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Beers, Steve

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## Thinking Globally, Framing Locally: International Discourses and Labor Organizing in Indonesia

STEVE BEERS<sup>1</sup>

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*In the final decade of the New Order regime, Indonesian labor activists turned to international organizations as a key ally in the dangerous work of challenging the state-controlled labor regime. As the political context has become more open, international organizations have continued to play an important role in the labor movement. This paper examines the changing role of transnational labor activism in democratic Indonesia. First, the paper describes the emergence of the discourse of global labor rights in response to the challenges of globalization. It then sketches the historical relationship between the Indonesian state, the labor movement, and international activists. Finally, the paper examines an internationally supported union organizing campaign. Drawing upon the literature on discursive framing, the case suggests that while internationally circulating, rights-based discourses remain an important resource for domestic activists, such discourses must be translated and modified for the local political context.*

**Keywords:** Indonesia; Labor Rights; Labor Unions; Transnational Labor Activism; Transnational Social Movements

*Im letzten Jahrzehnt der Neuen Ordnung wandten sich indonesische ArbeitsaktivistInnen an internationale Organisationen als wichtige BündnispartnerInnen für ihre gefährliche Arbeit, das staatlich kontrollierte Arbeitsregime infrage zu stellen. Im zunehmend offeneren politischen Klima spielen internationale Organisationen weiterhin eine wichtige Rolle für die ArbeiterInnenbewegung. Dieser Artikel behandelt die sich verändernde Rolle von transnationalem ArbeiterInnenaktivismus im demokratischen Indonesien. Dazu wird zuerst die Entstehung eines globalen Arbeitsrechtsdiskurses als Antwort auf die Herausforderungen der Globalisierung beschrieben. Der Artikel skizziert anschließend die historische Beziehung zwischen dem indonesischen Staat, der ArbeiterInnenbewegung und internationalen AktivistInnen. Schließlich wird eine international unterstützte Kampagne zur gewerkschaftlichen Organisation analysiert. Mit Bezug auf die Literatur zu discursive framing zeigt der Fall, dass international zirkulierende, rechtebasierte Diskurse eine wichtige Ressource für innerstaatliche AktivistInnen sind, solche Diskurse allerdings übersetzt und für den lokalen politischen Kontext modifiziert werden müssen.*

**Schlagworte:** Arbeitsrechte; Gewerkschaften; Indonesien; transnationaler ArbeiterInnenaktivismus; transnationale soziale Bewegungen

<sup>1</sup> Steve Beers is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of the blog *Working Indonesia*. This article is based on a Master's thesis in South-East Asian Studies written at the University of Michigan. Contact: sbeers@ssc.wisc.edu

## **Introduction**

After the democratic transition following the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, Indonesian labor activists went from being suppressed by the state and considered a 'communist' threat to be dealt with by force (Hadiz, 1997, p. 131) to gaining legal protection, including the right to organize unions and bargain collectively (Caraway, 2009, pp. 157-158). Both under the authoritarian New Order regime and in the post-Suharto democratic era, international activists and organizations have served an important role in supporting the Indonesian labor movement. In the final decade of the New Order regime, international organizations aided the difficult and often dangerous efforts by local labor activists to challenge the authoritarian regime (Ford, 2009, pp. 88-89). Likewise during the initial transition to democracy, when the Indonesian labor movement was still rebuilding and politically disorganized, international actors played an important role in advocating labor law reforms (Caraway, 2009, p. 177).

A decade into democratic rule, is there still a role for international actors in the rejuvenated Indonesian labor movement? And, if so, has this role changed as the political context has become more open? This paper examines the changing role of transnational labor activism in democratizing Indonesia. First, the paper provides an overview of the challenges globalization presents for labor activism, and the emergence of a globally circulating discourse of labor rights as a response to these challenges. The paper then provides a brief sketch of the historical relationship between changes in the Indonesian political system, the ability of Indonesian workers to organize unions, and the role that international activists have played in supporting domestic campaigns. It then uses an internationally supported organizing campaign by hotel workers in Bandung, West Java, to analyze the dynamics of international labor activism in a labor dispute in Indonesia. Finally, drawing upon the social movements literature on discursive framing, the paper examines how local activists draw upon internationally circulating discourses of labor rights and adapt these discourses into the local political context. The case study highlights the opportunities and limits for social movements in Indonesia to draw upon global rights-based discourses. The openness of the democratic context has not created a blank slate. Instead, activists drawing upon global discourses continue to adjust these discourses to the local political, institutional, and discursive opportunity structures, translate abstract rights

claims into citizenship claims embedded in Indonesia's democratic reforms, and enact social justice discourses when institutional channels fail.

### ***Globalization and Labor Rights***

The intensified globalization of recent decades, coming in the form of increased global market integration and the increased role of global governance bodies, has created pressures linked to the decline in labor union membership and bargaining power. Capital mobility and neoliberal policy reforms have led to weakened regulation of work conditions and safety, increased "flexible production" and contract work, decreased job security and density of union representation, and reduced wages due to the weakened bargaining position of labor unions (Deyo, 1997; Lerner, 2007; Mazur, 2000; Tilly, 1995). Labor unions face a complex and transnational corporate environment in which corporations can shift capital and jobs across borders (Bronfrenbrenner, 2007, pp. 1-2), while mobile capital pressured states to adopt policies that discourage workers' organization and weaken measures to protect workers' welfare (Deyo, 1997, pp. 103-104). Internationally, unions find the political landscape increasingly influenced by supra-governmental institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, which have failed to make labor rights a serious part of their agenda (Stevis & Boswell, 2007, p. 177).

In recent decades, nations in East and South-East Asia have seen trends that in other eras and regions have been associated with the development of strong labor movements, such as increased literacy, expanded wage labor, urbanization, and democratic reform. Despite these trends, labor unions in Asia remain relatively weak (Deyo, 1997, pp. 97-98; Hutchison & Brown, 2001, p. 12). Many states in South-East Asia have pursued economic strategies of light export-oriented industrialization, based upon labor-intensive industries and a compliant and low-cost labor force to attract manufacturing investment. International pressures to open domestic markets to foreign imports have intensified competition and further pressured employers to minimize labor costs. These pressures have led firms to adopt flexible production systems that rely heavily upon contract labor and outsourcing, which undermines the

bargaining power of workers and creates a precarious labor force difficult to organize (Deyo, 1997, pp. 103-104). This region-wide transformation of industrial relations has given capital more power over workers and has led to declines in union density and collective bargaining coverage (Caraway, 2009, p. 167; Kuruvilla, Das, Kwon, & Kwon, 2002, pp. 432-440). Though democratic reforms in the region have offered unions opportunities to influence state policy and labor legislation, labor movements have played marginal roles in the development of respective policies (Deyo, 1997, p. 100), while unionization and collective bargaining remain poorly institutionalized (Caraway, 2009, p. 170).

With these global changes, there has been increased awareness of the need for transnational organizing and a consistent rise in the number of transnational social movement organizations (Smith, 2010, p. 172). Many of the key factors in the process of globalization have also provided transnational networking opportunities for social movements (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 14-15), while the creation of international governing bodies has, unintentionally, brought together social movement organizations and created new forums for political claims (Kay, 2010, p. 87; Smith, 2010, p. 184). Such trends have led to an interest in “globalization from below” and the possibility for international civil society to contest the effects of globalization (Appadurai, 2000).

The labor movement has long fought for its place in the global economy and the need for transnational action. Much of this has come from the ideological left, epitomized by Karl Marx’ declaration “Working men of all countries, unite!” (1848/1978, p. 500). However, the pressure of international competition, capital mobility, and neo-liberal reforms have demanded a renewed interest in transnational organizing across a wider spectrum of labor activists and has come to be considered a *sine qua non* for the future of the labor movement (Herod, 1995; Lerner, 2007). If the sites of struggle are to be at the level of transnational capital and supra-governmental institutions, then labor must take on projects that operate at this global scale (Bronfrenbrenner, 2007, p. 1).

The internationally circulating discourses of labor rights have been one of the most important resources in the labor movement’s response to globalization. Part of a wider trend of a rights-based approach, such as human rights, women’s rights, and indigenous rights, the discourse of labor rights offers activists a set of universal claims flexible enough to be used to make claims and frame issues in the local context

(Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Shafir & Brysk, 2006). Historically, labor claims have taken the form of citizenship claims embedded in and enforced by the state. However, as the welfare state and labor regulations have eroded and human rights claims have gained legitimacy, a universal rights discourse has increasingly been applied to the claims of labor (Fudge, 2007, p. 31; Kolben, 2010, p. 451; Tilly, 1995). This discourse is most clearly embodied in the ILO conventions, which attempt to establish global labor standards through the voluntary ratification of key labor relations principles by member states. These conventions cover a wide range of issues such as freedom of association, collective bargaining, forced labor, child labor, and discrimination in the workplace. For labor unions, the most important of these conventions are Convention No. 87 and Convention No. 98. The former protects the right of workers to organize, the right of these organizations to control their own administration, and the right to form labor federations. The latter protects workers from anti-union discrimination and obligates states to establish procedures to respect these rights (Novitz, 1998, pp. 170-171). However, due to the ILO supervision of state compliance, the voluntary nature of convention ratification, the vagueness of their wording, and the impossibility of ILO enforcement, the conventions act as policy guidelines rather than legal standards (Novitz, 1998, pp. 171-173; Standing, 2008, p. 356). With the continued erosion of the welfare state and labor regulation, the ILO has emphasized negative rights against the worst abuses over strong state regulation and standard setting. In doing so, critics contend the ILO has ceded too much ground to the neoliberal agenda (Alston, 2004; Standing, 2008), while for proponents the current rights-based discourse is flexible enough to survive economic transformations and be deployed in multiple contexts. As the case study of Indonesia will illustrate, the rights-based approach offers local activists discursive resources to make labor rights claims. However, the operation of these discourses in local labor disputes requires further consideration.

### ***A Brief History of the Indonesian Labor Movement and International Involvement***

Before examining the role of labor rights discourses in contemporary Indonesia, this section provides a brief overview of the historical relationship between the Indonesian state, the Indonesian labor movement, and its international allies. In the years

following independence, Indonesia was a parliamentary democracy in which most labor unions were linked to political parties, the largest of which was the communist-affiliated *All-Indonesia Central Workers' Organization* (SOBSI – *Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia*). While representing a relatively small industrial working class, labor unions of that time took advantage of a weak state and fierce party competition to organize a vibrant movement. However, when Indonesia made the transition from parliamentary democracy to Sukarno's Guided Democracy in 1957, the consolidation of state power and increased role of the military led to greater restrictions on labor unions and workers' rights to organize (Hadiz, 1997, pp. 52-56). In 1965, the New Order regime under Suharto came to power through a coup and ensuing massacre of an estimated 500,000 people, based on the pretext of eliminating a communist threat to the nation. For the labor movement, this meant the banning of leftist labor organizations (Caraway, 2004, p. 33), especially the communist-affiliated SOBSI, and the killing or arrest of leftist labor activists (Hadiz, 1997, p. 59). Following the violent defeat of the left, any form of independent labor activism came to be labeled as 'communist' and, thus, a security threat (Hadiz, 2002, p. 131). The regime revoked many of the labor rights from the Sukarno era and consolidated all remaining labor unions into a politically docile, state-sponsored union run by officials with government, military, or ruling party ties that rarely confronted employers or the state (Caraway, 2004, p. 33; Quinn, 2003, p. 13).

The banning of independent labor unions and the domination of state and military interests came to characterize the state's industrial relations policy, known as *Pancasila Industrial Relations* (HIP – *Hubungan Industrial Pancasila*).<sup>2</sup> HIP emphasized harmony and partnership between workers and employers and specifically rejected "foreign models" of industrial relations that acknowledged antagonism between workers and employers (Ford, 2009, p. 34). In practice, this meant the stifling of workers' grievances and guarding against the development of an independent labor movement (Hadiz, 2002, p. 132; Quinn, 2003, p. 13). The regime characterized labor activists as dangerous outsiders attempting to use workers for their own political agendas (Ford, 2009, pp. 78-79). This included restrictions on the activities of international labor organizations, unless they were willing to accept the constraints of the *Pancasila*

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<sup>2</sup> *Pancasila* represents the five fundamental principles of the Indonesian state: belief in one god, humanitarianism, national unity, consultative democracy, and social justice. First articulated by Sukarno in 1945, the principles have remained the philosophical basis of the Indonesian state to this day.



framework and work with the state-sponsored labor union (Ford, 2009, pp. 49-50).

In the 1990s, the final years of the New Order rule saw an increase in labor disputes (Quinn, 2003, p. 51), along with the emergence of labor-related NGOs and a few independent labor unions that attempted to challenge the state-controlled labor relations (Quinn, 2003, pp. 7-8). This led to a growing concern within the regime about the possibility of labor unrest, a concern amplified by international labor rights campaigns that put Indonesia's labor conditions on the international agenda. The regime's concern for its international reputation opened up important political space for domestic activists, including modest reforms in labor relations and the protection of labor NGOs with international connections from the regime's most repressive tactics (Ford, 2009, pp. 88-89).

Much of the international support for domestic labor activism in Indonesia resembled what Keck and Sikkink (1998) term the "boomerang pattern", in which domestic actors attempt to bypass blocked political channels domestically by drawing upon transnational activist networks through which they bring pressure upon the state from the outside (pp. 12-13). Adopting the "naming and shaming" strategies commonly used by human rights campaigns (Hafner-Burton, 2008, p. 1), international campaigns used the most dramatic cases of labor rights suppression, such as the murder of female labor activist Marsinah, the jailing of union leaders Muchtar Pakpahan and Dita Indah Sari, or the sweatshop conditions tied to prominent multinational clothing brands to moderate the regime's most repressive tactics and create some political space for domestic labor activists (Hadiz, 1997, pp. 179-180; Quinn, 2003, p. 14). International connections also served as a key source of funding for labor activism outside the regime-backed labor union, with funds coming from such organizations as the Ford Foundation, the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID), the ILO, and the *AFL-CIO's American Center for International Labor Solidarity* (Ford, 2009, pp. 88-89). This support led to the growth of labor-specific NGOs and was part of a larger civil society resistance against the New Order regime (Aspinall, 2005, pp. 86-115).

Following the fall of Suharto in 1998 and the subsequent democratic transition, labor activists worked in a far more open political context that gave Indonesia arguably



the most worker-friendly labor laws in the region (Caraway, 2009, pp. 157-158).<sup>3</sup> While these labor reforms have been undermined by a lack of quality enforcement (Caraway, 2009, p. 177) and criticized for their emphasis on business-friendly flexible labor relations (Suryomengglo, 2008; Tjandra, 2008), they provide a basis for workers' claims to workplace justice. Along with gaining formal rights and institutional access, previously risky public demonstrations have been decriminalized and labor street protests have become a routine element of the political landscape (Juliawan, 2011).

International organizations have continued and even increased their involvement in the Indonesian labor movement (Ford, 2009, p. 170). International actors played an essential role in the initial labor law reforms following democratization (Caraway, 2004, p. 44; Tjandra, 2008, p. 5) and, while international labor organizations were unable to unify the Indonesian labor movement under one umbrella federation (Ford, 2009, p. 170), they provided important funding and organizational support to a labor movement decimated by decades of authoritarian rule.

Furthermore, while the "boomerang pattern" remains important, international organizations increasingly play the role of offering organizational and discursive support to domestic actors who have more political space to adopt and transform them in the local political context. In order to examine these dynamics in contemporary labor campaigns, the paper now turns to a union organizing campaign by workers at the Grand Aquila Hotel in Bandung, West Java, that reflects the intersection between a dynamic local union organizing drive and universal labor rights claims.

## **The Grand Aquila Campaign**

Drawing upon the social movements literature on discursive framing, this case study points to the ways in which transnational connections help domestic actors to tap into internationally circulating discourses on labor rights. However, it also emphasizes the need to translate and enact these discourses in the local political context. The following analysis of the Grand Aquila campaign draws on local press reports of

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3 This included the ratification of ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise; the passage of the Trade Union Act of 2000, guaranteeing freedom of association, the right to organize, and the right to bargain collectively; the Manpower Act of 2003, which strengthened the right to strike, limited outsourcing, and contract labor, and raised severance pay (Caraway, 2004, pp. 37-38); and the creation of the Industrial Relations Courts independent of the Ministry of Manpower (Mizuno, 2008).

protest events, findings from the ILO Freedom of Association Committee, local and international union press releases, and correspondence with local union leadership. While the use of press reports is limited by potential biases and selective reporting, such an approach is common among studies of protest movements as a way to both confirm activist narratives and capture what elements of a protest are being communicated to the public at large.

The union organizing campaign at the Hotel Grand Aquila, a luxury hotel located in the commercial district of Bandung, began in September 2008, when workers organized a union affiliated with the *Federation of Independent Labor Unions* (FSPM – *Federasi Serikat Pekerja Mandiri*) (International Union of Foodworkers Asia/Pacific [IUF Asia/Pacific], 2008). The campaign received support from the *International Union of Foodworkers* (IUF), a global union federation with local union affiliates in 120 countries (IUF, 2009). In early October, Grand Aquila workers informed the management that they had formed a union and would like to begin negotiating. The next day, the general manager dismissed the union chairperson and two other union officers without cause and let security forces escort them from the building (ILO, 2010, p. 151; IUF Asia/Pacific, 2009a). In a series of one-on-one meetings, the hotel management threatened the union members with dismissal or pay cuts if they did not resign from the union (ILO, 2010, p. 151).

Soon after the initial firings, management and the union engaged in talks mediated by the Bandung Ministry of Manpower. In those talks, according to the union, the management expressed their willingness to rehire the fired workers but refused to put anything in writing (Merdeka, 2008). These promises did not lead to the reinstatement of the fired union leaders. On 1 December, the management confronted the union members with an ultimatum: Union members would accept pay cuts or face dismissal. Following the ultimatum, the union continued to seek mediation through the Bandung Ministry of Manpower. However, as the management continued to refuse collaboration, the union informed management that they would go on strike if the union leaders were not reinstated and all anti-union discrimination ended. This culminated in a one day work stoppage. The next day, management distributed a list of 128 union members who were to be barred from the hotel premises, effectively terminating their employment (ILO, 2010, p. 154; Sopandi, personal communication, June 4, 2011). Furthermore, the hotel management attempted to undermine the

union by helping to create a competing union, the Family Association of Grand Aquila (SP IKGA – *Ikatan Keluarga Grand Aquila*) (IUF Asia/Pacific, 2009b). The case represents many of the most common forms of union discrimination by employers, both in Indonesia and worldwide: firing union activists, holding one-on-one meetings with workers, threatening dismissal, and creating an employer-friendly alternative union.

After the initial conflict over the right to form a union, workers started a more public campaign against the hotel. The union established a presence in front of the hotel, held weekly demonstrations, and demanded reinstatement, back wages, and the freedom to form a union (IUF Asia/Pacific, 2009b). Workers also created a “solidarity café” next door to the hotel to help raise funds for the campaign (IUF, 2008). In one of its early workplace actions, the union blocked two of the hotel’s entrance gates with 50 meter banners reading “Prohibiting workers from organizing is 5 years in jail or a 500 million Rupiah fine” (Rakasiwi, 2009), referring to a rarely enforced law against the violation of workers’ freedom of association.

Along with publicizing the dispute, workers sought redress through institutional channels. These included lobbying the West Java Ministry of Manpower to mediate the dispute (ILO, 2010, p. 159), demonstrating outside the Bandung City Legislature calling for the hotel to have its business license revoked (Sayuti, 2010; “SPM Desak Kasus Grand Aquila”, 2010), and urging the West Java Prosecutor’s Office and local police to bring criminal charges against the hotel (Martadinata, 2010). These attempts to seek redress through state channels gained the workers recognition but few results. After the failed mediation attempts, the Bandung Ministry of Manpower sent a series of reprimanding letters to hotel management, asking them to reinstate the dismissed workers, repay back wages, and respect the workers’ freedom of association. Workers also held mediation meetings with management through the Bandung Regional House of Representatives, but according to the union, management did not take these talks seriously. The local police opened an investigation against the management, though the charges were ultimately dropped. Even the National Commission on Human Rights recognized the case, repeatedly offering to provide mediation and urging President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to intervene to end the dispute (ILO, 2010, pp. 151-152; Sopandi, personal communication, June 4, 2011). Despite this recognition, the ILO identified a lack of willingness by the state to “impose sufficiently dissuasive sanctions” against the violating employers (ILO, 2010, p. 155). While the

ILO did not recommend specific sanctions for the Grand Aquila campaign, the ILO's Freedom of Association Committee recommends severe fines, the reinstatement of workers, and closing down enterprises in cases of anti-union discrimination where a settlement cannot be negotiated (ILO, 2006, § 825). The lack of sanctions in the Grand Aquila case illustrates the ways in which union organizing remains highly dependent both upon the freedom of association protections that came with Indonesia's democratic reform and the state's often lax enforcement of laws prohibiting anti-union discrimination (Caraway, 2009, p.165).

### *Universal and Local Framing Strategies*

The Grand Aquila campaign shows how the campaign's discursive strategies have been informed by the union's international connections and internationally circulating discourses on labor rights. In the social movements literature, these discursive strategies are discussed in terms of framing. David A. Snow et al. (1986) describe framing strategies as the "rendering of events or occurrences meaningful", in which frames "function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (p. 464). This approach to social movements emphasizes that activists not only act upon the world, but also give it meaning through interpretation and articulation (p. 466). In this way, social movements use framing strategies to make their message "comprehensible to target audiences, to attract attention and encourage action, and to 'fit' with favorable institutional venues" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 2-3). While the literature on discursive strategies has focused on "new social movements", that are based on identity and cultural politics (Edelman, 2001, pp. 288-289), the Grand Aquila case suggests the utility of framing analysis for labor union organizing as well.

Internationally circulating, labor rights-based discourses provided the language with which workers framed their initial grievances against the hotel management. During early demonstrations, workers held signs referring to ILO Convention 87 on Freedom of Association or signs saying "Stop union busting", with "union busting" written in English (Gandapurnama, 2008; IUF Asia/Pacific, 2009a). By referring to the right to form a union under ILO Convention 87, ratified by Indonesia in 2000, the campaign drew upon internationally accepted labor rights as a way to introduce new political norms and pressure their employer and the state to resolve the dispute. While the ILO does not have the enforcement

mechanisms to effectively combat such labor violations (Rütters & Zimmermann, 2003, p. 30), Indonesia's ratification of ILO Convention 87 provided the "texts and pretexts" upon which activists were able to build a campaign (Waterman & Timms, 2005, p. 185).

These international discourses, along with domestic legal protections, were part of a language of abstract rights with which the campaign framed its grievances. However, as the campaign moved on, protest strategies shifted from universal claims of labor rights to normative claims of local justice. In one such protest, outside the Bandung Legislature, activists staged a theatrical performance in which they carried plates of sand, representing the economic hardship the workers faced after 15 months off the job, while demonstration speakers emphasized the back pay workers were owed and the difficulty they had paying rent ("SPM Desak Kasus Grand Aquila", 2010). Similarly, the campaign received some of its widest press coverage when it conducted a seven day "long march" from Bandung to Jakarta, concluding it with a demonstration in the capital and demanding a meeting with the President (IUF, 2010; Sunarya, 2010). In describing the march, one activist called it an "action [that] comes purely from the hearts of our comrades" (Ginulur, 2010, author's translation), a language far more emotive and normative than the legalistic claims of ILO conventions. Furthermore, when two union members died from heart attacks during the course of the campaign, the union posted harrowing bedside photos on its official Facebook page and demonstrated with two caskets outside the Bandung Mayor's office (Demo Serikat Mandiri, 2011).

In each of these examples, one finds a shift away from the abstract claims of international labor rights to a normative framing, adopting an emerging repertoire of street protest in Indonesia that focuses on performance, symbolism, and hardships (Juliawan, 2011). The shift points to the importance of framing strategies that resonate with the way that grievances are experienced (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 208) and the relationship between framing strategies and institutional opportunities, in this case the move away from failed institutional strategies. The shift in campaign narrative from one about universal labor rights to one about the material impact of union busting and dismissal from their jobs also represented a key change in the claims of workers, from globally circulating abstract labor rights to social rights claims. Social rights, as described by T. H. Marshall (1949/1964), are claims to prevailing standards of economic welfare and based on a relationship between citizens and the state.

Whereas abstract labor rights provided the initial frame for the Grand Aquila workers, activists operationalized this rights discourse through claims embedded in material experience and targeting the state as citizens.

*Friction and Transgressing Proper Political Channels*

The shift in narrative represents a strategic choice of workers to frame grievances in ways that resonate with local target audiences, but it also speaks to the necessary translation of social justice discourses across borders and what Anna Tsing (2005) refers to as “friction”. According to Tsing, friction is the process through which cultures and discourses are continually co-produced across borders, with special emphasis on the negotiation between universal categories and particular local contexts (pp. 4-5). This process has particular implications for globally circulating social justice discourses. While they allow local actors to make claims, they also “must be negotiated not only across class, race, gender, nationality, culture, and religion, but also between the global South and global North, and between the great mega-cities of the world and their provincial hinterlands” (Tsing, 2005, p. 13; cf. Thayer, 2010). This is equally true of the universal labor rights claims deployed by the Grand Aquila workers, which must be adapted in ways that have relevance in the local political context (Seidman, 2007, p. 20).

Perhaps no event in the Grand Aquila campaign better illustrates this process of transforming universal rights into locally relevant political action than the union’s reaction to an ILO decision in its favor. In November 2010, the ILO published a decision stating that there was evidence that workers’ freedom of association had been violated and recommended that the Indonesian government “take without delay all necessary measures, including sanctions where appropriate” to have the fired workers reinstated and the union recognized (ILO, 2010, p. 156). The decision was a victory for the union as it gave legitimacy to the workers’ grievances, but it was not binding. The campaign had to translate the international recognition of its claims in a way that had local political meaning. The workers did so days later in chaining themselves to the gate of the West Java Governor’s office, demanding the government act upon the ILO recommendations (Budiana, 2010). Whereas the ILO decision gave symbolic capital and legitimacy to the campaign, it had to be articulated and made real, in this case in a physical sense. The choice to demand the implementation of the ILO

decision by chaining themselves to the gates of the Governor's office represented a strategy, in which they not only reframed the language of their claims but deployed protest strategies that transgressed 'proper' political channels and the ineffective institutional methods of resolving the dispute. The new tactics represented a shift to what Doug McAdam (1996) calls "strategic dramaturgy", in which the message of the movement is framed by the meanings encoded in actions, rather than language alone. In the Grand Aquila campaign, these transgressive, action-oriented strategies often involved physical demonstrations and made the hotel itself a politically contested space. A series of demonstrations, which coincided with large events at the hotel, involved union protesters throwing trash, rotten eggs, and chicken feces onto hotel property and burning tires in front of the hotel gates. The actions left guests holding their noses in disgust, while activists urged customers to leave the hotel ("Demo SPM", 2010; "Karyawan Hotel Lemparkan", 2010; Kurniawan, 2010). While receiving local press coverage, the actions were absent from the press releases of the campaign's international supporters, the IUF.

The union adopted other transgressive strategies which were left unmentioned by the otherwise regular updates of the union's international affiliates. For months, the cover photo of the local union's official Facebook page featured a picture of graffiti painted on a wall outside the hotel. The graffiti read "This hotel has been confiscated", co-opting the bureaucratic language of an official posting and declaring hotel property a site of political contestation. The graffiti included the word "dog" (*anjing*), a highly derogative term in Muslim-majority Indonesia. While the graffiti may not translate well for international audiences, it represents a shift in framing from abstract rights and the failed bureaucratic channels to a localized and emotional framing. These strategies are highly political, and the personalization of grievance can be seen as both a powerful way of generating anger and possible action and a way of imagining and articulating alternative social relations (Scott, 1985, p. 347).

The campaign did not only use graffiti to construct a political imaginary in which workers actually had the power to confiscate the workplace, but also attempted to enact this imaginary in a small way. For three months in 2009, workers occupied a section of the sidewalk outside the hotel with an installation of tents and banners. After three months, workers and the management met with government officials to negotiate the legality of the workers' sidewalk occupation. Soon after the meeting,



the local Satpol PP, Indonesia's unarmed public order police, arrived at the site to dismantle and confiscate the tent installation. Workers, left to clean up the remains, only did so after throwing some of their remaining things onto hotel property and turning two large speakers playing rock music in the direction of the hotel (Yulianti, 2009). These skirmishes between workers and management over the control of hotel property became an opportunity for the campaign to take the dispute outside the bureaucratic channels of the state that continued to fail the workers.

### **Conclusion**

Like other social movements in Indonesia, the Indonesian labor movement has seen its ability to organize and mobilize rise and fall with Indonesia's shifting political contexts. The democratic context of post-Suharto Indonesia has provided social movements with many new political opportunities unavailable under the New Order regime, including more opportunities to supplement domestic campaigns with internationally circulating rights-based discourses. Despite the lack of a resolution to the dispute, the Grand Aquila campaign represents a multi-faceted labor organizing campaign – involving international support, government lobbying, and direct action – that would have been difficult to imagine in Indonesia prior to democratization. The new political opportunities include the freedom to mobilize around internationally circulating discourses on labor rights. Yet, as the Grand Aquila campaign suggests, democratization has not created a blank slate upon which international discourses can be simply inscribed verbatim. Activists can more freely adopt international discourses, but must grapple with the limited impact of universal rights claims in the local institutional and discursive context. Each of the campaign strategies described above – the rhetorical shift from legal rights to social rights claims based on economic hardship, the use of symbolic demonstrations, the transgression of proper political channels, and the enactment of labor rights claims through physical demonstrations – illustrates how international support provides discursive resources to domestic activists and the need for those discourses to be translated and enacted locally by domestic actors. As Snow and Benford (1988) put it, framing and mobilization are “highly dialectical, such that there is no such thing as a *tabula rasa* or empty

glass into which new and perhaps alien ideas can be poured” (p. 204). In contemporary Indonesia, the more open democratic context has not eliminated the *friction* between international and local discourses for social movements. The Grand Aquila campaign’s shift from rights-based appeals to normative appeals demonstrates the ways that activists adjust framing strategies to the discursive and political opportunity structures in which they operate (Ferree, 2003; Meyer & Minkoff 2004; Snow, 2007). In this case, the shift away from rights-based appeals that garnered little response from the state bureaucracies assigned to enforce them points to the limits that institutional opportunity structures place on social justice discourses and the importance of work by local activists to deploy, adapt, and transform these discourses in ways that have meaning in the local political context.

Thus, for the Indonesian labor movement, international allies and internationally circulating social justice discourses remain a powerful resource to draw upon. Just as important, however, is creative adaptation of these discourses in the local political context, whether it is translation of universal discourses in ways that resonate locally, transformation of universal rights claims into citizenship claims upon local state actors, or enactment of these claims through transgressive direct action. Yet, the lack of resolution for the Grand Aquila workers illustrates how the utility of universal rights discourses remains dependent upon the strengths and weaknesses of civil and citizenship rights embedded in the domestic state.

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