

## THE WORKING CLASS' STRUGGLES FOR A BETTER LIFE IN DOS PASSOS' U.S.A.

*Perjuangan "Kelompok Pekerja"  
Untuk Perbaikan Hidup dalam novel U.S.A.  
Karya Dos Passos*

Danu Wahyono<sup>1</sup>, Djuhartati Imam Muhni<sup>2</sup>, Djoko Murdijanto<sup>2</sup>

*Program Studi Pengkajian Amerika  
Program Pascasarjana Universitas Gadjah Mada*

### INTISARI

Telah diteliti sebuah kajian tentang perjuangan masyarakat pekerja golongan bawah dalam upaya mencapai kehidupan yang lebih baik di tengah-tengah kemakmuran industri Amerika. Seiring dengan pesatnya pertumbuhan industri di Amerika, masyarakat negara ini menjadi semakin materialistis. Perkembangan industri yang pesat memberikan dampak bagi para pekerja tersebut. Karena dunia industri sangat kompetitif, kelompok pekerja tersebut menjadi korban monopoli dan eksploitasi dari kelompok kapitalis yang menghalalkan segala cara untuk mencapai keuntungan pribadi.

Perkembangan Amerika yang demikian mendatangkan keresahan bagi para pekerja. Kekayaan yang diperoleh negara itu tidak membawa kemakmuran bagi mereka. Hal yang demikian mendorong mereka untuk berjuang memperoleh perbaikan hidup karena dalam sistem monopoli kapitalisme, sulit bagi mereka untuk memperbaiki hidup. Walaupun mereka jujur dan bekerja keras seperti yang digambarkan dalam cerita "rags to riches" dari Horatio Alger, mereka tetap sebagai buruh. Akhirnya yang mereka dapatkan hanya kemiskinan.

**Kata kunci:** industrialisasi - eksploitasi pekerja - perjuangan untuk perbaikan hidup

### INTRODUCTION

The trilogy *U.S.A.* composed of *The Forty Second Parallel*, *Nineteen-Nineteen*, and *The Big Money* offers a vivid picture of society dominated by monopoly-capitalism and the sabotage of the workers' rights by business interests dominated by the profit motive. Throughout the novel, Dos Passos was most concerned with the way in which the system of monopoly capitalism exploits and destroys the working class. The working class here is the class which does not own the means of production and distribution. It is made up of a number of urban people including such as unskilled workers, clerical workers, sales workers, and technicians (Feagin, 1982: 36). The capitalists control wealth and power under the laws of the land, while the working class are shut out from the good that America stands for.

1) Fakultas Sastra Universitas 17 Agustus 1945, Surabaya

2) Fakultas Sastra Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta

My interest in this novel is in its content as a panoramic social novel particularly its strength in showing the life of the workers. In the midst of the country's prosperity, there was poverty throughout its working class. The book being written in a distinctive American pattern of literary creation adds one more point to choose the novel. It is written with four structural devices: newsreel, narrative, biography, and camera eye. Above all, this novel is chosen because it can enrich our understanding of America in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

In order to analyze Dos Passos' concept of the American working class, this study uses interdisciplinary studies, and it is carried out by library research.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The Industrializing America**

During post-Civil War era, the idealism, ethics, and moral values of the former Puritan Americans were no longer applicable to business practises. People began to admire the success of "Robber Barrons". They tried to understand views of success which were the implication of the economic and social theories of the time: Laissez-Faire and Social Darwinism.

Noticeably, the late nineteenth century showed the development of America into an industrial state. Industrialism had advanced with mighty strides in this country. It enabled this country to rise to a position of dominance in the world.

The triumph of materialism and business values brought prosperity to America. It created a competitive atmosphere in which the survival was determined by the success of getting profit. The economic system of the United States was later identified as a capitalist system characterized by "the concept of private property, the rights of ownership and the use of wealth to earn income" (Davies and Ovard, 1975: 260).

Capitalism encouraged the rise of industrial concentration. Small companies merged to form large firms. Some corporations forced others out of business by legal or illegal means. Major industries came under the control of a few companies. Consequently, a monopoly was established.

Under monopoly-capitalism, the means of production, distribution, and exchange were operated for private profit. The resulting drive for profits led the global competition for new markets as well as for technological innovation to expand productivity. Since the business competition was not coordinated or regulated on a national basis, a crisis of over production appeared on large scale in the 1920s.

### **The Impact of American Industrialization**

The unrestrained industry growth created some problems. It was

no longer feasible, in many cases, for the employee to manufacture goods at home and to supplement his income by rising agricultural commodities as he had done under the domestic system. The ordinary worker who had owned his tools and produced his outputs could not survive in competition with capitalists who have vast aggregated of money and machines. It resulted on the immigrated of dozens and villagers and small town folk into humming industrial cities.

The compelling attraction of the cities was basically the opportunity to earn more money and become a sophisticated city dweller. Americans emded up with unskilled factory jobs. The fact was that when they entered into industrial society, their habits and values were not associated with the industrial ethos that brought about the subordination of human values to property values. They were regarded as merely a means of production. This situation created suffering at various time.

Beside the drift from rural to the city, industrializing America also turned to the masses of Europe for factory labor. This great stream of immigration affected the labor force because most of immigrants were willing to work for lower wages and under less favourable conditions of employment than the "native" labor force. The increase of the supply of labor force pushed wages down. In this case, workers faced complex problems such as maximum hours of works and minimum wages. Overcrowding, slums, and municipal corruption appeared between the urban workers.

Industrialization and urbanization in the states also impacted education. As cities develop, children came to be raised and socialized outside the home in scholl, and other institutional settings. Commitment to get an education soon occupied an important place in basic American values. The education offered the chance to maximize one's mobility in the society. In addition, inflation apparently forced women to enter into the labor force to help their families.

Under the impacts of industrializing America, workers likewise received new understanding of the importance of the unions. Unions functioned as an instrument to advance the economic status of workers: for higher wages, for the reduction in the number of working hours. boycotts, strikes, and political actions were the weapons of unions.

Beside the aforementioned, American industrialization also influenced the American literaure. The promise of mobility became a central cultural theme of articles and books. Shady business practises, corruption in government, and poverty in the cities were exposed.

With high-tech industries, the United States achieved more property. "The standard of living in the States had shown considerable important. The prosperity had tended to improve the conditions of life for the great majority of Americans" (Allen, 1931:51). Although the economy was booming and prosperity was spreading, the wealth

still tended to flow into a few people's pockets, up to half of all workers still lived in poverty. The working class struggles to gain a better standard of life will be the main central topic Dos Passos tried to expose through the trilogy *U.S.A.*

## ANALYSIS

Under the system of monopoly capitalism, it is in the interest of the capitalist class to maintain the existing political-economic system that they substantially control. In contrast, the broad working class fundamentally want to improve capitalist control of business, industry, and politics with far more democratic system. Consequently working class struggles exist. They struggle to achieve a better quality of life.

### The Worker in Capitalistic Society

The industrialization has polarized society into two groups of capitalist and laborers. Capitalists place individuals in their fullest capacity to achieve the most possible expectations for individual profits. The workers who have very limited capability in competing with big business inevitably become the victims of capitalists as the accumulation of wealth also means the accumulation of power.

Apparently, the dole reality of Dos Passos' characters derive from the suffering, unsatisfied, and despair working class. They have less access to life, liberty, and property. The good examples of this situation is Pop. He no longer works for himself as he did in the past. He works for capitalist, the social class that owns the means of production such as capital, tools, and raw material. He sells his labor as a night watchman at the Chadwick Mill in the Middle town, Connecticut. He depends entirely on his wage income for livehood. As a labor he is paid less than he can produce for the capitalist. He only earns very small income that is only enough to buy his life primary necessities, while the capitalists reinvest the resulting profit passed in the exploitation of the workers to expand their business.

On account of his low income and unadequate work condition, Pop's housing is at best noisome dangerous to human health. He lives in an abject and small house where "the air is chocking all day with the smell of whaleoil soap" (FP, 5). Ugliness is ubiquitous in working class society.

One day Pop has been compeled to drop out of the labor force because of joining a strike. As he feels that he does not do it, he refuses the accusation, "I ain't going to join any strike" (FP, 8). He tries to find a help to his brother, Tim O'Hara, a social democrat. In fact, it does not yield a result as his boss does not want to hear his approval. The ability of powerful boss to dominate economy to his own advantages frustates Pop.

Shortly after he becomes unemployment, his wife has to work hard for "boilerfuls of wash to survive in the family's life. She faces the

double burden of household and working woman. And that her children, Mac and his sister, go to labor to help make ends meet when they come home from school. All members of her family pool their earning to achieve the family economic stability. As she works so hard, she dies.

Jobless due to a strike he did not want, pained by his wife's death, Pop is forced to leave town to seek job opportunity as he cannot obtain an adequate job from local sources. He starts a new life in Chicago. He enters into the urban labor force. As he was born out of the industrializing society, his traditional social habits and customs seldom fit into the patterns of industrial life. He has no skills in the industrial sense, so he finds himself economically obsolete. It is difficult for him to find any other jobs.

Knowing Pop's frustration, Tim O'Hara comforts him that lives of the laboring class in America are seldom prosperous. He blames it on the nature of economic system, "... is the fault of the system that don't give a man the fruit of his labor" (FP, 14). The experience of Tim O'Hara shows the extended development of this idea. He is forced to bankruptcy by his creditors because of printing a socialistic handbill. He has no power to fight against that system.

It seems that the social pressures bring about naturalistic selection in the jungle of capitaistic society. The working class are generally exterminated because they lost in the struggle. They become the victim of the natural law. For them, poverty is an inescapable fact of life in an economy blighted by rapid technological development. Shortly, this poverty is caused by the American economic system.

## **The Struggles of Working Class**

### **Success**

The most significant cluster of narratives in U.S.A. is that of Charley Anderson, J. Ward Moorehouse, and Margo Dowling. Charley Anderson represents a figure of the American success myth. He aspires to Henry Ford. A country boy comes to the city, he work hard to buildan airplane engine plan. He wants to rise to fame and fortune while aiding mankind through his ingenuity. But he soon discovers that hard work, honest do not bring the rewards promised by the myth. He learns that ruthlessness and deception are also required. He tries to ape these qualities. Seeking the big money, he is almost causally devoured by more rapacious birds of prey. He himself helps destroy those who are naively honest and faithful than he himself, notably his old mechanic friend Bill Cermak. So Charley Anderson becomes a garrulous and drunken hulk, a corrupted honest workman.

Moorehouse's life is an ironic fulfillment of an Horatio Alger's rise. Born on the Fourth of July, a reader of *Success* magazine in his youth, he works hard. He starts his life in a real estate office. He moves to be public relation. He is a man of great refinement and distinction of manner. Influence is his profession. His only product is the manipulation of people's thought. As he grows more powerful, he

becomes a supreme manipulator who exploits language for profits.

His upward-moving career, from selling real estate to public relations, touches upon the major areas of American life in which a false rhetoric of Americanism can be used by the wealthy and powerful capitalists to exploit the poor weak. Moorehouse has risen by luck and pluck to eminence because he has been able to manipulate the naive faiths by which most Americans live, including their faith in the Alger' myth.

Like Moorehouse, Margo Dowling is poor and likeable. She discovers that success requires the pervasion of one's salable commodity. Her rise to stardom is a parody of the Hollywood version of the rags to riches career of the movie star. This rise is achieved not by hard work but rather by the open exploitation of her sexuality and her ability at every stage of her rise to achieve an effective level of phoniness. Somewhat different in technique, but similar in effect is biographies. The significant biographies for this proper explanation are J.P. Morgan, Minor Keith, and Andrew Carnegie. They are chosen in relation with the cultural trend and common attitude of that time that is to extoll people who did things for the good culture. They are the examples of admittedly people.

### Failure

The representative character is Mac. Bitter experience as working class who has material disaster encourages him to have a better quality of life. He starts his life by getting a job in his uncle Tim's print shop. It is in his uncle that he first confronts the brazen and confident rhetoric of revolution. Unfortunately, he loses his job as his uncle is forced to bankruptcy because of printing a socialistic handbill.

After losing one job to another and moving from one place to another, he begins to feel that he has to do something to improve his lot. He thinks that his future as a laborer lies in industrial unionism that is in organizing workers. He joins a group of radical unionists and socialists called the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Being one of IWW's members, he hopes that IWW can give him a sense of dignity and selfworth. He joins the miners who are on the strike and then becomes one of the leading socialists. His wife can never understand his radicality. In the rest of his life, he follows the slogans of revolution to Mexico where a revolution occurs.

Similar rhetoric pervading Mac's narrative is Joe Williams. Mac and Joe have basically similar characters. Both represent the life of the working man in its empty and futile. Their lives are constant movement. Mac throughout America is a laborer, while Joe throughout the world as a seaman. They are archetypically rootless American workingmen in permanent transit not because they wish to be but because their marginal lives prevent them from putting down roots. They are beaten up, robbed, deceived, and cheated wherever they go because they are weak.

## CONCLUSION

During the early twentieth century American industrialism, the law of nature still rules. Life is a struggle for survival. The working class who lost in these struggles are generally exterminated. Although they work hard, honestly, and faithfully, they are unable to take pride in their works and finally to profit significantly by it. They are rootless laborers constantly searching for some outlet for their idealistic hope of restoring power to the worker. They become isolated and frustrated in industrial society.

Dos Passos' villain is big business. The entrepreneurial system is not only suspect, it has been convicted. Capitalism is the sin and only working class are free from this. Dos Passos refuses to adapt the general criteria success for capitalists because it destroys the working class. Apparently the Indonesian working class at this moment seems to have similar experience with the American working class in the early twentieth century. The rise of Industrialism also fastens the shift from rural to an urban society. The industrial ethos brings about a subordination of human values to property values. Workers become a cog in the industrial machinery which created suffering, unemployment, and poverty. The working class then struggle for "regional minimum wages" to achieve a better quality of life. The Indonesian government which is inspired by values embodied in Pancasila should not let any groups or individuals to dominate or to monopolize its economy. Monopolize economy will create social jealousy between the rich and the poor. Hopefully, the course of Indonesia development produces businessmen who have social solidarity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Frederick L., 1931, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*, New York: Harper & Raw
- , 1952, *The Big Change, America Transform Itself, 1900-1950*, New York: Harper & Raw.
- Beach, J.W., 1941, *American Fiction 1920 - 1940*, New York: The Mcmillan Company.
- Bloom, Harold, 1986, *The Twentieth Century American Writing*, New York: Chelsea House Publisher.
- Blum, John Morton, 1977, *The National Experience, A History of the United States*, New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Bonner, T. Heville, 1963, *Our Recent Past*, New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- , 1978, *Chapters of Literary History 1918 - 1978*, New York: The Viking Press.
- Dubofsky, Melvyn, 1985, *Industrialism and the American Worker 1865 - 1920*, New York: Harland Davidson, Inc.
- Elizabeth and Tom Burns, 1973, *Sociology of Literature and Drama*, Middlesex:

Penguin Books.

- Faulkner, Harold U., and Mark Starr, 1949, *Labor in America*, New York: Harper & Brothers, Publisher.
- Feagin, Joe R., 1982, *Social Problems: A Critical Power-Conflict Perspective*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Fine, Sydney, 1978, *Laissez-Faire and the General Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought 1865-1901*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Friedman, Milton, 1982, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Garraty, John A., 1981, *A Short History of American Nation*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Geismar, Maxwell, 1956, *The Writers in Crisis: The American Novel 1925-1940*, Houghton: The Riverside Press.
- Gutman, Herbert G., 1976, *Work, Culture & Society in Industrializing America*, New York: A Division of Random House.
- Hoffman, J.F., 1951, *The Modern Novel in America 1900 - 1950*, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.
- Hofstadter, Richard, 1982, *The Great Issues in America History*, New York: Random House.
- Horton, R.W. and H.W. Edward, 1974, *Background of American Literary Thought*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. Kazin, Alfred, 1982, *On Native Grounds*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publisher.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1984, *An American Procession* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Kwiat, Joseph J., and Mary C. Turpie, 1980, *Studies in American Culture*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Leuchtenburg, William E., 1958, *The Perils of Prosperity 1914-32*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ludington, Townsend, 1980, *John Dos passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, New York: Elsvier-Dutton Publishing Co, Inc.
- Lunger, Norman, 1986, *Business and Industry*, Washington: The United States Information Agency.
- McDowell, Tremaine, 1948, *American Studies*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Pasca Sarjana, 1992, *Petunjuk Penulisan Usulan Penelitian Dan Tesis*, Yogyakarta.
- Passos, J. Dos, 1936, *U.S.A.*, New York: New American Library.
- Pelling, Henry, 1960, *American Labor*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pizer, Donald, 1982, *Twentieth Century American Literary Naturalism and Interpretation*, New York: Southern Illinois University Press.



- Pusateri, C.J., 1984, *History of American Business*, Illinois: Harland Davidson, Inc.
- Rideout, Walter B., 1956, *The Radical Novel in The United States 1900 - 1954*, New York: American Century Series.
- Santis, 1963, "Industrialism and American Culture" *The Democratic Experience: A Short American History*, Chicago: Foresman and Company.
- Spiller, Robert E. gen.ed., 1974, *Literary History of the United States*, New York: Macmillan.
- Themstorm, Stephan, 1964, *Poverty and Progress*, London: Harvard University Press,
- Veblen, Thorstein, 1973, *The Theory of The Leisure Class*, Boston: Twayne Publishers.
- Walcut, C.C., 1958, *American Literary Naturalism: A Devided Stream*, Conneticut: Greenwood Press.