Workers’ Education and Political Consciousness: a Case Study in Indonesia

Rita Olivia Tambunan

‘Only an education facilitating the passage from naïve to critical transitivity, increasing men’s ability to perceive challenges of their time, could prepare the people to resist the emotional power of the transition.’ (Freire 1973:32).

I. Introduction

It is beyond dispute that participation in civil society, especially of working-class organizations, is crucial for the development of a democratic society. Trade unions, the most recognised representatives of organised labour, have the potential to play a key role in defending and advancing their own socio-economic interests as well as the wider interests of society. Throughout history, trade unions have made a valuable contribution in the establishment of social-democratic institutions of Western European countries (see, for examples, Rueschemeyer, Stephens & Stephens, 1992) as well as in many newly democratised countries of the Global South (for examples, Krauss, 2007; Beckman et al, 2010).

While recognising the importance of trade unions’ active involvement in building democracy, specifically with regard to socio-economic policies, it is worth examining the role that workers’ education has played in the ability of unions to shape and influence social and political change. How does workers’ education contribute to the development of political consciousness of the working class, especially its trade union members? How do worker educators help workers make sense of their working life experiences in a broader socio-economic perspective? These are some of the questions to be discussed in this article.

What is Workers’ Education?

When one mentions workers’ education, some would think about courses and training for workers on issues related labour, while others might argue that the dynamic of working life and workers’ struggle for basic rights at the workplace are inherently a form of education for workers. Both contribute to the definition utilized in this article. For our discussion, workers’ education is a series of learning processes for adults in their capacity as workers (especially as members of workers’ organisations), on issues related to their working life (Hopkins, 1985:2; Spooner 2001). Beside building
knowledge or skills through vocational programs, the basic purpose of workers’ education is to promote workers’ understanding of democratic life and to enable them to exercise their social and political responsibilities (Ryklief, 2009:2).

In this article, we explore workers’ education for the purpose of raising political consciousness. Polanyi’s pendulum has swung deep into neoliberal territory, threatening social protections, workers’ livelihood, and even our very planet (Polanyi, 1944). It is the task of trade unions to engage in the political process and push the pendulum back (to continue the Polanyesque analogy). But this move will require a shift from traditional ‘business unionism’ toward ‘social movement unionism’. And unions must learn to represent class interests - such as fighting against the privatisation of public services, or attacks on the welfare state – instead of narrowly focused member interests – such as winning a contract at one workplace while the rest of industry remains unorganized. Trade unions must develop the ability to translate the economic interests of workers into a broad understanding of rights and entitlements.. In doing so, unions can regain their political influence; they can aggregate the factory concerns into an popular agenda and apply a broadened perspective and comprehensive strategic focus towards such issues. (Turner 2004:2). In short, trade unions must learn to speak on behalf of the underprivileged who constitute the majority of the population to promote the common interests of development, equity and justice.

In order to build such a progressive program, unions should begin with their own members, who are undoubtedly already suffering under modern forms of alienation, even if they lack the vernacular to describe the concept.

The experience of Indonesia suggests that incorporating methods that develop conscientization, or critical consciousness, in workers’ education contribute to shaping workers’ political consciousness and thus encourage a radical and progressive trade union movement. Likewise, the abandonment of workers’ education has led to the opposite result – the weakening of the trade union movement. Evidence of this tendency in the brief overview of the shifting character of the Indonesian labour movement and its impact on workers’ education is presented here through a case study of an Indonesian NGO involved in workers’ education. The case study also explores the kinds of efforts taken by this NGO to revive the Indonesian trade union movement through raising political consciousness of workers.
II. Indonesian Trade Union History

Indonesia was colonised by the Dutch for about 350 years and later occupied by the Japanese for 3.5 years before the vast archipelago in Southeast Asia finally gained its independence in 1945. Indonesian trade union history however, began long before its independence. The first Indonesian trade union was formed in the tram and railway sector, VSTP (Vereeniging von Spoor –en Tramweg Personeel in Nederlandsch-Indie). This was followed by the founding of trade unions in various sectors such as teachers, public servants, dock and sugar plantation workers. During the 1920s and 1930s, trade unions became an important vehicle for raising the political consciousness of workers by merging their struggle for the improvement of working conditions with that of the nationalist struggle for Independence (Tedjasukmana, 1958). Closely tied to Western-educated nationalists, trade unions became ‘important training grounds for middle level leaders of nationalist parties’ (Ingleson, 1986: 5). Many leading trade unions at that time persistently incorporated working class interests and politics in their education programs (Tedjasukmana, 1958; Sandra, 1960). The education programs seemed to work well during this period as trade unions became the largest mass-organisations of civil society; even larger than the leading political parties (Ingleson in Ford, 2009: 21).

During the early years of the independent Indonesian state, in 1945-1965, trade unions remained a vital part of the civil society movement. The importance of trade unions was reflected in their membership numbers: In 1958, it was estimated that approximately 5 million workers belonged to a union,, while the labour force at that time was close to 32 million (though only 2.5 million were working in the formal sector) (Hawkins, 1963: 260; Ford, 2009:25). During this period, many large trade unions directly or indirectly, had close links with political parties, (see Tedjasukmana, 1958; Trimurti, 1975). While this relationship with political parties influenced the character of trade unions, most of them seemed to have maintained their independence by persuading political parties to support their economic struggle within the necessary dual economic and political objectives of trade unionism.

During this period, political consciousness seemed to frame trade union education programs. Existing trade unions at that time held a left orientation in their follow up actions. A wide range of literature was available, aimed at a worker readership, including translations of volumes on Marxism, Leninism, Socialism, and history in
Europe (Ford, 2009: 39-44; Tedjasukmana, 1958). There were also some volumes by Indonesian trade unionists dealing with religious approaches to labour relations. It is interesting to note, however, that despite differences in ideologies—including Communist and Muslim ideologies, trade unions were able to maintain their class-consciousness, albeit in the case of Muslim unions, only “to the extent that these ideas and aims are derived from the Qur’an” (Tedjasukmana, 1958:47). Scholars argued that such attitudes reflected a tradition in Java—where the labour movement was most developed—that subscribed to an ideology that the nobility has a duty to care for the marginalised people (Ingleson 1986: 5-6). Trade unions were using strikes and other labour actions to achieve their economic demands, as well as socio-political ones, in part by appealing to this tradition. At the grassroots level, trade unions also provided educational programs to combat poverty and literacy. These coherent educational programs, together with mass actions, and their ability to articulate left-ideology/political consciousness into concrete working class interests had gained popularity. Trade unions gained a strong influence in the state’s political process; for example, they were invited to work together with relevant state ministries in setting up social policy programs (Elliott in Ford, 2009:27) and to sit at the National Council—a body set up to reinforce the authority of the Cabinet (Ford, 2009:28).

The New Order regime (1965-1998), which came into power through a military coup, practically destroyed the organised labour movement under the pretext of fighting communism. The bloody military coup resulted in arrests, executions and disappearances of many unionists, especially from SOBSI—the union affiliated to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The new government banned leftist political parties and the links between civil society groups and political parties. There was a ‘floating mass’ policy, which forbade Indonesians from engaging in political activities except during election time. The government only allowed one national federation of trade unions, later known as FSPSI, whose aim was to support national economic development rather than the individual or collective interests of its members. The government also limited the presence of trade unions to mostly blue-collar secondary industries while restricting workers from exercising their labour rights.

The New Order regime systematically steered the union movement from political to economic unionism by eradicating the references to class and class differences and dictating that national economic development was the primary goal of the existence of
organised labour. The concept of *karyawan*, from a Sanskrit word *karya*, meaning ‘purposeful activity’, was thoroughly promoted to replace the word *buruh*, meaning worker, which was mired in connotations of class conflict (Leclerc, 1972). The regime also introduced the idea of Pancasila Industrial Relations in 1974, which imposed labour corporatism and state intervention –including military intervention– in the name of maintaining industrial stability. Later on, the term *pekerja* was officially introduced to replace *buruh* for “[t]he use of the word *buruh*, which has negative connotations, does not encourage the development of a familial atmosphere, mutual cooperation and consultation in a company. Consequently, the term *buruh* must be replaced and a term must be found that reflects the spirit of Pancasila Industrial Relations.” (Ford, 2009: 55-58).

The New Order regime, however, also incited resistance. Radical student groups and labour NGOs rose to the challenge of standing up in providing support for the working class struggle. During this period, there were numerous student groups and labour NGOs that provided support to working class struggles by organising and advocating on behalf of workers. On a practical level, these non-worker intellectuals provided advice, legal aid and moral support to workers’ groups and independent unions at a grassroots level. They also provided training and education to raise the class-consciousness and radicalise workers’ way of thinking. These training programmes focused on issues of workers rights, the triangular relationship of workers-capitalists-state, and labour policy (idem, 82-106). Some student groups and labour NGOs also helped plant-level unions to develop a more progressive character by participating in grassroot union work, by assisting them to systematise their campaigns against labour oppression and exploitation cases, and connect them to the international labour communities to tackle labour rights violations (idem).

However, the New Order regime rhetoric and policy towards the independent labour movement resulted in a crack down on radical student groups and labour NGOs. The regime aggressively sanctioned progressive labour NGOs and student groups that challenged the ‘one union’ policy or business unionism, pursuing criminal charges against them for being subversive. The regime consistently tried to keep trade unions away from progressive non-worker intellectuals by co-opting the recognised union leaders (idem, 62-81). Consequently, at the national level, workers education was generally undermined as the program simply sought to indoctrinate the rhetoric and
policy of the regime. Except through clandestine ways carried out by some progressive student groups and labour NGOs, there was practically no opportunity for radical education – in stark contrast to the earlier period (1945-1965) when it had been overtly aimed at enlightening workers about their rights and raise political consciousness.

Since the Reformasi era in 1998, however, the economic, social and political environment in Indonesia has undergone dramatic changes. Such changes have also had an impact on the labour movement. When the New Order dictatorship was toppled, there was a second chance to revive the labour movement in Indonesia. Freedom of association was recognized as a legal right and consequently, this has encouraged the establishment of various new federations and confederations of trade unions. The institutional support for union rights has opened a window of opportunity in creating political space for trade unions to regain their political character (Krauss, 2007:262).

However, despite the new government’s commitment to a ‘democratic Indonesia’, the political opening was quickly squashed with an economic tide as the Asian Crisis ushered in a wave of neo-liberal policies beginning in 1997. A series of Structural Adjustment Programs dictated by the IMF and World Bank has resulted in tight fiscal policies, cuts in public expenditures, privatisation and flexibilisation of labour market. International competitiveness has become an economic priority and the mission of attracting foreign direct investment dominates domestic policy, irrespective of the cost to the majority of the people. These economic policies have created new problems and challenges for the recently re-born Indonesian labour movement. While it struggles to regain support from the working class, trade unions have been weakened by downsizing, outsourcing, subcontracting and privatisation – the very policies they seek to overcome. The current profile of trade union members has changed, just as the Indonesian economy has responded to the pressures of global capitalism: If in 1945-1965, trade union members were skilled and educated workers in public service and heavy industry, today they are low-skilled workers in light manufacturing industries (such as garments, footwear, etc) –many of whom have zero organisational experience and live in a constant state of precarious due to low wages and lack of employment security (Ford, 2009; Manning, 2008). This fact, to some extent, is symbolic of the challenge for those involved in efforts to revitalise genuine unionism. The absence of a leftist ideology helps to explain the lack of direction of the union movement. This is troublesome for it may provoke unions to either stay in their traditional role of business
unionism or, even worse, fall into the trap that is gaining momentum of communalism (Tambunan, 2010).

Workers’ education has been affected by these factors in many ways. As freedom of association has only recently been reintroduced after 32 years of being silenced, trade unions must recognize the need rebuilding their organisation. Trade unions need to put energy into basic training of trade union administration. It is not an easy task considering that some Indonesian regions have been heavily traumatised from the 1965 massacre and the previous regime had been successful in stigmatising trade unions as communist organisations.

Since 1998, however, there have been renewed efforts in developing workers’ education. International labour communities, including foreign and international trade unions and labour NGOs, provide extensive support to Indonesian trade unions in developing larger and more structured education programs. These educational programs provide training on practical skills such union leadership and administration, collective negotiation and grievance procedures. There were also courses on labour law, political economy and introduction to international trade unionism.

Yet, despite all these endeavours to improve, the current trend of workers’ education is considerably inadequate with regard to supporting efforts to radicalise the labour movement (LIPS, 2006). There have been education programs to encourage gender emancipation and members’ active participation in union activities, but internal democratisation of unions seems to improve very slowly. It is also a concern that education programs do not really accommodate the current labour situation so they do not encourage workers to deal with issues that go beyond workplace. (idem).

The above review of the Indonesian trade union situation and corresponding changes in the situation of workers’ education might leave one with the impression that workers’ education in Indonesia has stagnated; it may also raise a concern about whether workers’ education can accommodate the urgent need to promote trade unions by raising workers’ political consciousness. In the next section we consider efforts to revive radical education traditions within the labour movement in Indonesia.

IIII. Labour NGOs and the Labour Movement in Indonesia
As suggested earlier, labour NGOs cannot be separated from the history of the Indonesian labour movement. During the New Order regime, and in reaction to systematic state repression against independent trade unions, labour NGOs took an active role in facilitating workers' expression of class-consciousness. Labour NGOs developed complex and creative strategies to encourage the formation of genuine workers' groups; from becoming ‘substitute trade unions born of necessity in a climate where independent unionism was not possible’ (Hadiz, in Ford, 2009: 83) to providing every support for workers to form alternative trade unions. In short, labour NGOs amalgamated themselves with the labour movement during the New Order period (Ford, 2009).

Since the Reformasi era, freedom of association and the flow of support from international labour communities have encouraged the formation of various independent trade unions, at national and regional levels. This has resulted in changes in the relationship between trade unions and labour NGOs. If before labour NGOs took the role as speakers on behalf labour, now they continue to play a crucial role but in supporting newly born trade unions in a partnership characterised by collegiality and comradeship demonstrated in activities such as: joint public advocacy campaigns, providing legal aid for union activists, and helping trade unions in areas of ongoing weaknesses such as research and educational programs (idem, 172-176).

The Trade Union Rights Centre (TURC) is a useful example of a labour NGO with a developed worker education program. This case study demonstrates that there is an effort to revive radical education traditions, although not always in a very visible and organised form. Data has been gathered primarily through interviews and document analysis, combined with secondary sources between March-August 2012. This analysis has been greatly enriched through the self-reflection of a labour activist once involved in this NGO’s education program activities.

**IV. Pedagogy for Trade Union Officials**

The Trade Union Rights Centre was established in 2003. The establishment of TURC was the realisation of a recommendation of a joint-workshop of union leaders from different confederations and labour lawyers/NGO representatives to establish a specific labour research and education centre to support all unions. (TURC rationale, 2003).
Since its establishment, education programs have become a major part of TURC's activities. While they include various issues that relate to labour—such as collective bargaining, wages, gender equality, and international unionism—in their education programs, the Centre decides how to use labour law and actual labour policies as a tool in workers' struggle (idem). This approach is based on the idea that the more politically conscious trade unionists are, the more likely they will be to participate in civil society and the political process. Increased participation means the increased ability of labour to shape actual law and policy. This specific approach is also based on the pragmatic reason that many Indonesian trade unions are in need of updating their knowledge of the new labour law system and key members of the staff at the Centre are themselves labour lawyers. The latter part of the paper elaborates on the use of this approach.

The labour law education programs are aimed at developing organising and legal advocacy skills, raising workers' critical consciousness of existing labour laws and policies, and encouraging political power consolidation, in order to have a more effectively advocate for better labour laws and policies (idem). The educational materials therefore include a critical analysis of labour law and policies, labour movement history, and a crash course in both domestic and global political economy, helping participants understand that there are various factors that influence the making of labour laws and policies. The programs are designed to accommodate active participation of adult participants and consist of class seminars, group works, and case study simulations. In each of the program events, the Centre usually invites 3-4 speakers (such as scholars, labour activists, union leaders, politicians, government representatives) to present their ideas and opinions, based on their expertise, on certain topics. There is also a facilitator team ready to help participants in summarising and sharpening their understanding on the key points of each session. The main task of the facilitators is to ground and sharpen critical reflection of the participants through a class-based analysis so that they can become confident in relaying this working class viewpoint when challenging questionable labour laws and policies.

The Centre's legal education programs specifically target rank-and-file union leadership from the plant or district level. These leaders have proven to be key figures in the process of union revitalisation and consolidation in Indonesia. In each of its labour law education programs, the Centre usually invites different trade unions to send two representatives, while limiting the event participants to 25-26 persons. During the
event, the participants are encouraged to share ideas and experiences. The goal is for the interaction to help foster a new level of understanding between the unions and thus create opportunities to initiate future joint activities. This point, according to one of the Centre’s staff, is important considering these leaders of different trade unions (especially those from lower level of organisation) have limited chances to meet and discuss important issues. Providing a forum for them to meet and interact helps to loosen some of the tightness and tensions different unions sometimes have.

Currently the Centre has two main events in its labour law education programs, the Labour Law Course (LLC) and the Labour Law Enforcement Workshop (LLEW). The latter is considered a continuation of the first course with the specific objective of encouraging and supporting participants to initiate a joint activity of legal advocacy in their specific region (TURC, 2008). In the early years, the Centre arranged two Labour Law Courses per year, each spanning an intensive 5-day curriculum, Today, as a result of positive feedback, the program has grown to have 3-4 LLCs per year and has reduced the length of the course to a 3-day event. Additionally, the Centre organises the Labour Law Enforcement Workshop two times a year as a 3-day event.

V. Critically Analysing the Daily Experience and the Non-neutrality of Education

Paulo Freire has argued that in educational circles it should be well understood that no one is ignorant of everything, but no one knows everything (Freire, 1973). Every participant of one educational process –educators and students– is in possession of certain knowledge. Therefore, for Freire, all learners should be regarded as ‘intellectuals’ as they are already in possession of certain knowledge gained from their daily experience (Roberts, 2010).

The TURC adopts such an understanding in implementing their labour law education programs. One of the educators explained how the Centre believes it is important to ‘learn the experience’. In preparing an LLC event in one region, the Centre seeks to utilize an actual local labour issue/case. Throughout the course, the facilitators encourage the participants to analyse the issue/case and, if possible, respond to it as a group. For example, in one LLC in Makassar (South Sulawesi), there was a dismissal case against several local union activists. During the course, facilitators stimulated a discussion on the case where participants were encouraged to explore their ideas about how the case could be addressed. Based on their own knowledge and experiences, the
class explored different possibilities of advocacy steps for that specific case. Subsequently, participants were given a chance to construct their own written recommendations and ultimately provide the workers involved in the case with a joint-statement addressed to the local authority. Through this kind of activity, according to the Centre's facilitator, LLC participants are able to realise that they all are already in possession of certain knowledge and skills concerning trade union advocacy work. Through interacting with other trade unionist, they can sharpen their skills for doing such work.

In another LLC session in Jogjakarta, the facilitators organised a visit to the Jogjakarta Labour Court where the participants had a chance to sit in a court hearing of a dismissal case against a union activist. After the court session, the facilitators organised two separate meetings; first with the dismissed union activist followed by a separate meeting with the judges. During the first meeting, participants were given a chance to ask questions about the case, as well as offer their sympathies and support to the troubled union activist. At the second meeting, the judges explained the functions and legal procedures of the Labour Court. After these visits, the facilitators led another discussion among the participants about their thoughts and impressions of the visit and the specific case they were able to witness. Through this series of activities, the participants begin to see the limitations of the existing legal procedures in fighting for worker and union rights. Together with other sessions of the LLC, it is hoped that the participants are able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role trade unions can play in the process of enforcing, as well as creating, effective labour law and policy that truly advances class interests.

According to one of the Centre's educators, this method helps participants to understand that every struggle against labour oppression is an opportunity to raise political consciousness. This educator stated that he does not need to preach about political consciousness - the participant’s experience of sitting in a court hearing, the process of crafting the statement for the dismissed worker, the solidarity they feel to support their comrades, and their signatures on the statement itself - have all taught them the importance of having political consciousness. When some participants came and said that they now understand why workers and trade unions need to consolidate their movement and jointly intervene in the labour policy making process, this educator said that he would feel as though his mission through the LLC has been accomplished.
The Labour Law Course introduces the importance of legal advocacy, and it is structured as an advanced step of the TURC’s education program. The Labour Law Enforcement Workshop (LLEW) is designed to bring together trade union leaders finding a common platform by engaging in joint-legal advocacy. Through the Labour Law Enforcement Workshop (LLEW) sessions, the Centre encourages the participants to take concrete steps in engaging with the labour law/policy making process. Thus, the LLEW is designed as a forum for trade union leaders to exchange experiences in labour advocacy and discuss current labour issues in the region. The Centre hopes that these sessions will lead trade unions to elevate their struggle from the factory level to the regional level, as different unions are encouraged to work hand-in-hand for better labour policy.

Usually the LLEW is organised at a regional level and thus the Centre invites existing trade unions in the region to send their leaders/representatives. The main method used in the LLEW is to invite certain union activists from other regions to share their experiences and strategies in doing labour advocacy –either on specific legal cases or influencing the labour policy making process. During this session, the presenter is encouraged to provide participants with detailed explanation as well as supporting materials (documents, newspaper clips, photos, etc). The facilitators then welcome the participants to share and discuss their concerns on specific labour issues in their region. After that, facilitators ask the participants to reflect on the experience of the presenter and discuss how such an approach could impact labour policy in their local region.

Again, the Centre uses these sessions to demonstrate to trade union activists how they can view the labour issue from different angle - daily workplace experiences can have deep effects in raising worker class-consciousness. Learning from other experiences in labour advocacy often proves to be more effective than lecturing about theoretical issues. For example, in some of the LLEWs organised in 2009, the Centre invited several trade union leaders from Surabaya, East Java, to share their successful experience in doing legal advocacy against a case of union busting. Apart from sharing their strategies, those Surabaya union activists also shared how the success has since raised their unions’ integrity and deeply affected the militancy of their members. Some participants of the LLEW later remarked how the story of the East Java union has inspired them to be more receptive to analysing and conceptualising their daily grassroots experiences.
Another important characteristic of the TURC's labour law education program is its non-neutrality. Distinct from other existing labour NGOs in Indonesia, the TURC has explicitly announced its position as a part of the Indonesian labour movement (TURC, 2003; Ford, 2009: 103). By establishing an institutional link with the trade union movement, the Centre provides its assistance to trade unions in areas such as labour law/policy research and education programs. On many occasions, the Centre positions itself as a supplier of alternative strategies for trade unions. In doing this, the Centre does not take a ‘neutral’ position by only facilitating the discussion. Instead, the Centre directly expresses its ideological and political position. For example, in the beginning of the LLC program, the facilitators often ask participants “What do you think is the problem with labour law in Indonesia?” After some discussion with the participants, the facilitators explain that the Centre’s position is that labour law is a product of an ideology and political struggle in the state; the weaker the ideology and political influence of the working class, the weaker the legal framework for labour rights under the law. Facilitators then argue that current problems relating to labour law enforcement in Indonesia are a direct result of the influence of the capitalist economic system on state politics. Thus it is urgent for the union movement to take action.

In another session of its labour law education program, the Centre’s educator led a discussion by asking participants “Why is the [regulated] minimum wage so low?” After hearing the various opinions and ideas of the participants, the educator then explained how the minimum wage is annually established. The educator then drew the attention of the participants to the importance of trade unions influence with the tripartite Regional Wage Council recommendation. At this stage, the educator emphasised the importance for trade unions to strategise their policy advocacy work and how collective trade union action – including strikes and rallies – can be powerful to persuade capital and the state to fulfil working class demands.

VI. Collective Actions to Raise Political Consciousness

Since the Reformasi era, as freedom of association became a legal right, trade unions have been mushrooming in Indonesia. Prior to 1998, the government only recognised one legacy trade union – FSPSI – and the union was dominated by an elitist and politically conservative leadership attached to the New Order regime (Hadiz, 1997). Nowadays, there are approximately a hundred federations of trade unions at the
national level and many more operating at the regional level. Though this can be seen as a sign of revival for the union movement, friction and tensions among existing trade unions could obstruct the development of a strong, progressive trade union movement (Rokhani, 2008). Inviting different trade unions to strategise and do joint-advocacy missions, however, has resulted in remarkable internal transformations.

The following examples illustrate how trade union federations have advanced working class interests through collective action, often setting aside their internal differences in furtherance of joint advocacy work. In early 2010, recognizing the importance of having a national social security system, three of the biggest confederations of Indonesian trade unions agreed on the establishment of an advocacy network for a national social security system, entitled *Komite Aksi Jaminan Sosial* (KAJS –the Action Committee for Social Security). Soon afterward, KAJS grew to become a movement of approximately 64 organisations including trade unions, women’s groups, human rights NGOs, and student groups, which actively strategised a series of advocacy actions (parliamentarian lobbying, mass protests, strikes, etc) to support their demand. While the initial actions were in Jakarta, the struggle has become a catalyst for workers in many Indonesian regions and become a model for similar actions at regional levels. Worker political consciousness is growing and has led to the consolidation of the union movement. Additionally, this work has resulted in a larger space for different trade unions to come together and exchange their ideas and experiences - they help each other in sharpening their political consciousness. The Centre is one of the key initiators of the KAJS and has been one of the instrumental members of the coalition.

On May Day in 2012 the three largest confederations of trade unions announced the creation of HOSTUM. This new coalition arose from frustrations with the state’s low wage policy and insufficient annual minimum wage determinations. The three largest confederations agreed that trade unions must come together in order to stand up and challenge the government to improve this fundamental labour interest. The main demands of the HOSTUM movement are clear: a) improve the national legislation for how the annual minimum wage is determined, and b) eradicate (or at least regulate) outsourcing in accordance with the Decision of Constitutional Court in January 2012. The Centre has been active in supporting the HOSTUM movement since its initial establishment.
Since its establishment, HOSTUM has inspired different trade unions to organise collective mass actions. A wave of mass protests by trade unions has swept many vital industrial areas throughout Java Island since May 2012. There was also a major mass protest on 12 of July 2012, when tens of thousands of workers paralysed business activities in Jakarta and 15 other provinces, calling upon workers on other islands to support their cause. Representatives of union leaders have since announced their intentions to have discussion with government representatives over the demands. Meanwhile, the HOSTUM movement plans to have another mass protest in between September-October 2012 to put more pressure on the state government.

HOSTUM has acted as a catalyst for workers and unions to take action in their local struggle, and have the confidence to confront management. In many leading industrial areas in Indonesia, such as Bekasi, Purwakarta, and Surabaya, trade unions have initiated collective bargaining, followed by strikes and protests, to demand wage increases and improved working conditions. In these local struggles, the trade unions consistently connect these actions to the national agenda of HOSTUM. This tendency, in and of itself, demonstrate the growth of worker political consciousness that has brought revitalisation and radicalisation to the union movement.

Observing a virtual ‘facebook’ group set up by KAJS activists, it is interesting to learn how the collective actions of KAJS and HOSTUM have become a learning ground for workers by shaping their growing political consciousness and militancy. Interactions in this specific facebook group, with approximately 8,000 members from all over Indonesia, demonstrates that workers not only experience collective protests/strikes/actions as powerful learning experiences, but these events also help union leaders to overcome existing tension among trade unions and focus on the common interest of working class struggles. Ordinary members gain and develop political consciousness as these collective actions help them to understand the connection between their daily economic struggles and the union’s political demands.

Below is an excerpt from what a worker wrote in this group:

*Dulu, hanya para mahasiswa yang memberontak, tetapi sekarang ribuan dan puluhan ribu kaum buruh telah bangun di semua kota besar. Mereka kebanyakannya berjuang menentang majikan-majikan mereka, menentang pemilik-pemilik pabrik, menentang kaum kapitalis. Kaum buruh mengadakan pemogokan, semua buruh di satu pabrik berhenti bekerja dengan serentak dan menuntut jangan dipaksa bekerja sebelas atau*
sepuluh jam sehari, tetapi bekerja hanya delapan jam saja. Kaum buruh juga menuntut bermacam-macam keringanan lain dalam kehidupan seorang buruh. Mereka menghendaki supaya bengkel-bengkel diperbaiki dan supaya mesin-mesin dilindungi dengan alat-alat yang khusus guna mencegah mesin-mesin itu membikin cacat kaum buruh; mereka menghendaki supaya anak-anak mereka dapat pergi ke sekolah, supaya yang sakit mendapat pertolongan yang selayaknya di rumah sakit; mereka menghendaki supaya tempat tinggal kaum buruh itu menyerupai rumah manusia dan bukan kandang anjing.

[In the past, only students protested; now there are tens of thousands of workers awakened in all major cities. Workers are fighting against managements, against factory owners, against capitalists. Workers organise strikes, do collective action to stop their work at factories and refuse to work 11 or 10 hours per day but only 8 hours/day. Workers demand improvements for decent life: demand enhancement of factory machines so there won’t be anymore injured workers; demand access to education for their children; demand free access for their health treatment; demand decent human housing, not the dog’s slump].

Another worker wrote:

kebijakan upah apakah bukan produk politik?
outcoursing apakah bukan produk politik?
apakah kita cuma dari pabrik ke pabrik mau sampai kapan?
kenapa buruh takut berpolitik?

[isn’t wage policy a political product? Isn’t outsourcing a political product? Do we want to fight only from factory to factory, until when? Why are we afraid to politicise [our demands]?]

The TURC’s labour law education programs combined with trade union collective actions, the existence of modern media to exchange experiences and ideas, and the consolidation of the union movement, have all helped to construct workers’ political consciousness, drawing the connection between capitalist labour policy and working conditions with low wages, repressive outsourcing, and the absence of social security.

VII. Conclusion

Paulo Freire’s concept of critical consciousness begins with a conviction that a human being does not simply exist in the world, but her/his main role is to engage in relations with the world; through acts of creation and re-creation, a human being is a subject that can change their cultural reality through an active engagement with their environment (Freire, 1973: 43-44). For Freire, education is supposed to raise critical consciousness by helping individuals understand their place in the world. This happens through a process of analysing social and political contradictions as a part of their own lives, as well
as learning to take action against oppression – at that point the learners become politically conscious and education becomes a tool by which they change their realities (Freire, 1972; Freire, 1973). In this light, an educator’s fundamental role is to enter into dialogue with the learners about their concrete causal and circumstantial situations and offer them the instruments by which they can teach themselves to respond and act towards their situation (Freire, 1973).

Through this specific Indonesian workers education case study, it is clear that while neoliberal globalisation has led to massive attacks on all fronts of the Indonesian labour movement, there is an effort to revive radical unionism through the tradition of radical workers’ education. The style of education is not ‘top-down’, but instead a method for the daily reality of working people to be transformed into alternative instruments of education for reflection and consideration as to what they can do for aggregating the working class struggle.

In the education program of union officials, TURC has made significant attempts to encourage trade union officials to reflect on labour law and policy and integrate their political perspective with the experience of their members. For TURC, labour law is a tool that can be used to gain perspective for trade unions to revitalise union strategies. The participatory and non-neutrality characteristics of its education programs, combined with the Centre’s mission of consolidating the union movement, allow officials from different trade unions to freely express their ideas and opinions on issues, exchange their experiential knowledge with one another, and together find common ground for joint advocacy work. Collective actions, including lawsuits, lobbying, mass protests and strikes, have allowed union members to learn and understand the nature of economic and political power, as well as provided a path way for different trade unions consolidating and reviving the union movement in Indonesia.

Of course there are still questions regarding how trade unions will sustain, or even improve upon, education for their political consciousness. Trade unionism in Indonesia is relatively young, having been reborn with the reforms of 1998. This young movement is facing difficult challenges in the form of aggressive privatisation and the flexibilisation of labour markets. On the other hand, trade unions still need to overcome internal challenges of democracy and member control as union elites are struggling to ease fragmentation among them. However, there is an expectation that members’ growing
political consciousness and ability to integrate experiential knowledge with the political perspectives of unions would breed more intellectuals organically. In that regard, partisan NGOs with close ties to the labour movement - such as TURC – have the potential to provide valuable support for the future of trade unionism.

References:


