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Still the “Opium of the Masses”? Religion and Labour Struggles in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The article links the literatures on Indonesian democracy, Islamic politics, and labour struggles through developments and contradictions in the sphere of ideology. It maintains that there is a continuing marginalisation of labour as a social force in Indonesia despite earlier victories in the democratic era. This marginalisation can be understood not just through the specific constellation of social power intrinsic to Indonesian capitalism but also to a related process of “religionisation,” characterised by the growing piety of Indonesian workers. Labour subordination has merged with the logic of the state ideology of Pancasila and with prevalent articulations of Islamic doctrine, posing internal obstacles to the growth of a robust labour movement. The analysis is based on recent fieldwork in the Javanese “heartland.”

KEY WORDS

Capitalism; Democracy; Indonesia; Islam; Trade Unions; Workers

What do the relationships between Indonesian capitalism, its labour regime, and the growing prominence of Islam in workers’ everyday lives tell us about the constellation of social power and interest after democratisation in 1998? More specifically, how are these relationships expressed in the Indonesian labour movement – long ago dominated by the Left and then severely suppressed by state authoritarianism for more than three decades – and in the worldviews of its workers?

The following is argued here: that the labour movement remains limited in its capacity to impact on struggles over democratisation because capitalist subordination of workers has merged with the logic of both state nationalism as expressed in official Pancasila ideology, albeit now within a democratic context, and of prevalent articulations of Islamic doctrine amidst growing piety within the ranks of the industrial labour force. This is the case even if there have been hard-won victories along the way. The implications are significant both for and beyond workers in terms of understanding Indonesia’s democracy and capitalism.

The above argument is developed through the findings of fieldwork in the Javanese “heartland” undertaken intermittently from late 2021 to early 2023, involving interviews with individual and small groups of workers but also others, such as local politicians,

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non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists, and figures associated with religious mass organisations. It is in the Javanese heartland of Greater Solo and the Special Region of Yogyakarta, though not the most industrialised, where we find an instructive meeting between traditional ideas of harmony on which Pancasila is ostensibly premised and the sort of Islamic values that emphasise the cultivation of individual morality in the face of life's trepidations. It is in this heartland, too, that the cultural and political bulwarks for traditional syncretic Javanese belief systems were found, as well as Leftist politics until the social changes unleashed following the annihilation of the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* or PKI) in the mid-1960s and the gradual proliferation of more orthodox forms of Islam soon after. While extrapolating from the cases encounters the usual problems of generalising from specific localities, insights from them help in understanding how contemporary Indonesian workers position themselves within the social world in which they work and live. Significantly, despite the tremendous differences in the contexts of Europe in the 19th century and Java in the 21st, these workers' world-views, as conveyed through interviews, resonate with Marx's (1970) observation about religion as an expression of the experience of class subordination – as “the opium of the people.”

With all this in mind, the continuing marginalisation of labour under democratisation is explored by examining the ideological contours of labour struggles. This is because of the obfuscation that may arise from predominant explanations based on how institutional arrangements have been transformed through democratisation. Such transformations may be seen in the presence of a multitude of trade unions in Indonesia today, which contrasts sharply with the repression endured by workers attempting to organise outside of state-sanctioned vehicles during the New Order (see Hadiz 1997; Kammen 1997; Ford 2009).

In the process, the article provides a link between literatures that have not always been directly connected to each other in discussions of contemporary Indonesian politics and society. First is the literature on its often-lauded democratisation, including by Slater (2023), and second is the literature on Islamic politics. There have been many attempts at connecting these two strands of literature (see, for example, Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani 2018). This is not surprising given that the vast majority of Indonesians profess to be Muslims and the country is often showcased as the third largest democracy in the world after India and the USA. A third, and much smaller, strand, though, pertains to *reformasi* period (post-1998) labour struggles.

Issues of democratisation and Islamic politics, taken together, have been only rarely linked to present-day labour struggles. While there have been a few notable works that have connected post-*reformasi* labour organising with democratisation after the fall of the New Order, they have tended to be the exception. Those by Ford (2009), Caraway and Ford (2020), Caraway, Ford, and Nugroho (2015), Juliawan (2011), and Törnquist (2004) all stand out. However, there has been a tendency to link labour struggles and Islamic politics to the relatively narrow sphere of electoral competition. Caraway and Ford (2020), for example, scrutinised ties between the *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS/Justice and Prosperity Party), a major post-*reformasi* Islamist party, and sections of the labour movement, especially in preparation for electoral contests. Yet contemporary labour struggles have not been linked to a broader phenomenon that can be called “religionisation,” particularly of Indonesia's Muslims, itself related to a recognised trend in the Muslim world (Hefner 2011, 72–73; Picard 2017, 18–21). This involves growing identification with religious orthodoxies, in place of more syncretic or folk belief systems, and an institutionalisation of religious governance.

The issues brought up by linking democratisation, Islam, and labour struggles, particularly in the ideological sphere, are ultimately understood here in relation to yet another area of concern – that of Indonesian capitalism (see Robison 1986; Robison and Hadiz 2004; Winters 1996). In canvassing these issues, this article contributes to the literature on Indonesian democracy, which is usually assessed as having lately “regressed,” but typically through analyses confined to formal institutions (see Power and Warburton 2020, 3).

The article is organised as follows: the next section considers the ideological baggage inherited by workers in democratised Indonesia from previous periods of struggle. It provides the necessary context to understand the subsequent section, which describes insights gathered from fieldwork about the concrete circumstances encountered by workers today and the ways they try to make sense of them. Narratives provided in that section are then analysed through a Gramscian-inspired exploration of hegemony and “common sense.” The final section offers concluding observations and suggests the article’s broader implications.

Shaping the Contours of Ideology

The continuing marginalisation of Indonesian labour despite democratisation may be somewhat contentious as a theme. It does not sit comfortably with the literature linking Indonesian democracy and workers, albeit a limited literature. For instance, Caraway and Ford (2020) have emphasised labour action around a decade ago that resulted in successful outcomes, most prominently in the form of improved wages and social security policy. Yet organised labour remains peripheral in relation to more entrenched interests within Indonesian democracy and much of this has to do with how workers have come to understand their social position and the nature of their struggles.

There are strong reasons why such a circumstance cannot be ignored in spite of understandable enthusiasm to showcase advances made by workers under democratisation. Workers have experienced important setbacks more recently (Caraway 2023). Most prominently this included the implementation of an Omnibus Law in 2022 – which contains associated “job creation” legislation – that encourages outsourcing and casualisation, while threatening work security by easing dismissal procedures (*Reuters*, June 9, 2022). Moreover, despite some election time overtures by the PKS, and to some extent, the nationalist *Gerakan Indonesia Raya* (Gerindra/Greater Indonesian Movement), there are no major parties that declare a pro-labour agenda. The fieldwork undertaken for this article reveals that workers and politicians alike do not think there are strong organic links between the labour movement and political parties. Several attempts to compete electorally as labour parties have also failed dismally, though a new one was launched in anticipation of general elections in 2024 (*Tempo.co*, October 5, 2021).

Still, there can be no denying that democratic-era labour vehicles enjoy the sort of freedom from state control that their authoritarian-era predecessors could only dream of having. But rather than privileging the opportunities provided by formal institutional arrangements, a more nuanced picture of labour struggles can be produced when they are addressed as being shaped within a broader socio-economic and political environment on which workers exert little control. This environment is conditioned by the imperatives of capitalist control over labour, the corruption-driven workings of Indonesian democracy, and the lingering effects of New Order repression (see Robison and Hadiz 2004; Aspinall and Sukmajati 2015). It is also conditioned by a growing religious piety within society.

Such piety is evident in the definition of personal identities by recourse to moral behaviour and practices associated with the Islamic religion.

The latter phenomenon could be ascertained through simple visual observation: in the early 1990s, during the rise of an independent labour movement against New Order's system of labour control, it was hardly common that female factory workers would don the *hijab*, a major signifier of personal religious piety. Indeed, it would have been rare for researchers to comment on the way female workers dressed. Today, however, female factory workers – who still form the bulk of the labour force within the textiles and garments industry – almost uniformly adopt styles of clothing associated with religious identity.

It is emphasised, moreover, that the values of harmony and non-confrontation are not only embedded in Pancasila, especially since codified by the authoritarian New Order regime (1966–1998), but also in predominant Islamic discourses to which workers are regularly exposed in their everyday lives. These tend to emphasise acceptance of “God’s will,” patience, and reward in the afterlife (following a worldly existence of pious suffering). They view conflict as contradicting the sort of individual moral self-restraint to be encouraged in the present world. The resultant social effect can pose a barrier to more militant or robust forms of labour organising despite greater legal scope for it since democratisation.¹

Pancasila

Promoted by Indonesia's first president, Soekarno, Pancasila initially served to resolve a dispute between those within the anti-colonial struggle whose visions of a soon to be independent country differed insofar as they tended to be either more secular-nationalist or more Islamic (see Madinier 2022). As codified state ideology, even in the democratic era, it is closely connected to an official, state-enforced form of nationalism, to which social and political organisations continue to profess adherence. This is a legacy of New Order rule, when all organisations were coerced into recognising Pancasila as their ideological fountain head as part of a strategy of averting challenges to the regime headed by President Soeharto (see Bouchier 2015).

During New Order rule, a highly predatory form of capitalism evolved where control over public institutions enabled private accumulation, including through violence and dispossession (see Robison and Hadiz 2004; Mudhoffir 2022). For labour, this translated into a rigid system of control, in which organising was severely curtailed and strike action often dealt with by brutal military repression (Kammen 1997; Hadiz 1997, 169–176; Ford 2000, 68–69). As the system became more oppressive, the *Federasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia* (FBSI/All Indonesia Labour Federation), which had been the sole state-recognised labour federation since 1973, was transformed into the even more military-like, state-subordinated, and heavily regimented *Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia* (SPSI/All Indonesia Workers Union).

While Soeharto's New Order met its demise during the Asian economic crisis near the end of the last century, its influence remains strong in many spheres of life, not least the ideological. President Joko Widodo, better known as Jokowi (in power since 2014), and Megawati Soekarnoputri – daughter of Soekarno and leader of the ruling *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan* (PDIP/Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle), to which the president is attached – have contributed significantly to the marked revival of Pancasila's organic-statist ideas. Today there is *Badan Pembinaan Ideologi Pancasila* (BPIP/Agency for Pancasila Ideology Education), for example, a state agency whose

purview is the preservation and implementation of Pancasila. It is reminiscent of the New Order-era *Badan Pembinaan, Pendidikan, Pelaksanaan, Pedoman, Penghayatan, dan Pengamalan Pancasila* (BP7/Agency for Development, Education, Implementation of Guidelines for the Appreciation and Practice of Pancasila), which was responsible for ideological indoctrination and screening. The BPIP was established by the Jokowi presidency and its supervisory board is headed by Megawati.

Whilst such a revival has been linked to attempts to forestall the influence of hard-line Islamic forces, one should be careful in assuming growing polarisation between nationalist and Islamic-based worldviews, as represented by social forces intrinsically in opposition to each other. Menchik (2016, 67), for example, suggests that an essentially illiberal “godly nationalism” has been pervasive across Indonesian politics since the 20th century. Bouchier (2019, 713) also identified a growing “religious nationalism.” Today, the complementary rather than necessarily oppositional relationship between Pancasila and Islamic-derived ideas can be observed in the sphere of labour organising.

It would be also incorrect though to overlook that workers were exposed to other sources of ideas and that these have had a lingering influence. A type of liberal or social democratic workerism advocated by international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation was already influential among labour NGOs and activists during the New Order. It promoted the importance of workers’ rights through a vocabulary primarily derived from the experience of Western trade union movements (see Tronti 2010). This vocabulary appeared prominently *after* the militant Leftist tradition associated with Indonesian communism had been violently removed from the scene. It was much preferred to the more overtly political Leftist vocabulary by the government and its international backers during the Cold War. That sort of workerism’s influence was limited though as long as the working class had become increasingly suppressed within a wider system of control over civil society, insulating dominant politico-bureaucratic and business alliances from potential challenges.

In time, workerist ideas were adopted by nascent dissenting labour groupings that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and also by the state corporatism of the New Order. In the process, they were partially incorporated and domesticated within a Pancasila Industrial Relations framework that emphasised tripartite “co-operation,” which in practice could only happen with labour subordination firmly in place. Such an adoption occurred in response to international and domestic criticism, by NGOs, of Indonesia’s labour rights record (Ford 2006, 177). It also coincided with the fall of international oil prices after the “boom” that had followed the Arab-Israeli War of 1973. Plummeting oil prices had forced a shift to an export-led industrialisation strategy based on abundant and cheap labour in the early 1980s.² Still, state-sanctioned, industry-wide unions representing textiles and garments as well as metal and electronics workers – parts of which evolved, respectively, into the democratic-era unions *Serikat Pekerja Nasional* (SPN/National Workers’ Union) and *Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia* (FSPMI/Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers’ Unions) – came to have reformist elements.

Today, the influence of such workerist ideas can be found in the training materials on workers’ rights put together by many trade unions. They often adopt a jargon associated with social democratic traditions (and sometimes, even those further to the Left of the political spectrum) (GSBI, n.d.). But such traditions never had a real social base, certainly not during the three decades of New Order rule. Such is the case even if a new Labour Party (*Partai Buruh*) portrays itself as struggling for the establishment of a welfare state (*Sindonews*, March 7, 2023).

It is possible that such training materials better reflect the sensibilities of upper union hierarchies rather than the rank-and-file. The former's sometimes rousing political language – against institutions representing global capitalism, for example – seems oddly divorced from the concerns expressed by workers in navigating through everyday life (Parto and Widodo 2007). For workers, circumstances appear to have brought them closer to lexicons associated both with state nationalism and interpretations of Islamic doctrine that prioritise living in harmony within the existing social order. It is no wonder that a national-level leader of the SPN bemoans the gap between the rhetoric of trade unionism and the cultural references that resonate with workers (Interview, Ramidi Abdul Madjid, Secretary General of SPN, Jakarta, February 23, 2023).

Islam

New Order authoritarianism had a fluctuating relationship with Islamic politics (Hefner 2000). While the social agents of Islamic politics took part in the anti-communist massacres that brought the New Order to power in the 1960s, in support of the military, they were largely frozen out by the 1970s. A range of underground or semi-underground Islamic groupings developed over time as a source of dissent against the increasingly corruption-ridden New Order. Many Islamic activists especially resented the legislation on Pancasila as sole ideology, introduced in the mid-1980s amid a concerted crackdown on dissent against the regime.

In the early 1990s though, with the establishment of *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI/Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals), middle class Islamic intellectuals and activists were brought back into the New Order's fold. Many of these were luminaries of NGOs, religious mass organisations, and veteran student activists. They were joined by bureaucrats and businessmen who suddenly found it beneficial to claim identification with Islam. However, this shift did not have any great bearing on the labour movement.

Later, at the onset of *reformasi*, the *Persatuan Pekerja Muslim Indonesia* (PPMI/United Indonesian Muslim Workers) was established, and some labour unions linked to Islamic organisations were half-heartedly resurrected. The most prominent were *Sarekat Buruh Muslimin Indonesia* (Sarbumusi/Indonesian Muslim Labour Union) connected to the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), and *Gabungan Serikat Buruh Islam Indonesia* (Gasbiindo/Amalgamated Indonesian Islamic Unions), genealogically connected to the old modernist Islamic Masyumi Party. In spite of this ostensibly Islamic presence, the accusation that labour movements indicated the resurgence of the Left continued to be occasionally trumpeted by elites (*IndonesiaInside*, June 5, 2020). Such claims demonstrate continuity between post-New Order and New Order Indonesia.

In the early 2000s, some social agents of Islamic politics, usually considered to be “radical,” came to the fore as a source of dissent once again, but this time challenging Indonesian democracy. They ranged from gangs of thugs donning Islamic garb, to armed militias, to murky terrorist groups linked to international networks. Their representatives included members of: Lasykar Jihad, which fought actively in the violent communal conflict in Maluku in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Schulze 2002); the Islamic Defenders Front, who Wilson (2015, 30; 2008) has dubbed a collection of “morality racketeers”; and recruits to terrorist organisations such as *Jemaah Islamiyah*. Their ostensible grievances varied, from the way democracy deviated from a preferred caliphate as a system of state, to how Islamic law or *sharia* was being subordinated to secular law, to how the *ummah* remained economically marginalised by entrenched domestic and/or foreign interests (see

Hadiz 2016, 139–140, 149–151, 170–171). This dissent against Indonesian democracy occurred while mainstream Islamic social organisations such as the NU and Muhammadiyah, together with several Islamically oriented political parties, became some of democracy's most enthusiastic participants.

Among these parties, much attention has been focussed on the PKS, which emerged from a largely campus-based Islamic student movement to become a well-organised political party (Machmudi 2006). But the PKS has not lived up to the early hype. It has had limited success within Indonesia's electoral democracy, though it has been part of national government coalitions and even dominated politics in some local or provincial settings. It was the PKS that engaged most systematically with a strategy of wooing labour, which would not have been considered a "natural" constituency until a noticeable Islamisation of the urban workforce took place. As documented by Caraway and Ford (2020, 45, 104, 127–128), the party had already forged deals with labour in 2009 by placing labour activists on its list of candidates for local elections. Nevertheless, this strategy has not amounted to a strong support base for the PKS among workers, in part because of the lack of electoral success under the party's banner.

Even so, approaching labour organisations was a logical course of action for the PKS. In wooing labour activists, the PKS could claim that it was following the enjoinderment within Islam for the strong to protect the *dhu'afa* (the poor, the weak, and destitute). But there was another impetus: the party's relatively poor electoral record revealed a desperate need to expand beyond its base among pious sections of the urban middle-class. The attempt to build lower class support was launched even if, in reality, the PKS was becoming more embroiled in the kinds of elite-level wheeling and dealing that characterises Indonesian democratic politics. These are associated with unbridled corruption, which though more decentralised, continued the bureaucratic, political, and big business collusion that had been a mainstay of the New Order.

As Caraway and Ford (2020, 128–129) show, the PKS worked closely with the FSPMI (and to an extent, the SPN), which has been a politically active trade union. Besides having been close to the PKS, FSPMI was also associated with Gerindra, led by retired New Order general Prabowo Subianto. Prabowo was courting the devout Muslim vote in presidential elections in 2014 and 2019 and was pitted against the forces that coalesced behind Jokowi, the victor in both elections. The FSPMI has more recently become the backbone of yet another attempt to establish a viable labour party to contest national elections in 2024, the aforementioned Labour Party. Its president is FSPMI leader Said Iqbal (2023), a devout Muslim who has stated that the party's establishment reflected "the will of God."

It has been suggested that in lieu of a viable Leftist stream in Indonesian politics, narratives offered by traditions of Islamic politics provided a means to advance grievances related to issues of social justice (Hadiz 2021). This was so because participation in neo-liberal globalisation has greatly exacerbated socio-economic inequalities. Adding to this propensity is the historical weakness of liberal/social democratic impulses, the few social agents of which were suppressed during clampdowns on student movements in the 1970s. Leftist currents did re-emerge though among segments of the student movement in the 1980s and 1990s, which evolved into the *Partai Rakyat Demokratik* (PRD/Democratic People's Party) (see Lane 2014). Some attempted alliances with labour and peasant groups, including in the Javanese heartland, but their influence has not been deep-seated or long-lasting. For example, sections of the FSPMI leadership once had close links to key figures behind the PRD (see Lane 2014).

It is true that dissent has been expressed with reference to Islamic historical and political references by social agents on the fringes of state and society, some of which were

cultivated within the traditions of the Darul Islam rebellion or its offshoots (Solahudin 2013, 4–8). But they have not achieved anything near hegemonic status (see Hakim 2023). For a significant period, following 9/11 and the subsequent Bali Bombings of 2002 and 2003, scholarly attention was focussed on “radical” Islamic groupings, including ones that claimed violence as a legitimate strategy (see, for example, Sidel 2007). Though often causing much consternation due to their ability to recruit despite member arrests and deaths, such groupings have not been able to displace NU and Muhammadiyah.

Through their schools, hospitals, affiliated social organisations, and vast army of preachers, teachers, and intellectuals, NU and Muhammadiyah continue to permeate society. Their “moderate” expressions of Islam have been celebrated for inhibiting radical tendencies among the *ummah*, the members of whom are well-represented amongst the poor. They have also played a part in ensuring that Islamic forces participate in Indonesia’s electoral democracy, given large NU and Muhammadiyah representations in a host of political parties.

Still, radicalisation continued to be at the forefront of debates, with the Jokowi government emphasising Pancasila awareness and appeals to religious moderation. This was a response to the mobilisation of Islamic sentiment against the President by his foes, including Prabowo Subianto (before he came to join Jokowi’s cabinet as Minister of Defence), including via concerted social media campaigns which cast aspersions on the religiosity of the President and his inner circle (Rakhmani and Saraswati 2021: 15). The president’s opponents suggested nefarious ties too with foreign or domestic Chinese capital.

Significantly, social grievances have been more openly expressed through appeals to Islam in electoral competition, most prominently in the Jakarta gubernatorial election of 2017. This ended in the defeat of a close ally of Jokowi in the face of accusations that he had slandered Islam, and the victory of Anies Baswedan (a 2024 presidential hopeful), who benefitted from the harnessing of an *ummah* identity to his campaign. Infamously, Baswedan’s victory was accompanied by mass mobilisations where actors such as the FPI, as well as the semi-official MUI (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia/Indonesian Ulama Council*), played major roles (see Hadiz 2019).

It is notable though that appeals to moralistic themes, resonating with a more self-consciously pious populace, has not been the monopoly of Islamic vehicles. For instance, a new Criminal Code was passed in 2022 by all the parties in the national legislature, which outlawed sex outside of marriage, while also placing new obstacles to criticism of those in power (Human Rights Watch 2022).

While their remit to constrain “radicalism” or “extremism” provides clout with the government and international community, leaders of NU and Muhammadiyah are also aware that their language of moderation could easily backfire (Alvian 2020). It has been noted that the organisations’ tendency for restraint and co-operation with powerholders can be off-putting for young and precariously employed people, whose discontent could be mobilised by those espousing a tougher rhetoric (Interview, Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak, former chairman of Muhammadiyah youth wing, Jakarta, December 6, 2017). Some observers have suggested a decline in the influence of *ulama* linked to venerable Islamic organisations (see, for example, Fealy and Bush 2014), thereby opening the door to unaffiliated preachers who may employ fierier rhetoric.

However, that rhetoric does not seem to have permeated through to factory workers in the Javanese heartland. Instead, more prominent is the sort of resignation to “what the Almighty has provided,” and compliance with injunctions to be grateful, which conceivably helps to inhibit a more assertive labour movement. As discussed further below, the

effect of regular exposure to such religious reference points is particularly meaningful in relation to female workers, who are asked to observe injunctions that encourage a subordinate role in the household – thus plausibly conditioning them for habitual compliance in the workplace.

The latter observation, on the surface, contradicts the findings of Rinaldo (2013), who suggested that piety has been mobilised in the struggle for women's rights. However, there is a class element at play that explains the apparent contradiction. Rinaldo mainly discussed the piety of civil society activists who would have tended to have more educated middle-class backgrounds. It is more than likely that the Islamist rhetoric to which they were exposed – much like the activists of student movements – leaned more heavily toward issues of rights and social justice than experienced by workers in their communities or workplaces.

This class element goes some way too in explaining the disjuncture between the rhetoric of the PKS and the predispositions of rank-and-file workers. The PKS is brimming with middle class former student activists who have been politically socialised through, and tend to employ, a heroic language of politics that targets the failings of the existing system and enjoins a struggle to change it (Interview, Sofyan Setyo Darmawan, PKS member of the Yogyakarta legislature, Yogyakarta, February 28, 2023). These party activists also tend to aspire to leading roles in society through democratic politics but remain locked out from the main halls of power due to continual losses in electoral contests. This is despite notable victories over the years in such provinces as West Sumatra or the city of Depok, where the University of Indonesia is located, and participation in different national and regional governments since democratisation, most often as junior partners.

By contrast, workers have had a different experience of religious inculcation. Theirs is a social world in which marginality is assumed by virtue of social background and vocation; there is no expectation of leadership roles in society. This sort of assumption is reflected in the religious messages to which they are exposed, underscoring the need for perseverance rather than struggle to achieve social change. The section below elaborates further on this point.

Workers in the Javanese Heartland

The main argument of this article – that the labour movement cannot impact on democratisation because labour subordination has merged with state nationalism and articulations of Islamic doctrine – is supported by findings gathered through recent interviews.

These were undertaken intermittently from late 2021 to early 2023, initially through Zoom focus group discussions due to COVID-19 constraints, but then through face-to-face meetings. Altogether 21 workers were interviewed through Zoom meetings in late 2021 to mid-2022. Afterwards, 31 workers were interviewed in person in February and March 2023, for a total of 52 interviews with workers, of whom 43 were employed in the textiles and garments sector and nine in the plastics sector. They comprised 29 males and 23 females.

The larger number of males reflects the fact that it was easier to access factory workers who had some level of engagement with workplace organising. Such organising still tends to be dominated by men even when women are the larger part of the workforce. The workers' ages ranged from their teens to their early 60s, although those in their mid-30s to mid-50s were preponderant. Their educational status ranged from primary school (though this was just one person) to university, while attainment of secondary school credentials was most common. Almost all originated from villages or small towns not far

from their present places of employment; in fact, many still lived in their places of origin and commuted for work.

Additionally, almost all workers interviewed by Zoom and in person were members of the SPN, though a few were members of other unions or non-affiliated. The SPN has had a circuitous history, having its origins in the *Tekstil, Sandang dan Kulit* (TSK/Textiles, Garments and Leather) section of the New Order-era SPSI.

In-person supplementary interviews were also undertaken in February–March 2023 with four local politicians of various political parties, whose brief included social welfare and industrial relations issues within local legislatures. Interviews were undertaken too with NU and Muhammadiyah representatives, activists of four local NGOs, and two prayer meeting organisers. These in-person interviews all took place in Yogyakarta and the Greater Solo area of Central Java, except for one with a national trade union official in Jakarta.

Significantly, most of the workers interviewed were permanent employees in their respective companies. Compared with the pre-*reformasi* period, when workers typically hopped from one job to another after short periods, many interviewees have enjoyed stable employment for years, with almost all the older workers having worked in the same factory for over a dozen, and sometimes over 20 years.

The interviewees were selected through a process whereby initial groups or individuals were identified through contact persons, known through past interactions, within the labour movement. Because of the main industry concerned, contact persons within SPN were relied upon. Some of these initial interviewees then provided contacts with other workers. More were identified through consultations with those possessing local knowledge of the labour scene, including NGO activists working on labour, gender, or broader human rights issues.

It should be noted that no statistical study was attempted and therefore the interviewees – particularly the workers among them – were less intended to represent specific demographics than to help provide a sufficiently deep understanding of the experiences of life and work among factory workers in the Javanese heartland. Their narratives were stimulated by semi-structured interview questions which then frequently turned to free-wheeling discussions. The interviews – which lasted anywhere between 1–2.5 hours each – provided an opportunity to explore the richness of these experiences and the oft-contradictory imperatives to which workers have had to respond.

As mentioned earlier, Yogyakarta and Greater Solo are not the most industrialised parts of Indonesia though each has pockets of manufacturing areas – for example, in the districts of Sleman and Kulonprogo in Yogyakarta and in Sukoharjo and Boyolali districts in Greater Solo. In these pockets, garments and textiles products are manufactured for international and domestic markets. It would be an error though not to recognise the extent of social transformation since the intensification of capitalist development under the New Order, which has altered life and work for large portions of the population. As described by Hadiz (2021, 606–608), the Javanese heartland is no longer dominated by stereotypically idyllic villages surrounded by terraced rice fields. It has been transformed by networks of roads connecting urban and peri-urban formations with prominent if unruly commercial areas. These are otherwise nondescript except for rows of storefronts displaying billboards about the latest consumer goods or candidates for political office – apt symbols of how capitalism and democracy are experienced.

It is true that evidence of social transformations in the Javanese heartland pale in comparison to those that may be sighted in the Jabodetabek (Jakarta-Bogor-Depok-Tangerang-Bekasi) region, a sprawling, seemingly ever-expanding megapolis of more than 30 million inhabitants. This region includes the capital city of Jakarta itself and stretches out to include large portions of West Java and Banten provinces. In comparison, the

population of greater Solo stands at about 6.7 million, with the city of Solo at half a million, while the Special Region of Yogyakarta's population is close to 4 million, with less than half a million in Yogyakarta city itself (BPS 2023a, 107–109; BPS 2023b, 94).

Historically, though, Solo and Yogyakarta are significant in the origins of Indonesian capitalism and in the history of social conflict. They were the strongholds of the Leftist politics, including its labour movements, going back to the colonial era, and again from the late 1940s until the violent events of the 1960s. Additionally, they are sites where traditional petty commodity producers and traders of garments, including those in the batik industry, used to be prevalent. The localities where the interviews took place, in other words, collectively formed some of the most important sites for the early struggles of both the petty bourgeoisie and modern proletariat, who were actors in the shaping of a modern, post-colonial Indonesia, replete with accompanying early ideas about nationhood, state, and community.

Those petty commodity producers and traders formed a major part of the social base of the famed Sarekat Islam, which emerged in the early 20th century as the first modern mass organisation in Indonesian history (see Effendy 2003). Their workers, along with those employed in the colonial-era export-oriented plantation and transport sectors, came to form more of the social base for the Left, most especially after the establishment of the PKI in the early 1920s (Shiraishi 1990, 235). By the early 1950s, the labour movement had become dominated by unions (such as those under the umbrella of *Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia* (SOBSI/All-Indonesian Central Workers' Organisation) connected to the PKI (Tedjasukmana 1959).

However, there were no traces of PKI-era labour rhetoric among contemporary workers encountered in fieldwork. This is not surprising given that the PKI was destroyed comprehensively at the height of the Cold War and given that any social memory of its activities in the labour arena was systematically erased under New Order rule. Nevertheless, the absence of such social memories does offer a stark reminder of how fully the arenas of ideological contestation have been transformed since the 1960s in the Javanese heartland that was once a bastion of Leftist politics.

Not coincidentally, it was also a bastion of what was called an *abangan* or syncretic variety of Islam, which Hefner (2011) argued had quietly collapsed by the early 21st century. While many *abangan* practices – associated with pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist and folk traditions – have persisted in present-day Java, Hefner (2011, 73) suggests that more “orthodox” forms of Islam have made strong inroads. Again, a simple visual observation would suffice; these former strongholds of Javanese religious syncretism are now the site of innumerable *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), some of which espouse hard-line Salafist interpretations of Islam (see, for example, Assa'idi 2021).

One reason for such inroads is that workers today, like a broader section of the population compared with half a century ago, are more inclined to place practices tied to mainstream religion near the centre of their lives. Forming a regular part of the narratives of everyday life put forward by workers is their participation in communal prayer meetings, usually in their own neighbourhoods and more rarely in the workplace.

Several major themes of life and work were identified from the interviews with workers. In the sub-sections that follow, these themes are explored.

Nrimo and Bersyukur

The most common theme mentioned in interviews was about the virtues of accepting one's fate (in Javanese, *nrimo*) and of being grateful for what God has provided in life

(in Indonesian, *bersyukur*, a term derived from Arabic). While holding on to such a belief did not mean dismissing active efforts to better one's lot in life – as Islam is said to enjoin – it implied being scornful of people who complain too much. In the context of post-*reformasi* labour struggles, the political effect of upholding such “virtues,” however, is to restrain workers from overtly fighting against perceived social injustices, thereby contributing to the obstruction of a more assertive labour movement.

Workers often felt that present social conditions were unjust, even if they might express relative personal contentment. This is to be expected, given the evidence of material inequalities everywhere in Indonesian society, especially its urban and peri-urban formations. There is also the realisation that many of the most “fortunate” did not attain their position and wealth necessarily through merit, but through family connections and the like (implying also, class background). However, any grievance tended to be tempered by an oft-repeated claim: that one's intended *rezeki* (fortune) will always be within reach; or that, “God willing,” one will always find a way to make ends meet. Thus, one female worker in her 20s in Yogyakarta states:

There was a formulation about personal fortune I heard about in a prayer meeting ... I think it is correct. It says that your fortune was already determined on the day you were born; even if you try as hard as you like, whether by hook or by crook, the amount of money you make [in a lifetime] will not be more than this. No point making money by crooked means because you will still end up with the same amount (Interview, IT, worker, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023).

Another worker, this time in Solo, opines: “Fortune can suddenly come from anywhere. We should be thankful that good fortune comes when we are most in need of it (Interview, UD, male worker in his 40s, Solo, March 4, 2023).

The obvious problem is that such attitudes could hinder labour struggles that require action against employers or the state to challenge existing conditions. This is especially pertinent when the institutions of state remain dominated by anti-labour interests. In fact, Yogyakarta and Solo are known to have very low incidences of labour protests, a circumstance that local politicians are pleased about – with Nurcholis Suharman, a member of Yogyakarta parliament from the Golkar party, even suggesting that though poor, workers were happy (Interview, Sleman, February 26, 2023). The lack of propensity for workers to undertake the confrontational route is typically explained by recourse to stereotypical views about Javanese culture, which is said to value harmony and peaceful co-operation.

The position of the Sultan of Yogyakarta is often referred to when making this argument. For example, politician Nurcholis Suharman declares: “Well, here you have a king. If the Sultan says something should be a certain way, then that's it. If the province sets a minimum wage rate that is low because the Sultan wants it, then everybody just accepts” (Interview, Sleman, February 26, 2023).

Indeed, Yogyakarta provides an especially vivid example of how religion and aspects of traditional Javanese culture, sustained by state ideology, can be appropriated in the interest of the kind of industrial peace favoured by business. Here, the Sultan is highly revered and criticism of him is virtually taboo. But the occupier of this hereditary position is also, due to a long-established special arrangement with Jakarta, the governor of the Yogyakarta Special Region.

The present Sultan has made good use of this dual position to pursue his private interests; he is widely thought to be the biggest capitalist in the area he governs (Interview, Irsyadul Ibad, NU-linked labour activist, Bantul, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023). The Sultan's business interests are diverse and involve real estate, banking, shopping malls, factories, and agricultural production.³ Thus, he embodies residual feudal power together with modern legal-formal power, further buttressed by wealth as a major capitalist.

Some locals privately speculate that as a businessman, the Sultan has an innate interest in keeping wages low. This is not all: the Sultan of Yogyakarta also historically exerts control over traditional religious authority, which resides with members of the religious apparatus based in the Kauman neighbourhood near the *kraton* (royal palace), where a grand mosque is located. Families linked to the Kauman community still form a major pillar of the Muhammadiyah organisation that has one of its headquarters in Yogyakarta (the other being in Jakarta), the city where it was established in 1912.

Yet social justice is an ideal within official state ideology. “Social justice for all the Indonesian people” is the fifth of the five principles of Pancasila and has been embedded within Islamic politics since the colonial era, itself a response to the predations of colonial capitalism. It is an ideal that workers sometimes have difficulty reconciling with social reality. It is not hard to ask workers to acknowledge the unfairness of a system in which someone may enjoy great fortune simply because of being born into the right family. One worker succinctly observed that: “What God has determined is just. But if we see injustice, we have to fight it” (Interview, IT, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023).

While workers frequently concede that what exists is not how things should be, the inclination to challenge the status quo is countervailed by relief found in the idea that the pious will be rewarded in the afterlife (Interview, IT, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023; Interview, FI, female factory worker in her 30s, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023). Told regularly in sermons that closeness to the Almighty should be cultivated through virtuous behaviour, including self-restraint, many describe confrontation with employers as evidence of the opposite kind of behaviour, thereby undermining any robust response that may be attempted against infringements on workers’ rights. In turn, this merges with and reinforces the inherent inclination within state ideology to shun conflict.⁴

Material Conditions

The issue of social justice is closely linked to the material conditions of workers. Again, there is an interesting convergence of values propagated through state ideology and through interpretations of Islamic doctrine in the way workers address deficiencies in their material conditions. The specific context of Central Java/Yogyakarta appears to particularly facilitate such convergence, which once again inhibits more vigorous struggles to improve workers’ material conditions of life and work.

Comparing the material conditions of workers there to their counterparts in Jabodetabek can be instructive. While Jabodetabek workers have been traditionally migrants from other parts of Indonesia, workers in the Javanese heartland commonly originate from villages and towns of relative proximity to their places of employment. This has some repercussions for how they sustain themselves with low wages.

Workers in Solo and Yogyakarta are keenly aware that their wages are low compared with their counterparts in the Jabodetabek, even if accounting for the higher cost of living in Jakarta and its surrounding areas. The minimum wage varies across Indonesia according to official calculations of cost of living in different localities. In Jakarta it was set at about Rp 4.9 million (US\$328) per month in 2023, whilst it was Rp 2.2 million per month in Solo city, and Rp 2.3 million in Yogyakarta city (*Kitalulus*, January 5, 2023; *Kompas*, January 12, 2023).

However, the workers of the Javanese heartland are not completely reliant on wages for their economic needs for it is common for them and their families to reside in shared abodes with extended family members such as parents or in-laws. This is made possible

because many workers' families have lived for generations near their places of work. They or family members can have other sources of income, via farming or the informal sector. There were workers encountered in fieldwork who undertook motorcycle taxi driving (mostly males), for example, or worked as tailors (mostly females) in their spare time. The possibility of help from family members when in dire need was underlined by one female worker in Solo, who related: "I still have family so, when let's say I have no more rice, it is possible to ask for it from family. This is common for my co-workers in Solo, who don't have to completely rely on their wages (Interview, YU, female worker in her 30s, Solo, March 4, 2023).

This sort of reliance on extended family – which accords well with the harmonious relations emphasised by Pancasila – can be justified too via religious doctrine. Hence, workers could say that they would provide the same sort of help to relatives when they happen to be in need because "Islam teaches that it is better to give than to receive" (Interview, UD, male worker in his 40s, Solo, March 4, 2023). By contrast, Jabodetabek workers have to rely more on their pay for everything from food, clothing, and transport to accommodation, as described by Warouw (2019) in his description of life in the grim workers' neighbourhoods (*kampung buruh*) in Tangerang, an industrial area located just outside Jakarta. Few of these workers have a semi-rural family to fall back on for help when times get tough.

Additionally, there is the political reality that Jabodetabek workers live closer to the centres of government, including the national parliament, where protests aimed to affect legislative processes make more sense. In the Javanese heartland, local parliamentarians have pointed out that they often – merely out of politeness – receive workers' delegations but any petitions directed towards them have little value in affecting labour law deliberations (Interview, Nurcholis Suharman, Sleman, February 26, 2023; Interview, Koeswanto, PDIP member of Yogyakarta parliament, Sleman, February 28, 2023). It is not hard to imagine how this circumstance would further encourage attitudes of resignation to fate among Javanese workers, who can exert little influence on public decisions that affect their lives.

Evidently, having the safety net of family and communities of origin has helped workers in the Javanese heartland cope with economic hardships. The problem, however, is that the existence of such a safety net can become justification to keep wages low in the interest of business. Reflecting on this situation, an NGO activist opines that a combination of Islamic and traditional Javanese cultural resources, brought together to celebrate the virtues of mutual help in a way familiar to all Indonesians who have studied civics in primary school, can be drawn upon for such justification (Interview, Irsyadul Ibad, NU-linked labour activist, Bantul, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023).

The Ideal Family

The textiles and garments industry remains one that has a largely female workforce. It was mentioned that female workers showed an inclination to comply with religious injunctions that encouraged a passive or subordinate role for women. Such encouragement often hinges on the widely acknowledged concept of the *kodrat* or the essential nature of women (Interview, IT, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023; Interview, FI, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023). *Kodrat* incorporates *nrimo* (acceptance) of her "God-given" role in family and society. The consequence has been to present further obstacles to the development of an effective labour movement, especially in female-dominated industries such as textiles and garments. This is the case even if women often

participate in factory-level union organisations and take up prominent roles as leads or members of committees.

Some female organisers recounted how their husbands sometimes discouraged them from taking part in such union activities. It was also observed during fieldwork that female workers tended to be less talkative when male co-workers were present. Indeed, there is a long history in Indonesia and across the region of employer preference in labour intensive industries for female workers – who they see as more docile than men (see Deyo 1989).

One female worker in Yogyakarta shared that she often went to prayer meetings, where male preachers gave sermons. She recalls that:

Their content changes but is often around how women should not stand up to their husbands, how they should obey him. If they leave the house, they should get permission from their husbands. If no permission is granted, then they should not leave the house (Interview, KR, female worker in her 50s, Bantul, Yogyakarta, February 26, 2023).

The ideal of a *keluarga sakinah* (a family of devout individuals who live together in harmony) is one that workers strive for in conjunction with the sort of religious socialisation that they have experienced throughout their lives, and which continue to be disseminated through institutions such as school and family (see Wierenga 2015). Such an ideal is consistently espoused by female workers. This is so even when the experience of actual marriage has been less than perfect, involving domestic abuse or divorce (Interview, KR, female worker in her 50s, Bantul, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023; Interviews, MU and NI, female workers in their 40s, Bantul, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023). In this *keluarga sakinah* ideal, women are deemed to have a primary duty of care for the children, the household, and the needs of the husband, due to *kodrat*.

Another female worker, in Solo, shared how she perceived her household responsibilities:

I do the cooking. I took care of the kids when they were young. All my tiredness disappeared when I saw these tasks as performing religious duties. The religious duties of a wife are not confined to prayer or fasting but include devotion to the family. Doing [household work] for the family is devotion. If we undertake any task with a sense of acceptance then anything that is heavy becomes enjoyable (Interview, NG, female worker in her 50s, Solo, March 5, 2023).

It may be further asserted that traditional understandings associated with the Javanese heartland about the position of women, based on patriarchal social relationships, have converged markedly with increasingly pervasive orthodox interpretations of religious doctrine (Suryakusuma 2012). Importantly, those traditional understandings had been appropriated in the recent past by the authoritarian New Order, which already emphasised female domesticity in its renderings of an “authentic” Indonesia culture (Newberry 2006, 272). Such an emphasis is echoed in the narratives of life by Javanese female workers today who cite religion as their guide, including those who – in reality – may be the main source of income for their families.

The consequence for the labour movement today is that married women, especially those with children, will find it hard to maintain the same level of labour activism as their male counterparts. In fact, it has been known for women activists/workers to withdraw altogether if their husbands objected to them being out of the house, and in the company of other men, for too long outside of work hours.

Of course, there is no intrinsic compulsion for women who are religious to be docile – much depends on the sort of interpretations of doctrine to which they are exposed.⁵ This has allowed for some leeway in utilising alternative interpretations of doctrine on the part of NGOs that carry out gender inclusion training for workers (Interview, Fitri Indah

Harjanti, NGO activist, Bantul, Yogyakarta, March 2, 2023). Yet, workers can experience dissonance when training programmes diverge from the content of sermons that instil conservative moral codes. In these cases, workers' own narratives suggest that it is more likely that the preacher's sermons would resonate more strongly with them than the training by NGOs – and would therefore guide their actions more decisively.

Distrust of Institutions

Another theme that emerged in the interviews revolved around distrust of elites and the formal institutions of Indonesian democracy. No worker interviewed expressed a belief that political leaders or political parties were fundamentally on their side, for example. Political parties were seen to be interested only in their votes. Even so, workers felt that there has been no concerted effort to gather these votes on the basis of advocating for labour issues. This was despite the efforts to court workers on the part of the PKS, and for which one local member of the party expressed great pride, and then disgruntlement when informed that workers did not feel that the PKS was any different from other political parties (Interview, Sofyan Setyo Darmawan, PKS member of Yogyakarta legislature, Yogyakarta, February 28, 2023).

While such distrust is clearly not encouraged by prevalent interpretations of Islamic doctrine, there has been a generalised effect of religionisation to inspire the cultivation of individual rectitude as a means to ensure “God’s favour” and thus one’s worldly well-being. This sort of individual moral cultivation in the face of worldly troubles is regularly conveyed in sermons, regardless of whether they are delivered by preachers with NU or Muhammadiyah backgrounds, or those unaffiliated with any large religious organisation. Addressing worldly troubles, including those related to work, in such a manner clearly impedes the kind of labour solidarity that underpins effective collective action.

Interestingly, religious mass organisations that perceive themselves as having a duty to advocate for the interests of the poor also did not fare well in the estimation of workers. The NU and Muhammadiyah, the great social organisations of Indonesian Islam, were seen to have paid little attention to their plight. In fact, a national leader of the Muhammadiyah openly admitted, with consternation, that his organisation has done little to connect with workers. He acknowledged that, in the colonial era, there was a history of workers (particularly in plantations and transport) having been organised by religious activists in Yogyakarta and Central Java. However, he accepted that the Muhammadiyah has made few efforts to forge links with the social agents of today’s labour struggles, going so far as to scrap a section established to advocate for workers, peasants, and fishers (Interview, Busyro Muqoddas, Muhammadiyah leader, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023).

Nevertheless, the role that Muhammadiyah, NU, and other preachers play in creating “inner calm” among individual workers through their sermons was appreciated by workers. Such sermons, sometimes taking place at the workplace with co-operation from factory management or owners, but more often in the neighbourhoods where the workers live, appear to provide solace in the face of whatever hardships needed to be overcome, financial, or otherwise. These workers say sermons that emphasise the virtues of patience and perseverance help them feel closer to God, as is of course the intention. They provide a sense of comfort about rewards in the afterlife, if not in the present life, where little support can be expected from formal institutions. In other words, their encounters with these preachers helped workers to cultivate stronger feelings of acceptance and gratitude for what they already have. This does not mean, though, that there is no room for aggravation. As one worker stated: “Sometimes the preacher does not know what conditions

we workers face. That's what I think. So, the preacher does not even know what he has to talk to us about" (Interview, FI, Sleman, Yogyakarta, February 27, 2023).

At the same time, the workers interviewed expressed considerable regard for the union to which they belong. They recognised how organising at the factory-level has provided an avenue to negotiate with management, thereby maintaining at least cordial relations, and to occasionally win concessions. But they also understood that unions do not operate on an equal footing with management. For example, one male factory-level organiser conveyed an episode whereby rank-and-file workers were clandestinely persuaded by management to agree to certain employment conditions behind the backs of union negotiators (Interview, SH, male worker in his 30s, Solo, March 4, 2023). Another female worker reflected on how some factory-level union leaders were too passive when fighting for the rights of their fellow workers' rights. She noted that:

If the leader is not inclined to struggle, then nothing ever happens. There are leaders who are too *nrimo* and serve the company too loyally (*ngawulo*). The consequence is that workers do not voice their grievances strongly to company human resources and owners. It makes it difficult for other workers to make a move (Interview, NY, worker in her 30s, Solo, 4 March 2023).

Given this background, it is not surprising that none of the workers encountered had any idea how unions will respond to a possible wave of casualisation being facilitated by the implementation of the Omnibus Law of 2020, driven by powerful external interests – for which the labour movement can be a nuisance but certainly no equal foe. Few seem to have given it much thought. Interestingly, both NU and Muhammadiyah have voiced opposition to the legislation, but this has not opened the door to labour collaborations (Alvian 2020). On balance, workers have become content to think about ensuring their well-being by acting morally as individuals rather than necessarily through collective efforts requiring institutional support, even that might be provided by religious organisations.

Workers and Hegemony

It was signalled earlier that the concept of hegemony as understood by Gramsci – and developed by a range of subsequent authors – would be utilised to bring together the fieldwork observations into a more coherent analysis. The purpose of this section is to employ the concept to answer the question posed at the beginning of this article: What do the relationships between Indonesian capitalism, its labour regime, and the presently greater prominence of Islam in everyday life among workers tell us about the constellation of social power and interest after democratisation in 1998?

The Gramscian understanding of hegemony involves recognition of the ideas, associated with interests, which compete to achieve dominance under capitalism in specific historical contexts. Within this framework, it is accepted that not all ideas are of equal standing – contra more extreme versions of liberal-pluralist notions of a marketplace of ideas all competing freely. Moreover, it is acknowledged that domination is typically achieved through a combination of force and consent.

In such a reading, domination is inextricably linked to the values or ideas accepted uncritically as the basis of “common sense” within specific social and historical settings (see Gramsci 1971, 360; Filippini 2017, 27–42). What emerges as common sense is also seen to be closely linked to the outcomes of previous historical struggles.

It is important to recognise that common sense is entrenched within popular consciousness and can appear as a disjointed collection of viewpoints, beliefs, or sentiments (see Liguori 2015, 85–93; Filipini 2017, 110). It can be expressed in “countless different forms,”

and is intrinsically “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential” (Gramsci 1971, 419). Thus, the worldviews that stem from common sense are often internally contradictory. These worldviews can be expected to be disjointed due to the possibility of fusing of elements derived from different kinds of inherited cultural resources and historical references.

The interview material discussed above provided a representation of the common sense of workers in the Javanese heartland of Indonesia. As to be expected, it depicted resultant worldviews that are a jumble of inconsistencies. For example, workers could believe that the virtuous are favoured by God, even as they accept that the most fortunate are often less than virtuous. They participate in struggles for justice, which would bring material improvement to their lives, but also place trust in a just God who has pre-determined each individual’s fortunes.

These inconsistencies are not randomly produced. They reflect the contradictions of undertaking labour struggles in an environment where these continue to be peripheralised by dominant capitalist-politico-bureaucratic alliances, from the national to the local level. To a considerable extent, they also express the ideological legacy of authoritarian New Order rule – which eradicated the Left – and means class-based understandings of power are largely outside the experience of workers.

Such a situation is also connected to the social effects of religionisation, certainly in parts of Java that used to be bastions of both syncretic belief systems and Leftist politics. There was a tendency among the workers encountered during fieldwork toward acceptance of personal conditions as being pre-ordained by a higher power rather than the product of social processes mainly directed by the material interests of others who are more powerful.

Yet it is unhelpful to speak of a monolithic Islamic ideology that may have taken root among workers and achieved hegemonic status. Nor is there hegemony of nationalist statist discourses, best expressed in official state ideology, over an Islamist competitor. It is more accurate to say that there has been a meshing of these cultural resource pools through a historical process that has taken place over the last half a century or so. It is not surprising then that the religiosity of the workers, as described in the previous section, was articulated in ways that reflect their encounters with capitalism, democracy, as well as nationalist state ideology, which have all left their mark on the Javanese heartland since the tumult and anti-communist violence of the 1960s.

Consistent with the approach taken here, the convergence of statist nationalist and Islamic cultural reference points in the worldviews of workers in the Javanese heartland does not take place in a social vacuum but within a specific socio-historical context. Here, the constellation of power and interests remains lopsidedly against the interests of labour despite institutional changes since democratisation that have opened up opportunities for freedom of organisation. It is, moreover, intrinsically tied to a predatory form of capitalism that has survived authoritarianism (see Robison and Hadiz 2004). It has been important to keep this in mind throughout the article, for the realm of the ideological, with all of its inherent contradictions, is ultimately linked to the structures of power and material circumstances encountered by workers in the Javanese heartland.

Given their circumstances, workers have tended toward forms of collective struggles, when these are attempted, that are at best reactive. This can be seen in the muted reaction by workers in Yogyakarta and Greater Solo to the promulgation of legislation by the state blatantly in the interest of businesses. The controversial Omnibus Law mentioned earlier, for example, is clearly a reflection of the imperative to maintain labour subordination and impose discipline to allow businesses more room to manoeuvre in dealing with their workforces, whether in the Javanese heartland or elsewhere.⁶

Conclusion

The article began with the argument that the Indonesian labour movement remains limited in its capacity to impact struggles over democratisation. This is because labour subordination has merged with the logic of state nationalism as expressed in official Pancasila ideology, and with prevalent articulations of Islamic doctrine. Such convergence has occurred amidst growing piety within the ranks of workers in a broader environment of religionisation over several decades. The argument has been developed through a discussion of the shaping of the contours of ideology and an analysis of fieldwork findings through use of the Gramscian understanding of hegemony and common sense.

Though the geographical locus of the fieldwork was the Javanese heartland, where the resultant characteristics of the ideological sphere are readily apparent, the findings have relevance to broader understandings of the limitations of the labour movement in spite of institutional changes since *reformasi*. The analysis has provided a link too between the literatures on Islam and democratisation and on labour struggles in democratised Indonesia, as well as its capitalism. Labour struggles are fundamentally presented here as taking place in a context where capitalist interests, long tied to politico-bureaucratic ones in predatory alliances, dominate; and where that domination is sustained, in part, ideologically.

Yet it is still possible for the mainstreaming of Islamic cultural references, including among subaltern groups like labour, to open the door more widely to social agents associated with hard-line Islamist tendencies. This is despite the continuing ascendancy of the “moderate” Islam of NU and Muhammadiyah. Such a development was seen in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and during recent presidential contests, mostly due to the machinations of opportunistic political elites.

There are few indications that the lexicon of hard-line Islamism is inherently appealing to workers, especially those who enjoy steady jobs, and – in the recent past – could count on modest wage improvements due to victories attained previously. Still unknown are the longer-term effects of setbacks such as the enabling of massive casualisation of the industrial workforce, greater precarity of employment, and deteriorating conditions, as employers gain even more of the upper hand. Having been conditioned to respond to their social world through a Pancasila-infused language of religion, and in the absence of a vigorous class-based one, some industrial workers could yet be mobilised based on religious sentiment in turbulent times, particularly when incited by the capriciousness of elite competition. This would contribute to the erosion of any desired pluralist bases for Indonesian democracy.

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Notes

1. For example, early in the *reformasi* period, the government ratified the International Labour Organization convention on freedom of association and the right to organise.
2. This strategy became less viable, however, in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998, and as China came to occupy the position of pre-eminent global factory together with the emergence of other rivals specialising in labour-intensive export industries.

3. *Aktual* (July 18, 2016) provides a list of some of the better-known businesses owned by the Sultan and his family. It is also clear that royal expansion into business has been undertaken for decades (*Tempo Magazine*, October 5, 1991).
4. Unlike during much of the New Order –when state security forces were regularly brought in to maintain “labour peace” in times of industrial conflict– employers today rarely resort to physical force. *Preman* or thugs, who can be privately hired by management and are discussed by Mudhoffir (2022), would also be much less required when, as in the Javanese heartland, even labour union organisers are prone to conflate non-confrontation with desirable behaviour.
5. Wadud (1999) provides a useful example of a possible Islamic feminism; also see the comment on Rinaldo (2013) above.
6. Protest action against the legislation, though ultimately unsuccessful, was far more prevalent in Jabodetabek, for example (see *BBC*, October 20, 2020).

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