

SOETOMO AND TRADE UNIONISM*

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In reaction to political oppression by the colonial administration during the 1920s and 1930s, some Indonesian nationalist leaders sought a middle way between the uncompromising opposition of the Marxist revolutionaries and the collaborationist rationalizations of the native administrative officials employed by the Department of the Interior. One important leader from the moderate nationalist group was Dr. Soetomo. Soetomo did not accept colonial repression, but he also recognized the weakness of the natives' position--a weakness caused by economic as well as political underdevelopment. Both Soetomo's analysis of his society and his advice regarding trade unions illustrate his views on overcoming this weakness.

Soetomo's Place in the Nationalist Movement

Dr. Soetomo (1888-1938),¹ who came from a "newly arrived" *priyayi* family,² grew up in the period of the so-called Ethical colonial policy.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the first National Conference of The Asian Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne, in May 1976. It has benefited from comments and suggestions from George McT. Kahin, Ruth McVey, and others. I would also like to thank David Reeves and other members of the Indonesian Study Group at Sydney University for a stimulating discussion of an earlier draft.

¹For more on Dr. Soetomo's life and views, see Savitri Scherer, "Harmony and Dissonance: Early Nationalist Thought in Java" (M.A. thesis, Cornell University, 1975), pp. 183-255. Soetomo's father had been formally trained to teach in government schools, but he then embarked on an administrative career, eventually attaining the position of *wedana* (native district head). At that time it was still an unusual achievement for someone who did not come from a *bupati* (regional head, the highest rank within the native administrative system) family to attain the position of *wedana*. Both Soetomo's maternal and paternal grandfathers were wealthy landowners and *palang* (headmen) of their respective villages. However, village heads were below the native administrative hierarchy of the colonial government, which ended at the level of assistant *wedana*.

²The term *priyayi* is used here to denote that class of people eligible for some sort of government office. That eligibility could be ascribed by birth, or it could be acquired by Westernized education in government-controlled institutions. Initially, most of those who received such educations were already entitled by birth to hold administrative positions. But around the turn of the century an increasing proportion of graduates from professional schools came from families whose members would not have been so privileged. The *priyayi* thus came to include the "old *priyayi*"--noble families of the principalities of Jogjakarta and Surakarta, and the Javanese territorial bureaucracy from the *bupati* on down, and the "new *priyayi*"--Javanese professionals and white-collar workers, including medical practitioners like Soetomo,

He was graduated from the Batavia native medical college (STOVIA) in 1911. In 1908, while still a student at this college, he was instrumental in founding Budi Utomo, an association generally regarded today as the earliest nationalist association organized along Western lines.³ In the years immediately following his graduation, Soetomo spent most of his time practicing medicine, serving in many remote places in Sumatra. In 1919, he went to Holland for further study, and there became chairman of the Indische Vereeniging during the period 1921-22. The association was then undergoing an ideological transition, and soon thereafter it took a radical political stand, demanding immediate independence for Indonesia.⁴ On his return to Indonesia in 1923, Soetomo was appointed lecturer at the medical college in Surabaya. He served for a short time as a representative on the local government council, but resigned in disgust at the council's ineffectiveness in defending the interests of the natives. He was also invited to join the Volksraad, but declined.

In 1924, Soetomo founded the Indonesische Studieclub in Surabaya.⁵ In 1930, he converted this study club into a political party, the

government school teachers, engineers, and lawyers. For more on the relationship between "new" and "old" priyayi, see Scherer, "Harmony and Dissonance," Ch. 1. On the priyayi cultural milieu and the role of native officials in the colonial administration, see Heather Sutherland, "Pangreh Pradja, Java's Indigenous Administrative Corps and Its Role in the Last Decades of Dutch Colonial Rule" (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1973), Chs. 1-3; and her "The Priyayi," *Indonesia*, 19 (April 1975), pp. 57-77.

³For more on the early period of Budi Utomo, see A. Nagazumi, *The Dawn of Indonesian Nationalism: The Early Years of Budi Utomo, 1908-1918*, Institute of Developing Economies Occasional Paper No. 10 (Tokyo, 1972). Nagazumi, however, fails to observe that the establishment of Budi Utomo in 1908 was significant in terms of intraclass friction among the priyayi. The association was formed several years after STOVIA was modernized, and it was initiated, and dominated in its initial stages, by graduates and students of this school. Its formation clearly marked the self-conscious "arrival" of the new professional element in the old priyayi class. The Javanese administrative officials attempted to undermine the potential social influence of these newcomers by forming their own exclusive association, Sedyo Mulya, in the same year.

⁴In 1922, the name Indische Vereeniging was changed to Indonesische Vereeniging. In 1924, it was further changed to Perhimpunan Indonesia, with Iwa Kusumasumantri as chairman and Hatta at treasurer. (See Scherer, "Harmony and Dissonance," p. 156 n. 8.) During Soetomo's chairmanship he was attacked by the younger, more radical members for being "too moderate and rambling." In turn, as he wrote in a letter to his brother, Soetomo felt that, with the exception of Hatta, these youngsters were a danger to the future of Indonesia. R. Soetomo, *Kenang2an* (Surabaya: n.p., 1934). For a participant's account of the history of the Indische Vereeniging and its development into Perhimpunan Indonesia, see R. Sunario, "Perhimpunan Indonesia dan peranannya dalam perjuangan kemerdekaan kita," *Seminar Sedjarah Nasional II* (Jogjakarta: n.p., 1970), 5, pt. 2. On the later development of Perhimpunan Indonesia, see J. Ingleson, *Perhimpunan Indonesia and the Indonesian Nationalist Movement, 1923-1928*, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 4 (Clayton, Vic.: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975).

⁵Dr. Soetomo's Indonesische Studieclub was a revision and an adaptation of an association suggested by Dr. Satiman Wirjosandjojo in 1923. Satiman's earlier plan to establish a club solely for young educated priyayi did not materialize for lack

Partai Bangsa Indonesia (PBI), which in 1935 fused with Budi Utomo to become Parindra (Partai Indonesia Raya, Greater Indonesia Party). Parindra, representing the moderate cooperative view, was one of the two major secular nationalist parties of the 1930s.⁶ Yet Soetomo himself directed most of his energy toward improving the immediate economic and social welfare of the native community rather than on party politics.⁷ He initiated the establishment of the first native bank, the Bank Nasional Indonesia, and the first native insurance company, Bumi Putra. He was also influential in establishing the peasant cooperative organization, Rukun Tani, and various orphanages, leprosaria, and other public health institutions.⁸ Soetomo clearly played a crucial role in the development of Indonesian nationalism. That role, however, lay more in shaping an Indonesian social identity, supported by economic prosperity, rather than an Indonesian political identity as such. He was above all concerned with raising the social and cultural level of the native community by giving them the resources to improve their economic condition.

The Gamelan Analogy

Soetomo wrote in both Javanese and Indonesian. His writings were directed primarily to the native Western-educated elite. He tried to show his readers ways to improve themselves economically, socially, and intellectually, and how to survive under harsh colonial oppression. Soetomo did not ignore the idea of "Independent Indonesia," but since he himself enjoyed the privileges of high status and did not feel constricted socially or professionally,⁹ he assumed that the concept of "independence," at least in some personal sense, was a more immediately achievable reality. It was this experience of personal independence from which Soetomo's aspirations for his community grew. It served as the basis for his concept of the state of Indonesia Mulia ("Glorious Indonesia") as the primary goal for Indonesians. Having once achieved

of support. Robert Van Niel, *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (Bandung: Van Hoeve, 1960), p. 215. For more on Soetomo's study club, see *ibid.*, pp. 227-29.

⁶The other party was Gerindo (Gerakan Rakyat Indonesia, Indonesian People's Party), established in 1937, which took a more radical, but still cooperative, stance. See George McT. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952), pp. 95-96. In 1939, Parindra had 10,000 members, and Gerindo 5,000. For comparison, the PSII (Partai Syarikat Islam Indonesia) had 12,000 members. Bernhard Dahm, *History of Indonesia in the Twentieth Century* (London: Pall Mall, 1971), p. 76.

⁷Van Niel, *The Emergence*, p. 251.

⁸It was also on his advice that the Muhammadiyah later expanded its activities to building hospitals and clinics. Scherer, "Harmony and Dissonance," p. 187 n. 13.

⁹In 1917, Soetomo married a Dutch nurse, who worked with him at a missionary hospital in Blora, Central Java (Soetomo, *Kenang2an*, p. 113). Because of his marriage, Soetomo was entitled to become a naturalized Dutch citizen, with rights equal to those of a Dutchman. Aware that his wife might be placed in an awkward position by marrying a native, someone with far lower status and fewer rights in the eyes of the colonial government, Soetomo raised with her the possibility of becoming naturalized. Sensitive to her husband's involvement with his own people's independence movement, she strongly urged him not to change his nationality (*ibid.*, p. 117).

Indonesia Mulia, Indonesians would again become Men of History, in control of the destiny of their land and people. For Soetomo, "independence" was less a political aim than an inner state.¹⁰

In his article, "Koewadjiban lan Gamelan" ("Duty and Gamelan"), written in 1932, Soetomo pointed out that it is a man's duty (*kuwajiban*) to work for the glory of his country.¹¹ The task (*pegawéyan*) which he chooses to take up in order to fulfill his duty must be carefully chosen. A person should choose the one task he performs best, whatever it may be. Soetomo used participation in a *gamelan* group as a subtle metaphor for how a man might choose the type of task he should pursue. In a gamelan, the person who plays the *kendang* (drum) should be someone proficient at it; the same principle applies to those who play the *gambang*, *kempul*, *kenong*, *gong*, and the rest of the instruments.¹² Each person must perform his task in harmony with the other members of the orchestra, who in turn are each performing their own tasks as best they can. To maintain harmony, Soetomo continued, each person should be aware of the regulation and the rhythm of the melody to be played--"He should know when to beat the instrument and when to rest."¹³

To anyone familiar with the gamelan orchestra, Soetomo's concept of gamelan-playing and the subtle relation of *kuwajiban* and *pegawéyan* involved clearly reflects the thoughts of many Javanese *priyayi* regarding their roles in the community. Just as a gamelan orchestra must have firm guidance, so must Javanese society. But the character of this leadership differs from Western ideas of community leadership. According to a well-known *priyayi* musicologist, Martopangrawit,¹⁴ there are two main functional groups in a gamelan orchestra: the *pamangku* (those who support or carry) and the *pamurba* (those who are in charge or supervise). These two groups are further subdivided into two. The *pamangku* are composed of the *pamangku lagu* (e.g., *saron*, *gambang*, or *gendèr*) and *pamangku irama* (e.g., *kenong*, *kempul* or *gong*). The *pamurba* consist of the *pamurba lagu* (*rebab*) and *pamurba irama* (*kendang*). No instrument or musician is more important than another. *Pamurba* and

¹⁰In his writings Soetomo stressed achieving Indonesia Mulia rather than Indonesia Merdeka (Independent Indonesia). He argued that a country could only attain glory when free of bondage to another country. Thus the demand for independence for Indonesia should not be the ultimate goal of the nationalist struggle. Rather, by working for Indonesia Mulia, nationalists would automatically bring about an independent Indonesia.

¹¹"Koewadjiban lan Gamelan," in R. Soetomo, *Poespa Rinontje* (Surabaya: Soember Kemadjoean Rakjat, 1932), pp. 11-12.

¹²Ibid., p. 11. ¹³Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴R. L. Martopangrawit, *Pengetahuan Karawitan* (Surakarta: Dewan Mahasiswa A.S.K.I., 1972), 1, A, pp. 9-14. Another *priyayi* musicologist, K. R. T. Madukusumo, who is in charge of Jogjakarta court music, sees the gamelan as a reflection of court administration, with its distinctive status hierarchy--the big *gong* representing the king; the *kendang* and *rebab*, the prime ministers; the smaller *gong*, the court officials; the *kenong* and *kempul*, the royal servants. Madukusumo's allocation of decreasing status to each type of instrument is based on the increasing frequency with which these instruments are played. Such status gradations are not, however, recognized by village musicians. See Margaret Kartomi, "Javanese Gamelan Aesthetics--Some Preliminary Thoughts" (paper delivered at the Thirtieth Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa, Mexico City, 1976), pp. 9-10.

pamangku are mutually dependent and tightly integrated with one another. One follows the other in a continuous stream, each taking the lead in turn. Each musician knows when to beat his instrument and when to stop. (This is especially true in traditional Javanese gamelan playing, where no written music is used.) Adherence to the melodic and rhythmic pace set by the *pamurba lagu* is required of the musicians simply to ensure a harmonious result.¹⁵ In addition, each participant thinks of himself, not as a creator, but as a preserver of musical tradition; thus innovation is quite out of place.

As we have seen, Soetomo's conception of a gamelan society thus requires that an individual should blend harmoniously with the community. At the same time, a particular rhythm is imposed upon the community, and each individual should tacitly agree to "play" according to this rhythm. Strict conventions are thus imposed upon the individual by his membership in the group, but within them each member may develop his particular skill--skill here meaning not so much how well he is able to "play," but how well he is able to play in coordination with the group.

How such tacit group cooperation may be solicited from the community was elaborated by Soetomo in his article, "Kompetisi ora Kongkoerensi" ("Competition not Rivalry").¹⁶ There he wrote, "As in the playing of the gamelan, people not only must know how to play and be expert at it, but they must also obey the rules." In this way, Soetomo argued, "they can work together, not jealous or concerned with showing off personal contributions."¹⁷ He then suggested that political parties and associations should work together as though they were playing a game like soccer.¹⁸ They should compete in a sporting spirit so that the best team would win, not sabotaging each other or subverting each other's efforts. Soetomo recommended that political parties compete by concentrating their efforts on serving the people, and be judged by how well they accomplished this task rather than by the polemical propagandizing of their ideologies.¹⁹

The Relation of *Panuntun* (Guide) and *Pamimpin* (Leader) to the *Rakyat Krama* (Common People) who must *Manut* (Obey)

As pointed out above, the gamelan is not leaderless. It has its *pamurba* (supervisors) and its *pamangku* (supporters). How then was such a framework to be translated into the reality of Soetomo's society, and whom did he see as suitable for these roles? Let us begin by examining his language. He used *panuntun* (guide) and *pamimpin* (leader) to describe the stratum of "enlightened" (socially and politically conscious) members of the society, and *rakyat krama* to describe the common people. In "Tata-tata Samekta ing Djoerit" ("Rules and Regulations in Preparing for Combat"),²⁰ Soetomo admitted that in his time it could not be ex-

¹⁵Judith Becker, "Traditional Music in Modern Java" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1972), p. 66. (To be published by the University of Hawaii Press in late 1977.)

¹⁶"Kompetisi ora Kongkoerensi," in Soetomo, *Poespa Rinontje*, pp. 41-44.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 43-44.

²⁰Soetomo, "Tata-tata Samekta ing Djoerit," in *Poespa Rinontje*, pp. 23-25.

pected that a leader who could alleviate their suffering would emerge from the class of common people. The common people still needed to be "guided" (*dituntun*) and "aided" (*ditulung*). At a later date, when their living conditions had improved, they would be ready to take up their true *pegawéyan*, the performance of which was necessary to achieve national independence. Then, Soetomo assured his readers, a leader would certainly be found among the common people.²¹

This did not mean that Soetomo's attitude towards his own people was condescending. He simply believed that the *rakyat krama* were still unenlightened about their duty to their community and nation, and therefore the duty of leadership fell on the more enlightened members of society (i.e., the *priyayi*). Hoping to raise the social consciousness of even his educated readers, Soetomo wrote the following regarding the condition of the *rakyat krama*:

The unenlightened people (*wong boḍo*), who are lazy as well as sloppy (*sembrana*), who are afraid and timid, who are unenthusiastic towards any kind of work, people like that are to be corrected until they become knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and diligent in their work.

We must be patient in giving [them] guidance (*tuntunan*) and examples (*tetuladan*); we must be attentive in giving them "enlightenment" (*sesuluh*)²² which is simple, yet the usefulness of which they can sense, so that their confidence in themselves can grow.

When these individuals have become conscious of their duty in preserving their lives, they will then become courageous in their search for the means to make their living conditions better. In this context, we will certainly have a group of people who will know their own will (*tékad*). Then we shall have people who can appreciate the strong energy of our movement.²³

Thus there were to be two stages of development towards the society envisaged by Soetomo. The majority of the people were still unenlightened about their duties and tasks and therefore needed guidance to achieve Indonesia Mulia. But, once enlightened, these people would readily carry out their responsibilities. They would become *pamangku* in the gamelan society. It was therefore natural that already-enlightened members of the society should act as leaders in the meantime. This stage would ensure a cohesive body of *pamangku*, who in turn would ensure that community development under the leadership of the *pamurba* could be realized. Eventually, Indonesia Mulia would become a reality. Soetomo commented as follows: "Thus when the intellectual group adheres to its status, it is very fitting and appropriate for them to be willing to become leaders (*pamimpin*) or guides (*panuntun*) to enable the rest of the community to do their tasks without fearing the danger of death. When conditions are like that, then those among the common people who are prepared and ready will go forward together to help us achieve our goal; once that step is taken, no one can prevent us [from realizing our goal]."²⁴

²¹Ibid., p. 24.

²²*Sesuluh* literally means to give light, to enlighten, to elucidate, thus to explain (*menerangkan* in Indonesian).

²³Ibid., pp. 24-25. ²⁴Ibid., p. 25.

Soetomo's Plan for Organizing the Laboring Class

An important step in achieving the gamelan society was organizing the workforce to become enlightened pamangku and follow their proper leaders. Soetomo's advice to his "guides" on the topic of leadership is relevant here. His views are contained in three of his main works on trade unions: *Penjoeloeh Bagi Kaoem Boeroeh Indonesia* (A Torch for the Indonesian Laboring Community), published in 1929; his speech "Pelita Boeroeh" ("A Lamp for the Workers"), read to the Union of Native Workers of the Department of Customs in 1932; and *Soeloeh Sarekat Sekerdja* (A Torch for the Trade Unions), published in 1934.²⁵ The main purpose of these writings was to illuminate ways in which the workers could be led to form trade unions and run them effectively. For this purpose he drew heavily on his own observations and past Indonesian experience. But, as his references to the works of Sydney and Beatrice Webb, to the economic policies of Ramsay MacDonald (British Prime Minister during the Depression), and to the recommendations made by Tillema (then Dutch Minister for the Colonies) show, he was well aware of the history of trade union practices in Western countries.

Two striking features emerge from these writings: the absence of any explicit ideological perspective, and a continuing insistence on grassroots participation as the basis of unionism. He was strongly against trade unions having any direct affiliation with religious or political groups.²⁶ Trade unions should simply have a broad nationalist and secular character, and reject the models provided by the PFB (Personeel Fabrieksbond, Union of [Sugar] Factory Personnel) led by Soerjopranoto of the Sarekat Islam, or the VSTP (Vereeniging van Spoor- en Tramweg Personeel, Union of Rail and Tramway Personnel), which was led by Semaoen and heavily under the influence of the Communist Party.²⁷ Soetomo reminded his readers that the PFB survived for only a short time, because its dominant leader, Soerjopranoto, was persecuted by the colonial government.²⁸ The VSTP also dwindled to almost nothing once Semaoen was expelled from the country.²⁹ In these cases, Soetomo

²⁵R. Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh Bagi Kaoem Boeroeh Indonesia* (Surabaya[?]: n.p., 1929); and *Soeloeh Sarekat Sekerdja* (Surabaya: Ketoea Poesat Pedoman P.B.I., 1934). The text of "Pelita Boeroeh" is contained in *Soeloeh*, pp. 24-50.

²⁶Soetomo, *Soeloeh*, pp. 5-6, 13; "Pelita Boeroeh," in *ibid.*, pp. 35, 42-45; *Penjoeloeh*, pp. 17-19.

²⁷For more on the VSTP and Semaoen's role in the nationalist movement, see Van Niel, *The Emergence*, pp. 112-14, 210-11; and Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), Chs. 3, 7, 9.

²⁸Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh*, pp. 21-22. For more on Soerjopranoto and PFB activities in 1919-21, see McVey, *The Rise*, pp. 90-93. McVey notes that most Indonesian workers, especially nonskilled workers, tended to regard unions merely as bodies for organizing strikes, and they lost interest once these strikes were over. They were thus very vulnerable to poststrike retaliation by employers (McVey, *The Rise*, p. 90). During the height of Soerjopranoto's popularity as a union leader, the PFB had 31,000 members. By 1922, the membership had dwindled to 400 (*ibid.*, p. 390 n. 55).

²⁹Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh*, pp. 21-22. The VSTP's membership of 16,975 in October 1921 dwindled to 7,731 during Semaoen's absence in Russia from October 1921 to May 1922 (McVey, *The Rise*, pp. 125-37). After an unsuccessful strike in May 1923, Semaoen was expelled from Indonesia, and many radical union leaders were arrested, injuring the union as well as the leadership of the Communist Party (*ibid.*, p. 152).

argued, the political parties represented by Soerjopranoto and Semaoen could do nothing to protect the interests of the union members; indeed, political party affiliation had proved to be a liability.

Trade unions, he believed, had to try to survive regardless of a country's current political climate, and this task was especially difficult in a colonial situation, where the government could arbitrarily purge a union's leaders. Survival, he believed, depended on having a sound financial base as well as a large number of competent leaders. Union leadership should never be dependent on the creativity or ingenuity of one particular individual.³⁰ Teamwork was essential, like the teamwork in a gamelan orchestra, where no player stands out above the others. Teamwork was most likely to be strong where all members of a union shared a single purpose--the improvement of its immediate membership's lives. Since not all members of a political party or a religious association would belong to the labor force or even be members of the laboring class,³¹ their interests and goals would necessarily differ from those of the laboring men in affiliated unions. In unaffiliated unions, however, the workers could be united as workers. Their unity would be based on their shared skills and the type of service they performed, not subject to ideological or religious divisions.³²

It is interesting that Soetomo also warned unions against organizing along ethnic lines. He pointed out the ease with which the colonial government divided the native workers by giving them differential wages, social security, retirement benefits, and the like, according to ethnic group. For example, the Ambonese and Menadonese workers received wages and privileges closest to those of their Eurasian supervisors, while the Javanese workers received the lowest wages permissible by law.³³ Employers were always unified by their economic interests and never allowed their varied ethnicity to undermine that unity. Workers should follow their example. Soetomo cited the Sugar Syndicate to make his point. Not only was it domestically united in protecting its interests against the workers and against government regulation. On the global level, too, the World Sugar Syndicate cooperated to drive down the price paid to the small producer as far as possible.³⁴

It might be thought that by these warnings Soetomo was clearly recognizing that class conflict was more fundamental than all others. Yet this surmise would not be quite correct. For though Soetomo saw the deep conflict of interest between labor and management, he did not deduce from this a radical struggle along class lines. Rather, he proposed that the laboring community work to manage its own financial affairs, and begin by dealing only with native banks. He warned that most of the European banks in Indonesia--e.g., Escompto, the Colonial Bank, and the trading banks--invested in and financed most of the sugar factories and plantations. The boards of directors of these banks usually also controlled the management of the plantations and factories in which the native workers were employed. It would obviously thus be

³⁰Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh*, pp. 21-22.

³¹Soetomo, *Soeloeh*, pp. 5-6, 8, 13.

³²Ibid. ³³Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh*, pp. 77-78.

³⁴Soetomo, "Pelita Boeroeh," in *Soeloeh*, pp. 45-46.

foolish for the workers and the unions to bank with these European institutions. The banks' primary commitments were to the managements of these enterprises; the banks would inform them of the exact financial resources of the workers, a situation which would render the workers vulnerable during wage negotiations and strikes. Soetomo therefore advised the unions to deal only with native national banks, which were not linked to colonial business interests. This would also prevent the European banks' managers from investing the native workers' savings to improve European-owned firms and factories.³⁵ Better still, unions should establish their own banks, which could, in addition, provide job opportunities for native workers by reinvesting their money in small factories manufacturing goods especially useful to the laboring community (e.g., shoes, clothes, or cheap processed food and so forth).³⁶ Aside from representing only the interests of workers, such banks would also ensure that the workers learned to manage their own financial affairs and help them gain insight regarding national economic and political matters.³⁷ Soetomo was certainly not advocating support for native banks in order to replace a class of European entrepreneurs with native ones. Nor did he want native to exploit native. It was rather that the laboring class had to acquire the skills and power of the managerial and entrepreneurial class, controlling their own financial resources.

Here lay the fundamental difference between trade unions as envisioned by Soetomo and those run by the Sarekat Islam and the Communist Party: Soetomo viewed trade unionism as a defensive economic weapon, useful mainly to ensure the economic survival of the workers, and therefore of Indonesians as a whole. The Sarekat Islam and the communists used trade unions for political ends.³⁸

It is perhaps significant that Soetomo did most of his writing on trade unions during the period 1929-34, a time when Indonesians experienced massive political repression and most of the radical nationalist leaders were muzzled or exiled. The options available to Soetomo were very limited; unless he chose to incur the wrath of the government, his position could be none other than a moderate one, socially rather than politically oriented. Yet a "social" approach fitted closely with Soetomo's deep private prejudices against political action and political parties. Even when he finally overcame these prejudices in 1930, and made a pragmatic decision to form a party himself, the Partai Bangsa Indonesia,³⁹ he made sure that the aims of the party were oriented toward cultural, social, and economic improvement within the existing system rather than toward dramatic political change.

³⁵Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh*, pp. 65-66.

³⁶Ibid., p. 67.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 68-69. To support his point, Soetomo cited examples from Belgium, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries, where workers were able to operate banking enterprises successfully.

³⁸The majority of the strikes initiated by the SI and the Communist Party were organized for political reasons, without consideration of the social and economic consequences of failure. (Almost all ended in serious reverses.)

³⁹Soetomo had wanted Budi Utomo to remain a cultural, rather than a political association, as proposed by Tjipto Mangoenkoesoemo and Soewardi Soerjaningrat (K. H. Dewantara). See Scherer, "Harmony and Dissonance," pp. 37-55, 201-7. The transformation of his Studieclub into a political party came about only because Soetomo felt there was a political vacuum after most of the more radical leaders had been arrested.

His negative attitude towards political parties did not necessarily mean that Soetomo entirely ruled out the possibility that union members might benefit from working with certain political parties. But the cooperation he envisaged was to be on a case-by-case basis and directed towards supporting particular politicians in legislative bodies. Many of the skilled workers' unions established under Soetomo's guidance thus supported Parindra. These unions included the VIPBOW (Vereeniging van Inlandsch Personeel Burgerlijke Openbare Werken, Union of Public Works Employees),⁴⁰ the PPPB (Perserikatan Pegawai Pegadaian Bumiputra, the Native Pawnshop Workers' Association),⁴¹ the PSI (Persatuan Supir Indonesia, the Native Motor Vehicle Drivers' Association),⁴² and the PGHB (Perserikatan Guru-guru Hindia Belanda, the Netherlands Indies Teachers' Union).⁴³ All had been long-time supporters of Budi Utomo and the PBI.

But tactical support for particular politicians or parties was insufficient, Soetomo believed, to achieve the unions' legislative aims. He therefore strongly recommended that trade unions maintain open communication with various sectors of the government to keep fully acquainted with the complexities of current regulations concerning workers. The unions could then formulate achievable reform policies and make plans for implementing them. Such reforms might include regulation of working hours, improvement of safety conditions, sick leave, life insurance, and the like.⁴⁴

Such protection of laborers was totally lacking in Indonesia, though in Holland itself an initial industrial safety act had been passed as early as 1895, a workers' compensation act in 1901, and a health and national insurance act in 1919.⁴⁵ Soetomo felt that the most basic needs of the workers must be taken care of before they could consider joining the political debates over class conflict, anticolonialism, and the struggle for an independent Indonesia. He was also deeply aware that the vast majority even of Indonesian workers, let alone peasants, were still illiterate, and that this made the problem of organizing them into effective unions all the more difficult.

Two hundred years of exploitive colonial rule meant, he believed, that the present struggle of the native laboring force against the European capitalists was like a battle between "a cucumber and a durian."⁴⁶ European capitalists in the Indies, with the powerful backing of colonial law, were assured of a large supply of cheap, illiterate

⁴⁰For a brief account of the role of the VIPBOW (established in 1917) in the nationalist movement, see Van Niel, *The Emergence*, pp. 122-24.

⁴¹For a brief account of the role of the PPPB (established in 1916), see *ibid.*, pp. 123, 147, 199-200. Cf. A. Nagazumi, "The Pawnshop Strikes of 1922 and the Indonesian Political Parties," *Archipel*, 8 (1974), pp. 187-206.

⁴²For the constitution and work program of the Persatuan Supir Indonesia, see Soetomo, *Penjoeloeh*, Appendices. This was the closest Soetomo came to trying to organize the urban proletariat--but note the specific occupational skills required.

⁴³For a brief account of the PGHB (established in 1912), see Van Niel, *The Emergence*, pp. 123, 155.

⁴⁴Soetomo, *Soeloeh*, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁶Soetomo, "Pelita Boeroeh," in *ibid.*, p. 31.

labor. Plantation laborers worked under government-approved contracts, for pitiful wages, and under miserable working conditions. Outside efforts to organize the workers were largely futile, since plantation managers permitted few persons aside from employees to live inside the plantation complex.⁴⁷ Even organizing skilled workers was an uphill battle, since government controls on the freedom to strike, freedom of the press, freedom of political expression, and freedom to hold workers' meetings and conferences, were all designed precisely to curb any growth in the native labor movement.⁴⁸ In such circumstances, Soetomo argued, the Indonesian labor force had to have a dual purpose, on the one hand fighting against the evil social effects of capitalist power, and on the other fighting nationwide for an independent Indonesia.⁴⁹ And both aims would have to be pursued in a style suited to Indonesian conditions, not one imitated from European models.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The main image of the society to which Soetomo aspired was not a society divided between leaders and the mass of the population, but rather a united, harmonious community. It may be that Soetomo thereby projected onto the Indonesian nationalist movement a priyayi taste for order and social deference; nonetheless, he did make concrete proposals for social change. In this regard his thinking on the "labor movement" in Indonesia was typical and important. His approach to trade unionism, although substantially derived from his views on Javanese society as a whole, was far from ideological or romantic. It was, in fact, as pragmatic as the strategies of many trade union leaders in Western industrialized countries. (In particular, his approach brings to mind that of Samuel Gompers, first head of the American Federation of Labor, who propagated "job conscious" business unionism.⁵¹) Unlike many educated idealists from privileged classes, Soetomo did not try to foist a romantic role on the laboring class.⁵² His personal experiences may well have contributed to his realism; for his own success in the modern world was achieved by intensely practical means.⁵³ Above all, he

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 35-36.

⁵¹I am grateful to Peter Scherer for pointing out Samuel Gompers's concept of trade unionism to me. The main theoretical exposition of Gompers's thought is in Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: Macmillan, 1928). The practice of exclusive craft unionism in Britain, though for the most part not intellectually rationalized, also bears some resemblances to Soetomo's approach to unionism. See Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London: Longmans, 1897).

⁵²Sukarno's concept of "Marhaenism" is an example of such romanticism. ("Marhaen" more or less means "the little people.") See Sukarno's speech to the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the PNI, Bandung, 1957, translated as *Marhaen and Proletarian*, Cornell Modern Indonesia Project Translation Series No. 24 (Ithaca, 1960). Lenin's view of the working class is yet another example. He rejected an "economist" role for trade unions and insisted that the only role of working class organizations was to bring about revolution. See Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1952).

⁵³High social status did not necessarily ensure economic security. The income of the impoverished lesser nobility of Jogjakarta and Surakarta was often lower than that of the newly arrived priyayi. Priyayi employed in the native section of the colonial administration were largely dependent on government salaries for their livelihood, while "professional priyayi," receiving their income from professional fees, could often make very handsome livings.

wanted the working class to be as independent and as economically secure as he was himself. He believed that the way to achieve this goal, given the conditions of colonial exploitation, was to develop "job conscious unionism." Stressing, as he did, "job security" over "class solidarity," Soetomo tended to downplay the future possibility of class conflict between priyayi and the bulk of the work force. While advocating that the priyayi share their economic and social privileges with the rest of society, at no time did he talk much about sharing political power. This omission, of course, may have been caused by the depressing political realities of his time.⁵⁴ But it would probably be truer to attribute it to his conception of a gamelan society. The gamelan image was, in his eyes, both culturally appropriate and sensibly pragmatic in its political implications. For while there are subtle differentiations of status within a gamelan orchestra between those who are supporters (pamangku) and those who are in charge (pamurba), these differences are actually what make possible the production of beautiful sounds.

⁵⁴See his text "Tata-tata Samekta ing Djoerit," quoted above.