

ORGANIZING, PROTEST AND WORKING CLASS SELF-ACTIVITY: REFLECTIONS ON EAST ASIA

GERARD GREENFIELD

The resurgence of working-class militancy in East Asia in the last decade has inspired the radical imagination and offered us renewed hope in the struggle against capitalism. This was most clearly expressed in the mass protests and strikes by workers at the height of the Asian economic crisis in 1997–98 which appeared to challenge the logic of the capitalist ‘globalization’ project, while demonstrating the power of (re)emerging independent workers’ organizations in the face of ongoing state repression. Precisely because of this ongoing repression and the social destruction wrought by the economic crisis, these strikes and protests were all the more significant for their courage, commitment and sacrifice. In this sense every strike and every protest may be viewed as a victory, with the historical accumulation of these fragments bound up in some way in the project of working-class emancipation. For example, in an essay published in *Monthly Review* in September 1998, David McNally concluded: ‘East Asia has become the focal-point of the international class struggle. Out of these struggles a new “Asian model” may emerge—a model of working-class resistance to capitalist globalization. We have much to learn from these struggles. And we owe them our solidarity and support’.¹

There is no doubt that we have a great deal to learn from these struggles and that international solidarity and support is necessary. Yet if we really are to learn from these struggles then it is also necessary to take a sober look at the substance of this resurgent militancy and to examine more closely the nature of these new, independent workers’ organizations and their politics of protest. Of course, such an assessment must not be based on a pre-determined model of

what ‘real’ working-class militancy should involve, or how working-class organizations should be organized. Insisting on conformity to a ‘correct’ model serves to extinguish rather than inspire creative organizing and radical struggle. My purpose in this brief essay is not to dismiss the importance of these workers’ organizations and their strategies, but to share some critical reflections on the contradictions within them. A critical understanding of these contradictions is all the more important if we recognize that many of these workers’ organizations—even those engaged in militant struggles—were not created *by* workers, but *for* them.

Organized labour in East Asia has long been characterized by the dominance of unions and workers’ organizations created and controlled by the state to repress genuine working-class activity. Organizing in defiance of this state-controlled unionism is precisely what defines the rise of ‘independent’ unionism. Despite this challenge, the persistence of state-controlled unionism has benefitted greatly from the collusion of other states (particularly the US) and international institutions, as well as extensive political and financial support by social democratic parties and national trade union centres overseas. In the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis this support has substantially increased, facilitating union ‘democratization’ based on the re-ordering of official union bureaucracies and a shift from authoritarian state unionism to pro-business or ‘social contract’ unionism. In a broader sense the mainstream current in international solidarity involves a mutually reinforcing rhetoric of compromise, where tripartitism, social pacts and ‘the rule of law’ underlie a strategy of containment of working-class militancy and an attempt to suppress it from ‘within’.²

In Indonesia, for example, prior to the resignation of Suharto on 21 May 1998, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and several overseas trade union centres and social democratic parties provided political and financial support to the state-controlled *Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia* (SPSI, All-Indonesia Workers’ Union).³ This support continued even while the ICFTU campaigned for the release of imprisoned trade unionists such as the head of *Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia* (SBSI, Indonesian Prosperous Workers’ Union), Muchtar Pakpahan, and the head of the more radical *Pusat Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia* (PPBI, Indonesian Centre for Labour Struggle), Dita Sari. When several SPSI unions renamed themselves *Reformasi SPSI* (Reform SPSI) following Suharto’s resignation, this change in name (but not in structure, policies or relations with the military) was welcomed by the ICFTU and overseas trade-union centres as sufficient grounds for providing greater financial aid. Part of the reason was that the ICFTU and powerful national centres such as the AFL-CIO and Japan’s Rengo were demanding ‘unity’ based on the formation a single national trade-union federation centred around the ‘reformed’ SPSI which continued to collude with the authoritarian political regime and the military. Ironically, this international manoeuvring coincided with the mass movement of workers out of SPSI at plant-level. By refusing to

pay dues, denouncing SPSI officials, or forming their own unions, workers directly challenged this system of repression and organizational displacement from above. Despite this challenge from below, consolidation from above was secured through increased overseas financial and political support. This external legitimation, combined with continued military intervention in strikes and labour disputes and state repression of freedom of association, enabled official union bureaucracies to consolidate their power while introducing more effective means of control over their rank-and-file membership.

The continued dominance of state-controlled unions in Indonesia and other parts of East Asia also raises questions about the uncritical use of unionization rates as a measure of the 'growth' or relative 'strength' of working-class organization. If workers are compelled to join unions created by the state and are prevented from genuine self-organization, then high unionization rates—and indeed the notion of union membership—is put in question. What is really happening is the *organizational displacement* of working-class self-activity. This displacement not only involves the suppression of genuine self-organizing among workers but also the appropriation of the language of working-class politics and organization. The very meaning of what a 'union' is and its purpose is fundamentally distorted and may continue to influence workers' perceptions and expectations long after the struggle against state-controlled unionism is won. In Indonesia, for example, while collaboration with management was the primary role of the SPSI unions, they were also expected to fulfill a paternalistic duty of assisting workers (individually, not collectively) in exercising limited legal claims by putting their cases to the labour department and labour courts. This pursuit of narrowly defined legal rights and dependence on assistance by authority figures still shapes workers' understanding of unions, including independent unions.

While these new, independent unions and workers' organizations are engaged in militant strikes and street protests, they remain to a large extent under the leadership and control of (former) student activists and are dependent on the charity and assistance of middle-class non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This dependence reinforces the notion of unions as vehicles for *helping* rather than *organizing*. Furthermore, the politics of these independent unions and workers' organizations is often characterized by the subordination of workers' knowledge and experience to elite expertise and technocratic rationality, further displacing workers' self-activity from within their own organizations. Moreover, while fighting for democracy and waging militant struggles these independent unions did not—and still do not—hold direct, democratic elections of their leaders. Most of the leaders and representatives in unions and workers' organizations such as SBSI, PPBI and its later incarnation, *Front Nasional Perjuangan Buruh Indonesia* (FNPBI, National Front of Indonesian Workers' Struggle) are not directly elected by the rank-and-file, but are appointed by a central executive committee which itself is not elected but is decided through closed discussions among an elite core of activists.

To some extent this is a reflection of their historical legacies. As illegal organizations forced to operate underground, organizing was based on secretive networks and the delegation of authority through personal contacts and trusted friends. Under these conditions the openness required for direct democratic elections often did not exist. However, more than two years after these organizations were legalized and their leaders released from prison, top-down structures and closed decision-making processes continue. The appointment of student activists and NGO staff as leaders of union affiliates and branches continues in Muchtar Pakapahan's SBSI and—despite its radical language and militant protests—also in the FNPBI led by Dita Sari. It could be argued that these organizations are still in transition, and that time is needed before the leadership can be directly elected without prior agreements and deals among the incumbent leaders. However, the leadership of these organizations claim to already be democratically elected (or more accurately, 'chosen'), and so the need for change and debate about such change is not acknowledged. Given these developments, it would seem that the journey from state-controlled unionism to more a radical, independent unionism will be longer than imagined.

This raises an important question concerning the relationship between acts of worker militancy and the prospects for working-class self-emancipation, particularly where there is an absence—or outright suppression—of workers' direct involvement in the determination of protest actions and their objectives. The fact is that the majority of strikes and protests which constituted this working-class militancy in Indonesia—as an essential part of what some claim was a 'revolution'—were organized and led by student activists with limited direct involvement in leadership and organization by workers themselves. Moreover, the way in which protest action and strikes were organized and carried out often reproduced hierarchies of authority and control and reinforced specific kinds of external expertise and elitist forms of leadership. Therefore, the mass mobilization of workers in militant protests and strikes tended to articulate political demands for democracy and democratic reform in society at large but without promoting democratic processes within the collective action or organization itself.

Take for example the struggle at the Hong Kong-owned textile factory PT Tyfountex in Solo at the end of June 1998. A five-day strike by 1,700 workers brought production to a halt, affecting all 7,000 workers at the plant. Strike demands centred on wage increases to keep up with high inflation, payment for overtime work and other allowances, and better working conditions. In organizing the strike workers directly challenged the authority of the SPSI union and rejected its claim to represent their interests. The struggle intensified when the management locked-out then fired several hundred workers. On 24 August, over 800 workers travelled from Solo to Jakarta and held a series of demonstrations at the Labour Department over a period of several days. When the workers attempted to take their protest to the representative office of the International Labour Organization (ILO) they were blocked by the military and

police, and in the violent clash which followed 20 workers were injured. In the following months 200 workers returned to Jakarta on several occasions to continue their protest. However, by early 1999 the struggle was in the hands of lawyers, ending with a ruling by the labour court that none of the 800 dismissed workers were entitled to reinstatement or compensation.

The strike was clearly of great importance in terms of the length of the struggle and its escalation from a factory strike in Solo to street protests in Jakarta. Yet many observers saw it as much more. Writing on the Indonesian 'revolution' in the September 1998 issue of *International Socialism*, Clare Fermont cited the Tyfountex strike as an example of a new wave of mass mobilizations among workers in the aftermath of the May uprising that overthrew Suharto. The uprising itself, as Fermont points out, was largely a student movement: 'During the protests that led up to 21 May, the workers were relatively passive'.⁴ The example of the Tyfountex strike thus implies an end to this perceived passivity and the consolidation of the working-class basis of this 'revolution'.⁵ Although Fermont assumed the participation of all 7,000 workers at Tyfountex in the strike, the point is less the number of workers than the qualitative transformation the strike underwent:

Some 7,000 workers at the Tyfountex [sic] Indonesia factory in Solo went on strike between 30 June and 4 July to demand higher wages and other fringe benefits. After management threatened mass sackings, workers set up an independent Workers' Committee for Reform (Komite Reformasi Kaum Buruh), which among other things called for their factory to be nationalized. The committee also declared that workers should not confine themselves to immediate economic demands, and invited student leaders to address the workforce.⁶

The transformation in demands from wage increases to nationalization is explicitly linked to the formation of the *Komite Reformasi Kaum Buruh* (KRKB, Working Class Committee for Reform). It is also implied that the KRKB politicized the struggle by inviting student leaders to address the striking workers. However, the KRKB was not organized by the Tyfountex workers but by student activists, and the act of inviting students leaders to speak to the workers was less a political move on the part of militant workers than an expression of the basic function of KRKB and its student-activist agenda. Moreover, while the most militant workers were involved in the KRKB's activities, in the following months it continued to be led by the student activists who created it. It was also the latter who decided to take the protest to Jakarta, taking the strength out of the picket line and allowing the management to replace all of the workers and resume production. In addition, the opportunity was left open to the SPSI union to propagandize against the strike among the remaining workers and new recruits.

When the workers went to Jakarta the student-led KRKB made no preparations for food and other logistics, relying instead on charity organizations and

volunteers. The workers slept on the floors, stairs and grounds of the office of YLBHI, a legal aid foundation, and were constantly without enough food or water. While hundreds of workers tried to find food or lined up to receive aid packages distributed by charity organizations, the student leaders discussed plans and strategies behind closed doors. Workers were informed of the day's plan of action only moments before. In fact, when they attempted to march to the ILO office and fought with the military and police, the vast majority of workers still had no idea of where they were headed or why. The possible relevance of the ILO to their struggle was not explained and the matter of going there was not even discussed.

My point here is not that the action was poorly planned or that it was a failure. Faced with mass dismissal and military repression, the courage and commitment expressed in these protests was of great significance to the workers and students themselves and to the wider labour movement. On the surface the image of workers marching down the street shouting militant slogans expressed their collective strength, and that is how it appeared in the mass media. But behind this something very different was taking place, with workers' frustration and uncertainty growing each day. When they returned to the YLBHI office each evening and waited for further instructions from student activists, their collective strength quickly dissipated. It was an important struggle and it was militant. But the question remains as to what exactly this has to do with revolution. 'The outbreak of the revolution in Indonesia raises a number of crucial theoretical questions',⁷ reads the opening line of an essay by Tony Cliff entitled 'Revolution and counter-revolution: lessons for Indonesia' (later published as a pamphlet in Indonesian). Yet the most critical question is whether or not it was *really* a revolution. In the same essay Cliff actually reminds us that: 'The heart of Marxism is that the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class'.⁸ Yet if we juxtapose this claim with the strikes and protests like the Tyfountex struggle, then the contradiction between the way in which the protest action was organized and working-class self-activity is apparent.

Of course, there are hundreds of other strikes which could be analysed to reveal a different political dynamic and very different consequences from the one I have chosen to discuss. The point is that if we are to take seriously the project of working-class emancipation as *self*-activity, then we must undertake a critical examination of the collective capacities and processes through which acts of protest are organized and carried out, rather than uncritically accepting these acts as militant or revolutionary in themselves. The Tyfountex workers were not in control of the protest action, the determination of their demands or the strategies for achieving those demands. The shift in demands from wage increases to nationalization could only be revolutionary if the workers were involved in making that shift. However, so long as student activists organized and led the KRKB and workers had no organization of their own, then the issue of nationalization is far less radical than it appears. If the factory *were* nationalized, who would be in control?

Another example of this dynamic between student activists and worker militancy concerns the strike by workers at PT Walet Kencana, a pesticide factory in Surabaya, East Java, which operated as a subcontractor for the German-based TNC, Bayer. At the end of September 1998 over 2,500 workers began a strike demanding wage increases which led to the destruction of parts of the factory and its closure. After smashing the offices and destroying equipment the protest shifted to the local parliament. The destruction of the factory is not really the issue. As unexciting as it may seem, if the workers discussed, debated and collectively decided this course of action—a long and complex process—then it would have some direct relationship to the process of working-class self-emancipation. Like the Tyfountex protests, the reality was that the course of action was decided by student activists on the workers' behalf. Therefore, while it was militant it was far from revolutionary. Once the factory was closed and the protest outside parliament dispersed, the student activists went on to organize other protests or went back to their campuses. What the workers did after that is unclear. Most likely they found themselves among the ranks of 20 million other unemployed workers.⁹ I am not suggesting that strikes and protest action be avoided for fear of unemployment. My argument is that whether this outcome is the consequence of workers' own collectively-determined action, organized and led by themselves, or whether it is the result of student activists' notions of radicalism, has important implications for the relationship between these acts of militancy and working-class emancipation. Over the past few years it is precisely this kind of mobilization from above by student activists which has alienated workers from the labour movement, creating distrust of workers' organizations and working-class politics.

As the Tyfountex and Walet Kencana strikes indicate, much of what is deemed as militant and radical often involves taking the struggle from the factory to the streets. Clearly this is important if workers' struggles are to move beyond issues such as wages and job security. However, what also occurred was that the issue of workers' control over production and workers' collective capacity to exercise that control was obscured. The possibility of long-term factory occupations and production control struggles were replaced with short-term street protests and rallies. Only a week in the seven-month life of the Tyfountex struggle was spent at the factory itself, while the rest of this time was dedicated to sporadic street demonstrations which expressed militant slogans and increasingly less radical demands outside the offices of the labour department in Jakarta.

A very different lesson may be drawn from peasant struggles in Indonesia—struggles which have received much less attention in the literature on the Indonesian 'revolution', yet nonetheless point to more radical processes and practices. From the early 1990s there have been widespread land occupations by peasant-farmers and villagers seeking either to reclaim land appropriated from them in the past or to establish control over new farming land necessary for the survival of their communities. This included the take-over of agro-

industrial plantations where export-oriented cash crops such as tobacco and coffee were destroyed and replaced with corn and basic foods necessary to feed the community. The take-over of several golf courses in East and West Java and North Sumatra in 1997–98 (some of which remain under occupation today) combined the planting of subsistence crops with a direct challenge to the privilege and wealth of the ruling class. Although these collective survival strategies met with forced removal by the military, the self-organized strength of these movements and their emphasis on control continues to shape their politics of protest and resistance. Sadly, the possibility of extending this experience to the labour movement is limited by the division of labour and territorial politics of NGOs and student activists which serves to isolate rather than unify the workers' and peasant movements.

The possibility of the *radical* organizational displacement of working-class self-activity, and the contradictions within the democratic aspirations of independent workers' organizations and their anti- or non-democratic practices, both suggest that the situation is far more complex than it seems. In the case of Indonesia, unraveling this complexity involves acknowledging both the importance and the limitations of student activists' contributions to mass protests and the radicalization of workers' struggles. For example, nationally coordinated campaigns against the Indonesian military (ABRI) have been effective in linking work-place confrontations with the military to wider popular opposition to the 'dual function' of ABRI in society and its excessive political and economic power.¹⁰ Faced with intimidation, threats, and beatings, workers' daily experience of military intervention in labour disputes was linked to the 'back to barracks' campaign organized by student activists and more progressive NGOs. The slogan 'back to barracks' was built upon a programme of popular education, pamphleting, and community organizing, which included teaching a critical popular history of the relationship between the labour movement and military repression under three decades of the Suharto regime. In contrast to other student-led mass protests (such as opposition to the IMF), it was not only the slogan that was radical but the very process of building a critical consciousness.¹¹

What this also suggests is that there *is* an important role for student and NGO activists in workers' struggles, but that this role should be carefully defined. Obviously, work-place struggles and strikes must be broadened to address wider political issues and to link up with other social movements and community-based struggles. This kind of radicalization may involve student activists active in trade-union education committees, study circles, critical-analytical research groups, as well as publishing popular education material such as newsletters, bulletins and pamphlets. However, there is a significant difference between contributing to these struggles by radicalizing them through clearly defined popular education strategies on the one hand, and assuming leadership roles and decision-making power which shape the politics and actions of workers' organizations on the other. In other words, radicalization

should not be based on external *intervention* to define workers' struggles, but on a critical *contribution* to the conditions under which workers' self-organized struggles are possible. The aim is to strengthen workers' collective power, not to supplant it. Such an approach also recognizes the fact that student activists and others have much to learn from workers and worker-activists, reasserting the importance of workers' knowledge and experience as central to these struggles rather than being reduced to 'testimonies', 'evidence', or 'case studies' situated within students' own radical agenda.

These issues relate to the wider contradiction evident in the emergent trade-union movements in the region—that independent unions supporting the struggle for democracy are not necessarily democratic organizations in themselves. This is evident not only in the absence of democratic elections and decision-making in these organizations, but also in the reproduction of paternalistic and patriarchal relations of authority and elitist notions of knowledge and expertise. While this observation is certainly not new, it suggests that the radical aspirations and revolutionary potential which many socialists attribute to these movements deserve deeper, more critical reflection. The reality is that, for all their exciting potential, the nature of these militant protests is such that they may inhibit the further development of workers' own capacities for self-emancipation. If they are not to perpetuate the organizational displacement of working-class self-activity (if only in a different form), then their organizational focus must more clearly locate radical 'events' in the broader and more fundamental context of building the kind of class capacities that can realise new possibilities for truly revolutionary change in East Asia.

NOTES

1. David McNally, 'Globalization on Trial: Crisis and class struggle in East Asia', *Monthly Review*, 50 (4), September 1998, p. 13.
2. Elsewhere I have discussed the case of the ICFTU in East Asia. See Gerard Greenfield, 'The ICFTU and the Politics of Compromise', in Ellen Meiksins Wood, Peter Meiksins and Michael Yates (eds.), *Rising from the Ashes? Labour in the Age of 'Global' Capitalism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998, pp. 180–9.
3. A useful historical background on the SPSI is provided in Vedi Hadiz, *Workers and the State in New Order Indonesia*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 76–82; 92–104.
4. Clare Fermont, 'Indonesia: the inferno of revolution', *International Socialism*, 80, Autumn 1998, p. 30.
5. According to John Rees' analysis of the demonstrations outside the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) in Jakarta in November 1998: 'The forces of the revolution are stronger than in May because the working class played a larger role in the demonstrations in November'. John Rees, 'After "Bloody Friday": What's next for the Indonesian revolution?', <http://www.internationalsocialist.org/pubs/indonesia/indonesia-e.html#rees>.
6. Fermont, 'Indonesia', p. 27.

7. Tony Cliff, 'Revolution and counter-revolution: lessons for Indonesia', *International Socialism*, 80, Autumn 1998, p. 53.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
9. Several months later PT Walet Kencana reopened and continued production for Bayer. The workers now employed there know nothing of the strike and protests two years' earlier.
10. 'Indonesia: Military intervention in labour disputes', *Asian Food Worker* 28 (2), April–September 1998, pp. 4–6.
11. Yet even here there were important contradictions. Despite this campaign to demilitarize society and restrict the role of ABRI, student activists from radical organizations such as KOBAR created 'command headquarters' on university campuses and appointed their own 'commanders' to organize and lead demonstrations. Thus hierarchical structures of authority and control were produced which often mimicked the very military structures they were opposing.