

‘Voice of Protest’: Propaganda of Indonesia's First Communist Leader Against Colonialism at the United States, 1925

Abstract

This article examines the pivotal role of Semaoen, the first Indonesia's communist leader in spreading anti-colonial ideas on the international stage during his exile. As a labor movement leader and a prominent Communist figure, Semaoen leveraged propaganda centered on social justice and resistance against oppression, inspiring a global audience to support Indonesia's independence. Through his activities and writings abroad, Semaoen fostered global solidarity that bolstered anti-imperialist sentiment among both Indonesians and international communities. This article reveals Semaoen's communication strategies in utilizing international networks to amplify the voices of Indonesians against Dutch colonialism. The research findings indicate that cross-border approaches taken by colonial resistance figures like Semaoen had a substantial impact not only on their home countries but also on global audiences interested in liberation movements. Additionally, the article addresses the limited access to Semaoen's primary sources and highlights the need for further in-depth studies on the international networks he established. This study offers a fresh perspective on colonial history research and cross-regional anti-colonial strategies.

Keywords: anti-colonialism, international propaganda, Indonesian labor movement

Introduction

Java in the 1920s became a stronghold for the 'Red group,' consisting of the working class and those increasingly exposed to communism. On the other hand, the Dutch Colonial Government in the Indies responded to the evolving social and political conditions with intensified repression to counter the Red threat. Strikes became a hallmark of the movement, often disrupting the operations of capitalists—at a time when the government was busy implementing its open-door policy. Furthermore, the Red group held a relatively strong position due to their involvement in the global network of the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU), also known as Profintern, an international labor organization established by the Communist International (Comintern) in 1921 (Reporter 1925a). The primary goal of establishing the RILU was to unite the labor movement worldwide under the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology and to promote social revolution for the working class through revolutionary labor unions (G Zinoviev 1920).

In the January 3, 1923 edition of the *Daily Standard*, it was reported that the oldest and largest labor union in the Dutch East Indies was the Railway Workers' Union, boasting 16,000 members. This union was led by Communist groups and had joined the RILU in 1921. Other notable labor organizations also existed at the time, including the Sugar Workers' Union with 20,000 members, the Dock Workers' and Metal Workers' Unions with 10,000 members each, the Book Printers' and Civil Servants' Unions with 6,000 members each, the Oil Workers' Union and the Semarang General Workers' Union with 4,000 members each, and the Postal Workers' and School Teachers' Unions with 2,000 members each (Reporter 1923b). At that time, railway workers had successfully secured a substantial wage increase, now earning approximately 100 guilders per month. Book printers received a similar wage, while sugar workers managed to raise their wages to 1 guilder per day.

In 1921, a 15-day strike involving 15,000 workers occurred on the Deli railway line in Sumatra, though it ended in defeat. A strike by 4,000 dockworkers on Ternate Island lasted five months and resulted in a partial victory. In 1919, labor unions unified under a central organization led by Semaoen and his secretary, Bergsma, a Dutchman. Unfortunately, in 1921,

this organization split into Nationalist and Communist factions. During a pawnshop workers' strike in 1922, however, both groups were compelled to collaborate.

As the labor movement grew in numbers and intensity, Java in those years was filled with strikes and voices protesting the injustices affecting the lives of workers. Among the 'Reds' stood a prominent figure named Semaoen, who played a major role in building anti-colonial propaganda and leading strikes to improve workers' conditions. Occasionally, he also voiced calls for independence, adopting a progressive stance. He replaced the term "Dutch East Indies" with "Indonesia," dismantled traditional ideas about feudalism, and championed freedom, fighting for his homeland's sovereignty and the freedom of its people. In the *DJawa Tengah* newspaper, May 11, 1923 edition, Semaoen was portrayed as a prominent movement figure in the Dutch East Indies, unafraid to threaten factory owners and the colonial government (Reporter 1923a). That same year, Semaoen was considered a threat to the colonial authorities—potentially awakening nationalist fervor among the native population. Consequently, on May 8, 1923, he was arrested and tried in Batavia on charges of inciting rebellion against the government. He was subsequently exiled to the Netherlands. There, his character as a 'protester' remained unchanged; in fact, he found a larger stage on the world platform to voice his protests against colonialism.

Semaoen's hoarse voice of injustice reached America, with *The Daily Worker* on its July 18, 1924 edition publishing his statement: "Semaun (from Java) declared that the Dutch Communist Party does not fully support the revolutionary movement in Java. In Java, the movement is growing stronger as a result of the 1917 Russian Revolution, yet it is not affiliated with the Dutch Communist Party" (Reporter 1924)." As a representative of Javanese communism, Semaoen rejected any connection between the communist movement in Java and the Dutch Communist Party. He emphasized the independence of the labor movement in Java as a pure form of resistance against colonialism.

Research on Semaoen, a key figure in Indonesia's national movement, has been widely conducted by scholars. Hongxuan (2024) in *The Minor Key: Indonesian Marxists Sojourning Abroad*, illustrates how Indonesian Marxists, including Semaoen, engaged in international networks during their struggle abroad. As a pivotal figure, Semaoen is known for his ideas on proletarian internationalism and his influence on the labor movement in the Dutch East Indies. McVey and Semaun (1966) also highlight Semaoen's early role in Indonesia's independence movement, emphasizing his involvement in communist-ideology-based labor organizations and interactions with global social movements.

Literary studies also spotlight Semaoen's works, such as those examined by Maier (1996) and Semaoen and Lingard (1996) which discuss *Hikajat Kadiroen*, Semaoen's radical novel reflecting class struggle and social critique in the colonial era. This novel is regarded as an important work in Indonesian literature, representing Semaoen's radical political thought and commitment to social justice. Dharmaputra, Pratama, and Larasati (2021) link the emergence of Indonesia's communist movement to the Russian Revolution, including Semaoen's role in integrating communist ideas into the labor struggle in Indonesia. Yamamoto (2021) focuses on how the colonial government censored radical works like Semaoen's to suppress resistance against colonial rule.

Previous research has largely focused on Semaoen's significant ideas and his resistance movement. However, certain critical moments, particularly his essays published abroad—such as those in *The Daily Worker* in Chicago, USA, from December 22 to 26, 1925—have yet to be analyzed in a dedicated section. These writings offer essential insights, portraying the increasingly developed labor conditions in Indonesia and the escalating repression by the government.

Based on the background above, this research offers a fresh perspective by highlighting Semaoen's contribution to spreading anti-colonial ideas on the international stage during his

exile in the Netherlands. Specifically, it examines a series of essays on the labor movement in Indonesia published in *The Daily Worker*, including four essays titled *Labor in the Far East*. This study focuses on Semaoen's strategies in leveraging political propaganda and international movements to rally support against Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. It also explores how Semaoen's Marxist ideas were intertwined with anti-imperialist rhetoric and their impact on the dynamics of the global resistance movement. By shedding light on an often-overlooked period in Semaoen's political life, this research deepens our understanding of his role in the cross-border anti-colonial movement.

The Revolutionary Narrative: Semaoen's Propaganda and Ideological Influence

Semaoen's essays in *The Daily Worker* emphasize ideological strategies for spreading anti-colonial messages through international labor networks and revolutionary media. He leveraged the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) to disseminate propaganda showcasing Indonesian labor resistance, inspiring workers abroad. TUEL, founded in 1920 in the United States by labor leader and communist activist William Z. Foster, aimed to educate and organize workers within labor unions to adopt a more militant stance against capitalism. TUEL promoted socialist principles and championed workers' rights through class-based approaches and worker solidarity (Beckner 1925; Zumoff 2014). In his articles, Semaoen asserted that only under revolutionary class leadership could Indonesian workers achieve freedom from Dutch colonial oppression.

“Both imperialist leaders and proletarian revolutionaries have repeatedly emphasized the importance of focusing on the Far East. Even William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, stated at the convention in Atlantic City that "labor"—which for him meant the bureaucratic leadership of the labor movement—should turn its attention to labor issues in the Far East (S. Semaoen 1925b).”

Semaoen's statement illustrates that both imperialist forces and proletarian revolutionaries in the West recognized the Far East as a focal point in global dynamics. William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, suggested that the labor movement shift its attention to the Far East, reflecting a newfound awareness of the region's emerging potential and challenges. Green viewed the Far East as a strategic area that required particular attention regarding workers' rights and welfare. In other words, the Far East was seen as a region with the potential to impact the international labor movement and foster cross-border solidarity—advancing workers' rights and resisting the exploitation faced by laborers under colonial and capitalist influence.

“Despite the ongoing terror against the labor movement since the major railway strike in May 1923, the Dutch government failed to suppress the resistance of our young working class in Indonesia... The strike laws in force at that time, the deportation of many comrades, and the imprisonment of hundreds of workers did not halt the progress of the labor union movement (S. Semaoen 1925b).”

Semaoen's statement indicates the resilience and strong spirit of Indonesia's young labor movement despite facing intense pressure from the Dutch colonial government. The government attempted to suppress labor resistance through various repressive measures, including strike laws, deportation of labor activists, and the imprisonment of hundreds of workers. However, these efforts failed to stop the momentum and consolidation of the labor movement, which grew bolder in fighting for their rights. This suggests that social discontent and class consciousness among workers had become deeply rooted, with repressive actions only strengthening their solidarity and determination to resist (Ingleson 1981; Bosma 2014). This phenomenon also reflects that Indonesia's labor movement was maturing into a resilient

force, not easily silenced by colonial control, and had a significant impact on the social-political dynamics of the period.

“By September 1925, only two and a half years after the railway organization was violently suppressed, the *Vereniging van Spoor-en Tramwegpersoneel* had regained its strength to the level it held before the 1923 strike was crushed. Its membership had returned to 14,000, and the circulation of its publication, *Si Tetap*, had increased by one and a half times compared to 1923 (S. Semaoen 1925b).”

The resurgence and resilience of the railway labor organization, *Vereniging van Spoor-en Tramwegpersoneel* (VSTP), in Indonesia following heavy repression by the colonial government in 1923 is striking. Although the organization was initially crushed through violent suppression during a major strike, within just two and a half years, VSTP managed to recover, reaching a strength equal to or even greater than before the repression (Mellink 1976; van Vree 1976). With membership once again at 14,000 and a notable increase in the circulation of its publication, *Si Tetap*, the repressive measures taken by the government appeared only to fuel greater solidarity and support for VSTP. This reflects the courage and determination of workers to sustain their struggle under colonial pressure and underscores that the union's ideals and objectives continued to resonate strongly among the labor force despite repression.

“The Maritime and Dockworkers’ Union, formed by a Javanese comrade deported from the Netherlands in September 1923, now has 4,000 members. Capitalists seem intent on suppressing this organization, viewing it as a threat to foreign trade and a link between revolutionary movements in Indonesia and abroad (S. Semaoen 1925b).”

Semaoen’s statement highlights the crucial role played by the Maritime and Dockworkers’ Union, a labor organization founded by a Javanese activist deported from the Netherlands (Ingleson 2015). Quickly growing to 4,000 members, this union not only served as a platform for workers’ resistance against injustice but was also regarded by the colonial government and capitalists as a serious threat. The union was perceived as capable of disrupting foreign trade interests, given that its members in the shipping and dock sectors held strategic positions within the supply and distribution chains (Shiraishi 2015). Additionally, the organization was seen as a vital link in the revolutionary network between Indonesia and the international community, intensifying colonial authorities’ concerns over the spread of revolutionary and anti-colonial ideas. This view underscores the union's significant strategic role, not only in the local struggle but also in fostering international solidarity against colonialism.

Semaoen’s reflections also bring attention to the challenges faced by fledgling labor unions in colonial Indonesia, especially the Maritime and Dockworkers’ Union and Sarekat Postel, both of which endured under capitalist pressures. Many activists were dismissed from the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij ships or forcibly disembarked at Tanjung Priok port as an effort to stymie union growth. Consequently, the maritime union managed to maintain a membership of only 4,000, comprised of dockworkers and seamen working on ships operating outside official oversight. *Djangkar*, the union’s newspaper, remained popular among sailors and dockworkers, reflecting their success in sustaining the spirit of struggle amid repression.

On the other hand, *Sarekat Postel*, the postal, telegraph, and telephone workers’ union in Surabaya, faced similar repression, particularly targeting its editor, Muso, who was active in revolutionary propaganda through the magazine *Soeara Kita*. With a membership of 2,500, the union continued to grow despite colonial threats and intimidation (Rochadi 2016; Ebon 1963; Poeze 2009). Muso, as one of the union’s primary propagandists, played a significant role in igniting the workers’ spirit of resistance in industrial cities like Surabaya. Both unions reflect the steadfastness of the working class in resisting exploitation and maintaining labor solidarity under the threat of colonial capitalism.

“In the first week of June, Semarang also hosted the transport workers’ congress. Various local organizations that had previously been part of the federation decided to merge once more into a single union, *Serikat Sopir Indonesia*, which had organized approximately 2,000 members across the archipelago. Active propaganda for this union began in June 1924, when the previous drivers’ union served only 1,000 members (S. Semaoen 1925b).”

This statement highlights the dynamic growth of labor organizations in Indonesia, which continued to expand despite colonial government repression. In June, Semarang became a central meeting place for transport workers, successfully merging various local organizations into the *Serikat Sopir Indonesia*, with a membership of around 2,000. This rapid development, initiated through active propaganda in June 1924 when the previous union had only 1,000 members, demonstrates that although young unions faced significant challenges, they were able to broaden their reach and attract new members across the archipelago.

Meanwhile, *Sarekat Boeroeh Goela*, the sugar industry workers’ union, displayed a different form of struggle. Operating under heavy repression since 1921, this union had to work illegally and in secrecy (S. Semaoen 1925b). With membership recently reaching 1,000, *Sarekat Boeroeh Goela* continued its activities under the shadow of capitalist power, which sought to dismantle every attempt at labor organization in this sector. These examples, alongside the challenges faced by the *Maritime and Dockworkers’ Union* and *Sarekat Postel*, illustrate that although labor organizations operated under difficult conditions, they continued to grow and consolidate by adapting new tactics, such as union mergers and covert propaganda. This underscores the resilience of Indonesian workers in fighting for their rights under constant colonial pressure.

Labor unions in the mining and healthcare sectors demonstrated a similar pattern of gradual progress amid challenging conditions, led strongly by Communist figures. The mining workers’ union, despite having only 700 members and operating illegally, showed signs of strong resistance by publishing its union paper, *Soeara Tambang*, since May 1925. This initiative reflected their efforts to raise worker awareness and solidarity through media as a strategic means of communication.

More significant progress was seen in the hospital workers’ union, which successfully increased its membership from 500 to 2,000 since early 1924. This union, which began publishing its newsletter regularly in 1925, marked an important step forward in disseminating information and organizing labor within the healthcare sector (S. Semaoen 1925b). This success, alongside organizations in the port, railway, driver, and sugar industries, demonstrates how communist leadership effectively utilized various propaganda and organizational strategies to build solidarity networks across key sectors. These achievements illustrate that, despite facing oppression, these labor unions continued to grow, leveraging media to strengthen their networks and proving that the Indonesian labor movement remained steadfast in fighting for workers’ rights under the colonial system.

Militant Unionism: Semaoen’s Role in Shaping the Indonesian Labor Movement

Semaoen provides an insight into the militancy of Indonesian labor unions in mobilizing strikes and resistance against Dutch capitalists. From railway and maritime workers to sugar laborers, efforts to resist grew stronger despite repression, including mistreatment, deportation, and job dismissals. A notable example is the Semarang dockworkers’ strike, which successfully forced the company to meet workers’ demands.

Semaoen also emphasizes the importance of the proletariat’s rise in the Far East, especially in Indonesia, for the global workers’ movement. His articles underline that strikes led by Communists and the Indonesian Red Labor Union were not merely local resistance against Dutch colonialism but had broader implications within the anti-imperialist context. This

suggests that if people in the colonies began to understand and be inspired by Communist ideology, the global imperialist structure, which relied on colonial exploitation, would waver and even collapse. In other words, the working-class resistance in the Far East became an important symbol for the working class in the West, demonstrating that colonialism was not an unshakeable system but one that could be toppled through international solidarity inspired by revolutionary ideas.

In Indonesia, the Red Labor Secretariat functioned as a central body that managed the general propaganda of these labor unions and connected them to the international labor movement. However, this did not mean that these organizations had left the General Federation of Labor Unions, led by a figure described as a “neutral” leader (neither Communist nor nationalist, merely a union member). The executive committee of the General Federation comprised both Communists and nationalists. This federation was also affiliated with several other unions, such as the reformist teachers’ union (6,000 members, some of whom were Communists); the Government and Public Workers Union (4,000 members); and the Pawnshop Employees Union (3,000 members), although most members opposed their leader, Surjopranoto, a reformist-nationalist who opposed the Communists. Additionally, there were several other small reformist unions, such as the opium traders’ union, which operated under a state monopoly, similar to the pawnshop workers (S. Semaoen 1925c).

The strikes across various industrial and service sectors this year highlight the direct involvement of the Red Labor Union and Communist leadership in encouraging the working class to demand their rights. The series of strikes documented by *Apy*, the Communist media outlet, demonstrates the consistency and militancy of the working class under Communist leadership in resisting the injustices they faced under the colonial capitalist system (S. Semaoen 1925a). *Apy* refers to a media organization or publication used by the Communist movement in Indonesia during Dutch colonial rule to disseminate information, propaganda, and ideology to the working class.

“May 5: General strike of carriage drivers (800 people) in Solo.

May 7: Strike by 150 workers at the Petjangan sugar factory. The strike failed to escalate into a general strike due to police intervention.

May 9: Strike by 50 coolies at the Tjikampek railway depot. Police attempted to force the strikers back to work, but they refused. Residents sympathized with the strikers, and management failed to recruit replacement workers. The strike ended in victory for the workers.

May 11: Strike by 61 female workers at a rubber factory in Djombang, Batavia. The strike ended in a compromise.

May 12: Strike by 32 workers at a lime factory in Batavia, resulting in a victory for the workers.

May 13: Strike at H. Bunning printing press in Djokja and Percetakan Indonesia. Replacement workers refused to work. A total of 300 printing workers participated.

May 16: Strike by 50 workers at De Echo printing press in Djember and 40 performers at Teater Tjahja, Semarang.

May 20: Strike by 50 workers at the Sawahlunto General Hospital (Sumatra), suppressed by police.

May 28: Partial strike at the Pakis sugar factory in Paty. The strike continued until June 7, involving 250 workers despite police repression.

June 2: Strike by 50 workers at the Angtjiwie Hien rice factory in Babat, ending in victory for the workers.

June 4: Strike by 30 workers at the military engineer service in Kupang, Timor Island. Despite mistreatment, the strike continued.

June 10: Strike by 25 coolies in the Aceh tram service, Langsa. Police failed to stop the strike, and the workers won.

June 1: Strike by 50 printing workers in Djokja.

June 15: Strike by 100 coolies in the public works project in Banjoemas, ending in victory for the strikers.

July 3: Strike by 40 workers at the steam laundry in Weltevreden (S. Semaoen 1925a)."

The Communists effectively used strikes as a means to mobilize the working class and assert their demands, including wage increases, job security, and fundamental rights that were absent in the colonial system (Varga 2016; Montias 1980). This strategy reflects an awareness that collective action can exert substantial pressure on company management and the colonial government, despite often facing harsh repression, such as police intervention and the threat of violence.

Despite serious threats from the police, these strike actions managed to destabilize the system and, at times, secure victories for the workers. For instance, during the strike at the Tjikampek railway depot on May 9, where 50 coolies refused to return to work despite pressure from authorities. Support from the surrounding community demonstrated that cross-sector solidarity had already developed, and workers did not feel alone in their struggle. Such successes boosted worker morale and underscored that strikes could serve as a powerful tool to combat injustice, even under repression.

Interestingly, this article also highlights the involvement of women workers in the labor movement, such as in the May 11 strike at the Djombang rubber factory, which included 61 female workers. Their participation reflects a growing class consciousness, and the dual challenges faced by women—gender and economic exploitation. The partial success of these actions through compromise indicates that women's strikes had a significant impact on employers and the colonial system, signaling an increasing awareness among female workers as part of the broader class struggle.

The strikes were not limited to a single industry but spanned various strategic sectors such as transportation (carriage drivers, tram services), manufacturing (sugar, rubber, rice), healthcare (Sawahlunto General Hospital), and the public sector (public works project in Banjoemas). This diversity demonstrates that the influence of the Red Labor Union extended across sectors critical to the colonial economy. This cross-sector movement reflects a high level of class consciousness among Indonesian workers and the strength of the Red Labor Union in organizing workers from various backgrounds. The Communists' ability to reach these sectors highlights the militancy of their organization in advancing the demands of the working class throughout Indonesia.

The strikes led by the Red Labor Union were not solely about demanding higher wages or labor rights but were also intended to exert economic pressure on companies and the colonial system. Actions in the transportation sector (such as the Aceh tram service and carriage drivers in Solo) and the production sector (such as the sugar and rubber factories) had a direct impact on colonial economic activities, which depended on smooth transportation and production output from these sectors. These strikes demonstrate the Communists' deep understanding that labor action could serve as an effective weapon against colonial capitalism by disrupting the economic system that supported colonialism.

The presence of *Apy*, the Communist organ, in recording and documenting each strike indicates that the Communist organization recognized the importance of propaganda in strengthening workers' fighting spirit and spreading their stories of resistance. By publicizing successful strikes, *Apy* became an essential tool for informing about strike achievements and inspiring workers in other sectors to join the struggle. *Apy* served not only as an information

source but also as an educational tool for the working class, broadening their understanding of the potential power of collective action.

The demands in these strikes, such as wage increases and job security, highlight the structural exploitation and poverty faced by Indonesia's working class. Low wages and poor working conditions drove workers to continuously seek improvements. Their resistance to these conditions was not only about material gain but also about dignity and recognition of their rights as laborers. Although many of these strikes achieved only partial success or ended in compromise, the workers' bravery in continuing to resist shows that their class consciousness had grown and continued to develop despite repression.

Communist leadership in the labor movement remained consistent, with the Red Labor Union leading actions across various sectors. The ongoing small strikes reflect the Communists' ability to mobilize the working class to act offensively for their rights. This proves that the Communists had effective strategies and organizational capabilities in mobilizing workers throughout Indonesia. This leadership also indicates the substantial trust that the working class placed in the Communists as defenders of their rights, revealing the reliance of laborers on the revolutionary movement to confront injustices.

These actions also had a long-term impact in building solidarity among the working class and increasing collective consciousness. With strikes occurring across various regions and sectors, Indonesian workers began to see their struggle as part of a larger movement against capitalist exploitation. This signifies that labor unions, under Communist influence, successfully transformed small strikes into a collective movement with broader social and political impacts.

Following these mass actions, a domino effect emerged. Reports in *Algemeen Handelsblad* on August 26, 1925, reflect the growing tensions between the colonial government and the labor movement in colonial Indonesia. A demonstration by 100 workers at Batavia's central hospital, which ended with an armed police crackdown, exemplifies the government's harsh reaction to any form of labor-led resistance. Repressive measures, including dismissals and arrests, became an effective tool for the colonial government to suppress activities deemed a threat to colonial stability.

Meanwhile, the involvement of Communist leaders like Darsono in these strikes shows the active role of the Communist Party in mobilizing Indonesia's working class and organizing direct actions in critical sectors such as healthcare. Darsono, with his international connections through participation in the Red International of Labor Unions (R.I.L.U.) congress, was seen as a serious threat by the government, even to the point of potential deportation. This illustrates that the involvement of influential Communist figures not only strengthened the militancy of the Indonesian labor movement but also highlighted the colonial government's efforts to curb the influence of revolutionary ideology.

Semaoen also provides insights into the intensity and large scale of labor strikes across various sectors in Indonesia, particularly in Semarang, which became the center of labor actions during that period. The strike at the Semarang port, involving 1,200 workers and later joined by 400 more, led to a complete shutdown of port operations. This demonstrates the collective power of labor in disrupting critical economic activities that served as the lifeblood of colonial trade, highlighting the strategic position of port workers in resisting exploitation.

The colonial government's implementation of laws prohibiting gatherings in Semarang represented a repressive attempt to prevent the spread of worker solidarity and curb broader organizing activities. Nonetheless, the general strike in the printing sector, involving 1,000 workers, achieved success when companies met their demands, illustrating workers' ability to overcome legal obstacles through collective power. A similar strike in Makassar underscored that these labor actions extended beyond Semarang, indicating the widespread influence of the labor movement.

Acts of sabotage at the port, which resulted in the paralysis of shipping fleets, reflect an intensification of labor resistance tactics in response to colonial repression. In reaction, the Koninklijke Pakketvaart Maatschappij established a new service with improved working conditions, attracting some workers back. This shift shows that the pressure exerted by labor actions compelled the company to enhance working conditions—a tangible outcome demonstrating that these strikes succeeded in achieving change.

The cancellation or postponement of the railway workers' union congress due to the meeting ban law illustrates the colonial government's seriousness in curbing labor movement consolidation. Despite facing strict legal barriers, the workers' ability to paralyze critical sectors reveals the revolutionary potential of this movement and underscores how they posed a significant threat to the stability of the colonial economy.

Colonial Repression and the Communist Response: The Impact of Dutch Policies on Semaoen's Activism

Dutch colonialism made extensive efforts to suppress the Communist movement led by Semaoen through political terror, bans on gatherings, and the creation of counter-organizations like *Sarekat Hidjo*. However, Semaoen observed that this repression only strengthened the class consciousness of Indonesian workers, motivating them to resist through politically oriented strikes, aligning with Zinoviev's prediction that resistance would resonate as far as Java. Grigory Zinoviev, a Bolshevik revolutionary, Communist leader, and a prominent figure in the Communist International (Comintern) in the early 20th century, was a close ally of Vladimir Lenin and played a key role in promoting global revolution, including in colonial territories (Lomas 2019; Black 2019).

“The events I mentioned in the last article clearly show that the Indonesian working class is once again eager to launch an offensive. It is evident that, in connection with events in China, which have inspired all of Asia and sparked mass demonstrations by workers and peasants in many places, reactions to these developments are becoming increasingly brutal (S. Semaoen 1925d).”

This statement reflects a renewed revolutionary spirit among the Indonesian working class, inspired by developments in China that have spread and motivated mass movements across Asia. Indonesian workers and peasants saw these events as a catalyst for bold protests and strikes. The connection between the labor movement in Indonesia and the struggle in China underscores a growing cross-border solidarity that strengthened the anti-colonial resistance among colonized peoples (Kuo 2017; Kwan 1997).

The increasingly brutal colonial response, including the dispersal of meetings, arrests of Communist activists, and intensive propaganda among soldiers and police, reflects the colonial government's fear of revolutionary influence spreading (Groen 2018; Goss 2009). This situation indicates that resistance was not limited to workers and peasants but also extended to soldiers, police, and young intellectuals. With a growing number of dismissed soldiers and young Javanese intellectuals gaining revolutionary insights while studying in the Netherlands, a widespread revolutionary sentiment began permeating various social layers. This suggests that revolutionary ideas were influencing not only the working class but also the educated elite and even members of the colonial apparatus, potentially strengthening and broadening the anti-colonial movement.

The colonial repression of the labor and Communist movements in Indonesia intensified, indicating that the colonial government and pro-colonial groups were beginning to employ new tactics to curb resistance. The arrests of over 200 people, the dismissal of hundreds of workers, and acts of violence resulting in injuries and deaths demonstrate that the colonial government

increasingly relied on violence as a primary strategy to suppress the influence of labor unions, the Communist Party, and *Sarekat Rajat* (S. Semaoen 1925d).

When physical repression was deemed insufficient, the colonial authorities funded the pro-colonial terrorist group *Sarekat Hidjo*, created to intimidate and weaken the resistance movement (Reporter 1925b). However, the formation of this terror group underscores that the labor and Communist movements had become a significant threat, prompting the colonial government to feel the need for an additional terrorist group to counter revolutionary forces. Ironically, *Sarekat Hidjo* turned out to be highly unpopular, even among Dutch authorities, who may have seen it as a risk to internal stability. Meanwhile, the emergence of a counter-group, *Anty Ribut Bund*, reflects the increasingly militant nature of the Red faction, prepared to confront physical intimidation, ultimately intensifying the climate of conflict in colonial Indonesia.

“When members of *Sarekat Hidjo* were no longer paid, they openly admitted that they had been misled by government officials and preferred to join *Anty Ribut Bund* without payment. Consequently, this reaction inadvertently served as propaganda for reformist leaders... For example, a pseudo-union leader like Soerjopranoto declared last August that ‘it is not good for workers to strike... and it turns out that capitalists aren’t so bad.’ Statements like these received widespread publicity, supported by reactionary forces, making Soerjo feel important and encouraging him to oppose the Communists. However, he faced jealousy from other reformist nationalist leaders, such as Tjokroaminoto and others (S. Semaoen 1925d).”

The statement above illustrates the internal dynamics and conflicts of interest within labor organizations, as well as the colonial officials' manipulation to weaken labor resistance. When members of *Sarekat Hidjo*, a pro-colonial group paid to counter labor resistance, stopped receiving payment, they switched their support to *Anty Ribut Bund* without compensation. This shift reveals that the loyalty of *Sarekat Hidjo* members was more pragmatic than ideological, showing that the colonial manipulation of this group was temporary and easily undermined. Their transformation in allegiance effectively became propaganda that bolstered the position of genuine reformists within the resistance movement.

Moreover, the stance of labor leaders like Soerjopranoto, who tried to curb the strike fervor by stating that capitalists do not always act poorly, illustrates how pro-colonial labor elements sought to weaken workers' militancy. Soerjopranoto's statements, widely publicized through colonial support, enabled him to gain influence and a reputation as a "leader," despite his stance being at odds with the true spirit of labor resistance. However, his alignment with colonial interests sparked tension with other nationalist reformist figures, such as Tjokroaminoto, who likely viewed Soerjo's approach as a threat to broader nationalist objectives. This tension highlights the divisions within the labor and nationalist movements, weakening their collective efforts against colonialism.

Semaoen also revealed that although the colonial government attempted political concessions to dampen the revolutionary spirit of Indonesia's working class, these steps were seen as mere ploys. The government planned changes for 1926, including introducing a new “democratic system” with broader election laws and increased funding for economic welfare. However, for a working class accustomed to colonial injustices, these offers were not viewed as genuine efforts to improve public welfare but rather as another attempt to pacify the growing labor resistance. In response, the government employed various repressive measures aimed at weakening labor opposition.

However, this continued repression only heightened class consciousness among workers and strengthened their pride in their revolutionary tradition. The slogan “Continue your terror!” expressed the belief that each act of repression would only further reinforce the working class's

determination to persist in their struggle, whether through legal or illegal channels. With poor working conditions and ongoing political repression, Indonesian workers were expected to become increasingly progressive and courageous in fighting for their rights, both economically and politically.

The relentless political terror, from surveillance to the imposition of strict laws against labor organizations, served as a catalyst for a broader struggle. This long history of oppression fostered a strong class consciousness among workers, transforming strikes from mere demands for wage increases or improved working conditions into calls for social and political change. The use of repressive measures to suppress labor resistance, as had been done throughout colonial history, ended up creating the opposite effect of what the colonial government intended.

Additionally, there was a belief that the power of revolution would spread, as predicted by Zinoviev: "Today China, tomorrow Java!" (Gregory Zinoviev 1925). This prediction reflected the hope that the impact of the proletarian revolution in China would inspire and motivate a revolutionary movement in Java, as anti-colonial and social revolutions were beginning to rise across Asia. The success of the revolution in China became a symbol and a new hope for Indonesia's working class to direct their struggle toward freedom and liberation from colonialism.

With increasing colonial government repression of the labor movement, Indonesian workers became more engaged in strikes that extended beyond economic demands to include political dimensions (Budiardjo 1986). This shift demonstrates that the Indonesian labor movement held the potential to evolve into a revolutionary political movement, driven by an awareness of the need for profound social change. Although the colonial government may have hoped that superficial concessions could resolve the issue, the reality was that the more they sought to suppress the working class, the stronger the drive to resist and fight for freedom became.

In this context, Indonesian workers were not only becoming more aware of their rights as laborers but also began to see their struggle as part of a larger revolutionary movement against colonialism and global capitalism. The major strikes expected in the future were likely to have broader impacts, affecting not only the economic sphere but also the political landscape, serving as a response to the structural injustices faced by workers under colonial rule. In this regard, repression was not a barrier but rather a catalyst, intensifying solidarity and militancy within the labor ranks.

Ultimately, each act of violence or attempt to silence the labor movement only strengthened the revolutionary spirit and solidarity among Indonesia's working class. Workers began to view their struggle as part of a larger social transformation, no longer confined to sectoral issues. This class consciousness was marked by increased participation in more progressive labor organizations and a desire to change the social and political structures they deemed unjust. Zinoviev's prediction of revolutionary potential in Java underscored that resistance to colonialism was no longer merely a local movement but part of a global struggle against capitalist oppression. Inspired by successes in other countries like China, Indonesia's working class grew more motivated to pursue revolutionary change in their own nation. From this perspective, colonial government concessions were seen as mere "deception" that would not address the root issues—a reality increasingly recognized by the working class.

Semaoen's ideas clearly illustrate that, although the colonial government attempted to pacify resistance through seemingly softer measures, Indonesia's working class was experienced enough to see these concessions as efforts to weaken their revolutionary spirit. The intensified pressure and repression, intended to silence labor voices, instead reinforced solidarity and deepened revolutionary awareness within the working class. Thus, every repressive act by the colonial government not only failed to stem resistance but became a

catalyst for a stronger, more militant labor movement—one that demanded not only economic change but also fundamental political transformation.

Conclusions, Implications, Limitations

This research reveals how Semaoen's ideas and propaganda contributed significantly to fostering anti-colonial awareness among Indonesians and international observers. As a Communist leader, Semaoen employed rhetoric centered on social justice and resistance to oppression, reflecting Indonesia's aspirations for independence. Through his overseas activities, Semaoen successfully reached an international audience, establishing a global solidarity network that supported Indonesia's struggle against colonialism. This underscores the power of international propaganda in expanding support for anti-colonial movements. The study demonstrates that colonial resistance was not only a local phenomenon but connected to broader international movements. Semaoen's ideas and propaganda strategies aimed at a global audience highlight the importance of cross-border approaches in political struggles, particularly in anti-colonial contexts. The implications for colonial history studies include revisiting the roles of figures like Semaoen, who leveraged international platforms to advocate for social change. For modern activism, Semaoen's approach offers lessons on the power of networks and global solidarity as effective advocacy tools.

However, this article has several limitations, including limited primary sources directly from Semaoen, leading to a reliance on secondary archives and interpretations by other researchers. Additionally, the study is confined to a specific period and region, providing a partial view of the long-term impact of Semaoen's propaganda on the anti-colonial struggle in Indonesia. Further in-depth studies on Semaoen's international networks and their domestic influence could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cross-border dynamics in the fight against colonialism.

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