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

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Chapter 6

Inclusive Unionism and Fragmented Constituents

Introduction

The Pekalongan branch of SPN is different from the union activism of Semarang. The Pekalongan branch of SPN has actively promoted community-based interests. Their activism includes the formation of diverse coalitions, active engagement in various community groups, intensive interactions with the local polity, and experimentation in electoral politics. This approach aligns with what scholars define as “community unions” (Mollona 2009) (Stewart, et al. 2009), which I discussed in the Introduction. It is not an exhaustive and rigid concept when used to understand union development in Pekalongan. Instead, the emergence of this kind of unionism in this region is a historical product reflecting a transformation from a workplace unionism into a community-oriented one. This transformation was accompanied by numerous challenges.

This chapter explores the union transformation in Pekalongan amid changing local economic and political contexts in the early decade of Indonesian reformation, leading to a community unionism. The chapter discusses the consequences of these changes on the representation relations between the unionists and the increasingly diverse constituents. The first section of this chapter describes the emergence of the union in Pekalongan and the key unionists who occupy different layers of the organisation, where they learned experiences from labour conflicts and organising activism, providing a social foundation for union development. The second section explains how the unionists attempted to dismantle past union corporatism inherited from the past authoritarian labour regime, laying the foundation for further organisational transformation. The third and fourth sections discuss the main research question of this chapter: how did the SPN unionists in Pekalongan develop their union organisation into a community-oriented unionism and what social processes were involved? This is represented by wider networks of coalitions, expanding activism targeting the urban poor to defend their rights as citizens, and the union’s experiments in electoral politics involving diverse constituents. These sections also examine the dilemma of the character of this form of labour movement, highlighting limitations and contradictions in achieving this orientation.

6.1. The Emergent Leaders: Paving the path for union transformation

The development of new unions in Pekalongan involves a significant contribution from the generation of unionists that emerged during local labour unrests in the era of the current labour regime, relatively disconnected from the past authoritarian era. This is in contrast to the situation in Semarang, where senior unionists took more dominant roles and faced challenges in dismantling the influence of the past authoritarian labour regime in navigating their local unionism. The social, economic, and political context of Pekalongan in this era exerted pressures and offered opportunities for the formation of distinct union leadership roles, which, in turn, shaped their interpretation of the direction of union transformation.

6.1.1. The Founders: Initiating a Distinct Local Union

The origins of the Pekalongan organisation can be traced back to the split in the SPSI Federation in 1998. Dissatisfied with SPSI's inability to safeguard workers' interests independently and enabled by a new democratic labour regime in Indonesia's reformation era, leaders of the Textile-Garment-Leather Union (SPTSK), one of the union divisions affiliated to this federation, decided to form a new independent union. Bowo and Basir, unionists at the Kismatex local textile factory, initiated the formation of a new local union in Pekalongan affiliated with the "new" SPTSK under the umbrella of a new federation, SPSI-Reformasi.¹⁷⁷ Thousands of workers from various local garment and textile factories immediately joined this new union.

This affiliation, however, was short-lived. In 2003, the union broke away from SPSI-Reformasi, adopting a new affiliation: SPN (the National Workers Union). The name change signalled a departure from sectoral exclusivity, expanding the union's base beyond textile and garment industries. Although these sectors still formed the majority of the membership, the union successfully recruited members from diverse industries, including service industries and other manufacturing sectors.

¹⁷⁷ As a symbolic strong reaction to resist against the existing union, the workers who seceded from the SPSI established a new union with similar name with a new orientation: SPSI-Reformasi. The term *reformasi* gained popularity in the early years after the fall of Suharto, symbolising anti-authoritarian and democratic ideals in various organisations and activisms. Nonetheless, the structure of this union closely resembled that of SPSI, including in its nomenclature like SPTSK. This name was completely the same with another name under the "old" SPSI.

This organisational shift marked a milestone, setting the stage for the emergence of new key actors in the local labour movement. Changes in leadership at the SPN city branch level also occurred, influenced by the local political environment (see the political section of this chapter). Within a year of SPN's foundation in Pekalongan, the main leaders began expressing political interests, with Bowo engaging with political parties while maintaining his position as SPN branch leader. Basir transitioned to the Regional General Elections Commission (KPUD) searching for new experience in local politics before eventually leaving SPN.

In exchange for the vacant secretariat position, in 2004, Bowo appointed a new unionist named Budhy Prathamo (known as Budhy) to replace Basir. Unlike Bowo and Basir who experienced the New Order's authoritarian rule firsthand, Budhy represents a generation of unionists shaped by Post Authoritarian labour regime. He entered the workforce after the fall of Suharto's regime in 1998, avoided from direct exposure to tightly state-controlled labour conditions. Instead, he perceived workplace labour conflicts through the lens of the new democratic political culture.

Before assuming a leadership role in the local union office, Budhy was employed in a lower managerial position, as an assistant to a supervisor at Sri Ratu Department Store, a non-unionised company, owned by an Indonesian Chinese business family residing in Semarang City. Budhy quickly learned about workplace injustices and collective resistance. Motivated by poor working conditions and facilitated by Bowo and other local union leaders, Budhy and his colleagues clandestinely prepared and successfully formed a union affiliated with the SPTSK of SPSP-Reformasi. This, however, marked the beginning of prolonged tension between the Sri Ratu management and its three hundred and fifty employees, a story that will be further detailed in subsequent sections. Budhy's conflicts with management escalated into a personal conflict when the union's affiliation shifted to SPN following changes in the local union. This ongoing animosity from the management culminated in Budhy's decision to resign after five years of organising the union in that company, moving to SPN for a new role as a branch union secretary.

In contrast to other union leaders and members who grew up in industrial working-class communities, Budhy comes from a fairly wealthy rural family in a village in Salatiga. At the time, he stood out as the only union member who had completed university studies in Solo, one of the larger cities in Central Java. Despite his different social background, Budhy, who was part of the critical young

middle class, engaged in a wide range of activism and gained broad experience in a wide range of political issues. His unique combination of social networks included involvement in both religious-affiliated networks and the leftist student movement. This duality, typically in fierce competition in Indonesian political history (see Chapter 2), provided him with a distinctive learning process on his involvements in various activism, as he explained as follows,

With SMID¹⁷⁸ student movements, I joined discussions, actions of solidarity, and labour protests in Solo. We discussed about the [authoritarianism of] New Order regime. By following the discussions and the [student's] actions, I became aware of the problems of the marginalised and the significance of networking. In GP Ansor¹⁷⁹ and Mosque Youth Communication Forum, I also learnt not only religious activities, but also followed inter-faith discussions that were organised against the pressures of [conservative] local leaders and regional government policy. These activities encouraged me to learn much, and build solidarities and the courage to organise.¹⁸⁰

Budhy's wide range of experiences, contrasting with the factory-centric backgrounds of his colleagues, earned him a broader view on marginalised issues in diverse social environments beyond workplace boundaries. This distinctive biographical context highlights how it also provided wider networks, a social capital accumulated from his positions in the middle class. According to Bourdieu, social capital is inherently individual and is typically acquired based on one's position within a specific social class. Different social classes generate varying sizes of resources for creating this capital (Bourdieu 1986). This perspective contrasts with from Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1990), who conceptualised social capital as a source of broader social integration, often overlooking the inherent inequalities within the social structure and the roles of agency (Portes 2000; Tzanakis 2013).

178 SMID (Student's Solidarity for Democracy) was a student's organisation established during the Suharto's era aimed at mobilising resistance against the authoritarian regime. The organisation had branches in cities of university's students. The organisation is also linked with the underground leftist political party, the PRD (Democratic People Party) which was mostly organised by students, but connected with workers' and peasant's movements at the grass root level (Sastramidjaja 2016, 229) (Nasution 1994)

179 Ansor Youth Movement was one of the large wing organisations under Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Its area of activities covers broad fields of social concerns of the national youth that are parallel with Islamic values based on NU traditions, although in practice the activities inevitably intersect with political fields (Alamsyah and Yulianto 2018).

180 Field notes collection of my interview with Budhy Phratamo, 12 October 2010, updated on 11 January 2021.

6.1.2. Transitional Agents: Learning from the Battles

While senior unionists, particularly Budhy and Bowo, at the top level of the local SPN branch organisation were pioneers in institutionalising changes within the local union, younger unionists at lower levels emerged as transitional agents who inherited and advanced the ideas shared by their seniors. The process was underpinned particularly by the crucial experiences in production relations that shaped their trade union consciousness under current labour regime.

The labour disputes in Pekalongan during 2009-2010 have served as an arena where numerous young workers learned about their rights, strategies to challenge private and state authorities, and the ways to become a powerful organised labour force. This period witnessed the birth and cultivation of new transitional agents, guided and supported by their senior counterparts.

Several reasons contribute to understanding why these years were particularly significant. Firstly, they were characterised by a severe economic depression, particularly, in the textile industries (Budyanti 2018, 128-131). To secure their businesses, numerous textile and garment companies in Pekalongan attempted to reduce labour costs, risking a wave of industrial conflicts involving unions and thousands of workers. Secondly, 2009 and 2010 marked the first large scale industrial strikes in Pekalongan since the reign of New Order regime.¹⁸¹ These industrial conflicts immediately raised awareness among Pekalongan workers about the opportunities to resist and assert their rights. The third reason is connected to the transformative phase of the local SPN. In 2009, Bowo achieved a peak in his political career by being elected as the local parliament (DPRD) leader in Pekalongan City while concurrently holding his leadership position in SPN. The combination of these two positions bolstered the confidence of local SPN unionists of their own power and enhanced their leverage to challenge business pressures. Fourthly, 2009 also marked a phase in which SPN leaders developed diverse networks in labour movements, facilitating the exchange of experiences and strategic social support for their collective actions.¹⁸²

181 The number of industrial dispute cases in Pekalongan City has shown relative stability each year since the enactment of the law on freedom of labour association, averaging around 29 cases annually (refer to Data of Industrial Disputes in Pekalongan City, 2001-2011, Disnakertrans Kota Pekalongan). However, there is a noticeable increase in the number of workers involved in these disputes since 2002, with a significant upswing observed from 2004 onwards, shortly after the transition from SPTSK to SPN, marked by the emergence of younger generation leaders. Between 2007 and 2010, the disputes involved thousands of workers, characterised by widespread protests, particularly related to layoff cases.

182 Further detailed illustration on the political moves of Bowo and the local unionists, and the roles of

Momentous battles: union militancy and the emergence of young unionists

Despite industrial unrest in various sectors, the labour disputes in textile-garment factories from 2009 to 2010 are among the largest industrial conflicts in Pekalongan. These conflicts significantly contributed to the initial consciousness of local workers and unionists about their own social class and potential strength. The most substantial disputes occurred in the Kismatex group textile factories. Involving thousands of workers organised by dozens of SPN unionists, the labour disputes transformed into a fierce collective action with political nuances. The disputes served as a testing ground for union leaders to persistently resist, combining political leverage in their actions, benefiting from their leader's political position.

Among the four textile companies of the Kismatex Group experiencing labour conflicts, Mujatex textile factory stood out as the most renowned arena of dispute. Lasting from 2009 to mid-2010, the dispute was ignited by a production crisis resulting from a sluggish national textile market and increased competition, particularly from cheap China's imported textile products.¹⁸³ The owners of Kismatex found themselves unable to defend the Mujatex factory, especially after shutting down three other factories.¹⁸⁴ At the end of 2009, Sritex, a giant textile company in Greater Solo, Central Java, owned by a local of Indonesian Chinese descent, agreed to acquire Mujatex.

The acquisition decision sparked labour protests at the Mujatex factory. The workers' anger arose for two main reasons. Firstly, the management unilaterally decided on the acquisition without involving SPN representatives. Secondly,

union networks will be discussed in separate special section of this chapter.

183 An owner of textile factory in Pekalongan expressed concerns about the business threats caused by the influx of inexpensive products from Bangladesh, Vietnam, and particularly China (Interview with Andi, The owner of the Tritex factory, 12 February 2014). This apprehension seemed justified, given that the national contribution of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in the textile and garment industry had been continuously decreasing since 2009. Local media reports from the past few years also highlighted the growing anxiety among local and national businesses regarding the potential impact of the Asean-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), implemented since 2010, on the local industries (Suara Merdeka, 20 January and 10 February, 2010)

184 Mujatex Factory faced a severe production crisis, being unable to compete in the local markets due to outdated machines they used. The head of personnel department of Mujatex told that most of the product they made, especially yarns for T-shirt making, were rejected by the buyers because the factory was unable to meet the developed standard of textile quality in competitive markets (Wawasan 30 December 2009).

word of mouth among workers revealed despotic labour relations practices in Sritex Company, causing restlessness among Mujatex workers for the acquisition. Workers feared that the change in company ownership would worsen employment relations. The discontent led to strikes, initially rejecting the acquisition, which eventually transformed into a demand for the layoff of all permanent workers as the owners insisted for not cancelling the acquisition.

The dispute unfolded over months, involving various actors from factory workers to the local politicians. Young female SPN leaders played a key role in mobilising workers, organising strikes, and raising demands within the factory. Meanwhile, local branch union leaders, led by Budhy, supplied legal information, facilitated negotiations, orchestrated protests, local NGO activists supports, including facilitated mediation of local Manpower officials. They also brought the case into the political sphere, leveraging Bowo's dual role (as the union leader and the chair of the DPRD) to seek support from other local political elites, particularly the local Mayor, against Sritex Company. Workers and unionists continuously pressed both the owners of Mujatex and Sritex by blocking the factory gates, leaving managements and owners locked inside, forcing them to settle the dispute. The unionists utilised local mass media to influence local public opinion, framing the labour dispute as their struggle against despotic employers and a contestation between local authorities and an external large company.¹⁸⁵

While the workers' resistance was ultimately celebrated by local SPN leaders as a "great success," it ended in mass layoffs of eight hundred permanent workers, all of whom were also local SPN members.¹⁸⁶ This represented a significant loss of union membership, not to mention the other thousands of workers laid off for the shutdown of the other three Kismatex's factories.¹⁸⁷ It was, however, still considered a symbol of an achievement for the union leaders as this outcome met workers' expectations in terms of severance payments. Despite the loss of jobs, the leaders view the entire resistance and its outcome as a milestone in laying the groundwork for union militancy and the emergence of new young leaders.

185 The narrative was conveyed by some local SPN leaders and it was also extensively reported by local medias such as Radar Pekalongan and Suara Merdeka.

186 Field Note nterview with Khotib, an activist from Yawas, June 2010.

187 In a separate field note of my interview in 2010 with an NGO activist who joined the Mujatex workers' protest to provide assistance, he revealed that many workers were reinstated in Mujatex as non-permanent workers instead of returning to their previous status as permanent labour. Some others moved to new factories for new jobs, while the rest transitioned to the informal economy, such as becoming street vendors.

The following wave of protests

During the same period as the Mujatex case, several other dispute cases gained attention in the local community. While some involved small-scale enterprises like protests against layoffs at the Sentono Batik Cooperative and Mahardika Pharmacy, two noteworthy cases were the chronic dispute at the Sri Ratu Department Store and the industrial conflict at Blue Sea Indonesia (BSI), a canned fish manufacturing company.

The Sri Ratu dispute stemmed from workers' demands for a profit-sharing bonus and the closure of the employee cooperative due to mismanagement and lack of transparency in financial arrangements. The protests, however, escalated when the company laid off eighty-nine employees due to the lack of company's ability to face the presence of new competitors in this business. Despite not being as dramatic as the Mujatex case, Sri Ratu workers' street protests and boycott campaigns, drew significant local attention. SPN unionists, facilitated by Bowo, also brought the case into the local political space, engaging in dialogues with the labour commission of the DPRD. This dispute became a chronic issue, reappearing in 2014 with more complexities.



Photo 15 (by Mundochi): Surrounded by a group of police officers ensuring the safety of the protest, the union leader of a textile company delivered an impassioned speech at a workers-demonstration in Pekalongan. The workers were politically supported, demanding the right to unionise.

In the same year, an industrial conflict erupted at BSI, a canned fish manufacturing company owned by a South Korean business. This marked the emergence of bold female leadership in the Pekalongan labour movement. This presents a contrast portrait to the factory women workers in Semarang, who were mostly passive. Led by hundreds of militant women workers of the fish head cutting division in the factory, the disputes began with protests against the layoff of three workers and the furlough of twenty-one others.¹⁸⁸ The protest eventually escalated into demands for the enforcement of labour standards.¹⁸⁹ The dispute took nearly a year to settle, involving various actions such as strikes, street protests, and political engagement with local leaders.¹⁹⁰

Despite the challenges in assessing the success of workers' collective actions, their engagement in each action had notable effects. Firstly, it led to the development of a new consciousness among the workers regarding their identity as a working class in contrast to the capitalists. Secondly, these experiences made workers aware of their collective forces, particularly due to the establishment of the union in the workplace and the attainment of gradual victories through organised pressures. The organisational movements under the SPN's flag provided evidence of a powerful collective vehicle in contentious actions. This organisational capacity increased their leverage in dealings with managements and local authorities, altering the way management perceived the strength of the workers (see Photo 15). The growth of such collective consciousness significantly influenced an increase in workers' enthusiasm to unionise and engage more with SPN branch leaders.

The mid-layer unionists

The labour troubles of 2009-2010 in Pekalongan had been the ground for shaping and reproducing new leaders across various levels of unions. Leadership, at both the branch and grassroots levels, naturally emerged through interactions with fellow workers and other supporters, confrontations with management, and dealing with local authorities. In cases like Mujatex, Sri Ratu, and BSI, unionists' militancy was generated through official positions in factory-level unions, where its effectiveness was tested in representing the voice of their members. While central figures like Budhy played central roles, younger unionists appeared and

188 Furlough in Indonesia (*merumahkan*) refers to the management's measure for not hiring the employees temporarily due to some reasons, either the employees' misconduct or the company economic crisis.

189 See Radar Pekalongan 29 April 2010; 14 May 2010.

190 See Suara Merdeka and Radar Pekalongan 14 May 2010.

actively participated in negotiations and information circulation, and bridging interactions among various supporting individuals and groups. Their involvement fostered a deeper understanding of union roles and responsibilities.

Disputes and collective actions not only represented instances of resistance, but also served as a source for knowledge circulation, offering valuable insights into the roles of unionists that proved beneficial for other workers and encouraged the emergence of new workers leaders and unionists in various workplaces in Pekalongan. Workers shared knowledge with each other through telling stories about their experiences. Additionally, the local media reports contributed in shedding light on the emergence of new leaders and the creation of role models. For example, media coverage highlighted the leadership of courageous female workers from BSI and recognised Budhy as the “Man of the Year 2010”.

Thus, the period of 2009-2010 stands out as a crucial phase in the development of the local SPN, serving as the breeding ground for new leadership and laying the foundation for continued union transformation. This period yielded three significant consequences. Firstly, the emergence of young leadership differed from particularly their senior counterparts who grew mostly in the era of past authoritarian labour regime. Their involvement in contentious actions under current labour regime became a crucial subjective experience that shaped trade union consciousness. Secondly, the interactions and engagements of union leaders in these actions fostered bonds between workers and the union, while simultaneously strengthening the leadership of local branch-level unionists.

In 2012, a change in leadership occurred with Budhy resigning to assume a new position as an ad-hoc judge at the labour court in different region, and a young unionist, Dammy, taking over, appointed by Bowo. Similar to many other factory workers, Dammy gained organisational experience through his workplace life. He joined SPSI in 1995 at Tritex textile factory in Pekalongan, initially as an ordinary member of the union. However, with the national reform and the subsequent splits of SPSI, Dammy and his colleagues established a non-national-affiliation enterprise union in the factory. He eventually became the leader of this union, representing 110 members, which covered nearly half of the entire workforce of the factory. Following successful strikes by Dammy’s union, they were invited to join the new SPTSK led by Bowo, impressed by their achievements. This merger marked the end of union conflicts and competition in the textile factory, as all union members eventually joined the SPTSK, which later transformed into the new SPN. This unification also elevated Dammy to a higher level of unions, facilitating collaboration with Budhy.

Similar to many other factory workers, Dammy acquired organisational experience through workplace. In 1995, he joined SPSI at Tritex textile factory in Pekalongan, initially as a regular union member. However, with the national reform and subsequent splits within SPSI, Dammy and his colleagues established a non-national-affiliation enterprise union within the factory, while the old SPSI remained existed. Over time, he ascended to the leadership role of his union, representing 110 members, covering nearly half of the entire workforce of the factory. Following successful strikes by Dammy's leadership, they received an invitation to join the new SPTSK led by Bowo, who was impressed by their achievements. This merger marked the end of union conflicts and competition in the textile factory, as all union members eventually joined the SPTSK, which later transformed into the new SPN. This unification also elevated Dammy to a higher level within the unions, facilitating collaboration with Budhy.

Despite changes in SPN leadership style, Budhy's legacy persisted, attempting to maintain militant values, leadership structures, and a commitment to community unionism (discussed further in the next section). Despite his leaving the union, the close personal relations between Budhy and the transitional young leaders endured through informal communication and personal interactions. In essence, Budhy's leadership gave a significant contribution in encouraging the new generation by effectively managing various resources during nearly the first decade of the local SPN.

6.1.3. Initiating Changes in Values

Strategic actions, contentious experiences, and the growing networks of workers in Pekalongan have significantly influenced the transformation of ideas, values, and consciousness within the local labour movements. These changes have marked an essential phase in the first decade as union leaders aimed to break down the traditional legacy of the past labour regime. They played a crucial role in disseminating new values and ideas among their members, particularly the unionists in workplaces.

The SPN leaders broke through the barriers between leaders and members, fostering new values, and encouraging various learning processes. They aimed to dismantle the traditional barriers inherited from the New Order's labour regime, which had created a distance between members and leaders at different levels. Unlike the past, when union leaders were often not genuine workers' representatives elected through democratic processes, the new approach involved actively opening internal dialogues between branch leaders and union members.

Pekalongan: unions, workers, and communities

These dialogues, sometimes attended by others from the union's networks, created a new atmosphere within the organisation.

The union office also transformed into a vibrant hub of various activities, serving as a place for organisational meetings, gatherings, consultations, trainings, including journalistic interviews (see Photo 16). It became a site of integration for union members from various local companies, fostering shared interests, exchanging experiences and ideas, and building a collective identity as union members. The union office provided a platform for workers to discuss daily problems encountered in the shop floors, examine solutions, learn leadership skills, absorb knowledge and fundamental ideas of movements introduced by the leaders and other sources like NGO activists and invited academicians.



Photo 16: Workers from various companies gathered at SPN branch Office in Pekalongan for union training workshop

These occasions served as an informal training ground, facilitating knowledge exchange and internalisation of values beneficial for organisational goals and operational necessities of workplace unionist, such as negotiating with employers and organising contentious actions. Additionally, these informal dialogues provided leaders with more opportunities to establish bonds between branch leaders and workplace unionists, injecting values of labour militancy.

A Language of militancy

Language plays a significant role in shaping the new values of labour movements, acting as the symbolic tool in contentious politics. According to Tarrow (2013, 21), language is functional in constructing and diffusing contentious politics. Workers adopt and learnt specific words or phrases used for challenging existing power structures. They serve as a strategic framing against the dominant political culture imposed by the state and capitalists (Ives 2004, 90). Local SPN unionists and other activists within SPN's networks perceived the significance of strategic use of language. By adopting words that carry specific meanings to build a sense of class antagonism, they aimed to break the historical chain of cultural legacy from the past authoritarian regime.

A crucial example is the use of word “buruh” (labourer). This term emphasises workers' subordinate position in production relations, symbolising a resistance against the oppression of corporate authority. Therefore, SPN leaders preferred the term “buruh” over more neutral and formal terms like the words “pekerja” (worker), and “karyawan” or “pegawai” (employee), which were primarily promoted by the New Order regime to suppressing labour militancy (see Chapter 2).

Another crucial term is also “kawan,” meaning comrade (or the more neutral ‘friend’), which in the context of labour movements, refers to those sharing the identity of being a worker subordinated by employers. It fosters a collective bond among working-class members, emphasising a shared sense of union membership and antagonistic relations of ‘us versus them.’ This relation is linked with another frequently used term, that is “lawan,” the opposition to ‘kawan,’ indicating whom to fight against. “Lawan” refer to those, like despotic management or corrupt government officials, whom the workers consider as opposing the workers' interest. It is often coupled with words like “berjuang” (to fight for or struggle) and “perjuangan” (struggle), used to boost collective spirit and generate a sense of injustice that workers should resist.¹⁹¹ These words define the worker as a subject of contentious politics and are strongly articulated in dialogues, discussions, and orations during worker demonstrations

191 In a special training that is organised with NGO activists from LIPS and Yawas, held at Handoko's Omah Tani, Budhy and Ida the female union leader including several others proposed a new concept of unionism: the *struggle union* (*Serikat perjuangan*) to replace the old epithet yellow union that has been labelled to SPSI and its offspring unions which still keep its legacy. Nevertheless, it never developed well further as a robust concept although in practice it was intended to institutionalised the chunks of separated ideas on labour militancy and various forms of extended activism.

in Pekalongan. While such words were also used among unionists in Semarang, the use of such language have embedded deeply in the daily unionist behaviours in Pekalongan, contributing to their understanding of their objective experiences in the workplace.

Beyond fearfulness

The adoption of language and symbolic representations, such as union uniform, flag, and anthem, played a crucial role in shaping the identity of workers within SPN and breaking the chain of fear and inferiority. Emotive words like “lawan” (oppose), “juang” (struggle), and “buruh” (labourer) instilled confidence in workers, denoting the significance of class struggle. Similarly, symbols embedded in union uniform, flag, and anthem had a meaningful impact, particularly on the younger generation of workers, instilling pride and courage as union members.

These linguistic and symbolic elements, however, were not autonomous; they functioned as Laclau’s empty signifiers, acquiring new meanings through the influence of hegemonic agents. The way workers interpreted these symbols was associated with the leaders’ success in bringing workers’ interests into the local political sphere and the increased popularity of the union and its leaders in the local public. This highlights how leaders defined language and union symbols, connecting them with various events.

The emotive effects of language and symbols complemented the learning process derived from workers’ experiences in industrial conflicts. While describing the experiences of young unionists, Budhy explained that a direct engagement in disputes provided emotional experiences that created awareness of fear and fearlessness in the face of powerful forces.¹⁹² He added that learning from such experiences, workers ultimately could break through mental constraints and overcome fears. Therefore, storytelling and the exchange of stories, especially about the celebrated protests in 2009-2010 and the significant 2012 protest blocking the north coast main road, became tools for instilling courage and fostering resistance among new members.¹⁹³ These stories reinforced the

192 Interview with Budhy, Pekalongan branch SPN secretary, 2 January 2014

193 In March 2012, unionists and members of the local SPN took a significant step by blocking the north coast main road that traverses Pekalongan city—an essential economic artery connecting the northern regions of Java. This protest was part of a series of national strikes organised by unions across federations, all aimed at demanding an increase in the minimum wage. The local SPN leaders had repeatedly communicated this strategy to their members and others, showing their ability to exert pressure not only at the district level but also at the provincial level

collective bond and skills needed to navigate challenges within the union, as admitted by another young SPN unionist.¹⁹⁴

Framing the labour rights

Cultural transformation within the union was driven by the learning process, focusing on the substance of labour issues and the meaning of workers' rights. The transformation involved the understanding of two key dimensions. Firstly, legal knowledge became a crucial element, creating an awareness of workers' objective positions in employment relations. Trainings for SPN unionists in Pekalongan, facilitated by international donors, NGOs, and the union officials from higher organisational level, contributed to this awareness. The trainings were mutually strengthened by the real experiences transferred through labour disputes and negotiation process of collective bargaining agreements. These experiences shaped an understanding and consciousness among workers and unionists on their positions before employers, and the local government officials. Secondly, knowledge of the law was seen as an instrument of struggle. The local SPN union leaders, through informal dialogues and official trainings, raised awareness among members about labour law as an instrument for defending their rights. The leaders emphasised that, in the current democratic state, workers had a political opportunity to defend their rights. This cultural element of legal awareness aimed to motivate legally illiterate workers, bridging the gap in understanding labour law.

The increasing enthusiasm for militancy in the union culture gradually led to the unionists' attempts in extending union activism and constituents. Although the unionists' interest in electoral politics had existed since the early union's founding, their political interests gradually developed following their own experiences in local labour dynamics as discussed further in the next sections.

The limits of transformation

During the first decade of the post-authoritarian era, the development of the union culture played a pivotal role in shaping a new identity for unions in Pekalongan. The definition and embrace of leadership roles in local union highlighted the significance of their collective values, interpersonal interactions, and the meaning of their own power. For Pekalongan's workers, these values

194 Interview with a Pekalongan branch SPN young unionist who was also a leader of Paguyuban Pasar Tiban Community, 6 February 2014.

formed the foundation of their union's militancy, enabling them to advocate for the collective interests of their members and even extend their outreach to broader potential constituencies at community level.

There were limitations, however, in the organisational leadership of the union. The charismatic leadership of figures like Budhy resulted in personal dependencies among lower-tier leaders. The centralisation of reformative ideas in the hands of a few senior leaders, coupled with the gap in skills between senior and younger leaders, led to disorientation among the younger members, particularly when Budhy's leadership ended and was replaced by Dammy in 2012. Despite the presence of new leaders, the replacement sparked confusion among the younger leaders on how to develop further the union key ideas into operational measures. This included challenges such as dismantling the old culture of corporatist unionism, building workers' militancy, taking political measures in collective actions, and transforming the movement into a broader arena. The complexity of these ideas proved challenging for many young leaders who were still navigating the organisation. This highlights the critical issue of experience disparity between senior and younger leaders in the cultural transformation of the union.

6.2. Extending to Communities

The rise of young unionists, coupled with the dynamics changes in union leadership and strong impetus for union transformation, has significantly influenced the orientation of unionism and the labour movement in Pekalongan. Despite the celebrated successes, the persistent threats to workers' welfare that is highlighted during the labour unrests since the establishment of SPN in the city, emphasise the challenges faced by the unionists in pushing their demands on employers. These structural challenges, converging with local political opportunities, have prompted unionists to explore alternative strategies.

In this context, the social process of generating ideas and subsequent actions reflecting these strategies becomes crucial, navigating unionists toward community-oriented activism. The interactions between unionists and their networks become an essential element in this process, offering ideas, discourses, and institutional access to strategic resources that enable the expansion of activism areas. That is how the agencies respond to the existing threats and opportunities in order to establish an alternative model of unionism. In the following section, I also describe the social process of how the community-based activism has evolved, highlighting two forms of communities organised:

those under a programmatic advocacy, and those loosely-integrated into the labour movements. Finally, I discuss further how the unionists claimed these diverse constituents.

6.2.1. Threats from Workplace and Reinterpretation of Meaning on Workers' Struggle

While the local SPN's collective actions over the past decade have undeniably unsettled local companies, the actual achievements from these struggles have been notably limited. Most of these efforts focused on basic law enforcement to prevent workers from extreme precariousness rather than substantially improving socio-economic welfare. The majority of industrial actions were organised to safeguard workers from despotic layoffs and compel employers to comply with standard employment relations, such as converting non-permanent workers to permanent labour or ensuring overtime payment based on regulations. While some assertive demonstrations, advocating for an increase in the minimum wage, targeted the local government, the outcomes were also restricted. Despite the dynamic fluctuations in wage growth, the local minimum wage consistently lagged behind those in other major industrial regions in Central Java (see figure A.5 in appendix).

There was a variety of structural barriers. The majority of enterprises employing SPN members were small to medium-sized, primarily targeting the domestic market, and most were situated in Java (see Chapter 5). Only a handful were export-oriented, but their production size remained relatively limited. These enterprises typically had fewer than five hundred employees on average, with a lower formal educational level among the workforce. The technologies in use were often simple, with some even outdated, indicating the limited capacity of companies to expand production and increase profits (see also Photo 11). Some large textile companies had to close down during the first decade of the Reformation era due to economic depression (see Chapter 5).

This restricted capital accumulation set a rational maximum limit for workers to consistently advocate for wage increases and improvements in welfare. This limitation further exacerbates the precarity of workers during economic downturns. The SPN leader who replaced Budhy described the barrier as follows:

Even if we are able to force the employers to raise our salary beyond the minimum wage, let's say two million Rupiah [€133 per month]: It even exceeds the KHL [the descent living standard] in Pekalongan, which is only 1.7 million

[€113],¹⁹⁵ but will the salary truly ensure our well-being? It won't! Perhaps, we can save a bit, but what happens if we face illness? Our salary cannot cover it.¹⁹⁶

His argument aligns with James C. Scott's use of Tawney's metaphor to describe vulnerable poverty, akin to "a man standing permanently up to the neck in the water, so that even a ripple might drown him" (Scott 1976, vii). In this context, the limited capacity of local industries in Pekalongan to grow easily submerged workers into a more precarious state of poverty. Additionally, this situation posed a threat to the sustainability of workers' struggles through existing unions.

Consequently, these threats underscored the unionists' necessity for a reinterpretation of the meaning of labour and workers' struggle. It became evident that reliance solely on the capacity of the local industrial economy to expand was no longer sufficient. This shift in perception involved recognising the social sphere beyond the workplace, where workers have additional roles structured within a state-citizen relations framework. Budhy, who introduced this concept within the local SPN, explained,

The worker is not merely a labourer (buruh). While we are indeed labourers when working in a factory, at home, we have the same rights as other members of society. Workers' welfare is not solely the responsibility of companies but also the state. Therefore, workers are not separate from broader social affairs. So far, workers have sometimes been viewed in isolation, as if we were beings unable to integrate into society. In reality, a worker is also a citizen!¹⁹⁷

These arguments serve as an essential rationale for the expansion of the movement, involving the roles of community-based key actors and government authorities. Dammy, who embraced Budhy's perspective, articulated this notion by stating:

That is the initial reason why we should go [engage with the] public. This is what I communicated to our members. It is about how the local government should take responsibility in fulfilling the people's needs. Consequently, we encourage our colleagues to assume strategic positions in public, even at the lowest levels like kelurahan (villages), or RT and RW (neighbourhood associations). Our objective is to influence public policy for the benefit of the workers. Access

195 The currency value equals to the rate valid at the time of the ongoing fieldwork, in which 1 Euro equals to Rp 15.040,00.

196 Interview with Dammy, the SPN secretary of 2012-2017 who replaced Budhy's former position, .

197 Interview with Budhy, 1 Januari 2014

to health facilities, provision of rice for the poor, and educational facilities provided by the local government are crucial for us because they alleviate our burdens.¹⁹⁸

As such, the unionists recognised that without evolving the labour movement, their struggles and the unions might become stagnant. Hence, their decision to navigate the union into another strategic political arena, by establishing linkages between individual workers as citizens, community roles, and the local state to pursue alternative resources, can be viewed as an attempt to secure the workers' fundamental interests (welfare) and ensure the survival of the workers' organisation itself. The latter objective is crucial for maintaining their capacity in negotiations with employers, leveraging existing opportunities beyond the workplace. Hence, this is not simply a rational choice to find an alternative space from beyond for the sake of welfare.¹⁹⁹ It is a strategic instrument for the labour movement itself.

Thus, the overall premise assumes that unionists in Pekalongan have indeed recognised the available political opportunity aligned with the workers' interests. The question then arises: how did they perceive this opportunity? How did they come into such a shifting perspective? This is where the interactions between unionists and their networks play a pivotal role in prompting the shift in notion.

6.2.2. Against the Mainstream: Opportunities and the Union's Networks

While many scholars often closely associate networks with mobilising resources (Tarrow 2011, 119-139) and view them as channels for acquiring larger membership (Porta and Diani 2006, 114-116) or form strategic alliances (Walker and Martin 2019, 169-171), other scholars consider networks as a significant contributor to the cultural basis, providing ideas and values, for a fundamental transformation of a movement (Dyke and Taylor 2019, 490-491). This is useful and evident in the case of workers in Pekalongan. Networks open channels for the circulation of new knowledge and values of movements, potentially leading to organisational change. Three groups of networks with different backgrounds

198 In interview with Dammy (2014) he often used the term of *public* to refer to the overall arena where workers play role as citizen in broader sense.

199 Tilly (1997, 83) has strongly criticized the principles of Coleman's rational choice (1990), contending that any individual or group decisions are not simply aimed at securing immediate benefits. Instead, they are influenced by a complex chain of causes, indicating the interdependence between the decision makers and their existing situations (Ritzer 2011, 451-452).

approached local unionists, offering different rationales but impacting on a similar outcome: a broadened labour movement. These three groups are formed by unionists relationships with a number of labour activists from NGOs concerned on the erosion of workers' movements due to increased precarious working conditions; activists from an informal association of farmers, who were actively building joint movements across sectors, and another local activists and grassroots figures who shared a common interest in improving the social conditions of the local marginalised.

Labour networks suggesting a community unionism

The early network emerged through collaboration between Pekalongan unionists and labour NGO activists from other regions, fostering an unprecedented relationship for most workers in Pekalongan. The initiative to collaborate originated from Fauzi Abdullah during early Reformation years (2003-2004). Abdullah is a senior labour activist affiliated with LIPS (Sedane Institute for Labour Information), an NGO based in Bogor, West Java, close to Jakarta.²⁰⁰ Abdullah and his well-educated cohort sought collaboration with local unions, considering them closer to the grassroots than national ones. Besides, Budhy's personal networks from previous student activism also introduce the union to Yawas, another labour NGO from Semarang City.

The initial relationship of the unionists and the NGO activists evolved into new activities through frequent meetings and discussions, exchanging experiences and perspectives on potential movement development. This was an unusual situation for unionists in Pekalongan, unlike their counterparts in major industrial regions like Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) and East Java, where collaborations between unionists and NGO activists have been frequent since the New Order era (Ford 2009, 92-106). Sharing experiences from other places provided richer knowledge for Pekalongan unionists and served as a bridge to changes in union's values, although many found it challenging to follow discussions with NGO activists, particularly when topics turned to academic-leaning issues. Budhy explained to me that "It was not easy for unionists in the beginning to adjust to discussions about elusive concepts like capitalism, neoliberalism, and politics of movements." Nevertheless, the discussions led to the maturation of ideas and offered a fruitful way to understand contemporary issues such as increasing

200 LIPS was a labour NGO based in Bogor, one of industrial city in the region of Jabodatabek (Greater Jakarta) The organisation was established by Fauzi Abdullah, a senior human rights activist who were involved in human rights advocacy, particularly in labour issues, against the New Order labour regime.

precariousness in working conditions, potential erosion of union strength, and the rationales of community-based struggles.

The relationship between local SPN unionists and NGO activists grew as attention across the country focused on a national labour issue: the new labour law (no.13 of 2003) perceived as a threat to secure working conditions and union bases (see Chapter 2). While most unions, workers, and NGOs were trying to find the ways through national level, dialogues between some NGO activists and Pekalongan unionists shifted toward community-oriented activism, utilising local resources. They began to see regional communities and local politics as an alternative strategic arena for workers' consolidation, surpassing national barriers dominated by opponents of "union-friendly" labour policies. They recognised that workplace was no longer seen as a strategic site for workers' struggle, not only due to unfriendly labour laws but also because of the incapacity of the local industries in Pekalongan to survive against market competition, limiting their ability to provide adequate distributive resources for workers' interests.

Community-oriented movements were not a completely novel development in Indonesian labour movements. During the New Order regime, workers and NGO and student activists adopted this approach to avoid backlash from employers supported by state bureaucracy and security apparatus. However, the rationale behind the idea differed from Pekalongan. In the past regime, workers established clandestine movements outside the workplace to outwit the state-led oppressive labour regime, using communities as a substitute social setting for building organisations and class consciousness (Hadiz 2001, 119-121). Workers were the sole focus of these consolidations and organisations. Other studies mention the involvement of community leaders (Silvey 2003, 145; Warouw 2006; Juliawan 2010), and families (Saptari 2008) as supporting agents for workers' actions and organisations, but not as equal subjects in a movement alliance.

While these supporting elements remain crucial under current market-driven labour regime, Pekalongan labour movements exhibit a different feature. Community engagement was expected to be more than just social support; it was expected to be a broader alliance comprising workers, their families and neighbours, including grassroots organisations. This alliance would exchange support to defend shared collective interests and transform into a socio-political force to achieve equitable access to welfare resources managed by the state. Despite the absence of material resources and direct political access resulting from the collaboration between SPN unionists and the labour NGO activists, the periodic discussions and training sessions they conducted together gave a

significant new perspective, especially among the unionists at the branch level, regarding the different concept of unionism.

Another Network: Learning from the Farmers

SPN also established connections with activists from Omah Tani, a community organisation advocating for local farmers in Batang, the neighbouring region of Pekalongan, who were fighting for their land rights against state appropriation.²⁰¹ Interactions with this community provided valuable lessons about the benefits of exchanging experiences in building militancy with those outside the industrial workers' community. One of examples of how the workers learnt the experience is evident in a joint rally in May 2012.²⁰²



Photo 17 (left): A woman, carrying her baby, speaks out at a farmers' rally in Batang.

Photo 18 (right): Nearly a thousand people turned up at an evening farmers' rally in a village in Batang to demand their land rights which were threatened with eviction by a government development project. A number of SPN Pekalongan unionists also attended the event.

At this rally, Over thirty SPN unionists, including young activists from LIPS and Yawas, visited Omah Tani in the green hilly area of Batang. There were also nearly a thousand farmers in attendance (see Photo 18). Local residents of different genders and ages gathered in the village, standing or sitting on the ground, filling village streets and yards, listening to speeches by Handoko, the leader of

201 The organisation was led by Handoko, an activist who was also a (pro-bono) lawyer and a former activist of PDIP (the largest political party in Indonesia – the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle). He also received Yap Thiam Hien Award as a national human rights Defender in 2016.

202 Field Note collection of my observation on 26 Mei 2012.

Omah Tani, and other peasant representatives, highlighting their struggles for defending their lands. The unionists were impressed by the enthusiasm of the farmers, particularly moved by an elderly man and a young woman speaking passionately while carrying her baby (see Photo 17). Some female unionists expressed emotion viewing a momentary effect of how Omah Tani activists mobilised entire households to participate in the rally. This gathering became a crucial moment in raising workers' awareness of other movements outside their field, offering potential references for broader movement involving different communities with related social concerns such as land rights, occupational rights, etc.

Despite large community of farmers, the interaction evolved into a knowledge exchange rather than an exchange of constituents. The unionists found the exchange of knowledge and experiences more valuable. Omah Tani activists became a mainstay from whom SPN leaders learned new knowledge, values, and political strategies. Handoko frequently provided his house for SPN's training sessions for unionists, learning the organisation from perspective beyond industrial labour. The farmers' organisation also facilitated a broader collaborative network with other unions across major industrial regions in Jabodetabek, especially when Pekalongan unionists engaged in a workers' political agenda in the 2014 General Elections (see section 6.3). Such interactions and activities raised awareness among unionists beyond trade union consciousness, fostering a sense of being part of a broader marginalised communities.

Networks leading to local public issues

Another network emerged through an entirely different thematic path: local grassroots activism involving a number of actors, including local NGOs, community figures, local government agencies, and international development agencies. This network becomes the milestone which significantly changed the direction of SPN model of unionism in that period. This activism focused on a governance improvement program aimed at the urban poor. The path was primarily approached through institutional mechanisms managed under the decentralisation program as part of the national political transformation, particularly during the early decade of the reformation era (Antlöv 2003, 82)(see also Chapter 2).

The presence of this program has been accompanied by a significant supply of international financial supports and technical assistance flowing to local governments and local civil society organisations to accelerate the

institutionalisation of public-participation (Antlöv and Wetterberg 2011). In Pekalongan, Pattiro was the local branch NGO which has engaged in this field since the inception of decentralisation in 2001, receiving financial and technical supports from international organisations such as USAID, Ford Foundation, The Asia Foundation, HIVOS, UNDP. They actively collaborated in promoting transparency in local government budgeting, subsidising for the local urban poor, and opening access for social welfare rights.²⁰³ The presence of such program, facilitated by what Meyer (2010) called these nested institutions,²⁰⁴ is determinant in creating an opportunity structure for the shift of the local union approach.²⁰⁵

Thanks to the personal relationships of Basir, the former SPN secretary, and the key leader of Pattiro, Budhy and some SPN leader engaged in intensive dialogues with this NGO activists, leading to the new interpretation on the workers social life and their role as citizens. Since then, the local SPN unionists have been involved actively in Pattiro's program, especially after Budhy was appointed as a workers' representative and given a formal key position at the Pattiro internal organisation in 2005.²⁰⁶ The engagement of SPN activists in this program also initiated extensive interaction and partnership with various local organisations invited by Pattiro as representatives of various grass-root groups. Many associations and informal groups – such as organised students under the banner of Nahdlatul-Ulama Islamic organisation (IPNU-IPPNU), alumni of Pekalongan University, local environmental activists from NGO Bumi Lestari, and many other such community groups, including the batik makers' union – joined this concerted program.

The joining of SPN leaders marks a new approach in unionism in Pekalongan. The reinterpretation of workers' struggle has led them a different perspective on workers' roles, recognising workers' social position beyond the context of

203 Field notes collection of my interview with Amin, the first leader of Pattiro branch of Pekalongan, on 15 June 2010

204 Nested Institutions within the concept of opportunity structure refers to a hierarchical structure of institutions, ranging from local to international, which are powerful in influencing the opportunity of a social movement achieve its own goals (see further (Meyer 2003).

205 Most of these institutions are characterised by technocratic approaches, intending to institutionalise democracy on one hand, and secure a market economy on the other hand (Hadiz 2004, 701). The engagement of local SPN unionists in the program, facilitated by Pattiro activists, has sparked a paradox, leading the labour NGO activists from LIPS to engage in a critical introspection about their own proposed experiment to broaden labour movements (in conversation with Abu Mufakhir, 15 April 2015). Specifically, they were considering the potential consequences on the unions' agenda, which traditionally opposes market liberalisation

206 Additional complementary online-interview with Budhy on 17 February 2021.

the production relations. These changes allowed them in a wider engagement with community issues, raising the broader social issues and the significance to extend dialogues with local polity and parliaments. Further illustration of how this network evolves into community-based activism is presented in the following section.

6.2.3. Communities with programmatic activism

The inclusion of SPN as an institution, represented by some union leaders, in Pattiro's program became the focal point for the union's institutionalised attempt into their new activism. This program was structured with specific targets, well-defined plans, a clear division of labour, formal accountability, and clearly defined constituencies. Primary funding from various international donor institutions, as mentioned earlier, propelled these activities. With these resources, unionists collaborated with activists from Pattiro and other grassroots associations to develop and execute a program plan.

Their primary goal was to influence local government in establishing policies beneficial to the welfare of marginalised communities. Typical labour concerns like minimum wage negotiations and industrial disputes were absent as the focus shifted to public healthcare services and poverty reduction, aligning with the local government's development priorities (Sudarsono 2012, 25-27). These themes were in line with local government's priority of development. Especially public healthcare had received major attention by the administration of Syawie, the Mayor of Pekalongan who had been political partner of Bowo, the SPN leader (see further section 6.3).

The engagement of unionists in healthcare issue was eased by Syawie's political campaign in his victories in the 2005 and 2010 local elections (Pilkada), which led to the establishment of City Health Forum (Forum Sehat Kota).²⁰⁷ This opportunity enabled them, together with various local grass-roots figures²⁰⁸, to interact with local government officials to set up communication channels with community figures at the subdistrict level (Kelurahan), collecting public

207 The idea of this forum actually dates back to 1998 when WHO carried out a project "Healthy Cities". Pekalongan, and five other regions: Cianjur, Balikpapan, Bandar Lampung, Malang and East Jakarta, were selected to be a pilot project. This project provided a chance for HN Syawie to take it as priority of government policy.

208 This forum involved several figures such as religious scholars (*ulama*) from local religious schools (*pesantren*), academicians, school teachers, community representatives, journalists and workers representatives.

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feedbacks and expectations through a routine dialogue as well as a means of campaigning for public policy programs on local healthcare issues.



Photo 19 (left): A signboard in front of union office in Pekalongan indicates the union's activities in providing assistance for public services.

Photo 20 (right) : The activists of Pattiro and SPN unionists organised a meeting to discuss some programs related to public services.

Both the unionists and the Pattiro activists used this opportunity also to extend the advocacy by proposing a subsidy in health care services to reduce the economic burdens of the poor, particularly the industrial workers. With the support of Bowo, as also the local parliamentarians, they were eventually successful in endorsing the declaration of a Mayor Regulation (Perwal) of Regional Health Insurance (Jaminan Kesehatan Daerah or Jamkesda) in 2010 benefiting the urban poor until the national security system, BPJS (Social Security Agency), replaced it officially in 2016.

The success in promoting Jamkesda was followed by another achievement as SPN unionists and grassroots associations under Pattiro networks produced a strategic policy document titled “Document for a Strategy to Overcome Regional Poverty (Dokumen Strategi Penanggulangan Kemiskinan Daerah).” This document, backed by detailed demographic data, prompted the local authority to expand Jamkesda’s coverage, leading to an increased budget from five hundred million to over one billion Rupiah. With these changes, union leaders launched effective campaigns on the ground, encouraging union members and the local poor to make optimal use of available healthcare services.

The engagement of unionists in these programmatic activities spurred the growth of organisational structures through collaboration with Pattiro activists (see figure 6.1), leading to the establishment of community centres focused

on reinforcing local citizens' rights (Sudarsono 2012, 22).²⁰⁹ These centres evolved into specific functional organisations fully organised in the hands of the unionists.

FORMAPP (Forum Masyarakat Peduli Pekalongan; Community's Forum Concern on Pekalongan) was the first community centre. It was initially established in response to challenging annual negotiations in the local tripartite body for a minimum wage increase. The deadlock in the negotiations was resolved by a breakthrough solution from SPN leaders with the support of Pattiro activists: the workers accepted the minimum wage proposed by the local government on condition they expanded access to better education, healthcare services, and low-cost housing for workers.²¹⁰ This unprecedented success opened a unique channel for negotiations with local authorities in public services.

Subsequently, other community centres were established, including KBP3 (Workers Community for Public Services) and KPBN (Community of Women Workers and Fishermen), all led by unionists. While FORMAPP became a platform for inter-community group meetings discussing various public policies, the other two centres focused on raising awareness among marginalised urban poor about their rights to healthcare, education, and residential administration

209 The genesis of this centres traces back to 2005, emerging as grassroots initiatives during the political mobilisation for Syawie's candidacy in the inaugural democratic regional elections. Bowo entered electoral politics during this period, aligning with the Golkar Party led by Syawie. Concurrently, several SPN unionists joined these grassroots groups, drawn by Syawie's populist campaign focused on tangible welfare issues (Rahmah 2019, 68). As Syawie assumed the role of local mayor, the grassroots groups evolved into community centres, viewing his populist programs as a strategic avenue for advancing local citizens' rights. This transformation positioned the centre as effective vehicle for unionists' objectives. Jumali, a young unionist, was subsequently appointed as the centres' leader, tasked with advocating for citizens' interests to the local government and facilitating the flow of strategic information from the government to the beneficiaries

210 Indeed, the local government eventually extended support for accessing healthcare and education facility services, but housing provision remained unaddressed (Field notes by Abu Mufakhir and Bambang Tridahana, 22-24 June 2013). While low-cost housing development often been features in populist election campaigns, most initiatives ten to falter. In the same year, central government under Jokowi's administration, introduced housing program for the working-class as indicated by housing apartment construction in Semarang. However, this populist program has progressed slowly. (detik.com 21 Mei 2020 <https://finance.detik.com/properti/d-5023421/apa-kabar-program-sejuta-rumah-jokowi>). Likewise, Governor Anis Baswedan, victorious in 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, encountered difficulties in fulfilling his political campaign promise to establish a low-cost housing for Jakarta's urban poor with his Zero Down Payment Program due to the issue of financial feasibility and conflicting regulations. <https://jakartaglobe.id/business/no-payment-mortgage-not-possible/>

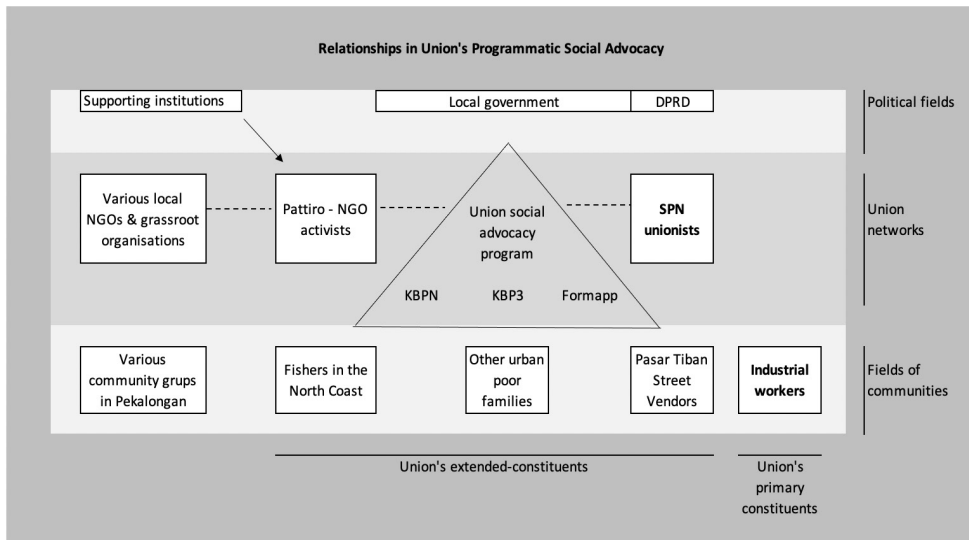
services. Additionally, these centres played a crucial role in advocacy, serving as channels for local residents to submit complaints about public services.²¹¹

KPBN, specifically addressing the needs of local women workers, prioritised those employed in the canned fish industrial sector and fishers' families on the north coast of Pekalongan. The rationale behind this priority was related to the socio-economic structure in these communities. The socio-economic life of workers employed in the local canned fish production factory was integrated with those who relied on the traditional fishing economy through a production chain. Thousands of these factory workers lived side by side with hundreds of poor fishing families in the north coast area. Therefore, communication between unionists and local beneficiaries, predominantly women in the fishing families, became more accessible through regular neighbourhood meetings (*arisan*) and other local assemblies, fostering discussions to enhance awareness of rights to public services. Unionists also provided advocacy and individual assistance, ensuring equal access to healthcare services like Jamkesda, which later transformed into BPJS.²¹²

211 The centre also collaborated with eleven other local community centres operated by various grassroots organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muslim Students' Association (HMI - Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam), batik makers' community in Pasirsari, the environmentalist student association, and village communities. The other complaint centres were also established at four locations of Pasar Tiban. See the following section for illustration on Pasar Tiban. For further details, see: <http://pattiro.org/2012/11/pattiro-pekalongan-launches-public-service-complaint-month/>

212 The unionists' advocacy for healthcare services was also driven by discrepancies in statistical data, resulted in the exclusion of a large number of the poor from accessing social security. According to national standard statistical measure, the reported number of the poor in Pekalongan had decreased. Consequently, some poor families in Pekalongan were no longer considered eligible for local social security (Jamkesda). However, local female unionists residing in the north coast contested this reduction, asserting that it was a statistical matter rather than a genuine decline. Ida, one of the unionists remarked, "I have seen that they remain poor, so how does the Statistical Bureau reduce the number of the poor?" She and other activists of KBPN and KBP3 and Formapp went to the officials of local Statistical Bureau and the Local Health Office to discuss this issue. Interview with Ida, 11 February 2021.

Figure 6.1



Despite receiving official funding support for a few years, these programmatic activities continued, leaving a lasting impact on non-traditional union activism even after the funding ended. Unionists maintained extensive networks with bureaucrats, politicians, community leaders, academics, and activists from various grassroots organisations. At the grassroots level, they established an institutionalised channel of communication and advocacy for poor families in the region. The BSI factory women unionists preserved regular village meetings, involving workers and fisher families on the North Coast, while young unionists in West Pekalongan congregated with neighbours to discuss access to national social security (BPJS).

The unionists' engagement in these social advocacy programs vividly illustrates the link between political opportunities arising from decentralisation and the workplace impasses faced by the workers, leading to the unionists' reinterpretations of the meaning of the workers' struggle. The interactions among unionists and other activists play significant role in this reinterpretation, revealing another arena of possible activism, and impacting on the making of a new category of constituents. Through this programmatic activism and intensive interactions with diverse groups, the unionists identified various local people, such as fisher families in the north coast, workers' families and neighbours, as the beneficiaries of their activism. This activism platform allowed them to engage with more diverse groups in the city as described in the following section.

6.2.4. Communities in loosely structured movements

The combination of experiences in programmatic activism and the knowledge accumulated from the unionists' interactions with other groups, such as farmers in Batang and labour NGO activists from other regions, has guided the SPN unionists towards a broader perspective on the social conditions in Pekalongan and the forms of advocacy they develop.

For example, some young SPN unionists played a leading role in settling a dispute between the national train company (KAI) and a workers' neighbourhood community, concerning land acquisition.²¹³ In 2010, unionists invited members to join a local mass demonstration in Pekalongan protesting increased electricity and fuel tariffs, perceived as burdensome for the urban poor. Other unionists were involved in defending the rights to education for workers' families whose children were at risk of dropping out of school. Some unionists also advocated for the widows of fishermen in the north coast of Pekalongan, fighting for severance pay for their late husbands who were lost at sea. Together with SPN members, unionists took on roles as community volunteers, participating in village consultative assemblies (LMD or LMK) to facilitate access to public services for those in need. To enhance the effectiveness of these extended roles, some union members were encouraged to participate in neighbourhood associations (RT or RW).

Of all the community-related activism, the closest intersection with workers' lives is the occupation-based organisation, Paguyuban Pasar Tiban (PPT), meaning an informal market of street vendors established only for a few hours on certain days. These traditional markets accommodated traders selling various household needs informally in the city of Pekalongan. Due to its flexibility, this market served as a safety valve for the unemployed, providing an alternative economic activity for those facing job losses, including those affected by the downturn of local batik clothes industries. Although there is no valid statistical record of the transfer of workers from industrial occupations to this informal market, the local union leader claimed at least eight hundred traders spread across four locations in Pekalongan.²¹⁴ With a net income ranging from Rp 10,000 to Rp 75,000 (0.60 to 4.5 Euro) per night, this market became the backbone of their survival amid fierce competition from both traditional and modern markets.

213 Interview with Edy, 3 June 2015

214 Interview with a Pekalongan branch SPN young unionist who was also a leader of Paguyuban Pasar Tiban Community on 6 February 2014.

The intersectionality of PPT and the SPN unionists was evident in its leadership, enabling PPT members to be the beneficiaries of Pattiro's programmatic advocacy. They collaborated in establishing Complaint Centres in markets since 2012 to facilitate grievances from street vendors and surrounding residents about the local environment, directing them to local governments. With SPN unionists in charge of the PPT leadership, some unionists also defended the vendors' interests, as demonstrated in a collective protest against the local government's decision in 2015 to outlaw street vendors, forcing them to move to an existing established market (see Photo 21). In response to this decision, hundreds of street vendors, supported by SPN unionists, took to the streets in protest, blocking access to busy roads close to government offices using their carts. Additionally, they brought the case to the local parliament, urging Bowo to facilitate negotiations with the local authority. The protest evolved into a political advocacy action, showcasing the collaborative efforts of PPT and SPN unionists to protect the interests of street vendors and challenge restrictive government policies.



Photo 21: Hundreds of street vendors, supported by some SPN unionists, organised street demonstration in Pekalongan to protest an eviction of their selling place.

The interaction between SPN unionists and various groups in Pekalongan highlights the distinctive nature of their unionism compared to most other

unions of that time. While the advocacy activities conducted by unionists and their members towards these community groups lack a structured program, these activities foster a sense of closeness between the union and diverse communities. This, in turn, reinforces the character of their activism, extending beyond the confines of the workplace. However, a crucial question arises regarding the effect of such non-regular activism for the union's primary constituents: the industrial workers. Does the involvement of unionists with these diverse groups contribute to the formation of a solidarity bond among various marginalised groups? This inquiry prompts reflection on the dynamics of representation between unions and these constituencies. The evolving situation illustrated above prompts a crucial question: Could all the targeted community groups engage in the union's extended activism potentially be claimed as new constituents of the local union?

6.2.5. Extended Constituencies, Strategic Alliances, and Collective Identity

Social movement constituents generally refer to those whose voices and interests are advocated by their representatives or leaders. Porta and Diani (2006, 145) refer to them as natural constituents. Owen (2019), however, provides a nuanced perspective by categorising them into two distinct types. He categorises Porta and Diani's term as beneficiary constituents for one category and introduces another type: conscience constituents. According to Owen, conscience constituents are individuals who indirectly benefit from the success of the movement's goals by engaging in indirect participation in the movement (2019, 26). These individuals are typically the diverse outsiders or sympathisers of the movement.

These diverse constituents become involved in movements for different reasons. While Owen's exchange theory approach (2019, 4-6, 40) helps distinguish different types of constituents, it lacks clarity on how the identification is constructed, which is crucial for understanding the collective identity in a heterogeneous movement. The identity of constituency is not solely defined by the institutionalised pattern of reciprocal relations derived from the benefits of the movement. Since a social movement is fundamentally the product of the contentious politics (Tarrow 2011, 6), the construction of identity is also shaped by such antagonistic relations between the movement constituents and the dominant opponents they are challenging such as the state (Meyer, Whittier and Robnett 2002, 19) or the capitalist forces (Cox and Nilsen 2014, 62).

Within a labour movement, the various community groups of non-industrial workers targeted may initially be categorised outsiders as they were not

inherently aligned with the core traditional interests of the union organisation. Community-oriented activism initiated by union leaders, however, have presented these outsiders with a nuanced dilemma: determining whether they remain true outsiders or could potentially evolve into integral elements of the movement. This question is pivotal as the main intent of the extended labour movement was to unite these diverse groups under a common banner by advocating collectively for their shared interests. To integrate union members into community-based struggles, a reciprocal support from other community groups becomes essential. Given the importance of collectiveness, the establishment of a collective identity becomes a significant focal point.

While unionists in Pekalongan achieved a degree of success in fostering cohesion among activists from various groups to support their collective activism, mobilising heterogeneous constituents at the grassroots level and claiming them as union constituents proved to be a more challenging endeavour due to their complex social structure. As the conscience constituents, referring to all groups of non-industrial workers whose interests were advocated by the unionists, they were literally the outsiders of the union movements.

Citizen's rights have served a central subject in shaping their relationship in activism. Their position is shaped by the common experiences of being marginalised by state policies – either national or local ones, some of which were even slightly oppressive as exemplified by the case of street vendors and land grabbing described earlier. The unionists had extended their own performance as the citizens' rights defenders. Nevertheless, such relationships do not elucidate the extent to which they had reproduced the shared identity consistently as the constituents of the broader movements. Each community group had a distinct relationship with the unionists, as indicated in table 6.1. This diversity reveals a complex structure of the heterogeneous outsiders, which consequently creates some challenges in fostering a unified interest and shared identity between the unionists and the various communities they advocated for, which bound them as a social force: a community-oriented movement.

Table 6.1. Unionists-communities Relationships in the Extended Movements in Pekalongan

Groups and Communities Aspects	Urban poor communities under Pattiro's program	Vendor community organised by Paguyuban Pasar Tiban	Community and groups with dispute cases (in land, education, etc).
unionist engagement	All union leaders and some members	Union leaders (individually)	Individual leaders (individually)
Status of collaboration	Formal	Informal / symbolic	Patronage / symbolic
Organisation of collaboration	institutionally integrated under collaborative programs	Less structured	Individual collaboration
Community-trade union relations	Program-based Beneficiaries	Direct and Indirect beneficiaries	Indirect beneficiaries
Position of workers/ union members	Primary Beneficiaries	Symbolic relationship	Mixed
Length of relationship	Based on program; but then it is ongoing independently	Long-term due to shared leadership	Short lived
Economic resources	embedded in the program	Voluntarily community-based resource	Voluntarily community-based resource
Relationship of activists and group members with the dominant power	Cooperative	Oppositional	Oppositional
The dominant power with which the unionists/activists were dealing	(Local) state/ power holders	(Local) state/ power holders	(Local) state/ power holders

The first challenge arises from the fact that most unionists' advocacies and struggles circulated primarily as particular issues and did not develop significantly into universal issues that were connected with major grievances of the marginalised groups in the city. The unionists indeed played a substantial role in the advocacy of the accesses to healthcare services and to providing communication channels for the local poor to local authorities. However, these were only limited scope issues for the marginalised urban poor. The limitation is affected by the unionists' attachment to the institutionalised programs initiated by the Pattiro activists, which were structured under the international

donors' framework. Some of the early initiatives such as low-cost housing and reducing educational costs which received inadequate response from the local governments were not developed further well by the activists.

This contrasts with the Brazilian social movements in the 1970-1980s which succeeded in uniting community movements and labour movements under the framework of claiming full-citizenship rights that gave them a strategic weapon to force the state to facilitate the reproduction of labour power (Seidman 1994, 198). Through this strategy, the heterogeneous social segments of the social movements converged in a nexus that covered fundamental common citizens' issues. Public issues like transportation, health, housing, sanitation, electricity, were collectively translated as a common need for underpinning the reproduction of labour power, which Seidman (1994, 203) defines this as process of spill-over of labour activism into labour community. The movements transform the particular citizenship issues into a class-based struggle.

Some unionists in Pekalongan had been indeed actively involved in addressing various issues like land grabbing, workers' children's education, the rights of fishermen's families affected by accidents at sea and the rights of street vendors to peddle. However, most of these efforts remain limited in scale. They did not address these to broader communities of the city. For instance, while unionists advocated for the right to educational continuity for some workers' children, there were similar issues that affected many others in urban poverty pockets.²¹⁵ Similarly, efforts to address land dispute settlements fell short of addressing the wider settlement challenges experienced by the northern coast residents. These villages were plagued by coastal floods on an annual basis, causing significant disruptions to the livelihoods of thousands of fishermen and factory workers for several weeks.

The second challenge is the limited narratives about the unifying social bases. The experience of social movements in Brazil aforementioned above is an example of how they highlighted the reproduction of labour power,²¹⁶ serving as a unifying strategic element that aligns the interests of diverse communities

215 Some workers of textile factories told that they were obliged to pay additionally educational fees (*uang sumbangan sekolah*) for various items such as standard textbooks, school buildings, uniforms, which created additional burdens in family expenses. Similar grievances were also expressed by some people living in the north coast. (Interview with Darsih, workers of textile factory, and her husband. 1 March 2014; Mulyono, workers of textile factory, 21 March 2014).

216 This concept of labour power reproduction, as articulated by Marx, is crucial for workers to sustain their work capacity and support the socio-economic well-being of their families (Marx 1976, 275-277).

and that of the working class. Unionists and activists addressed various issues of inadequate city infrastructure, and connected these concerns to the essential requirements for workers to effectively perform their daily works. Concurrently, they also persistently advocated for better wages from companies. This fusion of class-based demands and the aspirations for citizenship rights harmonised the diverse constituents, and mitigated tensions between citizenship relations and class dynamics, through populist strategies devised by the activists of movement and political actors (Seidman 1994, 222-224).

Beyond those circumstances that facilitated for community-workplace integration, activists also undertook strategic measures to redefine the relationship between these two entities, particularly the interplay between workplace and community life (Seidman 1994, 202). The re-interpretation of that relationship was essential. It was articulated through narratives which permeated various spheres of public discourse. By constructing these narratives, a clear understanding of the subjects and entities being advocated for crystallised in the minds of both activists and the heterogeneous movement's constituents.

In the context of Pekalongan, the narratives of the links between those two subjects were localised intensively only among industrial workers. At union meetings with workers in several labour pockets of Pekalongan city, the union leaders repeatedly reminded the significance of the access to the local social security to secure their health which is necessary for performing their tasks in the workplace. They talked eloquently about the various needs of workers' everyday life – such as child caring and educations, and workers needs for holidays – that connected with workplace-related narratives such as wages and the risks of dismissals. They also discussed it in terms of coexistence of labour roles and citizenship roles within the set of roles of each individual of workers.

The unionists, however, encountered difficulties in creating comprehensive narratives when engaging with ordinary people within communities outside the union membership. An illustrative instance occurred during the 2014 legislative-election campaign for their candidates in impoverished urban areas, where the unionists seemed to segregate community-specific concerns from employment-related matters. In this context, the workers' legislative candidate and his team predominantly emphasised the unions' struggles while offering only vague references to community needs. Another SPN's legislative candidate even entirely neglected to communicate any narrative encompassing labour and community issues, focusing solely on his own role as a candidate. Meanwhile, in public discourse, the only known unions' specific contribution in community

activism pertained to advocating for social security and improved healthcare access. This awareness found its way through various channels, such as media outlets and neighbourhood leadership forums.²¹⁷

Conversely, supporting activists, who were generally associated with the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), predominantly emphasised the interplay between religious values, their religious organisation, and the everyday challenges faced by their communities. Other factions, such as student groups and the batik-makers' union, concentrated on illustrating the relevance of their respective activism to community concerns, particularly in terms of public service. Consequently, each faction – including also the union members on the grass root level – articulated its own connection to the community's needs and interests, without a unifying foundation that represent the interests of diverse constituents.²¹⁸

The final challenge refers to the fragmented roles of representative figures. While the SPN unionists held prominent positions representing the interests of numerous union members and external groups, this did not necessarily align all these groups under a unified front with shared interests. This situation emerged due to the division of representative roles across various activist groups. An illustrative example is found within the street vendor community of Pasar Tiban (PPT). Despite the unionists assuming leadership roles within this community association, the members primarily perceived them as advocates for their interests in public advocacy and their personal struggles for livelihood. The way they ran this association hindered a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted roles of the unionists, who also represented the local working class. Consequently, the local industrial workers continued to be perceived by PPT members as outsiders with disparate interests. Although many PPT members were formerly employed in factories, they no longer identified with the industrial working class and had limited interaction with their former factory colleagues. Their focus shifted towards daily vending activities and the precarious, informal nature of their trade, diverting their attention from local industrial labour matters.

217 A few SPN unionists had been elected by the village (*kampung*) communities to be the neighbourhood leaders (Ketua RT/RW) in Pekalongan City.

218 I met a young ordinary worker at a company, a textile factory, where he was being employed, on 23 July 2021. He revealed that ordinary workers knew about the engagement of their senior fellows in Pattiro's community centres activities, particularly Formapp and KBP3, but many junior fellows did know much about the specific activities of these centres. Thus, it is reasonable if people from other communities were also unable to figure out the wider perspective of these collaborations.

The core issue lies in the absence of a unifying figure who became a symbol of representation for these diverse groups, resulting in a lack of connection among them despite being led by the same intertwined actors. As previously mentioned, all main activists engaged in the Pattiro networks were connected to the NU organisation, which had also led to unionists becoming involved in this movement. Nonetheless, Islamic symbols that were embedded into the activists exerted a more potent influence on the identities of various grassroots groups. A significant number of Pekalongan residents identified themselves as part of NU, rather than viewing themselves as integral to a broader working-class identity. The construction of NU's identity has evolved over an extensive history, while the development of a working-class identity in the city has fluctuated and was even dismantled during the New Order era due to its foundation on a fragile social context.

I argue that the most pressing challenge within the Pekalongan movements is, in fact, rooted in the constrained capacity of the unionists and primary supporting activists to establish hegemonic elements capable of uniting the diverse constituents. This situation is underscored by the absence of substantial discourses and narratives that could serve as a symbolic chain of equivalence, effectively connecting the disparate constituent groups into a cohesive front as initially envisioned. In contrast to several other social movements characterised by heterogeneous constituents, many activists have successfully introduced a fixed signifier, which takes the form of a consistent rhetoric, symbol, or name that effectively represents a collective identity of the groups involved (Howarth 2015, 66).

Within the context of Pekalongan, the existing sense of identity among community members has become fragmented across various groups, posing challenges for constituents to establish connections with one another. This situation highlights the failure of the unionists to effectively translate the well-formulated concepts articulated by their leaders regarding the imperative for workers to expand their struggle into the realm of citizenship. This expansion is not only aimed at aligning the workers' struggle with community interests but also at reciprocally aligning the community with the interests of workers. This issue becomes extremely essential when it comes to the political endeavours as discussed in the next section.

6.3. Politicising Union

Political activism is a prevailing characteristic of community unionism or social movement unionism (Moody 1997) (Waterman 1993) (Mollona 2009). Taking this direction will inevitably drag unions into political contestations with strong power holders. Incorporating diverse constituents with varying social backgrounds into this arena undoubtedly amplifies the intricacies of unions' political struggles (Schiavone 2007). For Indonesian unions, however, this path proves challenging due to their three-decade-long exclusion political traditions.²¹⁹ As a result, politics has become an unfamiliar domain for their endeavours. Even a decade after the fall of the authoritarian regime, many unionists remain hesitant to collaborate with political parties, and grassroots workers maintain reservations about potential detrimental effects stemming from the (re)politicisation of their traditional focus—workers' welfare (Caraway, Ford and Nugroho 2015, 1311). Conversely, some other unionists simplistically assume that the collective might of labour alone can function as a political force representing the working class.²²⁰ However, this assertion lacks substantial empirical support at present.²²¹

While it is indeed accurate that all workers' economic struggles inherently possess political dimensions, transforming workers into political forces necessitates significant ideological and organisational shifts. Thus, politicising movements through a community-oriented unionism within the Indonesian political landscape inherently involves risks of rise and decline. Such a transformative process with ups and downs is observable in the political evolution of SPN in Pekalongan. This journey was by no means characterised by smooth progression. The unionists' interpretation of political movements, opportunities, representations, and strategies underwent ongoing adjustments, shifting from one phase to another. These changes and disparities were not solely temporal but also influenced the social dynamics within the movement itself. Inevitably, internal tensions among unionists extended to the rank-and-file members. This

219 Therefore, the unions and the working class as political forces were still absent in the early period of political transition up to the second democratic General Elections (Törnquist 2004, 384). Although four new political parties appeared, claiming to represent the working class by bearing the names of labour (*buruh* or *pekerja*) in 1999 Elections, none of them had significant support from the working class and were well-integrated into the existing trade unions (Caraway and Ford 2020, 36-37).

220 This tendency was often found in several conversations with unionists from different union organisations and different regions, representing the lack of their experiences in political contestations due to the effect of past depoliticization.

221 A number of new parties claimed to represent workers, but there has not been any single labour party which successfully sustained until two decades since Indonesia's political reform.

dynamism, on one hand, underscores the dominant roles of union leaders in steering organisational development. On the other hand, it unveils the impacts of external political and economic forces. Consequently, this scenario significantly influenced the extent to which the interests of heterogeneous constituents were considered within political processes, shaping the overarching character of their movements as community-based endeavours.

6.4.1. Initiating political interests

The initiation of workers' engagement in electoral politics marked a departure from traditional labour interests for the SPN in Pekalongan. This shift, however, was not a meticulously planned collective agenda: it occurred abruptly and exhibited an elitist nature, lacking the systematic organisation needed to authentically represent the interests of the local working class. During this phase, the majority of local SPN leaders and members remained centred on workplace-based welfare, encapsulating their understanding of unionism in the phrase "The Union is all about wages." This perspective was prevalent among Indonesian trade unions, especially those that had severed ties with the old SPSI, inheriting a legacy of state corporatism that discouraged engagement with political matters.

The initial impetus for political involvement within the SPN in Pekalongan largely stemmed from external influences, rather than originating from within the union itself. NGOs and the allure of democratic elections emerged as significant factors shaping the union's early political agendas. The initial idea of political actions appeared after some Pekalongan unionists attended a voter education program in 2004, held by the International NGO ACILS (the American Centre for International Labour Solidarity).²²² This program aimed to encourage unionists to realise their potential strength and generate confidence to engage in electoral politics, breaking the widespread distrust of the working class towards political actions caused by the past authoritarian regime's depoliticisation (Caraway and Ford 2020, 137).

The SPN at national level union is arguably the first union that quickly made involvement in electoral politics as an official union program (Caraway and Ford, 2020, p. 131), although the initiative was never worked out neatly by the national leadership (see Chapter 2). When the central organisation entered into a political contract with PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Welfare Justice Party; a party with Islamic orientation) for a collaboration in 2009 elections, none of branch unions

²²² Interview with Budhy, 1 January 2014, and updated on 11 January 2021

in the regions followed the central instruction in a disciplined way. Instead, they were likely to move according to own local political conditions.²²³

In Pekalongan, labour NGO activists and local political conditions had played a significant role since 2004 in accelerating trade union political enthusiasm. Influential NGO activists like Fauzi Abdullah from LIPS and other activists from Yawas endorsed union re-politicisation. However, the political formulations were often too abstract at this stage, with discourse on labour politics mixed with broader issues of citizenship, lacking systematic organisational strategies within labour movements. Union politics, viewed pragmatically as union leaders' electoral experiments, often neglected the grassroots constituents as a significant political force. This approach, to some extent, was also caused by the unionists' doubts about the political capacity of the union base due to the legacy of past authoritarian regimes' political destruction²²⁴ This was indeed a common feature of labour candidates elsewhere. Opportunism and the immediate pursuit of local political opportunities characterised how Indonesian unionists set their electoral goals particularly in early elections of reformation era (Ford 2014, 342), contributing to the absence of consistent allegiance to a specific political party (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019, 67-69). This is how the unionists in Pekalongan also began their political moves.

It was Bowo who became the first unionist in Pekalongan promoted by the union elite circle to engage in the local electoral politics. He initially joined the Partai Demokrat (Democrat Party) in 2004, but later switched to Golkar, citing its strong local roots and attempts to shed its notorious image from the past authoritarian regime. Thanks to his collaboration with Syawie, a populist local Golkar leader who had been elected as the mayor of Pekalongan in 2005, Bowo gained a victory that sent him successfully to DPRD (regional parliament) as the legislative. He was even elected to be the chair of the council. His successful political leap in the 2009 elections opened a new political landscape and opportunities for him and the local SPN to develop a new character of unionism.

223 Unions in Pekalongan and Tangerang were two SPN regional branch unions which arguably took early political initiatives to participate in the General Elections. While branch of Tangerang began its move in 2009, Pekalongan had initiated in 2004.

224 Our study revealed an additional finding indicating that approximately half of our survey respondents disagreed with their own union leaders who aspired to participate in political competitions, including legislative elections or local elections (Pilkada). While this information was not included in the published data, it sheds light on the workers' reluctance, during that period, to involve their unions in politics. (Caraway, Ford and Nugroho 2015)

This initial foray into politics indicates three key points of reflection. Firstly, despite the lack of experience in political movements, the political measures represented a powerful branch-organisational dynamic beyond hierarchical control. In contrast to confusion among many branch unions due to the central organisation's inability to mobilise effectively, Pekalongan unionists moved convincingly in a direction of their choosing.²²⁵ The SPN unionists in Pekalongan capitalised on the flexible central instructions by garnering full support from the local Golkar party, instead of the PKS, for Bowo as a legislative candidate. Thanks to the local Golkar's appeal to fragmented Muslim constituents resulted from the collapse base of local traditional Islamic party, PPP, Bowo secured significant votes in his campaign (see also chapter 5).²²⁶ While Bowo's victory resulted from individuals' coalition rather than fully institutional collaboration of Golkar and SPN, it instilled confidence in unionists to pursue continued collaboration with the political party.²²⁷

Secondly, the politicisation of the movement led to the concentration of political capital and union power in the hands of a few elite union leaders. Bowo's position in the highest regional political institution provided avenues for direct communication with local authorities, politicians, community figures, and consequently also bestowed symbolic power on elite union leaders in front of local political and economic elites. This concentration of power became a significant political capital, increasing the leverage of the union. The local employers in certain companies recognised that Bowo transcended the role of an ordinary union leader. He indeed actively influenced the mayor to make pro-worker decisions in disputes, encouraged local labour officials to fairly resolve conflicts, and facilitated negotiations for pro-worker local regulations. This symbolic power, however, was not necessarily inherent but rather also constructed by the unionists collectively through claims and the articulation

225 A formerly SPN leader of Kota Tangerang (1 May 2015), admitted the difficulties of coordinating the union's legislative candidates due to the lack of communications among them and the lack of agreements about shared strategies. The former chair of SPN's central organisation, Wirahyoso (28 July 2011), also acknowledged that there was a widespread disappointment from union branches about how central organisation coordinated the cooperation between union and the political party (PKS).

226 In Pekalongan, NU and Muhammadiyah each have a substantial traditional Muslim base. This historically served as a political strength for PPP party, particularly during the Suharto regime, providing competition against Golkar's dominance in non-democratic general elections. However, in the reformasi era, this Muslim base has fragmented into various smaller Islamic-based political parties, including PKS.

227 There was no official collaboration between the local Golkar Party and SPN for winning Bowo to be the legislative candidate. It was simply the collaboration of individuals claiming to have the support of the working class.

of symbols representing the relationship between Bowo and other leaders. For instance, at a government meeting, Budhy and his union colleagues invoked Bowo's name as the chairman of the DPRD to press the local manpower officer (Disnaker) to facilitate broader access to public information as mandated by national regulations. These actions, along with symbolic representations, constituted significant political capital that enhanced the union's leverage, at least during this phase.

Lastly, the concentration of political capital in elite circles resulted in the reproduction of patronage within the union. The introduction of political activism created a new pattern of internal power relations, establishing a strong form of patronage within the movement. Bowo, as the most senior unionist, founder, and final decision-maker, concentrated power within the elite circle, creating a hierarchical structure that contrasted with the majority of members at the grassroots level. Although some middle-level leaders provided an open space for dialogues with members in rank and file, this unequal distribution of power sometimes caused unrest within the union.

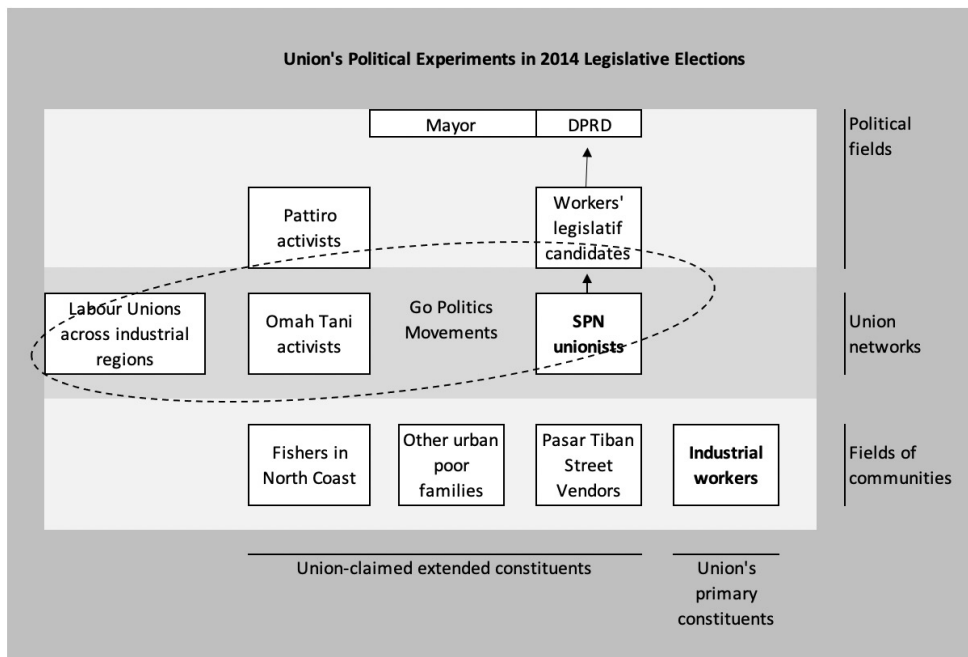
6.4.2. Securing the movement

While the initial stage marked a significant onset of union politicization in Pekalongan, the subsequent phase represented the union's actual political character. During this new phase, unionists undertook an organisational transformation to reduce their strong dependence on existing local political elites. Political experiences were shared among all union members at the grassroots level, fostering independence among constituents as political subjects. This phase was crucial not only for internal shifts but also due to changes in the political context. The local political elite gained increasing strength, leading to escalated conflicts between SPN unionists and the political elite, fuelled by a barrage of industrial disputes. These conflicts ultimately reversed the political relationship between the union and local political forces. Taking the 2014 legislative elections as an experimental milestone, this phase marked the beginning of establishing a genuine collective political character to secure their existence amidst local political changes and the national shift in labour movements.

The accumulation of industrial conflicts between 2010 and 2014 significantly affected the relationships between local SPN unionists and Golkar elites in Pekalongan. The union's demands for the intervention of local political elites in settling industrial conflicts eventually disrupted the elites' power. Syawie, initially a populist, transformed into what Sidel categorises as a 'local strongman'

(Sidel 2005).²²⁸ Syawie secured and consolidated his power, particularly during his second term (2010-2015), by controlling the government bureaucracy, the majority of local parliamentarians, gaining support from extensive business networks, aligning interests with national elites, and mobilising larger grassroots groups for his own interests (Savirani 2015). As Syawie’s power expanded, the activism of SPN, initially supported by him, increasingly faced obstacles within Syawie’s networks. Unionists were aware of these challenges during recent struggles for pro-worker local labour regulations, demands for higher minimum wages, and the settlement of industrial disputes.

Figure 6.2



228 In his critique of Migdal, who originally coined the concept of 'local strongmen,' Sidel redefines it in the context of Southeast Asia, specifically citing examples from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. According to Sidel, 'local strongmen' are individuals who exert powerful control over local resources by capturing local state power, encompassing both local bureaucracy and parliaments. They also leverage local business networks to amplify their overall influence and, at times, possess the capacity to mobilise massive grassroots forces using primordial identities or underground connections. Sidel argues that the emergence of 'local strongmen' is an unintended consequence of Indonesia's decentralisation and democratization (Sidel 2005, 67).

The peak of tensions occurred during the industrial conflict at Aro Hospital, which was triggered by the dismissal of two new SPN leaders.²²⁹ Heavy pressure from thousands of SPN members and other supporters, expressed through street protests, unfolded over several days. This protest disrupted the close connection between the hospital's top management and the mayor. In response to the protest, political pressures within Golkar intensified. Bowo, representing both the union and the party, was forced by party elites to confront his own union, which was ironically fighting for the fate of its members. The intense political pressure resulted in workers' disappointment due to the failure of the union to meet their demands, as it prioritised securing Bowo's position in Golkar for the union's long-term political interests.

This incident was just the tip of the iceberg in the growing tensions between local political elites and the SPN. The political nuances of the industrial conflicts highlighted how Bowo's political position became increasingly vulnerable, coinciding with the time when unionists were more dependent on formal political resources for bargaining power. This encouraged unionists to reconsider their position by seeking an alternative political path to reduce reliance on ruling elites.

The restlessness among unionists aligned with the national political revival of labour movements, led by major unions seeking to rectify their failures in the 2009 elections (see chapter 2 and 4). Major unions, particularly the Metalworkers Union (FSPMI) with support from NGO activists, initiated the Go-politics project (see Chapter 2), aiming to establish a working-class political force for electoral success by using unions as a major political machine, avoiding traditional Indonesian political practices such as party control and vote-buying (Savirani 2015). The 2014 legislative election became the target of this ambitious political experiment.

As the only union in Central Java with ties to the networks of Omah Tani, where Metalworkers Unionists and other activists learned about political movement education, SPN unionists were drawn to this political idea.²³⁰ Joining the project led them to establish a new strategy involving changes in the characteristics of constituents, political-parties collaboration, political resources, technical

229 The detailed description of this case will be presented in the next section of this chapter.

230 It is noteworthy that, at the moment, the SPN central-organisation's decision not to engage in institutional political cooperation was still valid. However, there was no strong sanction from the central organisation to any violation on this decision.

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strategies for constituent mobilisation, and the perspectives on the nature of electoral politics in the labour movement.

Change of political vehicle

The characteristic of constituents slightly changed in this new form of SPN's political activism. While the local industrial working class remained the core constituency, a significant decline in union membership, from 8000 members in the early 2000s to 3000 currently, made it insufficient as a political base. Hence, workers' families and neighbourhoods became the most strategic second layer. Additionally, community groups long advocated by SPN unionists through social advocacy activism in collaboration with Pattiro were considered another potential layer. The unionists expected that relationships built through these collaborations could be converted into political capital, targeting mainly industrial and fishing communities on the north coast, and working-class enclaves in the east and south.



Photo 22: A political training workshop held at the union branch office in Pekalongan, attended by SPN unionists from several companies. The workshop aimed to support the union candidate in the 2014 Legislative Elections.

Another inevitable change was the political parties they needed to collaborate with. It became a critical issue as the local Golkar Party decided to send Bowo to compete in the legislative elections at the provincial level of Central Java, instead of in Pekalongan level. Most local SPN leaders viewed this move with scepticism, anticipating it as Golkar's hidden agenda to exclude Bowo from the Pekalongan elite circle and thus tame union interests. Restlessness spread among the unionists at the branch level as the union's leverage gained from Bowo's political patronage was in a critical situation. In the face of dozens of ordinary union members from a local textile factory, who attended a union political training, one of the branch union leaders admitted frankly, "This really scares us. We, the branch unionists, would be vulnerable because no one protects us, no one backs us, to deal with government and security forces. We're dead! So, we need someone else to replace Pak Bowo's position as our representative."

In response to Bowo's situation, after weeks of internal dialogues, the union elites chose Dammy, the union secretary who had replaced Budhy, as a legislative candidate for the 2014 Elections. The Democrat Party was chosen as their vehicle. The rationale for choosing this party was its status as a small local party, assumed to be easier to negotiate with, evident by the party's willingness not to charge any collaboration fees, which could otherwise burden the union.²³¹ While Bowo continued with Golkar at the provincial level, another SPN unionist decided to compete in Pekalongan legislative elections targeting southern districts with the same party. However, like Bowo, he was not officially endorsed by SPN for the Pekalongan council for union's limited resources for his candidacy.

Political resources

The most critical issue for SPN's political actions in the 2014 elections was their access to resources. Changes in fundamental strategy reduced the union's dependence on party's resources, but problems of financial resources were the greatest worry. While achieving financial independence from party resources had the potential to generate workers' independent political consciousness, unionist faced significant challenges due to its limited financial capacity compared to larger unions participating in the Go-Politics network, particularly the Metalworkers Union. The Metalworkers Union, supported by tens of thousands of local members and external financial assistance, had a greater financial capacity,

²³¹ In Indonesian context, it has been a common tendency that political parties require the legislative candidates to contribute a large amount of money in order to fund the campaign costs.

collecting dues at 1% of the local minimum wage from its members mostly employed in large, modern, globalised manufacturing industries.²³²

In contrast, SPN of Pekalongan suffered from extremely limited financial capacity, collecting dues at only 0.5% of the local minimum wage from around three thousand members mostly employed in medium-scale industries. Dammy, worried about the union's financial ability, estimated they would need a budget of more than 50 million Rupiah (approximately 3,100 Euros) for campaign props, equipment, organising teams, etc. Unable to collect sufficient funds as the campaign days approached, Dammy decided to retire from his job to use the severance payment for campaign financial support.

Another scarce resource was the institutional network support candidates could count on. Pekalongan unionists were isolated as a 'single fighter' within their own environment due to the national congress of SPN deciding to keep political distance from any institutional coalition with political parties. Hence, they had to rely mostly on their own networks, Bowo, Pattiro activists, and Omah Tani activists, for learning political strategies. By contrast, the Metalworkers Union's political agenda was accelerated by strong support, not only from Omah Tani, but also the its central organisation, including several labour NGOs, academicians, and national politicians.

Limited resources were also influenced by changes in leadership style within the union itself. Since Dammy replaced Budhy in daily organisational operations, interactions with external networks changed significantly. Unlike Budhy, Dammy had a limited personal network, and the only external network they maintained was their relationship with Omah Tani in Batang. Activists and others with whom Budhy had established productive relationships over the years were less involved in this SPN's political project. Interactions with local journalists became rare, and communication with various local groups of activists also declined.

Parliament seats or political learning?

The limited resources sparked heated debates among unionists about how to perceive 'Go-politics' and proceed with their political agenda. Two main stances emerged: one favouring a parliamentary-oriented approach, and the other

²³² Metalworkers Union (FSPMI) collected financial supports mostly from regular membership dues and external sources such as supports from donor institutions, etc (Tjandra 2016, 122). Most of its members came from large globalized industrial companies, mostly in metal, electronic, automotive sectors, which provided better wages, enabling them to collect significant amounts of due .

emphasising union-centric-politics. While only a few adopted the parliamentary-oriented view, they had significant influence. They considered the council seat highly valuable and non-negotiable, insisting that limited resources should not confine attempts to win the elections. On the other hand, the union's-politics-oriented stance prioritised political education based on the union's actual political capacity, emphasising the importance of organising genuine constituent mobilisation and refusing vote-buying practices.

Internal tensions surfaced within the union as some members advocated for a pragmatic approach, emphasising the importance of prioritising the acquisition of a parliamentary seats as the primary means to safeguard the unionists' political interests. These pragmatic unionists, influenced by common traditional practices in Indonesia's elections and elite perspectives, tended to distinguish the post-electoral period from the electoral moment. They viewed the relationship between elected representatives and constituents as diminishing after winning seats due to the prevalent practice of vote-buying.

Honestly, most of DPRD members no longer maintain a connection with constituents [after securing the parliamentary seats], because [the votes] had been 'sold'. They cease to represent anyone. The logic of such [vote] buying has made the relationship between voters and representatives end [after the elections].²³³

This perception, hence, separates the "post-electoral" context from the electoral moment, framing the latter as a political arena where candidates collect tickets only to secure parliamentary seats. In this view, campaign promises become meaningless, and campaign sessions are seen as transactional rather than oriented towards fostering lasting connections with constituents.

This was confirmed during several campaign sessions I attended where this approach was applied briefly. Instead of presenting a program aligned with constituents' interests, the union's legislative candidate focused on sharing his personal information, followed by a quick technical explanation of how the constituents should vote for him at the ballot box. On occasion, he stood in front of people sitting on the floor, creating an impression of hurried interaction. After his concise explanation, a member of his campaign team distributed souvenirs to each participant. The candidate defended that this wouldn't be legally considered

²³³ Interview with one of the SPN leaders, 14 October 2010; reconfirmed his opinion at another interview, 23 January 2014.

as vote-buying practices since there was no written suggestion to vote for him on the souvenirs. Similarly, he distributed 50 thousand rupiah within a blank (unwritten) envelope to several participants at a campaign meeting, categorising it as a transportation fee.

The application of such a method impacted other union legislative candidates who began considering it as more effective in securing votes. However, this attitude led to tensions within the majority of unionists. Rumours about these tensions spread beyond the union office, drawing reactions from local activists, including those from Omah Tani. Some local activists attempted to convince the SPN unionists to adhere to the original political track agreed upon by the Go-Politics network. Many fellow activists, however, chose to remain silent, despite their disagreement with such pragmatic tactics.

On the other hand, unionists who held the union's-politics-oriented stance acknowledged the difficulties of winning the council seat due to the union's limited resources and the political incapacity of the union's constituents. Moreover, they recognised the difficulties posed by vote-buying practices from political rivals and the absence of a strong working-class political identity. Despite the workers' militance in industrial relations, which to some extent strengthened the working-class identity, the unionists believed that transforming this militancy into a formidable political force required significantly greater resources.

The prevalence of vote-buying practices in elections heightened suspicion among grassroots union members about the personal motives behind the union's political agendas. In an informal dialogue at the SPN office's backyard, an ordinary union member expressed concerns about the lack of understanding among members regarding the political meaning of the labour movement. The member bluntly reminded the leaders that suspicions were fuelled not only by this lack of understanding but also by their observation of how decisions on labour disputes were taken by a handful of union elites in exclusive dialogues with political party leaders and government officials. The member cited labour dispute cases in ARO Hospital, the unfinished case of Sri Ratu, and some other cases in textile factories, which raised doubts about the genuineness of the union's struggles in the political field. The apolitical attitude, lack of enthusiasm, insufficient political comprehension, and the absence of political identities among union members were identified as essential reasons for some union leaders' scepticism about winning the legislative elections.

The scepticism among the majority of unionists marked a shift in political attitude, with winning the legislative elections no longer seen as the primary target. Instead, they began to emphasise the significance of political education for the union's constituents over victory itself. The elections were viewed as an opportunity to assess the extent of the political power held at the base level and to gauge community support for the union's struggle. Despite acknowledging the benefits of Bowo's political patronage, many unionists with a unions'-politics-oriented stance began to realise that the power they enjoyed in previous years was not genuine union power but a political dependence that became detrimental to the union when it conflicted with defending members and elite political interests.

Cultivating political knowledge at grass root level

In such circumstances, internal efforts became the mainstay to strengthen the base for their political goals. They regularly organised enterprise-based meetings for political education in various locations, including the SPN branch office, where the campaign team gathered union representatives from each enterprise. During these meetings, union representatives from the enterprise level typically took positions in the centre of the meeting room, while ordinary members gathered around the edges or corners, sitting quietly or occasionally engaging in conversation.

Despite the usefulness of large meetings for introducing members to union political goals, informal gatherings in small groups held in turns at unionists' houses were more effective for exchanging political knowledge and particularly for consolidating political strategy. Some mid-layer unionists took initiatives to conduct these meetings to confirm the unionists' commitment to mobilisation based on actual union political capacity. These meetings also aimed to dispel worries and suspicions that spread among members about rumours regarding the union's political agenda. Mid-layer unionists paid serious attention to this situation, especially following the increasing number of cases of industrial disputes that erupted along with the union's political activities.

Despite the limitations in maintaining the broad networks of the local SPN, mid-layer unionists played a significant role in preserving the union's political moves. They allowed fierce debates to take place within the elite circle of the local union at the branch office. In informal settings, these mid-layer leaders sought to exert their influence over others outside the formal union structure. This backstage influence was crucial in maintaining their strategy. Meanwhile, the formal forum of political training became a front stage for the alignment

between a few leaders' strong political passion and the mid-layer unionists who wanted to retain the union's political agenda.

6.4.3. Contested Constituencies

The working class is often viewed as a potential source of votes in elections, with their votes sought after for either defending their interests or contributing to the political success of candidates aiming for parliamentary positions. However, in political reality, the distinction between these two motives is not always clear-cut. During campaigns, various claims and framings are presented in the name of workers, contested by political actors for their own political goals, often without the full awareness of constituents in the grassroots. Political elites may exploit such campaigns for their personal interests. Similarly, when union leaders participate in legislative elections, it becomes a complex task to differentiate between hegemonic elitist rhetoric and representation that genuinely aligns with the interests of constituents. The worker constituents can only evaluate this distinction when their leaders are faced with dilemmatic labour disputes during the campaign period.

Contested by Others

Some cases were observed revealing how workers' votes were contested by other legislative candidates who were interested in political collaboration with the SPN unionists. During interactions between unionists and political candidates, a battleground emerged between manifest and hidden interests. Language, rhetoric, social status, and attributes became signifiers of how antagonistic actual interests were framed to encourage harmonious alignments of interests. This dynamic resembled Goffman's dramaturgy of front stage and back stage (Merelman 1969; Goffman 1959), unfolding within an antagonistic class structure – the context that conventional interactionist scholars completely overlook (Puddephatt 2013, 61).

Poppy Dharsono, a former celebrity, came to SPN of Pekalongan for the support of the local working class. She was a well-known politician from Jakarta who was a former top model in the 1980-90s, a fashion designer, an owner and a leader of a number of companies, including the garment and textile industry. She was an incumbent of the Regional Representative Council who represented the Province of Central Java at the national level.

When a prominent politician, Poppy Dharsono, sought support from the local working class, tensions arose. Despite her upper-class image and businesswoman

status, she attempted to align business and workers against the government. However, her narratives revealed contradictions as she framed workers' issues under business logics. While using jargon like 'fight Neoliberalism (lawan Neoliberalisme)', 'struggle for people (berjuang demi rakyat)', 'defending workers' rights (membela buruh)' to attract unionists, she argued that poor labour condition was the consequence of how business interest of the 'powerless' employers was harmed by inadequate socio-economic government policies. By framing harmonious industrial relations as an ideal business climate, she expected a joint political front against the ruling government to defend the business interest in order to secure the workers socio-economic well-being.

Poppy's campaign immediately alerted some unionists to the unitarist approach of New Order's industrial relations system which they had abandoned, triggering discomfort among unionists who had attempted to dismantle the legacy of the New Order's labour regime. The unionists became increasingly unenthusiastic when Poppy's campaign team treated them merely as campaign operators rather than independent political subjects.

A similar situation unfolded with another politician from Gerindra party, who aimed to win elections in Pekalongan City. Despite claiming knowledge on labour problems, her campaign rhetoric indicated otherwise. The negotiations focused more on concrete tactics of mobilising votes than addressing critical labour issues. Unionists exhibited militancy through orations and video presentations of their demonstrations, while politicians concentrated on campaign tactics.

Despite the obvious attempts of these politicians to capture workers' votes through rhetoric campaigns, it did not necessarily sway the workers' political preferences. In campaigns in front of the SPN constituents – both union members and the communities they have advocated for – the unionists also did not take any systematic and significant measures to encourage the members to vote for Poppy and the other parties' candidates. There was no discourse on these politicians except for the circulation of posters without any illustration about the figures and their relevance to the workers. The unionists alone were preoccupied with the complicated issues of the campaigns for their own legislative candidates, as illustrated earlier. Like any other politicians, the unionists themselves could not even assure the support of the union's core constituents for their candidates without remarkable efforts.

Unionists' concerns about the lack of support arise not from the rhetoric battles in political campaigns, but from the widespread practice of vote buying

in Indonesian elections. This practice has encouraged less popular candidates to rely on this approach to attract more voters. In such ‘voting markets’, no candidates can assure their success since they may not be able to control the decision that voters make in the ballot box (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019, 115). Voters have their discretion to deliver their votes based on the highest ‘payouts’ of several competing candidates, or for non-economic reasons such as personal ties, better knowledge of the candidate, or identity ties (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019, 116-117). This left the union campaign team in a vulnerable position, even when it came to securing the support of their own constituents.

Internal mobilisation amidst shadowing doubts

Mobilising workers’ votes for union candidates is a challenging endeavour fraught with power dynamics and inevitable tensions. The process of transforming an apolitical base into a political force often results in unionists’ dominant roles over their members. In Pekalongan, the challenge became particularly apparent when unionists defined organisational political goals as individual political goals for the members. For most rank-and-file members, casting votes for their union leaders in legislative elections, based on organisational instructions, remained an uncommon practice. Political choices were typically individual decisions or influenced by the family’s political orientation. Members primarily viewed unionists as simply responsible for advocating for their socio-economic interests, specifically focusing on wages, job security, and access to public health services.

Union’s legislative candidates, like Dammy and others, were often perceived by many union members as abstract figures, with their positions at the branch level being too distant from members’ everyday lives. Leaders known to the members were usually those encountered on a daily basis at the workplace, such as line leaders negotiating with foremen to defend rights or shop floor union representatives vocally fighting for wages and holiday benefits. Even if some members were familiar with Dammy’s role in negotiations with the DPRD and the government officials, they did not necessarily perceive this as political leadership. Electoral politics was considered a different arena from the daily concrete problems of labour, even if it played out in parliamentary chambers or the mayor’s office. Generating workers’ understanding about the roles of union leaders in this political arena required additional effort, which was integrated with political education initiatives.



Photo 23: Union's political training in North Pekalongan was held concurrently with the *Arisan* Meeting in order to attract more union members to participate.

Dammy's campaign heavily relied on image branding and political education initiatives. The campaign team actively travelled to villages, inviting workers to meet Dammy face to face. They utilised community traditions to create effective ways of introducing and shaping Dammy's image. For instance, in the north coast, political education took place during women's social gatherings) in villages organised by BSI factory unionists, concluding with a lottery for arisan money (see Photo 23). The rhetoric drew on everyday language, a mix of Indonesian and Pekalongan Javanese, to ensure simplicity and accessibility. The campaign team showed a video highlighting Dammy's participation in various street demonstrations, aiming to revive memories of his leadership and services.

A recurring narrative in SPN's political education was the demand for members to 'return the favour' to the union. This narrative aimed to maintain members' loyalty to the organisation and establish counter-narratives that delegitimised unacceptable conduct, specifically accepting vote-buying from other politicians, deemed a 'betrayal to the union.' Analogies of paternalistic relations were occasionally used to reinforce these messages. In one instance, a male union branch leader addressed predominantly female and younger members, stating that helping the union, akin to helping one's family,

Let me take an example: One day, you find out that your parents are going to have a party. What would you do? You will help them, won't you? You

wouldn't help somebody else simply for a money, would you? Why should you help others who will not fight for you? It would be better if we could help our families who have raised us since childhood, who have taken care of and educated us, and from whom we got everything they strove for (20 March 2014)

The battle against the pervasive practice of vote buying, which poses a threat to constituent loyalty, was further underscored by the affirmation of class identity. This contrasted the portrayal of movement leaders as opposed to the untrustworthy politicians associated with the bourgeoisie. As he continued his speech,

Pak Bowo [the SPN branch leader] worked as weaving machine operator, just like us! He climbed the career ladder from below, so he understood our struggles. That's why he consistently stands by us. Dammy is also like him. He is a dedicated worker at Tritex [factory]. Now, you can compare him to other legislative candidates who won elections using their money; because they came from rich families. Their parents were wealthy employers. So, when they became the DPRD members, they lack empathy for the people's suffering. When you see their poster claiming "fight together with the people (berjuang bersama rakyat)", it's a lie! Whose people they are referring to?

The construction of class identity and organisational ties illustrates the dominance of unionists over their core constituents. However, members retained their autonomy to define the extent of that dominance. The way they valued the leaders' actual roles in the daily experiences at work, especially during the campaign season, influenced the way they evaluate the idealised image of their leaders – particularly the union's legislative candidates. This becomes the source of unease among some union members.

6.4.3. Politics or Jobs?

The SPN unionists faced increasing political fervour alongside several unresolved industrial conflicts. At the forefront was an ongoing dispute involving the dismissal of workers at Sri Ratu Company, marking the third such case since Budhy's initial layoff by the same company. The recent conflict stemmed from the company's shutdown due to unequal competition in the local retail sector, exacerbated by the entry of the globalised company Carrefour from France into Pekalongan. With declining consumer numbers, the company, having nearly two hundred employees, primarily women, resorted to closure and layoffs. Tensions rose as the severance pay offered to workers fell significantly below statutory provisions. Despite months of dispute settlement efforts and ignored

orders from the Manpower Offices of Pekalongan and Central Java province, a resolution remained elusive.

In response, union leaders sought political intervention, taking the case to the Mayor of Pekalongan. Rizal, the union leader, claimed the Mayor's support and legal representation, but workers hesitated to go to court, fearing prolonged resolution. Some workers pragmatically considered accepting any severance pay for a swift resolution, while others insisted on their demands, prompting plans for a large demonstration (see Photo 24).



Photo 24: A union leader from Sri Ratu led a meeting with fellow workers to discuss negotiation tactics with management. The meeting, held at the Pekalongan Municipality, aimed to urge the Mayor to provide political support.

The need to conduct a demonstration became a crucial intersection between the workers' interests and electoral political agendas. As the settlement process extended beyond expectations, it coincided with the legislative election campaign period, necessitating a balance between worker concerns and political considerations. The mayor actively sought to prevent workers' demonstrations, recognising the potential disruption to the prevailing political atmosphere. Bowo, in alignment, encouraged fellow unionists to temporarily halt street protests, acknowledging the potential disturbance to the strategic plans of local political elites. This presented a dilemma for union leaders and the campaign team. On

one hand, they were driven by a political agenda to secure victory for Dammy. On the other hand, the ongoing dispute at Sri Ratu demanded their attention. The dilemma reached its peak when the workers of Sri Ratu were at an impasse and, ironically, wanted to use elections as a moment for their solution.

Ten days before the end of the campaign period, Rizal came to a meeting at the union office with some of its leaders. Expressing emotionally, he conveyed that all Sri Ratu workers planned to stage a demonstration in front of the Central Governor's office in Semarang. Their demands included an immediate resolution to the dispute and a protest against the perceived inadequacy of the provincial and city government in compelling Sri Ratu's employers to comply with standard labour laws. The workers intentionally chose the day before the election for the demonstration and expressed their intent to continue until election day if there was no response from the provincial government. He expressed,

In these elections, our goal is to raise awareness of the people in Pekalongan and Central Java regarding Ganjar's [the Governor of Central Java Province] failure to address the ongoing dispute. So, we may choose not to participate in the voting on 9 April [the election day] as our focus will be on asserting our rights and demands on that day. In essence, we intend to be Golput on that day.²³⁴ No compromise at all! ... This is about the life of 171 employees. So, everybody will go on strike! No one will stay at home or work on that day. We need to reach this goal! (24 March 2014).

The union leaders were taken aback on hearing the workers' plans. Following a moment of silence, one of the leader voiced concerns about the workers' security, pointing out that electoral regulations typically prohibit street gatherings during the pre-election days. In response, Rizal defended the workers, emphasising their frustration and resistance to any postponements:

I've tried to speak to Dammy, but he was so busy. So, with whom I should discuss this? No one! Listen, I understood that everybody is busy with political campaigns. I understood that politics is more important and Dammy's victory is more valuable. But now, I am asking you: 'Do we listen to our conscience' when we find this problem unsettled? Whether we would like it or not, the only chance for us to bargain is only on 8 and 9 April! No compromise anymore! (24 March 2014).

²³⁴ *Golput* is literally an abbreviation of *Golongan Putih* (White Voters) that refers to those who did not vote intentionally in the General Elections for political reasons.

The unrest was not confined to the Sri Ratu workers. Another instance involved the dismissal of Gisapda factory workers due to wage-related protests and company's pressures on union.²³⁵ Predominantly comprised of women, these workers expressed dissatisfaction with the sluggish response of union officials in advancing the settlement process. Concerns escalated, particularly when the workers' intention to organise a protest lacked convincing support from branch elites for political reasons. Similar to the Sri Ratu case, workers grew frustrated as legal decisions for the disputes would not wait for the conclusion of elections.

The workers' discontent posed a dilemma for the union's campaign teams. The planned demonstration on election days delivered a serious moral blow. Traditionally, branch leaders actively participated in demonstrations and strikes across various companies as part of collective actions. Organising actions, however, on election days presented a substantial dilemma, forcing them to make a choice between elections or protests, politics or jobs. While technical difficulties impeded the planned action due to security concerns, the frustrations and perplexities among the workers illustrate the vulnerable nature of the union's political agenda in the eyes of its own members. The clash between electoral priorities and the workers' urge for collective action highlighted the complex balancing act faced by the union's campaign teams during this period.

6.4.4. Limits and Challenges

The conclusion of the 2014 legislative elections marked the culmination of the workers' political struggle in Pekalongan, resulting in failure as none of the candidates, including Bowo, secured a parliamentary seat. Bowo, once marginalized by local political elites, lost his political positions held since 2004. Another SPN candidate in South Pekalongan also faced disappointment, and Dammy in North Pekalongan received only 560 votes out of the targeted 2,500. Unionists involved in these political experiments expressed frustration finding the results.

Despite this setback, unionists aimed to derive constructive insights from the results, acknowledging the genuine level of political support among the union's core constituents. While the amassed votes surpassed the existing number of SPN members within the electoral district, revealing substantial backing from

²³⁵ Workers protested for the dismissal of fifty workers who complained about extremely lower wages, receiving only nearly a half of local minimum wage (Interview with Gisabda workers, 21 March 2014)

the union membership, it highlighted a lack of support from workers' families and neighbours.

The inclusion of workers' family members and engaged neighbours as strategic constituents in union politics was overlooked in unionists' political campaigns. Major political mobilisation and educational efforts primarily centred on union membership, with community campaigns being less intensive.²³⁶ The disconnected narratives between the lives of union members and non-unionised individuals engaged in community advocacy activism, coupled with a lack of class-focused discourses, raised concerns among unionist about their own political engagement.

The difficulties in constructing narratives and discourses that align with integrated interests led to the absence of a robust shared politicised identity essential for effective electoral engagement. Although the trend of party-related identity in Indonesia has been weakening, constructing a strong politicised identity remained crucial for the working class and allied communities in countering dominant political forces (Caraway and Ford 2014, 152). This was evident in the success of the Metalworkers Union in Bekasi, which garnered significant working-class votes by establishing a robust working-class identity during the 2014 legislative elections (Savirani 2015, 263). Similarly, experiences in Argentina demonstrated that mobilising heterogeneous constituents relied on establishing a common antagonistic identity or signifier, fostering unity among diverse groups (Gaonkar 2012). The adoption of slogans like "Vote PT [labour party]. The rest are bourgeois" in Brazilian social movements effectively unified various groups under a common banner of the people's heterogeneous interests (Seidman 1994, 224).

The absence of politicised identity and weak narrative links between the industrial working class and other community groups in Pekalongan created vulnerability to vote-buying practices that eroded Dammy's and other union legislative candidates' supports. Through tactics such as *Serangan Fajar* (the dawn

236 The initiative to provide political education and mobilisation of supporting communities was left to individual members at ranks and files without any systematic coordination and control from branch organisation. For instance, a union leader once suggested dozens of workers from a textile factory who lacked political knowledge to influence their families and neighbours to deliver their votes for Dammy. However, there was no further specific strategies from the campaign team to ensure the effectiveness. In practice, none of these workers are able to convey the political messages properly to their family members, let alone neighbours.

attack), rival candidates from other parties seized Dammy's potential votes.²³⁷ Some workers' neighbours admitted that they voted for candidates who offered payments ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 Rupiah (approximately 3-6 euros). This practice significantly eroded Dammy's community support base. In such a competitive votes market, campaigns devoid of monetary or material incentives lost their appeal within the community, weakening their political values.

The practice of vote buying was compounded by widespread political distrust toward electoral politics within the local population. For community members, vote buying held little political significance except simply a transaction. They freely admitted to extracting as much payment as possible from buyers, and even willing to give their votes to buyers who offered higher payments. Yet, the payments extended beyond mere economic motives, entailing a 'moral obligation' of exchange between givers and recipients, buyers and sellers (Burhanuddin 2019, 123-125). It was hardly any reasons of real political representation in delivering votes. True political representation seemed implausible to them. It was this political distrust that brings forth doubts to the claims of political representation in Dammy's campaigns. A female worker's neighbour captured this sentiment, stating, "Huh... he would be the same as other candidates. Once he wins [the parliamentary seat], he will surely forget [his promises to the constituents]".²³⁸

The threat of political distrust also extended to the union's primary constituents: its members. While union leaders anticipated support for Dammy from union members, two contrasting challenges are noteworthy. Firstly, they were dealing with constituents' concerns about the balance between union political goals and the original mandate of defending workplace-based welfare. Secondly, the ongoing debates within union leadership – about the significance of electoral politics as a means to gain political power vis-à-vis a union militancy parameter – indicated a lack of an established conception of the union's political struggle. These debates also imply that the union's political agenda was still predominantly shaped by ideas circulating among elite leaders' circle. Although leaders' dominance is typical in emerging social movements as Laclau argued (see Introduction), it perpetuated the dilemma of political patronage. When the

237 The term *serangan fajar* popularly used in Indonesia to refer to the practice to distribute money after dawn on the election day to people to pay for the votes they cast for candidates (Burhanuddin 2019, 53). Although in reality this is not always literally after dawn, but it is carried out at times before the voters leave for the ballot box, in the hope of influencing the decision on their vote (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019, 107).

238 It was expressed in meeting at unionist's house in the north coast region, attended also by some of her neighbours (22 April 2014).

union needs to maintain its long-term political dependence on the figure like Bowo, it always creates the risk of compromising members' interests. It is such a patronage relationship which induces vulnerability on internal political distrust.

Summary

The evolution of workers' movements in Pekalongan portrays the gradual development of a community-based unionism and its politicisation. While not yet fully crystallised, workers and activists have embarked on a deliberate trajectory for this movement. Their aim is to dismantle the legacy of New Order corporatism and carve a path of struggle tailored to the context of time and space.

This emergence rests on two primary factors: shifts in the local and national political economy and the corresponding responses of movement agents. Transformations in Indonesia's political economy had provided an opportune moment for key local actors to voice collective interests of the working-class. However, these transformative moments carried inherent paradoxes. Democratisation, on one hand, opened a political avenue for workers to enhance their welfare and bargaining power. Yet, economic liberalisation exposed Indonesia to global competition, leaving Pekalongan's companies unable to fully meet workers' demands and avoiding to generate vulnerabilities in the workplace.

In response, unionists redefined democracy's essence at the local level, devising alternative avenues for struggle. Past experiences of movement actors, civil society networks, and local politicians played a pivotal role in shaping this alternative framework. The outcome combined workplace-based concerns with community-centric interests, creating an intersection of labour and citizenship roles. It redefines the labour movement's militancy into these dual spheres of engagement. The movement's political objectives centred on redistributive rights, achieved through public policies and electoral politics, for the benefits of both the local working-class and marginalised groups.

Unionists and activists successfully secured essential public services for diverse local community groups and resolved industrial disputes through political means. This strategic shift, however, broadened their grassroots constituents, ushering in complexity. As both groups endeavoured to expand their scope and benefits for their constituents, limitations arose, as revealed by their experiences in the 2014 General Elections. Electoral politics held a promise as a means to increase political leverage, offering representation in local parliament and influence over

public policies—crucial for grassroots groups, particularly the working class. Yet, a roadblock emerged as well: the failure to win the political competition and none of the union candidates was able to gain a seat. While local political-economic forces indeed played a substantial role in their defeat, solely attributing it to elite power and vote-buying practices overlooks intrinsic realities within the social movements.

Resistance to the the movement's engagement in politics emanated not just from external political-economic forces, but also from internal challenges in transforming their diverse social bases into a cohesive political front. While unionists and activists achieved access for various grassroots groups—advocating for public health, social security, budget allocations for the urban poor alongside wage and job security demands—the advocated groups remained disjointed in their shared interests. Efforts of each group remained compartmentalised, lacking robust interconnections. The narrative of intersecting social bases as a unifying chain was inconsistently echoed by unionists and activists. Thus, the collective foundation for these heterogeneous groups proved insufficient.

Consequently, a shared identity, an essential cultural capital for electoral politics, failed yet to materialise. Therefore, practices like vote buying readily eroded social ties cultivated during public service advocacies. This also explains why union candidates' narratives, focused on union struggles, that were delivered during the political campaign resonated less with other community groups. While the 'workers are citizens' narrative had gradually redefined the union members' perspective of themselves, its chain of equivalence to other community groups remains nebulous, leaving an emptiness in understanding and solidarity.