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

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Summary

Since the collapse of the Indonesia's authoritarian New Order, workers in this country have been seeking effective ways to organise and express their interests in dealing with a new labour regime amidst the economic and political transition. While traditional workplace-based unionism remains the dominant model, community unionism has started to gain some local attention. Workplace unionism primarily involves unions using collective bargaining in employment relations to protect workers' traditional interests. In contrast, community unionism focuses on unions collaborating with communities and community organisations to address issues relevant to either or both groups.

This dissertation examines the rise of both types of unionism and their effects on the representation relations between unionists and the constituents in two industrial regions in the Province of Central Java: Semarang and Pekalongan. Both are the regions where union activism has been rising significantly in this province especially since the early of Reformation era. The specific questions I explore are: how do the workers in each region develop strategies that led to different kind of unionism despite some similar underlying conditions? To what extent do the chosen strategies adequately serve the interests of each constituent they mobilised under the existing social, cultural and economic-political contexts?

Unions in both regions essentially maintained traditional workplace-based struggles, and had relatively equal opportunity to develop other activism beyond workplace such as community advocacy and participation in electoral politics. Both unions also similarly affiliated to the same parent organisation: the National Workers Union (SPN). However, these two unions differed significantly in several important ways. The first one is in the scale of resources mobilised by unionists in each sphere, the workplace and the community. The second one is in the way they introduce and reinforce different values to their respective constituencies.

Workers in Semarang, a major industrial hub in Central Java with a globalised economy supported by abundant workforce from nearby rural areas, focus predominantly on workplace-based organisations. In contrast, workers in Pekalongan, with its smaller-scale industrial economy but dynamic local political structure, embraced community-based activism. While unionists in Semarang occasionally experimented with community advocacy programs, their primary focus remains on workplace resources for member welfare. Collective action and building alliances among local unions for increased leverage in minimum wage negotiations were more prominent than engagement in electoral politics and

advocacy for low-cost education for workers' children. By contrast, unionists in Pekalongan adopted a more balanced approach, addressing both workplace welfare struggles and social advocacy programs, as well as political initiatives. Political channels were even often a key tool for resolving industrial disputes, and electoral politics became an important avenue for unions to engage with their broader constituencies.

I argue that the development of each union model results from the interplay between some structural factors and the way unionists, as the agency, respond to these factors. Political opportunities and economic threats—more specifically related to industrial activities, have been the major structural elements. While, the unionists' perception of opportunities, shaped by their experience in past social movements, and the available strategic networks determine the way the unionists, as the active actors, respond the structural factors.

The dynamics of the structural elements of the political economy and the way unionists respond to them can vary significantly. In Pekalongan, these elements interact through push-and-pull factors, fostering the development of community-based unionism. In contrast, in Semarang, the structural elements tend to reinforce each other, sustaining the traditional model of workplace-based unionism.

In social movement theory, threats serve as a catalyst for the emergence of movements. The development of a union organising model is largely driven by how much economic conditions threaten labour relations and how workers, particularly unionists, perceive these threats. Changes in Indonesia's labour regime, especially the shift toward increased labour flexibility, have been widely recognised by workers across the country as a significant threat. However, workers' responses to this situation vary across different regions.

Workers and union leaders in Semarang did not view these threats as central issues. Improving the minimum wage remained the union's primary and normative mission, even with the widespread use of flexible labour, such as short-term contract labour and home-based workers, in the region. The cultural legacy of the corporatist unionism, established during the New Order authoritarian era, continued to strongly influence the values of the union's leadership, particularly regarding the significance of union's economic role. This legacy had shaped the orientation of unionists and workers towards maintaining the conventional workplace-based union model. This orientation was also reinforced by the hegemonic production politics of corporations, which limited the union's focus to wages and workplace economic welfare.

Union leaders in Pekalongan faced a very different situation. Job insecurity and poor working conditions were the main drivers of unrest, largely stemming from local companies' limited capacity to compete in regional economic markets and their small economies of scale, which restricted their capacity to meet workers' ongoing demands for improved conditions. This reality led labour leaders to recognise how little leverage they had to push workplace changes through traditional union actions. At this juncture, the political and economic context created momentum for change. Economic pressures pushed unionists to explore alternative strategies, while political shifts presented new opportunities for action.

Local democratisation has been a key political factor in the development of unions in response to economic threats. The democratisation of the early 2000s was characterised by a strong push for local political participation in both elections and public policy-making. In Pekalongan, this opportunity attracted unionists who saw it as an alternative arena for gaining socio-economic and political support. By aligning with the Golkar party—keen to regain favour through the populist leadership of local elites—and capitalising on the changing political landscape that weakened the dominance of Islam-based parties, the unions in Pekalongan were able to cultivate new activism and strengthen their bargaining power.

In contrast, union leaders in Semarang did not pursue similar opportunities for union development. The union's leadership remained rooted in the conventional model I previously described. Furthermore, political changes in Semarang led to opportunities that were tightly controlled by political parties. Although the PDIP (Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle) has been the dominant force in Semarang—and Central Java more broadly—since the beginning of reformasi, the party showed little interest in building structured alliances with existing workers' organisations. Similarly, despite receiving structural support from international labour institutions for community advocacy programs, the local union's involvement in local policy-making was limited.

I argue that worker leaders and unionists play a crucial role in interpreting the local structural conditions that shape the choice of organisational models. Their actions must be understood in the historical context of their agency and how they mobilise available resources. On one hand, their direct involvement in daily workplace conflicts has been essential in fostering a deep awareness of workers' social position relative to employers and capital. Similarly, their decision to organise resistance through institutional and organisational strategies is influenced by their organised conflict experiences within the workplace.

However, the choice of a specific organisational model and strategy is also influenced by past experiences in diverse social movements. In Pekalongan, some union leaders brought a unique perspective due to their background in leftist student organisations opposing the New Order regime and their activism within Islamic organisations. This contrasts with the unionists in Semarang, who had experiences primarily within factory environments. While the Semarang leaders viewed their factory-based resistance as the sole ideal model for union activism, some Pekalongan leaders opted to expand their union work into the community, referring to their diverse experiences.

Equally important is the role of the networks each leader has built. Their biographical backgrounds have provided them with different forms of social capital. While most leaders in Semarang focused on building networks among local unionists from various unions and limited their interactions with religious NGO activists, unionists in Pekalongan developed much broader connections. They engaged extensively with colleagues from local religious organisations, local grassroots activists, cross-regional labour activists, and local politicians. These diverse networks enabled circulation of ideas, which in turn shaped their ability to interpret economic opportunities and threats, influencing the model of unionism they pursue.

As unions's constituents in Semarang and Pekalongan became diverse, the strategies that evolved along with the development of each type of union significantly impacted on how the unionist established interactions with the diverse groups of constituents they mobilised and advocated for. These dynamics are primarily seen in several ways: 1) the way unionists perceive the diversity of their constituents, 2) the way unionists in each type of union build collective ties as a strategic instrument in defending the interests of their constituents, 3) forms of representation gaps that emerge between them, especially in particular arenas where the heterogeneity of their constituents is prone to competitions and conflicts.

Unionists in Pekalongan and Semarang faced different challenges due to their heterogeneous constituencies. In Semarang, the diversity of union constituencies was primarily shaped by corporations' production strategies aimed at maximising profits (capital accumulation). Corporations categorised the labour force based on migration status, locality, gender, age, and employment status. By contrast, Pekalongan's union constituents included not only workers but also fisherfolk from the north coastal areas, urban street vendors, other impoverished groups, and those with religious organisational affiliations. These categorisations reflect

the local urban socio-economic structure, even sometimes the structure of political base.

The way unionists interpret these labour categorisations significantly influences their strategies for unionism, while also exposing their vulnerabilities in building effective relationships. In Semarang, unionists at all organisational levels developed strategies that led to, what can be described as, precarious representation. These strategies were shaped by corporate labour categorisations, reinforced by exclusionary and divisive labour narratives. For example, hegemonic narratives surrounding the concept of ‘partners (*mitra*)’ perpetuated the separation and exclusion of homeworkers from permanent factory workers. This exclusion was often viewed by both workers and unionists as an objective reality rather than a politically constructed production relation. By maintaining this division, corporations retained control over segments of the labour force, limiting the unions’ ability to unite all worker categories into a collective force. As a result, homeworkers were left to advocate for their own interests, but with fewer resources.

In Pekalongan, unionists similarly viewed their constituents in a compartmentalised manner. Despite their active attempts to engage with these groups, they were often treated as relatively independent entities, connected only through limited programmatic advocacy focused on specific issues such as health and civil registration. There was only limited intersection among these urban community groups, including industrial workers, which enabled their ability to interact and build mutual support for common interests. This lack of cohesion prevented the formation of a unified community that could collectively advocate for shared goals. The impact of this disunity was evident in the unionists’ failure to win the legislative seats in 2019 elections, as they garnered little support from ironically their broader and diverse constituents, including their own traditional base: the industrial workers.

The compartmentalisation of these groups rendered them vulnerable in the arenas where their diversity became a contested resource or is strategically exploited by others to obstruct and control the union’s goals. Two critical arenas where this dynamic played out are production relations and electoral politics. As previously discussed, corporates systematically created labour categories to maximise profits. In many cases, this segregation has become a battleground for unions to reclaim collective power and advocate for precarious workers. However, such contestation was not pronounced in Semarang, largely due to internal constraints within the union and its leadership.

Meanwhile, the intense competition of political contestation in Pekalongan is evident, where unionists saw the electoral arena as a strategic gamble to maintain their bargaining power. This competition not only involved rivalry between unionists and local political elites vying for the support of potential union constituencies, but it also triggered tensions among political candidates within the union itself, due to differing interpretations of the political significance of their constituents.

This study ultimately highlights the importance of focusing on the role of actors, specifically unionists, an element that has been largely overlooked in many labour studies in Indonesia. By examining unionists, it becomes possible to better understand the relationship between local political-economic structures, movement history, individual biographies, and the networks that shape their actions. This explains why two unions affiliated with the same parent organisation can exhibit different characteristics. The findings suggest that organisational reform is driven by actors who can dismantle the traditional legacies of past authoritarian labour regimes, although their ability to do so ultimately depends on the opportunities available to them. Their effectiveness can be seen in their ability to craft a narrative that links their class conditions, available opportunities, and defined goals, while also mobilising resources for collective action. In this regard, Semarang had fewer unionists with such a capacity to navigate meaningful internal organisational reforms compared to their counterparts in Pekalongan.

The choice of unionism strategy for its representational function also underscores the importance of actors' capacity to recognise the diversity of their organised bases and the social foundations that shape this diversity. In Semarang, heterogeneity was shaped by the corporates' strategies of production and labour control. Union leaders' inability to recognise the connection between production organisation and the working class's diverse structure led to a significant representation gap between the unions and workers. In Pekalongan, the urban social structure formed the social foundation of the labour movement model they adopted. However, union leaders' difficulty in recognising the substantial needs across different communities resulted in a movement that remains fragmented, with constituent groups disconnected from one another. The findings underscore the persistent challenge of representation within organised labour, especially in the diverse landscape of the labour movement. Leaders often fall short of fully realising the alignment between the actual characteristics of constituents and the strategic conceptualisation they claim

This study finally demonstrates that the interplay between structural factors and the ability of actors to interpret these structural elements is crucial in explaining

why many other regions, at that time, did not develop alternative organising models in response to changes in labour regimes. Moreover, the challenges unionists faced in understanding the diverse categorisations imposed by socio-economic and political forces significantly impacted their ability to mobilise the constituencies they aimed to represent. This situation highlights the need to identify and unify fundamental bonds to effectively advocate for diverse constituencies. While the recent emergence of the Labour Party represents a promising political development in the labour movement, failure to assess the complexity of its diverse constituency could replicate the vulnerabilities experienced by workers in these two regions, posing social and political risks for the labour movements.