CHAPTER TWO

STRUCTURES, LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

The colonial labour movement was very diverse. Well-established unions for public sector workers contrasted with more volatile unions for private sector workers. Within the public sector there were a few large, well-organised and financially strong unions which dominated the labour movement and a greater number of smaller unions for specific occupational groups. Despite this diversity, and especially the gulf between those in the public and those in the private sector, unions faced many similar issues in trying to create structures and programs that would attract and retain urban workers. Among these issues were: effective branch and central leadership; race, class and gender divisions; and the balance between focussing on industrial issues and providing social security for members. If the problems they faced were similar so too were many of the solutions, as unions struggled to rebuild a strong labour movement with deep linkages into urban workplaces and kampung.

The Political Context

The Indonesian Community Party’s resort to rebellion at the end of 1926 and the beginning of 1927 failed dismally. The party was banned and thousands of members were jailed or exiled to Boven Digul, the specially created prison camp in West Irian. Most of the unions for private sector workers in the early 1920s had been created by the PKI. They too were banned and hundreds of their members interrogated by police or employers. Many were exiled to Boven Digul and many others jailed.

The colonial state’s ruthless destruction of the PKI changed the political landscape. Sarekat Islam, with a platform based on an Islamic as well as a national identity, had been a fierce competitor but by the mid 1920s was a fading force never to recover its former strength.1 More conservative groups such as Budi Utomo, the first nationalist political party founded in 1908,

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had small constituencies, as did a number of regional parties. None had the capacity to take over the leadership of the nationalist movement. This political vacuum was filled in the middle of 1927 by the creation of a new nationalist party, Perserikatan Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Association—PNI). With the notable exception of Sukarno, who was a student at the Bandung Technical Institute, leadership came largely from young men recently returned from university study in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands they had been members of the Indonesian students’ association, Perhimpunan Indonesia, and had kept a close eye on events at home while developing their ideas on new directions for the nationalist movement. At its peak the PNI had about 10,000 members, of whom nearly ninety per cent lived in the three major Java cities of Batavia, Bandung and Surabaya. The vast majority were school teachers, government employees, clerks and tradesmen, with a sprinkling of self-employed at the higher echelons. The PNI refused to accept appointments to the Volksraad, or to the Provincial Councils in Java, and refused also to take part in the very restricted elections for Municipal Councils.

The PNI had only a short life. In December 1929 many of its key leaders were arrested, including Sukarno whose energy and oratory skills had played a major role in its success. The party was effectively banned. Despite its short life it was remarkably successful in popularising the idea of an independent Indonesia as a united and secular state. The emotional appeal of the idea of Indonesia was clearly on display at the 1928 Youth Congress where hundreds of young men and women made a public pledge to one fatherland, one nation and one language. The red and white ‘national’ flag was solemnly raised while the ‘national’ anthem, the Indonesia Raya, was sung for the first time.

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4 Ingleson, _Road to Exile_, p. 106.
