusion prevailed among workers during the campaigns and on voting day, marked by competing political rhetoric between union candidates and party candidates. While PKS cadres emphasised Islamic identity, unionists focused on labour issues, particularly the improvement of wages and workers' welfare. Workers, especially union members, questioned the benefits they would gain from voting for union candidates, prompted by widespread vote-buying practices among rival party cadres. Despite Abdi's efforts to campaign on issues such as better wages and welfare by traveling between factories, many union members did not perceive this as a compelling political bond or a moral

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120 The union national elites had this political intention since 2006 and PKS was chosen for collaboration as it was the only party which showed a welcoming response to the union's interest, and it was the only one which had interest strongly in mobilising support for the working classes (Caraway and Ford 2020, 128).

121 A field note of a focus group discussion conducted by the activists of YAWAS, 19 June 2009; Interview with Sumanta, 1 June 2015.

obligation to vote for him. The money distributed by political rivals through vote buying proved more attractive and binding. The election results proved this unequal competition, as parties' candidates garnered more votes, while Abdi received only 250 out of the targeted 3,000 votes, and other fellow unionists even received fewer votes.

In the 2014 legislative elections, Abdi and his colleague, Ari, sought another opportunity by collaborating with different political parties, specifically the Democratic Party (Demokrat).<sup>122</sup> However, the absence of official support from the elites of the Central Board of SPN, increased widespread distrust among union members regarding the political motives of the union, and the lack of support from local political parties made their campaigns heavily reliant on individual efforts rather than organisational resources. Once again, they had to contend with the prevalence of vote-buying practices by political rivals with strong financial backing, a challenge that union candidates were ill-equipped to overcome.

Unionists faced the additional challenge of competing with long-standing political ties between certain sections of communities and specific political parties, influencing the political choices of workers at the grassroots level. Families and neighbourhood leaders played significant roles in pressuring the political choices of workers, with women workers, the largest constituents of local unions, being particularly vulnerable to such control. Some married female workers admitted seeking the opinion of husbands, siblings, or parents when deciding how to vote.<sup>123</sup> Even when family members did not exert direct pressure, their opinions became the primary reference for voting decisions, especially in villages where residents consistently adhered to certain political choices over the years.

For an example, a young unionist approached Abdi during the 2014 legislative elections, apologising for not being able to support him and expressing allegiance to a dominant different political party, PDI-P. Abdi acknowledged that he could not force the young unionist, recognising the influence of personal political preferences on the choices of workers in the factory. Abdi's preferred political party was less popular in the electoral districts in Semarang, leading

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122 Partai Demokrat (Democratic Party) actually did not have a robust political base in Semarang. The union's candidates opted this party was simply caused by the ease of its requirements for collaboration. However, the candidates faced difficulties to garner supports from constituents traditionally aligned with the local PDI-P.

123 Interview with home-based workers for a glove-making factory, on April 9 2014.

to disappointing results for both him and Ari, each receiving less than three hundred votes.

The experience of local unionists in legislative elections highlights how their political endeavours were hindered by local political forces and internal conditions within the union itself. The dominance of local political forces has been considered a democratic irony in current local legislative elections, where control over resources, such as financial support and campaign organisations, and the political loyalties of communities are in the hands of local elites (Aspinall, et al. 2020, 510). This dynamic often excludes marginalised candidates, like union candidates, from gaining significant advantages in political competitions. The powerful collective force of workers, a source of collective identity for unions, faces challenges in transforming into effective political capital due to the domination of local elite forces and the long-standing social ties and identities entrenched in families and communities.

Examining the internal dynamics of the movements, the challenges in generating workers' political force have been influenced by how they define the interests of workers and constituents. The focus on welfare, confined within standard or *normative* labour rights, particularly on wages, has narrowed the frame of workers' activism, their narratives, and discourses. On the one hand, narratives on normative rights served as a strategy to defend basic rights. Workers used collective action to send a message to employers, governments, and the public about the legal position to defend their rights. This legitimate collective action aimed at defending primary interests. On the other hand, this boundary-making has limited the opportunity to broaden activism into the broader arena of class politics. The resulting narrowed space of activism was reinforced by workers' own definitions, further solidified by external influences.

The local government officials, for instance, often reminded unionists of the acceptable area of workers' interest by praising peaceful activities defending labour standards while discouraging participation in political activism. Similar suggestions came from local academics with whom SPN leaders engaged in dialogues. Likewise, even criticism from fellow unionists, as seen in the strong backlash to SPN unionist's presentation in 2008 highlighting community-based activities sponsored by the Solidarity Centre, also emphasised the exclusion of workers' political measures beyond the major area of *normative* interest from workers' activism.<sup>124</sup> These pressures impact how the local unions define their

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124 The community-based activism was not only a vulnerable notion among many SPN unionists in

constituency: while union members remain the primary constituents, others—non-unionised workers, communities reliant on the local industrial economy, and other marginalised groups—are considered irrelevant or, at the very least, less relevant constituents.

### 4.3. Politics of Production and Workers' Struggles within Factories

As a workplace-based union, the nature of its struggles and the way it serves the workers' interests were also shaped by the social dynamics at the corporate level. The company serves as an arena where the production relations is intertwined with the broader labour regime, affecting the daily interactions between union and their claimed constituents. With over thirty thousand members, the unions affiliated with SPN in Semarang were organised under large-scale companies, mostly subcontractors producing commodities for international brands. Their typical production strategies and labour process determined the employed labour types and the dynamic of union activism. This was a result of their industries being integrated into global production chains and markets.

I present a case involving workers at the company level to illustrate this. This case describes the emergence and decline of union activism within Tapak Company, a European shoe-making manufacturer, employing a diverse workforce. It demonstrates how factory workers attempted to establish a new tradition of union militancy under the SPN banner, challenging old legacies and representing the workers' interests. However, these initiatives could not endure for long due to management backlash, which exploited the SPN split and sought to reassert control over the union to maintain production stability amid the international market's volatility. This case also serves as a prelude to the next section which explore the reality of workers employed by this company in the communities. It highlights how the union and workers grapple with the repercussions of the

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Semarang but was generally unpopular among trade unions during that period. In March 2008, I unexpectedly met one of the Semarang SPN branch leaders, in a workshop organised by NGOs, in Bogor. During the discussion, he presented the success of SPN Semarang in the community-based program sponsored by the Solidarity Centre. He was not alone. Another participant, an SPN unionist from Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java Province, also shared his organisation's experience in lobbying for an increase in government budget for local labour inspection for fostering a pro-worker local government performance. However, these two presenters faced strong criticism from workshop participants, mainly union officials. Many considered the idea as deviating from the core focus of the workers' primary struggle: wage improvement. The prevailing sentiment among participants was that such ideas and activities should be the domain of NGOs rather than trade unions.

company's strategy to separate production spaces, showing the challenges faced by unions rooted in the tradition of workplace-based unionism.

#### 4.3.1. A Factory under Competitive Markets

Tapak Company is an international shoe producer owned by a family of European investors. Tapak's Indonesia branch is only one of production sites across Europe and Africa. Established in Indonesia in 1991, Tapak specialises in exporting shoes primarily to European markets, with additional distribution in the US, Australia, Japan and China. By having total investment in Indonesia exceeding US\$3.7 million, this company produced around one million shoes and one million shoe components annually. Using a combination of modern machines and traditional manual labour, Tapak is a moderate-scale company employing over two thousand workers who worked in the factory and around seven hundred home-based workers dispersed in villages in Semarang.

During my fieldwork between 2015 and 2017, the working conditions at Tapak Company reflected the evolving dynamics of employment relations influenced by past workers' struggles within the workplace. There was a noticeable increase in management control over the labour process, coupled with the union's apparent accommodation of the company's interests. While corporate management attributed these changes to the recent instability in European markets, the workers and unionists I interviewed believed that the major factor of changes was the significant strikes that occurred in 2013. These strikes, the largest ever in Semarang, marked a turning point that led to drastic shifts in company policies and management's stance. Nonetheless, despite of the workers' belief in strikes as the major cause, the increase in labour militancy itself served as a primary threat to the company's interests, prompting extreme changes in managerial behaviour.

#### 4.3.2. The emergence of contention

Prior to 2009, the period at Tapak Company seemingly had 'quiet' employment relations on the surface which papered over underlying tensions. Tapak's management, largely led by European expatriates, sought to comply with the minimum provisions of Indonesian labour regulations. The Management paid new permanent workers according to the standard minimum wage regulation, which at the time was 1.2 million Rupiah,<sup>125</sup> while those who had worked longer

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125 The minimum wage of 2012 equals to 75-80 Euro per month.

than a year received slightly higher wages based on wage-scale referring to the agreement between management and union. The workforce was divided into permanent workers who received a regular monthly wage, and temporary or non-standard workers – among others the casual workers employed in factories (*pekerja harian lepas*) and home-based workers – who were paid on a daily piece-rate basis.

While the management complied with the basic standards, worker grievances persisted. Permanent workers complained that their wages fell short of meeting their monthly needs. They raised the issue of a gap between the wage scale in government regulations (Ministerial Decree 49 of 2004) and the corporate wage structure. Similar grievances circulated among casual workers, especially when piece-rate workloads declined, potentially leading to wages below the local minimum wage. Another issue adding to the discontent was the limited rest hours. Despite not directly related to wages, the short lunch and midday-prayer breaks (*dzuhur*) were deemed inappropriate by permanent workers. With limited time for thousands of workers to queue for food and to use the prayer facilities, concerns arose, sometimes even leading to suspicions of discrimination in religious practices. The fundamental complaint, however, as asserted by some workers, was that the company had stolen workers' rights of rest period for the sake of corporate profits. Amidst this, the unionists at the time were perceived as being compliant, with workers assuming they lacked the courage to protest to the management. Additionally, the union was accused of neglecting the interests of casual workers, as the company management physically segregated them in a separate building, limiting interaction between different categories of labour.

The labour dynamics at Tapak Company experienced a shift in 2009 when Catur, a candidate with no prior experience in organised movements, was elected as the union leader.<sup>126</sup> His victory was fuelled by his persistent protests against management which initially stemmed from his personal dissatisfaction with his career development obstacles. He then turned his experiences into a protest against the entire factory working conditions. Catur, an employee in the information-technology division, became a leader known for his outspoken statements and leading work stoppages against the management. He was

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126 Approaching to the union election at Tapak Company, many workers felt hopeless about finding a suitable new union cadre. Rather than identifying an alternative leader among the existing cadres, they unexpectedly found Catur, an ordinary member, as a potential candidate. Although they were not initially prepared to endorse him for the election, they persistently pressured the election committee to accept his candidacy, even ignoring the deadline for candidate submissions.

successful in garnering support from workers who shared similar interests. The emergence of his leadership shows how the rise of collective force could stem from personal interests and struggles, which were defined by key figures as a collective interest, and the existence of key figures who were able to articulate those interests antagonistically into a real challenge to power.

After replacing the old union officials with new recruits, workers witnessed the emergence of a fresh organised labour culture. Catur and other young officials quickly realised that the challenges faced by their predecessors in advocating for workers' interests stemmed from a lack of collective spirit among union members. Previously, varying interpretations of issues and urgency among individuals, groups, and different categories of workers had hindered effective communication. Internal organisational matters preoccupied union officials, preventing them from connecting with workers in various roles. This resulted in a failure to identify and collectively address real issues, determine the severity of problems, and formulate shared interests and strategies. Beneath a seemingly calm surface, there existed a significant gap between unionists and grassroots workers.

Under the new leadership, unionist established a strong connection between workers' representation and their level of activism. Catur emphasised that militancy was crucial for defending workers' interests, asserting, "Union officials must become a strategic layer of the working class, capable of both safeguarding members' interests and mobilising them as an effective force in negotiations with management." Although Catur defined the working class simply as those permanently employed by the company without ideological connotations, his determined leadership and consistent narratives about the antagonism between workers and management played a crucial role in fostering group awareness and boosting workers' militancy.

In addition to changes in organisational values, the new union officials implemented a structural reorganisation by establishing a larger group of shop floor representatives, consisting of twenty-five workers. The union also altered the nomenclature of the group from 'perwakilan anggota' (member representative) to 'komisariat' to symbolise and instil a sense of militancy and organisational discipline among union members. Abdi, the Semarang branch leader of the SPN, expressed concern about the size of the representative group, considering it to be too large for the company's scale, which only had 1,800 union members. By comparison, the 11,000 members of SPN in a local garment company had only 17 representative members on the shop floor.

Catur, however, stood firm in his decision, emphasising that the large size and different nomenclature of union representation aimed to mobilise as many workers as possible while expanding the scope of representation. The Tapak's union officials recognised that the size might not be fully effective in managing representation, but they expected that increasing representation in the union would revive members' trust in the union's roles and ignite their passion to participate in a movement against the management. Catur believed in the strategic power of the workers' mass, stating, "If we do not empower this mass of workers, we won't be strong. No matter how smart the union officials are, they will be meaningless if they only criticise the company policies without the support of the mass."<sup>127</sup>

Another reason for enlarging the Komisariat size was to reduce elitism among union leaders. The growing number of Komisariat members allowed greater participation of workers in the union body at the enterprise level. Catur argued,

I have learned many times from the behavior of regional union leaders everywhere, especially those in higher positions in branch union offices. They often position themselves on par with those at the highest rank in the management of companies, falsely thinking that all the decisions they make always seem right and wise to the members.

This argument aligns with the account of a former prominent national leader of SPN who acknowledged that many union leaders tend to overestimate themselves, assuming an "equal" position with top management or government officials while actually creating a greater distance from their own grassroots.<sup>128</sup>

Another organisational change within the Tapak's union was the abolition of a union's election for group representation, a tradition upheld by SPN for years. Instead, they implemented a direct election format, employing a one-person-one-vote system. The objective was to dismantle the management's influence over shop floor representatives, as these layers were susceptible to managerial intervention. Line leaders, acting as worker representatives, were directly controlled by managers and often aligned with management interests. To enhance democracy, shop floor representatives were elected by workers in each production line.

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127 Interview with Cature, former SPN leader in Tapak Company, 27 March 2015.

128 Interview with Lilis, a former union leader at the national office (DPP) of SPN, 2014

The initial three years of this new union leadership marked a critical period. Many workers, particularly women, remained apprehensive about becoming shop-floor representatives. Their insecurity stemmed from two reasons: navigating conflicts with management and facing family pressure.<sup>129</sup> Some male and female unionists explained that, in Javanese culture, women, especially those who are married, were expected to prioritise caring for their children and husbands over active participation in union activism, which is perceived as a masculinist activity. Consequently, mobilising female workers proved challenging. While this cultural aspect held some currency, it could be negotiated. Active campaigns highlighting the relevance of the union, union training sessions, small victories in negotiations with management, and, notably, the role model of some female unionists contributed to the increased participation of female workers in the *Komisariat*. This transformation became more evident after Catur's successful re-election for his second term of leadership, securing nearly a hundred percent of the votes.

Catur's landslide victory was perceived by unionists as the starting point of a new battle. With the strengthened *Komisariat* and the consolidation of permanent workers at the grassroots level, the company management faced growing difficulties in maintaining control over shop floor union representatives. After three years of consolidation and increased confidence among unionists in their own power, the union launched a major offensive against the management. From December 2012 to January 2013, Tapak's workers executed systematic moves that culminated in a large strike, intensifying the hostility of the management towards the union. Over 2,000 workers participated in the three-day strike, making it the largest and most militant attack on the company in Semarang. The strike received broad coverage from local and national media, drawing attention from local authorities and other unions in the region and beyond.<sup>130</sup>

The strike marked the culmination of agitation against unfair wage structures, triggering an outright rejection from the management. This response further fuelled a sense of anger amongst the workers, and discontent expanded to encompass broader issues. Grievances extended to other labour law violations, including inadequate break hours, poor working conditions for casual and short-contract workers, and a lack of protection for women workers with night-shift

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129 Group interview with some SPN unionists of Tapak, 18 May 2015; and a female unionist, 7 April 2015

130 Some prominent local and national media, including *Tempo*, cover these disputes in 2013. The media link is not provided here to secure the anonymity.

assignments.<sup>131</sup> Union leaders strategically used these issues as leverage to force the management to address the workers' wage demands.



Photo 4: A union poster expressing protest against the inadequate wages as compared to monthly needs. The poster reads 'For God's sake, 1,397,500 Rupiah (around 84 Euros) is not decent.'

In response, the management countered the union's narratives by providing alternative accounts to line leaders in the shop floors. They hoped that this disconnection between line leaders and workers' representatives in the *Komisariat* would weaken grassroots support.<sup>132</sup> The management argued that the unionists were inconsistent in their demands. Despite these efforts, the union's tactic eventually proved successful. After three days of strikes, the

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131 According several local unionists: the use of short-contract workers longer than legal requirement and no social security provision for contract workers were the most common cases in Semarang.

132 Line leaders are designated by the management as representatives within the managerial structure responsible for controlling production process. In this role, they not only engage in managerial interactions but also adopt the managerial system's perspective on labour processes and relations. Consequently, it is logical for the management to leverage them as allies in the struggle against unionists and workers at the grassroots level. However, this approach encounters challenges, particularly when production pressures exceed the acceptable tolerance levels of line leaders, as I will elaborate on in the following paragraphs.

management conceded to the wage demands but rejected improvements in working conditions of the temporary labour, urging the union to view it as a compromise. The unionists accepted this, recognising that the wage increase was the primary goal of the strikes.

The end of the demands for casual and short-contracted workers in the large strike highlighted the marginalised position of this worker category compared to permanent workers. Despite ongoing union advocacy for this group in smaller protests, this strategy heightened tensions between workers and management. The situation worsened when the management decided to lay off all short-contract workers, and the union found itself powerless to further defend their demands, especially as these workers were not official union members.

In numerous companies, such precarious temporary workers are often excluded from union membership, creating problems from both perspectives. These workers are frequently hesitant to join unions due to the perceived risk to their employment. There are documented cases where management promptly terminated workers who opted to join unions (Juliawan, 2010: 45-47; Tjandraningsih and Nugroho, 2008). Companies often utilise this category of workers precisely to evade union control, capitalising on their flexibility—easy hiring and firing (World Bank, 2009). This flexibility aligns with the prevalent corporate strategy to compete in the current neoliberal markets (See Deyo, 2001). Given this context, many unions exercise caution in encouraging these workers to join their ranks. Some unions exhibit a lack of interest in incorporating temporary workers, given the high turnover rates in this labour segment (see Juliawan, 2010: 47).

#### 4.3.3. Management's backlash: the increase of labour control

With the resolution of the wage dispute, the management shifted its focus to countermeasures aimed at increasing labour control. Two strategic paths were pursued: reducing workers' militancy and tightening control in the labour process, with the overarching goal of ensuring production security and minimising the risk of higher losses. The workers' demands for changes in the wage structure had increased labour costs, necessitating a new strategy for sustainable production and maximum capacity while avoiding union disruption, particularly crucial in volatile markets.

To diminish workers' militancy, the management prioritised a form of "union cleansing," targeting militant activists known as "orang-orang kuat pergerakan" (strong movement-activists). The management compiled a list of alleged 'sins,'

including mistakes and work violations, such as repeated technical errors or sluggish work. In order to secure these measures legally, the management ensured first its compliance with standard labour rights, such as providing a decent wage based on the new scale, distributing benefits, and ensuring social security, including freedom in union activities, before imposing harsh sanctions. After collecting sufficient evidence of violations over several months, the management decided to lay off the activists, citing ‘securing corporate efficiency and reducing redundancy’ as an official reason.

While carefully dealing with the unionists, the management took more measured steps against Catur as the union leader. Instead of toppling him, which could risk a backlash from the workers, the management targeted the grassroots, disrupting solidarity and delegitimising Catur’s leadership through counter narratives. The Komisariat and line leaders were targeted as key channels for these tactics. The management sought individuals amenable to their moves, offering personal incentives as rewards. As the 2014 union elections approached, the management silently encouraged some workers aligned with the management to challenge candidates from the unionist faction. This intervention fragmented workers in the rank and file, creating political noise around the elections. Rumours about union leadership spread among workers, coupled with increased hostility from management, making it difficult for Catur to organise his supporters. Finding increasing fragmentation among union members and unfriendly management attitudes, Catur eventually made a surprising decision to retire from the company, sparking disappointment and restlessness among his loyalists, leading to a decline in union strength.

The loss of key union leaders became a critical turning point in the downfall of militant unionism at the Tapak Company. The election of a woman, as leader during a chaotic election further intensified the turmoil, compounded by the impact of an organisational crisis in the region. The split in the SPN Semarang branch, resulting from organisational rupture and elite conflicts at the national board, led most branch leaders to move to a new union, KSPN. The confusion spread among Tapak’s workers, and the situation in the factory deteriorated as some unionists in Tapak followed the lead of their patrons in the union branch. The newly elected leader and some other unionists unilaterally decided to change the union affiliation from SPN to KSPN without notifying or consulting the members. As a result, workers became fragmented into more factions, with many remaining unaware of the actual conditions due to the lack of union transparency. The broader chaotic atmosphere in the grassroots became inevitable.

Capitalising on this chaos, the company management escalated its control over the union. Following the successful dismissal of key unionists, the management sought to dismantle Catur's organisational legacies. They approached the new union leaders, urging a shift in union values from adversarial to cooperative. Considering the company's struggles with increasing market competition and the need to maintain the existing labour force, the management pressured the new union officials to adopt a more cooperative stance. They also suggested replacing union representatives by removing Catur's loyalists. Faced with organisational chaos at both the factory and regional levels, the new union officials had no choice unless taking a moderate approach, compromising with the management's strategy.

In line with exerting control over the union, Tapak's management implemented several reorganisations in production lines to strengthen their grip on labour control. A fundamental change was the shift in the gender composition of the workforce. The number of new female workers recruited surpassed that of men, while the number of male workers 'forcibly' laid off was higher than that of female workers. According to female unionists, this appeared to be a deliberate policy, as most female workers were perceived as more obedient to supervisors, line leaders, and especially male managers; while male workers, particularly male unionists, were viewed as potentially rebellious, as evidenced by previous disputes and strikes.<sup>133</sup>

Another change occurred in the labour process by intensifying control through more stringent individual work targets. Targets for each part were determined based on the type of shoe and its components, creating different vulnerabilities among various categories of labour. Workers in the assembling section of shoe components faced strict recording and careful calculation of working time, along with associated sanctions and consequences. A line leader in the department, expressed,

After the strikes ended, the management was enraged! They treat us like workers in a garment sector. Every output is calculated, and our targets and work results are recorded. We work for eight hours. The number of items we produce is recorded and reported to the management office. Our monthly achievements are calculated. If it's bad, employees would be called for sanctions.<sup>134</sup>

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133 Interview with the new union leader at Tapak Company, 7 April 2015.

134 Interview with the line leader at Tapak Company, 1 June 2015.

Even as a line leader, he was frustrated with increasing pressure from the management and deteriorating working conditions in the assembling section. Boredom and exhaustion plagued the workers, as they were forced to avoid overtime work as much as possible. They also complained that the substantial workload did not come with additional income due to limitations on overtime in this section. Overtime was considered a source of adequate additional income for single workers, except for those already married as it sacrificed family time. Meanwhile in the sewing section, less-than-optimal production output could lead to extended work on weekends, triggering unpleasant rebukes from management.

The increased stringent working methods and workload, and the demands for changes in union activism were interconnected conditions, representing the management's attempt to reclaim control over the workforce. The significant strikes led by Catur had indeed resulted in increased wages, especially for permanent workers with more than one year of service. However, the management sought to mitigate their losses, and the heightened pressure in the labour process became an additional cost for workers. Moreover, two years after the union elections or three years after the major strikes, the union militancy was hard to restore back

Internally, the new union officials identified the large composition of women in the Tapak's workforce as a constraint in rebuilding militancy. A female leader of the new union at Tapak noted,

Our female co-workers have numerous responsibilities to consider. Today, women are no longer solely secondary wage earners (*pencari nafkah-sampingan*) to men. Many of them are also the primary breadwinner, becoming the backbone of their families. It is really hard for them to fight for the family.

Women faced objections from their parents or husbands for their engagement in union activism. Local traditions and religious values about women's duties in the household also further limited their agency. Some female union leaders have even contemplated not extending her activities in union activism beyond their term, planning to dedicate themselves to her family. In such circumstances, union leaders found difficulties to mobilise the majority of women serving as member representatives (previously known as *Komisariat*). Consequently, union leaders often relied on male line leaders to mobilise and collect grievances from their members. However, this created a reluctance and resistance among union members to deal with line leaders who were seen as naturally inclined to represent the interests of the management. As a result, the relationship between members and the union's representative apparatus remained continuously vulnerable.

The entire illustration above captures the dynamics of unionism within the primary workplace setting: the factory. This example illustrates how leaders emerged from grassroots, amidst the uncertainties of the union roles and the traditional leadership styles. This novel approach of leadership advocates a union transformation, dismantling old legacies in a manner perceived as militant, particularly when contrasted with the generally calm organising tradition in Semarang labour movements (Juliawan 2010). Despite lacking solid ideological roots, the integration of symbols from the militant workers' movement, coupled with the restructuring of the representation system to be more participatory and open, has proven to be an effective instrument in building workers' collective strength and advocating for their interests.

Nevertheless, this narrative echoes a familiar story experienced by local senior unionists, where vocal unionists faced challenges in sustaining active unions for the long term due to corporate counter-movements, forcing the unions to adopt a more accommodative stance toward management. Companies exploited the paradox of labour regulations to legitimise their actions by consistently fulfilling workers' rights, but also increasing control through both labour processes and informal interventions to subdue unions, for maintaining their production capacity in the market competition.

Simultaneously, organisational fragility is exacerbated by internal factors. The challenges faced by the union in Tapak Company mirrors the portrait of SPN at the branch level. The union split within the company arose not only caused by the fragmentation of the parent organisational structure but are also triggered by patronage relations between union leaders of different hierarchies, leading to chaos at the grassroots level. These repeated splits, militancy attenuation, and weakened leadership eventually prevent workers from stable institutionalisation of unionism.

In such a landscape, precarious temporary workers become the most vulnerable group. They had been sacrificed in the battle between management and the union, and their existence, both real and symbolic, remains largely overlooked in the dynamic of unionism. The subsequent section will explore further details on this aspect, particularly regarding the most precarious ones: the home-based workers.

## 4.4. Marginalised Workers beyond Factory

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the spread of flexible forms of production and labour has presented a challenge to workplace-based unions. To reduce production costs without loosening control, companies have adopted practices of flexibility like spatial separation of production, which involves shifting one or more parts of the labour process out of the factory floor into households within the community. Tapak, is one of companies in Semarang which has been using this approach for more than 20 years. Although the practice has originated during the era of state authoritarianism, the current market-driven labour regime has facilitated its expansion. While there are no specific regulations governing home-based labour, the regime's strong support for labour flexibility justifies expanding the use of this type of labour.

This section explores the impact of Tapak's production practices on working conditions in the community and the relationship between the home-based workers and the 'insiders' (*orang dalam*)<sup>135</sup> consisting of management, factory workers, and the labour union. The structure of production and labour processes has created a representation gap for home-based workers, leading to exclusionary and marginalised attitudes towards them from unions and 'inside' workers. I argue that the tendency to maintain this exclusionary attitude is influenced by labour control of the companies, which combines despotic and hegemonic elements that prevent unionists and factory workers from understanding the objective position of the home-based workers in the production chain. As a result, external groups and organisations were competing to fill the gap in representing the interests of home-based workers, increasing the complexity of relations and workers fragmentation.

### 4.4.1. From factory to the villages

A brief overview of the production structure and labour processes is essential for identifying how home-based workers are positioned within the overall footwear production structure. This objective description helps to reveal how the company constructs the production politics through categorisations, relations, and work instructions that obscure the subjective understanding of the unionists and other workers regarding the real position of the home-based

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135 This is how the home-based workers defined the separation of 'us and them' within the factory social structure, indicating the impact of social categorisation created by the production structure that leads to inequality and exclusion.

workers. In other words, the production politics have created divisions between the home-based workers and the factory counterparts, making it difficult for them to receive adequate support

Tapak's footwear production process began in the factory, where the materials went through a dozen stages of production such as cutting, sewing, sole-making, and pressing. Permanent workers, assisted by temporary workers like short-term contract workers and casual workers, carried out these stages using machine processes. Once the process in the factory was complete, the outsole and upper parts were sent out of the factory for the manual assembly process.<sup>136</sup> Home-based workers in the community handled these tasks, which involved combining the two components through manual stitching to form the basic shape of a pair of shoes. This process was used for all footwear items that required manual assembly, except for shoes made using the pasting method that fully used machine technology.

Tapak selected seven villages in Semarang as centres where the company distributed shoe materials to workers for manual assembly. Tapak has also sent the components to local prisons, where convicts were employed for similar assembly. The company took benefits from prison's training program that was conducted internally for preparing convicts before released. The material distribution also took place in Tapak's factory with particular focus on reaching home-based workers living in locations beyond the seven villages.

The village offices (Kantor Desa) served as a hub for exchange and control, where workers submitted their completed tasks, and management representatives conducted a quality check before distributing new materials to the workers.<sup>137</sup> This routine occurred daily, with around thirty female workers gathering at the office from 8 am. They arrived carrying large bags filled with dozens of completed shoes, with bag size and weight varying based on the footwear type. Some workers arrived on foot, while others used motorcycles, and some were accompanied by family members. The quality check determined whether the workers would receive new material packages to take home and work on. If the quality did not meet the standard, workers were asked to fix the shoes on the spot. A similar pattern was followed in the factory, with workers bringing their

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136 See the appendix on a diagram presenting the work process in producing the shoes in Tapak Company.

137 The village officials did not participate in controlling the production process. They only provided a space for the meeting between factory representatives and the workers. Tapak Company rented rooms in the offices as distribution centres that connect factories with home-based production activities.

completed work to be inspected, repaired, and exchanged for new packages. In the prison, quality control officers utilised a room where convicts submitted their completed work.

#### 4.4.2. Flexibilisation and the formation of home-based labour

Tapak Company recruited thousands of home-based workers in villages, whom they referred to as ‘production partners’ (*mitra produksi*); a term that is misleading and deceptive. By using the concept of *partners*, companies aimed at avoiding the compliance with labour laws and gained maximum flexibility in the recruitment, the use and the layoffs of their workforce. This is a crucial aspect of how the company created a segmented workforce. Despite being aware of the extreme inequality and vulnerability of this work, most of the factory workers and the unionists – including even the home-based workers – ironically accepted the use of the terminology. Most of them identify the term as separate category of labour and did not clearly understand how to locate this category within the standard employment relations. Only a few were trying to break away from the framing formed by this company which I explain in the following sections.

The home-based workforce employed by Tapak was almost entirely comprised of women, with the majority falling between the ages of 40 and 45 and being married with children. While no official data existed regarding their exact number, one of the home-based workers with over five years of experience estimated that there were more than 2,000 workers (including nearly 200 prison workers) based on her identification number that exceeded three digits. Local NGOs had also attempted to collect data on these workers and had recorded more than 900 individuals, though they suspected that this number was likely higher.

These numbers do not include the support workers that might be much bigger than the main homeworkers. The exact number of support workers is even more difficult to identify, as they did not always work regularly. Support workers consist of husbands, children, or other family members who assist with the assembly processes. The involvement of these support workers varies greatly, and not all of them work with the same load as the main workers. For example, Wani,<sup>138</sup> the first home-based workers I met, was assisted by her husband as a full-time partner, while her children were involved but stopped due to school. Similarly, the children of other workers assisted during their schooling years but discontinued their participation upon finding other employment opportunities.

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138 Pseudonym.

Conversely, one home worker opted not to engage her children in the work due to concerns about their skill level, choosing instead to engage her mother as a full-time working partner. Yet another worker primarily worked alone, with occasional assistance from her husband. Such patterns were common among other home-based workers' households.

Some workers also shared their work with neighbours or friends through a practice known as *pocokan*. This is a Javanese term referring to sharing work at a wage price determined by the main workers, which was often lower than usual due to deductions for transportation and repair fees. While some workers used this system to provide job opportunities to others, others found it inefficient and chose to stop the practice. Some workers who received *pocokan* eventually became full-time homeworkers by applying to Tapak company for a change in status, which allowed them to receive full wages without any deductions. However, others chose to quit after a prolonged period of *pocokan* work.

Home-based workers do not always have a fixed status, as some of them might occasionally become *the insiders* (factory workers) for a certain period of time. The decision was made by the lowest level managerial officers, such as supervisors or line leaders specifically for home-based labour. The shift was driven by fluctuations in market demand. For example, when the company needed to ramp up production, it required additional temporary workers to perform factory tasks – such as shoe pasting, marking, putting on accessories, installing zippers, sole making, folding boxes – which were primarily the responsibility of permanent employees. Skilled home-based workers could be also recruited as quality control officers to assess the quality of the overall output of home-based tasks.

Recruiting home-based workers as factory workers was a common corporate strategy to reduce labour costs while maintaining control. Rather than hiring additional permanent employees during times of high market demand, companies often relied on home-based workers, who were cheaper and easier to lay off in times of low demand.<sup>139</sup> This recruitment process involved a change in the workers' status, from home-based to casual workers, who were paid on a

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139 The utilisation of permanent labour is comparatively more expensive than employing flexible labour, such as home-based workers. This cost disparity arises from the necessity for companies employing permanent labour to comply with minimum wage regulations, which are consistently higher than the wages of home-based workers. Moreover, permanent workers are typically affiliated with labour unions, creating a layer of complexity for management in terms of workforce control. Additionally, companies are obligated to provide severance payments for layoffs, contributing to what managements complain as additional financial burden.

daily basis – instead of output quantity. They were employed for a short period of time, typically two to three months, depending on market conditions. This change in status also entailed a shift in the workers' way of working, as they were expected to perform tasks traditionally carried out by permanent employees.

Home-based workers offer company higher 'flexibility' in the labour practices, both because of the context of their production base and the informality of their work arrangements. Since there was no specific contract binding them as employees, the company could freely transfer and change their status between home-based and factory work. By labelling them as informal *production partners* rather than employees, the company also avoided labour inspections. On the one hand, it increased the capacity of control in the hand of management. Any refusal to work as a casual factory worker may result in termination of home-based work. On the other hand, this strategy gave company a high degree of flexibility, exceeding other categories of precarious labour such as short-contract workers or outsourced labourers. While, permanent factory workers were more rigid and less influenced by market fluctuations,<sup>140</sup> home-based workers are subject to changes in recruitment, placement, individual workload, remuneration, and other forms of work control.

#### 4.4.3. Pursuing target and wages: working at home

Bringing factory work into the home created an intersection between factory production spaces and the social spaces of the family and community. The home thus became a site of economic exchange: the household provided resources to support the work, while the work became a common source of income for the family. However, the exchange made workers and their families vulnerable to exploitation as they became instruments for achieving production targets. Workers who undertook low-paid jobs also faced social and cultural challenges that arise from the domestic realm of the family.

The wage system used by a company is indicative of how work is organised. In the case of home-based work, the company used a piece-rate system that allowed for tighter control over the productivity of cheap labour. Under this system,

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140 While permanent workers are generally expected to work until retirement, several cases in Semarang and other locations have shown that companies could expedite their retirement period, sometimes en masse, to reduce the number of permanent employees and replace them with short-contract labour or other flexible types of workers. This labour control strategy has become a popular choice for management, particularly in labour-intensive industries, due to intense market competition. Moreover, post-Reform labour regulations have made it easier for companies to carry out this strategy.

wages were paid per batch of ten pairs of shoes, with the price varying according to the type of shoe and the level of difficulty in their assembly.<sup>141</sup> The cheapest wage was for assembling sandals, which paid Rp 14,000 (around 85 cents in Euro) per batch, while the highest wage applied to the assembly of boots, which paid Rp 42,000 (around 2.5 Euros) per batch. However, the production of boots was only carried out during April-May as they were intended for the European markets during winter season. Most shoes made for all seasons are generally priced between Rp 19,500-35,000 (1.2 – 2.1 Euro) per batch, depending on the type of shoes.



Photo 5: Some women workers bringing their children to a distribution post in the village, where they attend to their childcare responsibilities while also carrying out repair works.

Workers typically took home two or three batches of shoe components that would then need to be assembled within two days. The more support-workers they invited to join, whether they were family members or neighbours (the *pocokan* process referred to above), the more batches they could take on. A worker, along with support workers, could typically complete thirty to forty batches in a month, with an average total income of Rp 550,000-800,000 (33.5-48.5 Euros). However, these wages were considered collective or family wages,

<sup>141</sup> The home-based workers used the terminology of category that the company has created, that is *party*. Each party consists of ten pairs of shoes.

rather than individual wages, as they were derived from the participation of family members or neighbours. Thus, the actual value of the monthly individual wage was much lower. Moreover, they must also deal with transportation costs that further reduce their net income. For example, Wani and her husband, who lived approximately four kilometres from the factory where they collected the work materials, must pay a transportation fee of at least Rp 15,000 per month. This condition resembles the concept of “shared poverty” coined by Clifford Geertz, which refers to the collective condition of poverty in which an increase in wages does not significantly improve individual economic capacity (Geertz 1963).

The social value of wages is diminished when it comes to the type of work being done. The majority of the workers were housewives who performed assembly work while carrying out their daily domestic tasks, which are influenced by traditional conception of Javanese households where women are expected to maintain household duties. While the work was chosen for its flexibility, it added to the overall social burden of women in the household.

Starting from dawn, women engage in several routine activities such as parenting, preparing breakfast for the family, cleaning the house, doing laundry, which would go until approximately 9 am. Assembly work began after that and continued until 11 pm with breaks in the afternoon and evening for preparing meals and prayer activities. An industrious home-based worker was able to spend at least ten hours per day assembling ten shoes or five pairs of shoes. However, the gap between the time for domestic affairs and assembly work was usually only around 10 minutes. For young women with toddlers, the burden was even greater as they could not allocate care needs strictly. Thus, these young mothers often brought their toddlers to distribution posts in village office, where they carried out their childcare while waiting for quality inspections and doing some repair works (see Photo 5). Therefore, although this is a part-time job, the workload multiplies as the pressure of combination of domestic work and the burden of working women. As culturally constructed domestic tasks cannot be neglected, home-based workers lived with these burdens. As Maryati, one of the workers, explained: “Neglecting this task can risk the emergence of quarrels with the husband, especially if the husband is not involved directly or intensively in the work.”



Photo 6 (left): A home-based worker is stitching together components to assemble a shoe.



Photo 7 (right): Tools used in assembling the shoes.

Despite the fact that assembly is a home-based job, it is inseparable from capital control, in which target achievement, punctuality, and neatness were strictly controlled by company management. A dextrous worker was able to complete a pair of shoes within two hours by working in a high degree of concentration. By contrast, a less dextrous worker would provide lower productivity due to lack of experience. Wulan<sup>142</sup>, a dextrous home-based worker, refused the notion that this job could be done while doing domestic tasks freely. She argued, “This is a tough work. We must focus completely on it. We should *freeze the time* (*mematikan waktu*) [not be distracted by other things in order to fully dedicate to work].”

To increase their productivity, workers needed to find the right ways and tricks to work more efficiently. However, many workers struggled with the difficult and painful stitching process, which caused some new workers to quit after sustaining hand injuries (see Photo 6 & 7). The assembly of complex boot shoes posed a particularly high risk of injury if workers did not find the right techniques. Some

142 Pseudonym

senior workers had found ways to work around this burden, such as replacing the company-provided sewing needle with another and using soap to smooth out the punctures. Although this method was prohibited by the company due to its potential to damage the leather, some workers still used it to meet their productivity targets without compromising the quality of their work. For assembling complicated types of shoes, some workers solved this constrain by helping each other without any extra pay. Mona, one of the workers, explained, “it is only the solidarity that can overcome such difficulties. We often did it especially among those who know each other well.”

The completed shoes are submitted to the quality control officer, either at the village offices or at the factory, within two days. The quality control officer ensured that the work met the required standards, and if not, the workers are required to make repairs. The most common mistakes that required repair were stitches that are too tight, too loose, or sloppy. The repair process took place on the spot, and it could be time-consuming. Young mothers often brought their toddlers with them to the quality control rooms in the village offices to make repairs. Sometimes, more deft workers were asked to help with repairs without additional pay, which was a source of complaints. However, refusal to repair the work could result in termination of assembly work. Therefore, it was rare for workers to defy against this instruction in order to maintain their employment.

#### 4.4.4. From disputes to the emergence of informal leaders

Low wages and strict supervision had been two main sources of tension between workers and company management. While wages might not be a daily dispute, they were the most central issue. The wages of homeworkers were substantially lower than those of factory workers, even compared to short-contract and casual workers. The wages for home-based workers were mostly decided unilaterally by the company management. By contrast, factory worker wages adhered to regional minimum wage regulations and were decided based on the collective labour agreement reached by the union and the company management. The minimum wage at the time was Rp 1,208,200 (approximately 73.22 Euros) per month, which was 50%-100% higher than the average wage, as a collective income (i.e., the combined income of all family members), earned by homeworkers. If calculated on an individual basis within the household, the wages of homeworkers became extremely lower.

Although the wages for home-based workers increased periodically, it was at a slower pace than the rise of factory workers' wages. The home-based workers

considered that the wage system was unfair as it reduced severely the economic value of their work, threatening the continuity of the reproduction of labour power.<sup>143</sup> Some of the wage increases over the past 10 years were even the result of protests by the workers rather than employers' voluntary actions. For instance, in 2006, around 200 home-based workers went on strike because management withheld their wages while the wages of factory workers regularly increased through minimum wage negotiations. It was the first strike by home-based workers. A former home worker<sup>144</sup>, who participated in the strike, shared her fear about the seventy police officers who were guarding the factory area while the workers protested from outside the factory fence. However, as a result of the strike, all shoe manually assembly wages were increased by 30%.

In 2013, a potential of wage increase emerged as an effect of large demonstrations initiated by factory union leader (see the previous section of this chapter). The negotiations during the protest, however, resulted only in the increase wage for the factory workers, while deferring the wage increase for home-based workers until the following year. However, paradoxically, it led to tightening of work controls, followed by a massive reduction in casual workers. Less productive permanent workers, including key union activists, were laid off. Supervisors closely monitored also the speed of work and the productivity of all categories of workers, including homeworkers who were recruited to be factory workers, through timekeeping.<sup>145</sup> The pressure from quality control supervisors became even more intense. Wulan, a home-based worker who was recruited to be a quality control officer at the prison, complained when she was accused by her leader to be too lenient. She said, "I was scolded almost every day and told to be firm. But as homemaker, I know the actual situation of this work. I went to my friend, and crying, [I said] I didn't want to be quality control [officer] anymore."

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143 The average wage for an individual homemaker is only approximately 50%, or even less, of the Semarang district minimum wage. Additionally, the average minimum wage typically is just slightly above the standard for a decent living (KHL). In 2014, for instance, the minimum wage was only 2.7% higher than the KHL, which amounted to Rp. 1,176,817.77. This pattern is observed in many regions, particularly where labour unions lack strong influence, resulting in minimum wages lower than standard decent living. In practice, the home-based workers' wages, amounting to 50% of the minimum wage, severely constrain their ability to meet basic needs such as food, health, transportation, and housing, not to mention the educational needs of their children.

144 She is no longer working as a home-based worker and is currently earning money by selling foods, mainly to factory workers, which she considers more profitable and provides greater time flexibility .

145 Interview with line leader (1 June 2015), former unionist (18 May 2015), and two homeworkers (9 April 2014, 10 April 2014).

## Semarang: workers and workplace unionism

As a result, increased tensions turned to be a daily situation especially in every session of quality inspection, both in the villages and the factory, including the prisons. Most of the women were pressured to achieve the production output based on quality and quantity targets. While most workers adhered to the instructions, a few others boldly challenged the front-line managerial officers. Conflicts were often unavoidable.

An increase in wages occurred in 2015 which were an unexpected consequence of the protests. The workers' protest actually aimed at the Collective Labour Agreement (CLA) which was drawn up by the company that specifically regulated the employment relations of the home-based workers. The main issue in the protest was about the prohibition of home-based workers from protesting. The CLA was prepared unilaterally by the company without negotiation with workers. Instead of being successful in forcing the company to comply with the demands of declining the CLA, the demand was exchanged for an increase in wages through an unexpected negotiation carried out by a worker who claimed to be the workers representative. Although the increase in wages was profitable, this event created internal tension within the home-based workers themselves.



Photo 8 (left): A worker, carrying a bag filled with shoe components, prepared to return home to assemble the shoes.

Photo 9 (right): Home-based workers gathered at the distribution post in the village, submitting their work to the Quality Control (QC) officer for careful inspection.

The strikes, protests and negotiations can be closely related to the roles of key informal leaders among the home-based workers. In each village, there were workers who informally represented the voices of the colleagues. Some of these informal leaders emerged with the help of local NGO activists, as I will explain later. Some of them had long experience of working in factories, giving them

a better understanding of labour relations, workers' rights, and the widely felt sense of injustice.<sup>146</sup> This had been an important reference in understanding the work situation at Tapak as home-based workers.

However, the stronger impetus to become informal representatives mostly arose from the daily conflicts between workers and front-line managers, such as QC (Quality Control) officers and home-based labour line leaders. These conflicts reinforced workers' sense of marginalisation within the production system, but they also raise their awareness of the potential for resistance. For instance, Wani refused three times the offer to do assembly work in the factory. She suspected that the offer was a hidden way for the line leader to confine her activities outside the factory more strictly. As a result of her refusal, she was suspended an exaggerated-accusation of wrongdoing: untidy stitching and torn shoe. Then, she complained to a higher-level manager, who seemed more willing to listen to workers' voices. In his complaint to the manager, she emphasised the need for fairness and reminded the manager that many workers made similar mistakes. While visiting and negotiating directly with higher-level managers, which they called *going up (naik ke atas)*, could sometimes be effective in reducing pressure in the short term, it often proved ineffective in the long run, especially when market demand was high. Nonetheless, these negotiations have given management first-hand experience with workers' courage to stand up for their rights.

These workers who were active in voicing their working conditions were well aware of the significance of the home-based work's position in the production system. This helped them recognise their potential strengths. Several experiences demonstrate this valuable understanding, which became a reference for negotiations. The first is a comparison of the economic value of the product vis-a-vis working conditions. They knew the selling price of the products they made, based on verbal information from "the insiders".<sup>147</sup> This knowledge helped them to imagine the degree of exploitation they experienced. It was useful for negotiations with higher level management, to argue against what they considered as "unreasonable wage calculations". Armed with hand-written approximate calculations, Wani highlighted the imbalance between wages received and hours

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146 Before working with Tapak Company, Wani and his husband, worked in the metal factory during 90s. They learnt much about the despotic treatments of employers and the managements, and the way workers organised themselves in holding strikes.

147 They heard rumours from the insiders (factory workers) suggesting that the shoes cost more than one million Rupiah (more than 60 Euros). My search through the company's online shopping site found prices ranging from 90-150 Euros per pair of sandals or shoes. For confidentiality reason, the web link is not provided here.

worked, as well as the needs of their families to survive: such as food, clothing, health, transportation, children's education, etc. For this reason, she demanded that, at the very least, the repair work that was not received payment so far be rewarded with additional wages. Despite being unsuccessful, they had voiced it.

The second experience is related to an understanding of the significance of their work position. They recognise that the type of work they handle is part of the core of the company's production. Mona even demonstrated the importance of their work by showing me the stitching of the soles of the finished products she had worked on, saying, "Look, this is not a side job because the results are [physically] obvious. This is the same as assembling using a machine." In a separate interview, other critical homeworkers like Wulan, expressed the same sentiment, "if we [all home-based workers] stop working for two days simultaneously, all shoe production [that uses stitches] would come to a complete stop." The workers were proving their essential existence. This understanding has also demonstrated their awareness of the gap between the central position of their work and the marginalised and precarious status of home-based workers. Therefore, there is a significant gap between the circulation of production in real terms and the position of the workers as the real producers.

#### 4.4.5. Organising resistance amidst fragmented representation

Despite the emergence of several vocal informal leaders among the homeworkers, organising the homeworkers into a mobilised force has proven difficult. While hundreds of homeworkers had participated in mass protests, these actions had been largely reactive and lacking in an institutionalised organisation. Many others chose not to participate in spite of supporting the morals of the struggle. The vocal homemaker leaders expected to establish an organisation in two optional ways: either by joining an existing union or building their own recognised organisation. However, both options have proven difficult, due to three main sources of vulnerability. First, the majority of homeworkers tended to avoid conflict. Second, unionists had an exclusionary orientation. Third, NGOs that claimed to advocate for the workers created debilitating competition among the different organisations.

The informal leaders of the homeworkers expressed their frustration with the majority of homeworkers who were reluctant to organise and fear negotiating with management. Mona said, "We found it difficult to get them together. Even though they are willing to pay contributions [to finance joint activities], many of them still refused to take part in meeting activities let alone in organisation."

She added that workers who had been involved in organisations were even often reluctant to directly confront management about working conditions. In fact, according to Wani, all discontents were actually related to reasonable basic rights of workers, such as wage increases, holiday allowance (THR), rejection against termination of employment for a common mistake. Umi, one of the active workers said that what they demanded was still part of labour standards. “We just don’t want our wages to be too low. We don’t even insist on being paid the minimum wage.” However, some others also expressed a more fundamental demand: “We want the recognition of our rights as workers.” This statement refers to their status as partners which they thought worse than that of factory workers.

The position of homeworkers as partners (*mitra*) in the production relations has been the source of vulnerability as it constitutes a false status of the relations. This partnership is different from the concept of social partnership in the European industrial relations tradition, which has a long history of consensus building through institutional support for negotiations between workers, unions and employers’ representatives (Keller 2004, 211-253). At the Tapak Company, the partners relationship lacked an institutional structure that allowed for dialogue. Collective Bargaining Agreements had been concluded by the company without any real negotiation with the home-based workers. The absence of employment contract, apart from the registration of workers’ names, illustrates the precarious relationship of workers. The practices of partnership are contradictory as they are marked by unequal working relationships. The fear of the majority of workers having a dialogue, let alone arguing, with the QC officer sufficiently illustrates this inequality. Although the use of a labour force structure dominated by village women is not a consequence of the concept of partnership, it confirms this inequality. The use of female labour massively is typical in labour-intensive industries that take advantage of the tradition of women’s submissiveness and obedience to establish tight control over their workforce (Momsen 2010, 210).

The vulnerable position of home-based workers is not only caused by their false-partner status but also by their high dependence on precarious work, which discourages them from confronting the company management. For many workers, especially for those whose partners had low-paying jobs in the informal economy or in farming, assembling shoes was not a sideline but the main source of income instead. Since the average age of workers and their partners was around forty, implying the presence of children at home, they found it difficult to secure more stable jobs like those who had permanent status in factories. Therefore, the threat of losing their shoe assembly work was a risk that could

jeopardise their family's finances. As a result, they were willing to tolerate poor working conditions as long as they could keep their jobs. This structural inequality makes their position very weak when dealing with the company management. Thus, when the management tightened work control after the 2013 strike, most workers did not resist strongly, except for a few bold ones who challenged the management for collective interests, while others merely complained and relied on those informal leaders.

While a handful of informal representatives tried to fight for better working conditions of all home-based labour, local trade unions remained aloof. In my interviews with the homeworkers, they complained of the indifference of the unionists both at the company level and at the district level. Likewise, in every meeting I had with unionists, the discourse on homeworkers was almost absent, both in daily conversations and in official union meetings.

The SPN union only raised the issue of homeworkers on a large scale during a major demonstration in 2013 led by the Catur leadership (see earlier in this chapter). This issue was a part of a package of demands of various issues, particularly wage increases for all categories of workers at Tapak Company. However, the issue of homeworkers was only a minor concern. Furthermore, it was not supported by much interaction between the unionists and the homeworkers, even while the issue was raised in the protest actions. Wani told me that he had discussed homeworkers' rights with SPN leaders at the provincial level during an official meeting, but there were no concrete follow-up actions at the district and company level. This effort was further hindered when the company laid off a number of active unionists following the demonstration.

After the management of the union changed and a new organisation called KSPN emerged due to union split, the issue of homeworkers was once again neglected. When I attended the annual general meeting of union members (*rakerta*) in May 2015, there was no discussion about home-based workers. The discourse revolved solely around permanent workers and union members. The issue of short-contract workers and casual workers was even only mentioned briefly. Unionists at the factory and regional levels perceived the home-based workers simply as a category set by the company's management, namely, the partners (*mitra*). Consequently, the unionists excluded the home-based workers from potential constituencies of the trade union. The dominant discourse of SPN and KSPN only revolved around wages and formal institutions, as previously explained in this chapter. Even if they discussed the issues of employment

status, such as the rejection of outsourced labour and excessive use of contract labour, home-based work outside factories was not a central concern.

The focus on wages and neglect of other critical issues demonstrates how union leaders have failed to grasp the social relations of the production system. While informal women leaders among home-based workers, such as Wani and Wulan, had recognised the significance of their job position in the production system and the potential for resistance, union leaders lacked the same perception. Across different levels and hierarchies, the unionists failed to perceive the underlying structure of production relations which was concealed by company's narratives, discourses and concept of partners. Instead, the unionists and factory workers reinforced the company's narratives about the irrelevance of the workplace arena beyond the factory walls - in the community and the household.

A new understanding about the home-based labour began to emerge among a small circle of union leaders at the factory level, when TURC, a labour NGO from Jakarta, held a union-workshop on this issue in mid-2015. The NGO introduced the notion on the linkages between production structures and the labour process in home-based labour, which assist them to uncover the real social and economic relations of this work. While this step was undoubtedly useful in making a small breakthrough for the relationship between the unionists and the home-based workers, it does not improve significantly the existing problem of the lack of representation. The union's shift in attitude towards home-based workers has been facing both internal and external constraints. Internally, it was constrained by the traditional union activism model that emphasises factory-workplace issues, which has been firmly established and institutionalised. It is also worth noting that it is also a legacy of the past corporatist-union tradition perpetuated by most union leaders at both the corporate and regional levels. Externally, the company's tendency to maintain a decentralised production strategy is a significant constraint. Decentralisation is a favourable form of labour control that was supported by local governments.<sup>148</sup>

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148 Local NGO activists described that Semarang manpower office officials used the language that aligned with company management, referring to homeworkers as *partners*, instead of home workers. I witnessed this first-hand during a dialogue meeting between NGO activists and the local government at the provincial level, where the officials seemed hesitant to acknowledge the existence of these homeworkers. They cited the national regulations as preventing an explicit recognition (Observation 6 May 2015 at the meeting between NGOs and Askesra [Assistant to Governor on People Welfare at the Central Java Province]).

Filling this representation gap, NGOs played a critical role in advocating for home-based workers. They provided trainings, organised meetings, conducted research projects, engaged in dialogues with local governments, and encouraged union involvement. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), TURC (Trade Union Right Centre) based in Jakarta, and some other organisations had also entered into this area in Semarang. Among these organisations, Yasanti has had the longest and most intensive engagement with home-based workers. It has been working on this issue in Semarang since 2008, and its most significant contribution has been to raise awareness about the precarious position of home-based workers, to identify potential leaders, to build a workers' identity, and to assist them to legal recognition.<sup>149</sup> Although the Tapak's home-based workers were not the only group of beneficiaries, they were the largest group that Yasanti has supported.

Yasanti's interaction with Tapak's homeworkers began through their acquaintance with Wani, a former factory worker who switched to working from home after being retrenched. This marked the beginning of Yasanti's shift in focus from factory workers, which had begun from 1982, to the issue of homeworkers. Since then, Yasanti's activities have received positive responses from home-based workers in local villages, which enabled the organisation to identify potential leaders.

This organisation provided support by organising workers' meetings, which were aimed at workers from various companies, including Tapak's homeworkers. Some groups continued to hold their own internal gatherings. For example, some workers from a sporting goods factory preferred to have periodic *arisan* meetings.<sup>150</sup> However, the most important consolidated meetings among Tapak's workers took place on the day of distribution. These meetings were held

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149 The foundation of Yasanti in Semarang is a response to the region's industrialisation (Istiatun and Khasanah 2011, 35-49). While Yasanti's activities on homeworkers may be relatively recent, but the organisation has been advocating for groups of women industrial workers in the Semarang area since 1982. Yasanti's presence in Yogyakarta also traces back to the same year. Despite being a small organisation managed by a woman activist and supported by only 4-5 other activists with loose ties, Yasanti has successfully forged collaborations local union leaders and other NGOs and donor institutions.

150 *Arisan* is a traditional gathering activity that holds various meanings depending on cultural context and social class, influencing its function, purpose and resources. Typically attended by adult women, especially those who are already working or married, *arisan* involves regularly collecting funds from each member and then circulating them on rotation. The gathering serves not only a means to poll funds but also a platform for socialisation and fostering a sense of togetherness and cohesion among members based on shared identity, whether it is territorial or based on other social bonds.

informally in places such as village offices and Tapak's factory, where workers exchanged information and encouraged negotiations, while waiting for the inspection process and taking on additional tasks. Sometimes, Yasanti activists visited these meetings to discuss and observe.

Despite difficulties in maintaining routine meetings due to timing issues, the informal leaders of the workers and the Yasanti activists still found them valuable for sharing their complaints and expectations with grassroots workers. The activists played an important role in these meetings by educating workers about their legal rights and encouraging collective awareness of shared challenges. The meetings also aimed to identify informal representatives who could bring workers' complaints to quality control officers, line leaders, and even company managers.<sup>151</sup>

NGOs took strategic steps to build networks with other groups and organisations that have greater influence. This activity was carried out by various organisations at the local, national, and international levels, with Yasanti often playing a major and sustainable role. In collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and European NGOs, these organisations brought the issue of home-based labour into wider public policy discourses, at both the national and international levels. Some activists also engaged in dialogues with local governments at the provincial level, together with representatives of home-based workers from various regions, to push for legal recognition of the homeworkers.



Photo 10: Home-based workers participating in 2015 International Labour Day (May Day) celebrations in Semarang with the support of a local NGO.

<sup>151</sup> The workers' complaints can pertain to various aspects of their work, such as the work or production process, wages, and treatment from quality control officers or supervisors. The issues raised by the workers include sewing needle damage, difficulty in stitching new shoe materials, non-existent repair fees, and undue pressure from line-leaders that is considered unjust by the homeworkers.

On one hand, the steps taken by NGO activists provided hope to homeworkers for more favourable possibilities. However, as they expanded the networks and mobilised wider external resources, the situation became more complicated, causing concerns and tensions among various groups of workers as well as the activists. For instance, workers realised that the steps taken by NGOs in collaboration with the ILO to bring their issues into public policy discourse might directly impact them (ILO/MAMPU 2015). Some workers were also concerned about the NGO activists pressuring Tapak companies by involving international NGOs, causing some home-based worker leaders to feel alienated and raising concerns of unintended impacts, such as job loss. Meanwhile, workers and some other NGO activists preferred approaches directly involving immediate authorities, such as initiating dialogues with the Central Java provincial government. The divergent approaches among NGOs not only created confusion and alienation among home-based workers, but also sparked rivalries among several NGO activists competing for the most effective strategy.

Until the end of this field research, there have been no significant changes in the situations faced by home-based workers, who continued to work in precarious conditions without effective representation to make their voices heard. Instead of being able to unite into an organisation with the support of NGO activists, they found themselves entangled in patronage conflicts with different NGO activists, leading to divisions among their informal leaders. This vulnerable condition led to further fragmentation among the workers in the grass roots.

## Summary

This chapter has underscored that workplace-oriented unionism can extend beyond the confines of traditional understandings of industrial workplace, such as factories. It has demonstrated how such unions can find themselves engaging with industries that include home-based work which have been integrated into the social fabric of homes and communities. The exclusion of spaces beyond the conventional workplace by these unionists reveals the power relations inherent in defining the workplace. The deliberate separation of home-based workers from factories, designed to maximise capital accumulation, highlights an unequal power structure where unionists and even factory workers are often unaware of the existence of other such categories of workers within the same constituency.

Workplace-oriented unionism also does not imply complete isolation from social and political experiences beyond the conventional workplace. This case study has revealed the involvement of Semarang unionists in electoral political

experiments and community-based advocacy. However, reducing political steps to conventional interests, especially the wage struggle, without understanding broader socio-political foundations undermines their own political endeavours. Failures in electoral experiments and discontinuity in social advocacy programs indicate that the reductionist orientation does not add value to workplace-based struggles.

Thus, the character of workplace unionism is fundamentally shaped by the goals of the struggle and the development of organising culture of union. Many unions with a similar orientation prioritise the so-called 'normative' interests as the core of their movement's goals, highlighting the significant influence of the state in defining workers' and unions' sphere of interests. This, however, also reveals how unionists interpret these ideas separated from the evolving and intricate capital strategies that surpass the 'normative' conception. This suggests that unions, especially those struggling to move beyond the legacies of New Order state corporatism, face difficulties in shedding state hegemony over the labour regime's design. Such unions often become preoccupied with wage issues as the central discourse, neglecting critical attention to subtle capital strategies shaping an increasingly challenging labour structure for unions to organise.

I have shown that the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital, both within the workplace and extending into other aspects of life, is not solely sufficient for building critical awareness about the forms of exclusion and fragmentation among workers created by capital. My findings show that conflicts in the workplace generate varying levels of awareness among different groups of workers and unionists. The accumulation of conflict experience is crucial, particularly evident among home-based worker leaders and certain critical young unionists. However, senior workers or those occupied solely within the factory environment, distancing themselves from critical groups outside the labour movement, exhibit a different perspective.