

Frustration and Aggression as the Basic Factors of Workers' Strike: A Case Study on Railway Workers' Strike in Semarang, Central Java, in the Colonial Era

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ABSTRACT: *This research aims to analyze the basic factors of the railway workers' strike in Semarang, Central Java, in the Dutch colonial era. Historical method, that is finding and examining the historical records, was used to get authentic and credible facts. The historical analysis was supported by other relevant social sciences concepts, especially psychology, sociology, and politics to reach the objective construction of the history of railway workers' strike in Semarang. The result of this research can be summarized as follows. Semarang, a city which has been industrialized since the middle of the 19th century, is a nutritious area for the growth and the development of industrial community which consists of employer and worker classes. In this industrial community, capitalism lacking of appreciation to the workers' force led the workers to frustration. Frustration could make every human being or even animal aggressive. This research shows that "frustration and aggression" are the basic factors of the workers' movement, among others in the form of strike.*

KEY WORDS: *workers' strike and movement, frustration and aggression, Semarang city, and colonial era in Indonesia.*

INTRODUCTION

This research was inspired by Tan Malaka's view of Indonesian workers in the colonial era. He described the sorrowful condition of the indigenous workers as follows:

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Million of indigenous workers become the colonial slave, who suffered by very little wages, which could only prevent their lives from death. The railway workers started working at wages of f. 15,- and they could earn f. 30,- to f. 40 per month after they were getting old. We could say that these wages actually very little in the capitalism era, if we remember that thousands of people depended their lives on the work and responsibilities of the workers (Malaka, 2000).

In the first quarter of the 20th century, Karl Marx's theory of social change had already spread over the world. According to Karl Marx, social change was mainly caused by conflict between the have and the have not class or between employers and workers class. The result of this social conflict was the transformation in economy, law, and social stratification (Poloma, 1985:137). Based on the conception of Karl Marx, this research proposes a question as follows: *"Is the conception of Karl Marx absolutely appropriate for analyzing the basic factors in mobilizing the workers to go on strike?"* It is a reality that in the common view, workers' strike is often considered as movement based on political interest. Based on this common view, the main question proposed in this research is: *"How academic point of view should judge the basic factors of workers' strike?"*

Workers' movement, especially strike, can be viewed in psychological domain. Robert Ted Gurr, in *Why Men Rebel*, proposed the postulate of Dollard and his colleagues at Yale in 1939. Workers' strike could be analysed by frustration-aggression theory. Frustration means disappointment which is caused by failure to meet the success of some one had been expecting, or failure to meet the goal-directed behaviour. Aggression is an action which is planned to injure the parties, which had lead some one to be frustrated. There is a tendency, at persons or even animals, to attack the parties which cause them to be frustrated. The postulate of Dollard is that the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration, and contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some forms of aggressions (Gurr, 1970:33).

In the industrial relationship, workers' strike means the absence of working which is done by workers in a certain industry, certain period, and accompanied by certain demands (Sandra, 1955:5). Workers' strike can be caused by many suppressive factors such as very low wages, the rise of daily needs price, and the longer duration of working hours with no additional payment (Sukarno, 1982:34). These suppressive factors can be understood as the preceding condition of workers' frustration, and strike is the form of the workers' aggression.

This article will analyze the movement factors of railway workers' strike in Semarang, which comprises of the basic and the impetus factors.

The process of railway workers' strike also becomes the main discussion in this article.¹

THE MAKING OF RAILWAY WORKERS' UNION OR VERENIGING VAN SPOOR EN TRAMWEG PERSONEEL (VSTP)

The first indigenous worker organization established in Indonesia is Railway Workers' Union or *Vereniging van Spoor en Tramweg Personeel* (VSTP). The meeting for establishing this union – as cited by the newspaper of *De Locomotief*, 16/11/1908 – was held on 14 November 1908 in Semarang and attended by 63 European official working in *Nederlandsch-Indische Spoor* (NIS), *Semarang-Cirebon Spoor Stoomtram-maatshappij* (SCSS), and *Semarang Joana Stoomtram-maatshappij* (SJS). Dutch Socialists named C.J. Hulshoff and H.W. Dekker² were the pioneers of VSTP establishment. Even VSTP was formerly headed by Dutch, this organization was the first worker union in Indonesia of which the members were indigenous people of Indonesia, either Western-educated or non Western-educated people.

At the end of 1913, Mohammad Joesoef was elected as the Chairman of the Central Board of VSTP. He was working as typewriter in *Semarang Joana Stoomtram-maatshappij*, the Head of Sarekat Islam Semarang (Islam League of Semarang) in 1914-1917, and as daily editor *Sinar Djawa*. His skill in Dutch and Malay languages and his experience in politic made him to be appointed as board of VSTP centre. During its development, VSTP accommodated a unity of state-owned or private railway officials. In the history of worker movement in Indonesia, VSTP was known as pioneer organization.

¹This article is taken from one part of my Ph.D. Dissertation in Gadjah Mada University (UGM) Yogyakarta and it entitled "Dinamika Pergerakan Buruh di Semarang, 1908-1926" (The Dynamic of Workers Movement in Semarang, 1908-1926).

²Henri Willem Dekker (1874-1926) was an officer (*ambtenaar*) at *Nederlandsch-Indische Spoorwegmaatschappij* (NIS); the founder and Secretary of VSTP (1908); Head of VSTP (1915-1919); close friend of Sneevliet in VSTP; ever got involved in Matros movement in November 1918. In 1919, he was on leave to Dutch, and in this he was active in labor movement and Communist to support labor movement in Indonesia. Trying to seek for leaders who were appropriate to strengthen the labor movement in Indonesia, on 7 June 1920 he was back to Indonesia and promoted as Vice Head of VSTP (25-26 December 1920) and PKI; Treasurer of PKI (1921-1922); got involved in the strike of pawnshop labor movement (1922); on behalf of colonial government of Hindi Nederland, he was move to Den Haag by NIS; in Den Haag he was active in an International Communism Movement; in July 1924, as representative of Java, and Semaoen that was isolated to Dutch, he attended Congress of Communistern V and Congress of Profintern III in Moscow (July 1924). See F. Tichelman (1985:212).

The membership of indigenous people of Indonesia in VSTP was tightly related to the role H.J.F.M. Sneevliet.³ In the middle of 1913, VSTP was composed of European (Nederland and Indo) and the control was held by propagandists of European workers' league. Seeing the fact of increasing number of skillful and literate indigenous officials and idea of H.J.F.M. Sneevliet, at the end of 1913 VSTP decided to receive the indigenous members, and they had similar right as the European members did. In the beginning of 1914, VSTP congress decided that at least three of seven chairmen of VSTP were indigenous people. The efforts of H.J.F.M. Sneevliet to encourage VSTP as active, professional and radical organization made many indigenous peoples of Indonesia join this organization, and this meant that starting from that point, VSTP had experienced process of Indonesianization. This process was also marked by the issue of Malay VSTP news *Si Tetap* in 1915, and the elevation of indigenous propagandists. The process of this change can be seen in the following table.

Table 1
The Comparison between Members of European and Indigenous People in VSTP

Date	Number of European Member	Number of Indonesian Member
1-4-1914	764 persons	701 persons
1-1-1915	853 persons	1439 persons
1-1-1916	1020 persons	2729 persons
1-1-1917	834 persons	4075 persons
1-1-1918	558 persons	5341 persons

Source: F. Tichelman (1985:16 and 44).

H.J.F.M. Sneevliet and his socialist friends succeeded in the making of indigenous people to be interested in, especially by provoking the problems of primary needs. Through VSTP, H.J.F.M. Sneevliet was able to place the base of proletariat movement for socialistic movement. This condition resulted in the exodus of a lot of number of European members from VSTP. Thus, the high-salary members of VSTP resigned. This meant that starting from this era, the basic of this association had been removed by Indonesianization and the influence of socialistic consolidation. The reinforcement of socialism was not only coming from H.J.F.M. Sneevliet, but also coming from H.W. Dekker and Semaoen.

³H.J.F.M. Sneevliet was the Head of *Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij* (SDAP) in Nederland; coming to Indonesia in 1913 for working in *Surabajasch Handelsblad*, then in 1914 he worked in Semarang in a trade association *Semarang Handelsvereniging*.

After Semaoen became the propagandists of VSTP (1916), this organization experienced a rapid development. In 1920, there were 33 branches in Java; some were in Western Coast of Sumatra, and Deli. The biggest branches were situated in the cities where the railway operated, such as: Cirebon, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Madiun, Batavia, and Bandung (*De Volharding*, 10/2/1920). In the territory of Semarang residency, branches of VSTP were founded in Gundih, Demak, Kudus, Kedungjati, and Ambarawa (see "Bijlage Algemeen Verslag" in *Politiek Overzicht*, 1925:7).



Figure 1.
Office Centre of VSTP in Semarang in Jalan Purwodinatan.
Source: Soemardi (1954:10).

Up to October 1921, the members of VSTP were increasing, but after that these number were decreasing drastically. This decrease was the result of banishment of two worker leaders, P. Bergsma and Tan Malaka, caused by their involvement in pawnshop workers' strike (Blumberger, 1987:141). Besides, VSTP which was affiliated with PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* or Indonesian Communist Party) could not function maximally as media of workers' aspiration. According to Semaoen, the interest of worker was split by nationalist-capitalist leaders.⁴ The development number of VSTP starting from 1920 to the end of 1922 could be seen in the following table.

⁴The nationalist-capitalist leaders, according to Semaoen, were national leader who had no firm way of behaving against capitalism and didn't totally defend the interest of *kromo*, people to save themselves from the pressure of capitalist colonial government. See the newspaper of *Sinar Djawa*, No.16 (Semarang: 19 January 1918).

Table 2
The Number of VSTP Member, Year 1920-1922

Year	Indonesia	Nederland	China	Total
Prior of 1920	6.235	236	23	6.494
End of 1920	12.084	95	34	12.213
October 1921	16.831	104	40	16.975
End of 1921	15.621	102	46	15.769
June 1922	7.642	45	44	7.731
End of 1922	9.549	43	15	9.607

Source: Ruth T. McVey (1965:407).

RAILWAY WORKERS FRUSTRATION:

A. The Preceding Condition

In the second decade of the 20th century, the daily need price was rising highly in Semarang. The price of rice rose 30%, sugar 9%, potato 25%, cotton 10%, palm oil 6%, and bamboo 90%. The rise of price was not accompanied by the rise of wages (*De Locomotief*, 18/3/1913). The wages of the indigenous workers, which were no more than f. 1/day, were not able to meet the demand of the daily needs.

Entering to the World War I (1914-1918), the economic life of the workers deteriorated drastically. At that time, inflation highly rose and the Europeans entrepreneurs in Indonesia took great benefits because of the rise of crops export demands. On the contrary, the workers' wages value went down, because the price of imported and domestic goods had risen highly, while the workers' wages were steady.

After the World War I ended (1918), the indigenous workers earned very minimum wages. According to Yeekes, in *De Opbouw* (1923), the indigenous workers only earned f. 196 annually, and they should pay the taxes, so their monthly wages average were only about f. 13. Tan Malaka, with a sorrowful heart, also depicted that the Javanese workers lived in decrepit houses or had no houses. They suffered from famine, sickness, and their clothes were in tatters. When there were cholera, pest, and malaria epidemic, "only" hundreds of thousands of indigenous people died, because they had no stamina to face these diseases. "*This is a tenacity that should be appreciated*" was the expression of Tan Malaka to depict the firmness and patience of indigenous workers in Java to face this difficulties and lacks (Malaka, 2000:52).

The economic problem during the World War I (1914-1918) was reflected by the complaint of *Perhimpunan Roro Jitno* (organization of

private workers) on the impact of the war to workers in Semarang. The emergence of war made some coolies went home since there were no job to do to earn money. There were foremen and shop keepers had been released with separation pay, but not all companies did this generosity (*Sinar Djawa*, 27/2/1915). Because of this economic problem, *Perhimpoean Roro Jitno* made an open letter proposed to Central Committee of Misery in Batavia to get separation pay for those who lost their job. The following is the letter content:

The signed, *Voorlopig Hoofdbestuur of Perhimpoean Roro Jitno* stated that in this difficult time, that was the time of war in Europe, the Misery didn't only happen in Europe but also in Hindi Nederland. The word "miser" was not intended to person who suffered from war but those who lost their job. Starting from August, there were many foremen quitted from job, and there were many potters and coolies having no work as usual. Because of that, *Voorlopig Hoofdbestuur of Perhimpoean Roro Jitno* hoped with respect that donation for Misery in *Nederlandsch-Indië* would be soon distributed to those who suffered from war (*Sinar Djawa*, 27/2/1915).

Beside the difficulties in finding job and dismissal of work, the suffering of indigenous workers was worsened by the rise of daily needs price as the result of war. The rise of price during and post war was caused by several factors. *First*, the import of daily primary needs was obstructed by the shortage of carrier ship, since a large number of Dutch ships were needed by English for the shake of war. *Second*, in 1917 English banned the rice export from India and Singapore to Indonesia (*Nederlandsch-Indië*). Consequently, the supply of daily needs was decreasing and the price of the goods was rising. The middle of 1918 to 1920 was the worst economic depression in Indonesia (*Nederlandsch-Indië*). That time was also indicated by very high inflation. The price of all daily needs was rising, while the salary and wages were stagnant. In the middle of August 1918, the price of foodstuffs, clothes, and domestic needs were rising up to 50% (Larson, 1987:104). *Third*, the entrepreneur conducted an extension of plantation by mobilizing the role of villager head to force farmers to hire out their land to plantation entrepreneur. The villager heads were motivated to force farmers, since they got preemie f. 2.50 per 7,096 m² of hired out land (*Sinar Hindia*, 5/5/1918). Moreover, the area for plantation was getting extensive and the area for rice was getting narrower. The implication of extended area for exported commodity was a tendency of agricultural product increase from Semarang port. We could see the data from the table below.

Table 3
The Export of Agricultural Products from Semarang, Year 1906-1929 (in Ton)

Year	Sugar	Tobacco	Coffee	Cotton
1906	183,593	10,530	1,939	3,042
1907	245,647	9,329	1,973	4,674
1908	238,852	11,831	1,532	3,384
1909	264,224	10,681	1,176	4,870
1910	243,096	10,498	1,639	4,526
1911	237,833	11,485	1,065	4,610
1912	312,928	17,062	1,343	4,722
1913	294,894	17,307	1,909	4,082
1914	328,379	14,899	805	5,352
1915	258,666	18,108	1,173	6,684
1916	369,196	17,015	725	5,704
1917	252,981	1,502	857	7,472
1918	356,181	508	427	5,686
1919	488,300	31,523	6,688	10,043
1920	378,294	14,224	1,327	8,379
1921	491,406	8,776	1,342	11,215
1922	325,660	10,039	2,623	9,661
1923	478,249	10,122	578	8,129
1924	463,805	13,475	2,214	9,877
1925	535,117	13,545	1,514	95,259
1926	397,197	13,335	1,445	9,925
1927	521,613	12,730	1,136	10,243

Source: Theo Stevens (1970:93).

The rice price in Semarang kept increasing. In February 1918, the price of rice quality number one reached f. 14 per load or 22.7 cent per kg, and second rice quality reached f. 13 per load or 21 cent per kg (Liem Thian Joe, 1931:237; in which he stated that one load equals 61.76 kg). This very expensive price experienced more rising. The price of rice quality number one reached f. 16 per load, second price quality reached f. 15 per load, and third rice price reached f. 14 per load (*Sinar Hindia*, 14/1/1919). In addition, the price of sugar reached f. 16 per load or 0.26 per kg (Liem Thian Joe, 1931:234). The indigenous worker earned only about f. 0.50 per day, the price of rice and sugar that was very expensive made life burden harder (*Sinar Hindia*, 20/2/1920).

This economic decline was also accompanied by the lowering of public health quality. In 1917, the citizen of Semarang city experienced an

epidemic of pest which resulted in the death of hundreds of people. This condition was caused by various poverty factors; they are lack of nutritious food, lack of good public health sanitation, and very poor housing (made of bamboo and coconut leaves, lack of proper ventilation, crowded in the narrow and muddy area).

In responding to the rise in price, workers affiliated with Sarekat Islam (Islam League) of Semarang held a general meeting on 10 February 1918 in *Stadstuin* (Semarang town square) which was attended by branches board and 3,000 members. In the meeting, Sarekat Islam of Semarang decided to deliver a letter containing several demands to lower the rice price to the Governor General. The demands formulated by Sarekat Islam of Semarang were as follows:

- a. determining the price of rice produced in Java f. 10 one load for rice of quality number one and the other one was also limited on the same proportional price.
- b. determining the rice price from abroad f. 9 per load for rice of quality number one and the other one was also limited on the same proportional price.
- c. confiscating rice in big rice barns, and selling the rice to people and rice seller who had little capital and sold the rice in local market and villages. The selling had to be monitored so the price would not be over the limit.
- d. decreasing the area of sugar cane fields, tobacco, tea, and coffee which were cultivated to meet the need of outside of Hindi.
- e. extending the area for planting rice, corn and crops planted as second crop in dry season of which the harvest was enjoyed by people of Hindi themselves.

The letter, signed by Semaoen (the Chairman) and Kadarisman (the Secretary), was published in daily news *Sinar Djawa* on 12 February 1918. CSI (*Centraal Sarekat Islam* or Islam League Centre) and *Sarekat Islam Lokal* (Local Islam League) were called out to discuss the rice price as well (*Sinar Djawa*, 12/2/1918; and Liem Thian Joe, 1931:237-238). However, the written demands to the Governor general did not succeed and this made people frustrated that some day would change into aggression.

B. The Impetus Factor: Marxism Fits Nationalism

The decline of people's economy condition, including workers, encouraged Marxists fused in VSTP and ISDV to recruit the sympathy of indigenous workers by holding a general meeting on 17 February 1918 at Stadium (*Stadstuin*) Semarang. The meeting that discussed the price of primary food stuff was attended by approximately 7,000 people coming from different countries, namely Indonesia, China, and Europe. The main speakers of the meeting were Van Burink (speaking in Dutch),

Darsono (speaking in Malay), Baars (speaking in Dutch), Sneevliet, and Semaoen (speaking in Malay). They demanded the colonial government to immediately lower the rice price (Liem Thian Joe, 1931:237-238). For Marxists, the economic decline was their great access to inflame the spirit of struggle for worker class to destroy the Capitalism.

The economic decline in Indonesia after World War I was accompanied by the spread of International Communism influence. *Komintern*, as an International Communism centered in Soviet Union, was established in 1919. This organization had interest to spread Communism (Marxism-Leninism) among developing countries through the world; the colonized countries in Asia, Africa, and South America which were exploited by the regime of European and United States capitalism (McVey, 1965:1).

Concerning to the interest to move workers in colonized countries, it was interesting to consider the Declaration of Zinoviev on "Colonial Subject" in Congress III *Komintern*, as follow:

International Communist has decided to develop principles of worker and Communism movement in all colonial zed countries. This is the first duty of International Communist. However, at the same time, International Communist has also decided to support people's revolutionary movement in colonialized lands in fighting against imperialism, since International Communist believes that the victory of proletariat revolution will free the colonized lands. Our slogan is: "*Proletariats through the world must unite to fight against Imperialism for Communism*" (McVey, 1965:1).

Based on the declaration agreement in the congress, cooperation with nationalism became the strategy of *Komintern* to extend its influence to colonized lands. Slogan of anti Imperialism and Capitalism was responded well by colonized people. Communism propaganda was socialized through various media, namely: meetings, speeches, newspaper, novels, and songs.

One of the effective propagandas to make public interest was art. Song is one of effective propaganda media, since it was easy to teach, could be sung together, was able to raise emotion and was entertaining. One song that became media of propaganda was song of *Internationale*. This song was created to commemorate the founding of *Internationale* (International Worker Association) on 1 May 1864. The lyrics of the song was written in German, and then was translated into several languages, such as Dutch, France, English, Spain, Italy, Portuguese, Denmark, Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, Turkey, and Malay. The translator of the lyrics into Malay was Soewardi Soerjaningrat (*Sinar Hindia*, 5/5/1920). Below is the translation of *Internationale* in Malay.

Bangoenlah bangsa jang terhina!
Bangoenlah kamoe jang lapar!
Kehendak jang moelia dalam doenia
Senantiasa tambah besar
Lenjaplah adat pikiran toea!
Hamba rakjat sadar, sadar!
Doenia telah berganti roepa!
Nafsoelah soedah tersebar!
Kawan, kawan hai ingatlah!
Ajo madjoe berperang!
Serikat Internationale, jalah pertalian orang!
Negri ditindas, hoekoem berdoesta
Jang kaja teroes hidoep seneng
Orang miskin terhisap darahnja
Tak sekali berhak orang
Djangan lagi soeka terperintah!
Ingat akan persamaan
Wadjib dan hak tiada berpisah
Hak dan wadjib haroes sepadan
Kawan, kawan, hai ingatlah!
Ajo madjoe berperang!
Serikat Internationale, jalan pertalian orang (*Sinar Hindia*, 5/5/1920).

The song of *Internationale* was always sung in the meeting of worker organizations, and was the song that had to be sung by the students of Sekolah Sarekat Islam Semarang (School of the Islam League of Semarang) when they asked for donation for operational fund of their school. The song that was able to raise the spirit of anti Imperialism was tightly monitored by colonial government, since it was published through very effective media, newspaper and general meeting. The advisor of indigenous affairs, R.A. Kern called out the government to be aware of for the song had to be sung in the opening and closing of every meeting.⁵

World crisis since the middle of 1922 made workers more suffer. Many companies saved their expenses by deleting the expensiveness allowance and this policy was followed by other acts of saving; asking the workers to resign from company and they got no provisions, reducing 50% annual allowance starting from January 1923, rising the price of house rent for officials from 10% to 15% of salary; omitting housing allowance, reducing base salary and extra allowance; distributing uniform only for once and then the official would hold the uniform by themselves, omitting extra salaries, and reducing over time payment (*Archive of NIS*, Nr.400, as cited by Ingleson, 1986:228-229).

⁵See "Report of Advisor on Indigenous Affairs (R.A. Kern) about the Congress of Communist Party IX in Batavia, on 7-10 June 1924" in *Mr. 1924 No.501x*.

This hard burdens on the shoulder of workers, making them frustrated and encouraged by Marxism and Communism propaganda that was likely to defend the interest of indigenous people, caused the aggressive action performed by the act of strike in railway companies in Semarang.

C. Railway Workers Strike: The Form of Aggression

After the failure of pawnshop worker strike in Pawnshop Service Ngupasan, Yogyakarta in January 1922, the worker movement was weakening. Tan Malaka and P. Bergsma were isolated⁶ and Semaoen left to Rusia in October 1921 to attend Congress of Far East Worker in Moskow on 11 November 1921. In the congress, the problems of worker organization of International Communist in colonized countries were discussed (Blumberger, 1987:141).

Semaoen went back to Semarang on 24 May 1922 and in that time he had faced the fact that worker movement in this city was weakening. He felt necessary to recover the revolutionary worker organization. He thought that the leagues of worker had to unify in the form of new organization.

On 25 June 1922, Semaoen held a meeting of worker unions, especially worker unions affiliated to Hindi Communist Party (PKI). In the meeting, the need of fusion between PPKB (*Vakcentrale*) and *Revolutionair Vackcentrale* was discussed. The plan of reunion of these two organizations could be held on 3 September 1922 in a meeting in Madiun, East Java. The purpose of the fusion is to unify against Capitalism. The new federation was named *Persatoean Vakbonden Hindia* (PVH). Severe worker leagues joined in PVH were *Persatoean Pegawai Pegadean Bumiputra* (PPPB), *Persatoean Goeroe Hindia Belanda* (PGHB), *Persatoean Ghoeroe Bantoe* (PGB), VSTP, and *Personeel Fabriek Bond* (PFB). The number of PVH reached 20,000 people (Blumberger, 1987:141-142).

In responding to the rules that made the life of workers get harder, on Christmas day year 1922, PVH held a meeting in Semarang. In this meeting, Semaoen saw that workers were getting restless. Therefore, in January 1923, as the leader of VSTP, Semaoen issued a circular letter containing proposal for the railway workers to strike, if the expensiveness allowance was deleted. This proposal was once again discussed in the meeting of VSTP on early February 1923. In this meeting, Semaoen warned the Director of Railway Company and Tram for not playing "a dangerous games".

⁶Tan Malaka and P. Bergsma were isolated to Nederland since they were accused of leading pawnshop workers' strike in pawnshop Ngupasan, Yogyakarta, in 1922.

Semaoen, on 12 April 1923, met the leader of *Staatspoor* to discuss the following items: (1) giving the expensiveness allowance to workers; (2) the working hours were 8 hours per day; (3) the establishment the peace maker boards; and (4) giving minimum salary f. 1 per day.⁷

The meeting between Semaoen and the leader of *Staatspoor* did not succeed as the workers' hope. All demand could not be fulfilled by the company (*Sinar Hindia*, 5/5/1923). The failure of meeting with the company became the main subject in VSTP meeting held on Tuesday, 30 April 1923 headed by Kadarisman. According to Kadarisman, proposal was denied by the company since there was nobody who lacked of food would die, even the employees of the company seemed fatty and healthy. These ridiculous and disappointing responses encouraged them to move together. If there was anybody who went for work, it meant that she or he took advantages from others.⁸

Finally, Semaoen called for a strike for all railway workers in Semarang. PVH on 29-30 April 1923 held a meeting in Surabaya. In that meeting, the board of VSTP (Semaoen, Kadarisman, Soegono, and Soedibyoy) announced a manifesto that if the strike happened, Semaoen would be promoted as the dictator of VSTP, and the general strike should be implemented immediately after Semaoen was arrested. Then, Semaoen said that he was not afraid of being in jail and isolation by the government for the shake of struggle for the life of railway workers and tram.⁹ The announcement of appointing Semaoen as the dictator of VSTP could be seen from this citations as follows:

If some day, there is a strike of railway worker and tram, for several reasons, such as: (a) since at the time of strike, the struggle needs a tight and fast command or the highest rank of command from the head of movement; and (b) since at that time, all workers worked as ordinary worker of VSTP.

VSTP decides:

If there is a big or little strike, the head of VSTP appoints Semaoen as dictator of VSTP in his command and hands out all responsibility and leadership to Semaoen, while the member of VSTP will obey him to manage and defend all railway workers in *Nederlandsch-Indië*.

The railway companies, you must know the importance of this decision. Today dated 19 on behalf government, the Resident of Semarang has threatened Semaoen

⁷See "A Circular Letter of VSTP, *Sanget Penting* (Semarang Drukker) VSTP, 23 April 1923" in *The Collection of Algemeen Rijks Archive in Den Haag*, Inventory Number 144, VSTP Semarang, 1923. See also *Sinar Hindia* (Semarang: 5 May 1923).

⁸See "Rapport-Secret" in *Report of Politic Ministry Gew. Recherche*, 1 May 1923.

⁹See "The Letter of Governor General Fock to the Ministry of Colonialized Countries (De Graaf), 16 May 1923" in *Vb 14 July 1923*, No.15.

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with isolation, however Semaoen will keep defending his struggle for the railway workers without any doubt. Jail and isolation are considered hard, since the life of workers in poverty has similar life as in jail. See and follow the firmness of Semaoen, brothers of railway workers and tram.¹⁰

On 8 May 1923, since he was accused of breaking the law of making spontaneous speech in front of public, Semaoen that was living in the office of PKI in Tegal Wareng was captured and sent to the jail of Semarang town square (*alun-alun*). He had no time to talk with his wife that was delivering a baby.

That day, the worker of railway held a meeting in the building of Islam League, Gendong village to proclaim that the strike should be started from that moment. The calling out for strike was also done through daily newspaper owned by the Islam League of Semarang, *Sinar Hindi*, as follows:

Hi, proletariat! Arrange our march soon.
Throw away the betrayer Capitalism.
The youth of Hindi don't be a coward.
Lead your nation.
The strike of railway worker and tram must happen when our demands are not realized or our leader is isolated. Be aware my friend to the sign of strike.
The man of railway worker, let's strike whenever your leader is arrested.
If you keep silent, you will have trouble later (*Sinar Hindia*, 8/5/1923; and Liem Thian Joe, 1931:259).

Even though calling out for strike had been spread out the leader of VSTP, represented by Soegono, kept reminding for not causing any damage. This advice could be seen from the following statement of VSTP:

Because of bad destiny, demands are not agreed and our leader Semaoen was arrested and was in jail, the railway worker got angry and stroke.
All personals strike.
City tram is not operated.
Train machinists of NIS are on strike.
The rail worker and tram got angry and were on strike.
They are angry and they are on strike since the director of train and tram Semaoen was sent to jail.
Angry man often forget, that is why brothers, we must be careful. Don't let any crash happens. My brothers do not make any troubles. Do not make any troubles. Stay at home, show to our enemy that we as indigenious have responsibility and humanist.

¹⁰See "A Circular Letter of VSTP, *Sanget Penting* (Semarang Drukker) VSTP, 23 April 1923" in *The Collection of Algemeen Rijks Archive in Den Haag*, Inventory Number 144, VSTP Semarang, 1923.

But the situation can get worse. The reaction can make the train overthrown. Since they don't want us behave as human being. That is why do not make any accidents, do not make any noise and disturbance. Stay still at home.¹¹

On 9 May 1923, the mass strike occurred in Semarang. The strike was not only done by the railway workers, but it was also conducted by various workers in this town: tram of Jomblang-Bulu, the train machine shop of Semarang-Juana, indigenous officials, the sellers in Johar and Padamaran market and two wheeled buggy. The city was so lonely and no activities. The maids and servants that usually delivered meals for their masters had to walk. The train of NIS, SJS, and SCS were not operated, since the machinists and stoker, conductor and other indigenous workers were also on strike.

To accelerate the transportation system in the city, city tram was operated by volunteers from students of Technische School Semarang. Each railway coach was guarded by police officers. The police also guarded station of NIS, SJS, and SCS. The strike of railway workers attracted solidarity of workers that worked in different sectors. The day after, on 10 May 1923, there were other strikes conducted by traders in market Johar, Peterongan, Karang Bidara, and Buggy coachmen. The calling out for strike of railway workers was not only responded in Semarang but it was also attracting solidarity railway workers in other places, such as Weleri, Pekalongan, Tegal, Cirebon, Kertosono, Madiun, and Surabaya (Liem Thian Joe, 1931:260-261; Ingleson, 1986:240; and Blumberger, 1987:144).

One interesting point is that the strike was conducted in *Ramadhan* (Fasting Month). The struggle of Prophet Mohammad was used as guidance to fight evil and to commemorate victory of the month. In the context of worker movement at this moment, Capitalism is considered as evil (*Zondig Capitalismeu*). *Ramadhan* is considered as a good moment to struggle against the evil of capitalism, and workers celebrated the victory if they succeeded in the struggle (*Sinar Hindia*, 12/5/1923).

Consolidation to strengthen the strike defense kept being done. Soemantri led the meeting on 10 May 1923. This meeting was attended by the representation of VSTP, PKI, PVH, Pasarbond, Kleermarkerbond, *National Indische Partij* (NIP), Gemeentebond, and Dokarbond. Darsono, in the meeting, gave suggestions and strengthened the spirit of the strikers. To strengthen the spirit of the strike, the board of VSTP issued leaflets containing provocation as follows: "*Do not nod your head! Watch out, watch out! Keep moving forward! Do not step back!*"

¹¹See "Makloemat VSTP (Semarang Drukkerij V.S.T.P.)" in *Collection of Algemeen Rijks Archive in Den Haag*, Inventory Number 144-VSTP Semarang, 1923.

The strike in Semarang is very good. The train of NIS stopped. Tram of SCS stopped and so did the tram of SJS. Only one keeps going on, that is the one that is operated by the coward. Market is on strike, the door is locked to protest and to show its solidarity to railway workers' strike. Taxi Chauffeur is on strike as well, and the buggy coachman today is on strike too. The railway workers are asking for a better life, they want to be treated as human being. But last night the office of Sarekat Islam of Semarang was guarded by the police officers with guns. Workers only ask for a better future. Is it necessary to point out the guns to them?¹²

The strike of railway workers centered in Semarang had caused strikes on several sectors of economy and the colonial government, then, took action. The government intervened to pressure this worker movement. The implementation of article 161 made the strikers powerless.

The hope to gain victory after the strike vanished before the holiday came. The strike ended at the end of May (Blumberger, 1987:144). Finally, the board of VSTP announced their defeat to all branches as follows: "*Because of the hard reaction, we are so weak in this struggle. Now we have to admit that the strike didn't work*". When negotiating with *verzoeningsraad* (board of negotiator), they realized that the board only gave them suggestion and only gave correction that the movement was political strike. In the meeting, the negotiators (*verzoeningsraad*) asked for the strikers to give description about: the name, salary, expensiveness allowance, bonus, the burden of work, and resigning workers caused by the saving. The board of VSTP answered the request only if the workers could work again based on the given rules of work.¹³ After this negotiation, hundreds of workers could work again, but thousands of workers were fired, and the centre board of VSTP had to admit that this situation was not avoidable. Once again by lowering their voice, the board of VSTP stated: "*There is nothing we can do, since hands and feet are tied tightly. We can not talk; we are going to hungry and will not have sympathy from our brothers*".¹⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the discussion mentioned above, we can draw conclusions as follows:

¹²See "Centrale Leiding van de Spoor en Tramweg Staking in Nederlansch-Indie, Semarang, *Djangan Toendoek Kepala!! Awas, awas!! Madjoe teroes!! Djangan moendoer!!*, 10 May 1923" in *Collection of Algemeen Rijks Archive in Den Haag*, Inventory Number 144-VSTP Semarang.

¹³See "Vereening van Spoor en Tramweg-Personnel in Nederlansch-Indie" in *Collection of Algemeen Rijks Archive in Den Haag*, Number 144-VSTP Semarang, 1923.

¹⁴See "Bulletin of Centre Board of VSTP, Enclosed in the Letter of Resident of Semarang to Governor General, 8 June 1923" in *Vb. 24 August 1924*; and John Ingleson (1986:250).

First, the railway enterprises in Semarang had provided no proper wages to indigenous workers to meet their daily needs. This can be figured out from the wages received by indigenous worker at the beginning of the 20th century that is approximately between f. 0.25 to f. 2 per day.¹⁵ This wage is too low if compared with the wages received by European and the price for basic needs in Semarang at that time, where the price of rice reached f. 0.22 per kg, sugar f. 0.26 per kg, and the cost for health care reached f. 2.5 to f. 5.

Second, the heavy burdens of their daily lives and the failure of workers' efforts to get better earnings made them to be frustrated. This research found that the basic factors of railway workers' strike are frustration and aggression. When there were preceding conditions, collective behavior to meet the goal, and the failure of the goal-directed behavior, there was happened frustration, which could lead the railway workers to do aggression through strike.

Third, according to Karl Marx, the consciousness of workers is determined by production relation. A social group can be viewed as a class if this group had awareness as a class, as a certain group in the society which had special interests and they would like to struggle for these need. This class consciousness is the awareness of their enemy, Capitalist class, and awareness of their power and their destiny (Kohl, 1992:149). This opinion is not totally true. Even though production relation (job position, function, wages, working hours, health insurance, pension etc) is important factor in determining the class consciousness of workers, there are severe factors that influence as well. Psychology, liberalism, imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, Marxism-Communism, leader role, economic crisis, social stratification system are factors that also influenced the arousal of railway workers' consciousness in struggling work requirement and wealthy for improving their lives.

Fourth, nationalism is the significant impetus that encouraged the indigenous railway workers in Semarang to struggle for improving the quality of life in industrial and colonial community. If John Ingleson (1986:326) stated that intellectual society in big city functioned as the pioneer of national movement; and Takashi Shiraishi (1992:342) placed the leaders of organization or party such as Hadji Oemar Said Tjokroaminoto, Soerjopranoto, Hadji Agoes Salim, and Semaoen as national heroes, this

¹⁵Based on *Koloniaal Verslag 1917*, in the Residence of Semarang, only one foreman received f. 2 per day; 10 expert workers and foreman received f. 1 to f. 1.75 per day; most of indigenous workers and foremen (9,669 people) received their wages f. 0.25 to f. 1 per day.

research shows that a phenomenon that the indigenous workers in Semarang are also the pioneer of nationalism. This phenomenon can be proved from the fact that the strike by railway workers was also supported by community of non-railway workers. The solidarity of indigenous society was so intense. This fact can be figured out from the difficulties of European employers to seek for the substitution of indigenous workers. Worker nationalism in Semarang also emerged on the meeting that they held. Even though they had to come to space less room for the limit of place, they attended the meeting enthusiastically to find out a way of improving the indigenous quality of life. Even though the meaning of nationalism was only understood by limited number of intellectual, the symptom could be witnessed in the community of workers, poor or *kromo*¹⁶ society, and counted on their power to work with Capitalists, private or state-owned company. Thus, the indigenous workers that are often considered as proletariat that are isolated socially, economically, and politically, have actually significant power in their movement that is "worker nationalism". Even, the word Indonesia at that time was only imagined community,¹⁷ one-sidedness as "nation" was the one part of laborer movement in Semarang.

Fifth, in the history of Indonesia, Semarang is recorded as centre of radical worker movement in the first quarter of twentieth century. In answering the question why Semarang became the centre of worker movement in Java, John Ingleson (1986:101-102) gave his opinion that Sarekat Islam of Semarang and ISDV had moved formerly to organize workers in worker unions and formulated the demands of workers to the entrepreneurs in Semarang.

Sixth, culturally, the consciousness of indigenous railway worker was implemented in two ways, namely cultural system and social system. The first system occupied feeling, understanding, thought, aspiration, interest, and ideology. Different from the first system, in the second system, worker's consciousness was more concrete representing the activity of human people in interacting with other people, such as organizing, writing and reading article in newspaper, attending a meeting, conducting

¹⁶*Kromo* is used to call proletariat indigenous. See *Sinar Djawa* (Semarang: 4 March 1918).

¹⁷Nation is the imagined political community which has limit and sovereignty. Political community is called imagined community, since a nation will not be able to recognize its citizen, impossible to meet each other or listen one to other, and what is coming up in each person is only imagination or description about their community. A nation can be built, if each person in whole community is willing to convince themselves as their imagined state. See Benedict R.O'G. Anderson (1983:15).

propaganda, and striking. Press, general meeting, organization, and strike are the characteristics of modern laborer in urban area, which differ from traditional social movements that were mostly experienced by farmers in village in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁸

Finally, this research found several more specific phenomena about the position of Semarang as the centre of radical worker movement. Like theory of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly on *Dynamics of Contention*, this research found the similar elements.

First, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, there were local values that enabled the forming of worker movement frame (framing process). These local values can be explained as follows. In one side, in the first quarter of twentieth century, Semarang had become imperialism development dominated by political power and economy and Western capitalism (marked by the recruitment of indigenous man power with very low wages compared to European). On the other side, Semarang was the meeting centre of liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism-Communism. Since the end of the 19th century, liberalists such as Pieter Brooshooft and Lievegoed, redactors of *De Locomotief*, had spread the idea of liberalism and democracy by press. Nationalism and Marxism-Communism have similar interest value that is anti Imperialism, anti Capitalism and anti Colonialism.

Second, the existence of many industries, VSTP and Sarekat Islam in the beginning of the 20th century were the good access for structural mobilization. And *third*, the values of liberalism such as openness and free of talk in press and general meeting and the strengthening of nationalism were political opportunity for political leaders for people mobilization. In addition, the exploitative action of capitalism system and the economic decline as result of World War I were threat for laborer. In other words, Semarang experienced *repertoire of contention* that encouraged the railway workers to move in order to improve their quality of life.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, Semarang had indigenous worker leaders who had great influence such as Semaoen, Darsono, Tan Malaka, Mardjohan, Aliarcham, Sugono etc. that were able to arouse and motivate the worker class consciousness to improve their wealthy and well-organized working requirements. Their influence was not only limited in Semarang, but also in the other cities. In the first quarter of the 20th century,

¹⁸The characteristics of traditional social movement are: not well organized, not controlled by centre office, the local resident initiative, temporary, and spirit of Islamic revivalism mixed with pre-Islamic mysticism. See Sartono Kartodirdjo (1973:1).

press' industries (European, Chinese, and vernacular press) had also developed in Semarang. These press were able to arouse the consciousness of indigenous on racial inequalities, solidarity among workers and other groups of society, being aware as one nation, and aware of their enemy, namely foreign Capitalist and Dutch imperialism.

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