

Becoming a Union Leader: the story of Indonesian garment union organizer Aan Aminah

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From unhappy childhood in a village, working as a domestic worker, to learning to become a union leader who courageously leads workers' protests, Aan Aminah recounts her inspirational stories in a wide-ranging conversation.

On a rainy Thursday in September 2022, we visited the office of a union secretariat in Bandung, Indonesia. In the middle of making *sumpias*, three women welcomed us—not only with warmth, but also with plates and plates of Sundanese food.

One of them is Aan Aminah, Chairwoman of the Federasi Serikat Buruh Militan (Federation of Militant Trade Unions, SEBUMI). In June 2020, Aan Aminah led a protest of fellow workers against wage cuts and mass layoffs at her textile factory. She and other organizers were fired by the company. They fought back, and Aminah was arrested and imprisoned for 10 days.

More than a year after her imprisonment, Aan Aminah has kept the union secretariat running by making and selling *sumpia* with her fellow members. The process to kickstart their small business was far from a breeze—money was often tight, especially during the recent price hike of cooking oil. Fortunately, there were always customers. They have distributed their product to many places: Madiun, Sumatra, Bali, even Yogyakarta. The business does help support their day-to-day life and fund some activities.

As we finished our lunch, Aminah recounted how she became a union leader in a wide-ranging conversation: from the threats and harassment from her supervisors; to distrust and hostility from her co-workers and fellow organizers; to obstacles as a woman in the union movement; to her role in leading protests, and her arrest.

What follows is a condensed version of the conversation conducted by Astika Andriani, an activist and researcher based in Bandung, Indonesia.

Astika Andriani (In): I'm curious about your stories. Would you mind telling us about how you started to be active in labor?

Aan Aminah (A): I grew up in a village called Karang Pancar, in Pangandaran Regency. My childhood was an unhappy one. After graduating from the sixth grade, I worked as a domestic worker in Jakarta for 7 years. Nowadays, I realize it's a form of exploitation. I left my employer because she moved to Kendari. My mother didn't allow me to go there, so I went back to my village. I asked my brother to help me find a job.

Then I was taken to Bandung and was unemployed for three months. Because I had only graduated

from elementary school, every day I went from one factory gate to another, carrying a folder of job applications.

In: Which year was that? How did you find a job in the textile factory?

A: It was 1995. I was someone who never gave up. I traveled back and forth to look for work, and when I got there, I was starving. Finally, my cousin offered me a job, because Sandang Sari was opening a branch here. 'Do you want to work there?' he asked, 'I do!' I replied. Then, getting hired at the company wasn't so difficult. But what was difficult at that time was that I was wearing a headscarf, and there were no people there who wore headscarves.

In: That was during the New Order era (Indonesia under President Suharto from 1966 to 1998), right?

A: Yes, because it was the New Order era. And it was hard for me because I had to take off my headscarf. To be honest, I was reluctant to do it. I wanted to stand by my belief, but the important thing is that I can work first. One day I worked without wearing a headscarf, I did it for the sake of working. It turned out that the supervisor I worked for hated me. I was bullied and threatened.

In: When you first entered the company, what department did you work in? What were the working conditions like?

A: I was in the Packing section. At that time, the work was still manual. The cutting tools were still using cutter knives, and scissors made of iron. Then the wrapping part was still manual. I was still learning how to wrap.

I was scolded because I didn't know how to do my work. I was insulted and called stupid. It motivated me to learn and show them that I could do my work.

Initially, there were two women who received such treatment, but one could not survive and left.

In: During your employment, some workers managed to unionize. When did it start, and what motivated you to take part in it?

A: At that time the workers were supposed to go home at 3 o'clock (7 hours of work), but I was asked to go home at 4 o'clock. I didn't know that we are supposed to be paid for working overtime. We were treated like that for 2 years. When I was actively working, I realized that I had been lied to, because overtime was not paid, but I did not dare to fight back.

But soon I began to be perceived to be a dissident because I dare to speak up at work. If other workers are called by the supervisor, they will definitely obey and be polite. But not me. Because I felt I was not wrong. So I dared to speak up and oppose. The supervisor said, 'It gives me a headache to have an employee like you'.

There was already a union in the factory at that time. It has been running since 2006. In 2010, I approached the union because I had work-related conflicts. I was just about to become a member of the union. The union thought I was a spy and a sycophant for the company, while the company thought I was a spy for the union.

When I was intimidated, I was not defended by the union leader. The union leader said, 'The supervisor is nice, maybe it's [Aminah] who has a bad attitude'. Automatically this supervisor oppressed me even more. That's when I thought about getting involved in the union.

In: Why did the union leader not defend you?

A: Because I wasn't part of the union. I was considered close to and in favor of the company. That's not how we act now. Workers have to be defended. That's why I decided to join the union, because I found that the union (as it existed then) couldn't help me.

I came to the union secretariat in Rancaekek and sat in the back row and corner. Other people didn't want to sit near me because I was considered a spy for the company. But I didn't give up. I came to the secretariat in Rancaekek every Saturday.

In May 2011, there was a meeting for May Day. It turned out that there might be an explanation of the strategy on May Day by the union. Everyone who was not yet a member was asked to leave the secretariat building. It was for members only. I tried to ignore that and stayed seated in the corner of the room.

There were three meetings, and at the third meeting they said, 'If this person (Aminah) is told to leave, she will definitely snitch to the company; if she stays here, she will also snitch to the company'. Then someone said 'Leave her alone. If she's a snitch, let her snitch on us to the company!' While in fact, I really wanted to learn about unionism.

That was part of my struggle in joining the labor movement. Not everyone would immediately believe me.

In: But then you succeeded in gaining their trust, and joined the union. What did you do, and how did the union advocate for workers?

A: After May, the chairman of the union and 16 of my friends were expelled, so we held a demonstration in front of the company. At that time, I was only a passive member. I had only been a member for about a month.

Maybe I was considered to have the potential to become the head of the union. Honestly, I wasn't looking for popularity. I wasn't looking for a position. I just wanted to fight. In the end, the union promoted me to Field Coordinator. Later on, I was promoted again to the Education Division within the union. After that, I was promoted to the Advocacy Division.

I was asked to advocate for 16 of my friends who were expelled. It turned out that of the 16 people, 8 of them left, and 8 others stayed. The matter was followed up, and forwarded to the Manpower Office. Finally those who had been laid off for 3 months were supposed to receive Rp. 6,500,000/person as severance pay.

At that time, I still didn't know much about organizing. I was invited to a hotel with 4 friends from other organizations by a company director. It turned out that at the hotel, they offered my friends and I to embezzle the severance pay from a total of Rp. 6,500,000/person. So the laid-off workers will only receive Rp. 4,000,000, and we receive Rp. 2,500,000.

Seeing this, I immediately refused. But my four friends chose to take the money. Since then I have been antagonized by members of my union.

I realized that the union was not completely clean from such forms of misappropriation. What I wanted was a union that was clean and defended workers. In the end, those who were not in line with me naturally stepped aside one by one.

After that, I was appointed Deputy Chairwoman of the union. I was very vocal, both in the factory

and in the union. From there I learned about how to run demonstrations for May Day.

Because I often organize and handle labor dispute cases, in the end, I only got paid Rp. 300,000 per month by the company, while my other friends were paid Rp. 1,000,000. This has happened to me since 2014. So I thought being the head of a union or being active in union activities, how can you live a prosperous life? The company only paid me Rp. 300,000, while I still have debts and bills to pay. But I never backed down from the union.

In: Have you ever asked the company or others about the wage deduction, or have you ever asked about why your wages are lower?

A: As I understand it, maybe because I participated in the union too often. Then there is a regulation called P1 P4 imposed by the company. I don't know what it is. According to the information from the company, if I violate P1, my wages will be cut, if I violate P4, my wages will also be cut. [1]

In: So every time you violated the rules, your wages were cut?

A: Yes, like that. I was never given an explanation of how or what kind of activities violated the regulation. Even when I asked the supervisor about it, no explanation was given. I let it go as long as I could defend my friends who wanted to organize. As a result, I sometimes went to work and returned home on foot, because I had no money and felt bad to borrow more money from my friends.

Because I was often active and studying in the union, I was not allowed to take overtime. I think that was also intimidation. So, during that time I decided to study in the union secretariat in Rancaekek, learning about contracts, about overtime. I realized that the way to fight is not with muscles but with the brain.

In the Packing department, I was tasked with packing 20 parties of fabric (one party is equivalent to 2000 yards of fabric) in 1 day, and it had to be completed. My workload was increasing and it seemed to exceed Rodi work. [2] That's where I continued to resist, not caring how or what other people would react, or whether or not other people would join my resistance. I fought for my comrades on maternity leave, holiday leave, and so on.

Some people asked me, 'Why are you still in that company?', 'Why don't you look for another workplace?' I thought that moving to another workplace with a similar working condition makes no difference. I had to fight to change this system. There may be people out there who feel worse than I do. That's not the way out, but I think about how the work system here must change, and I continue to fight.

In 2020 there was a Covid-19 pandemic, and the company didn't want to negotiate. So we shut down the machines, we shut down everything.

In: This was the strike where you experienced violence and harassment from the factory's security officers. The company ended up suing you and other workers for more than Rp. 12 billion. How did the strike start?

A: So when the Covid-19 pandemic happened, we were told by the company that they would impose a new work system. Covid-19 was just a tool for the company to blackmail us.

The rule goes like this, 50% of the workers are furloughed for one week, and the other 50% will be working. I actually don't object to this change. However, I want to defend my friends, because the wage calculation of this change is that 50% of the workers who are furloughed are only paid 35% of the full wage; 50% of the workers who are fully employed are paid 100%. Secondly, 50% of the full-

time employees have double or the same workload as when 100% of the employees were working.

So on May 12, we asked the company to negotiate with us, but it was not possible. Finally, we all shut down the machines and occupied the factory. We did that for 2 weeks, 24 hours a day.

Perhaps out of spite, the Antapani police, who were paid by the company, came in every night to negotiate with me. Because actually I don't want to stay here to strike, I just asked them to solve my problem with the company.

But after we went back to work, ten of us were summoned by the board of directors, and we were dismissed on the ground that we were provocateurs of actions that influenced our comrades. At 3 o'clock, we were not let out, and we waited until 4 o'clock. It turned out that the police had been hired by the company, so there was a clash.

In: After the clash in the protest, you were detained. The legal process was still ongoing at that time, but you stayed in the prison for 10 days. During your detention, was there any support? What motivated you to keep fighting and organizing?

A: Definitely a lot of support from my friends. That's why I didn't stay there for a long time. However, what motivated me was not only the support, but seeing and experiencing the treatment in the prison.

In prison, not everyone is there because they're guilty. There are many people like me too, who experienced injustice, and got into prison because they were cheated or thrown in by people who are more powerful.

From the moment I entered prison, I was stripped naked. Our movement was really limited. We were isolated and could not hang out with others. If we tried see each other from the iron bars, we would be punished. Three times a week we were told to cut grass. There were only a few tools available, while there are hundreds of inmates. So I can never use the proper tools and I had to use my hand to cut grass until my hands bleed.

We are also given food, three times a day. But what do we eat? The rice was yellow. I thought it was just the rice that has really poor quality, but I heard from the people who delivered the rice that it's mixed with kapur sirih (calcium hydroxide). It made the rice really hard and springy. Salted fish, too, and one spoon of vegetable. Everything tasted horrible.

In: As a woman worker and an activist who had been through a lot—from receiving threats and intimidation from the company and even suspicion from your fellow members in the labor union. I'm sure it's challenging. What is it like being a woman activist in the labor union?

A: It doesn't only happen in the workplace, but in my community at home. Double prejudice, which especially affects my daughter, as well. I live alone with my daughter. Whenever I go out for a day or two for union activities, or arrive home at night time, usually the male members in my union drove me home on their motorbike. Today it's one person, and the next day it's another person. My neighbors accused me of many things, and thought that I was a bad woman.

I tell my neighbors that I'm a woman activist. The one who brought me home is not some guy I'm having an affair with, but a member of my union. It took a really long time to convince them. It affected my own daughter, how we were treated by my own community at home. But that's the risk of being a female activist.

In: Are there any immediate things that you and your friends are focusing on right now?

A: Definitely, we want to always advocate for the comrades. I also always tell my comrades that I, as chairwoman, am the dumbest person, and they understand the most. That means they have to be more advanced. But if they become defectors, I will leave and do not want to organize anymore.

I had hoped that Bandung would be the pioneer, but now it seems like the spirit has died out. Maybe the spirit has died out because the union is still obedient to the company. I want new bases to emerge in Bandung from new people who want to fight for their comrades.

Astika Andriani
Aan Aminah

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P.S.

Asian Labour Review

<https://labourreview.org/becoming-a-union-leader/>

Footnotes

[1] Workers who are active in the factory-level union often have to leave work to advocate or handle cases, or to conduct other union-related activities. In Indonesian legislation, this is stipulated in Law No. 21 of 2000 on Labor Unions. Article 29 states that employers must provide opportunity to the officials and members of a labor union to carry out their activities during working hours; Article 28 states that everybody is prohibited from preventing the labor union from carrying out their activities, including by reducing the amount of the worker's wage. In this case, if the employer does not provide opportunity for labor union activities and goes so far as to cut the official's wages and send warning letters, it can be categorized as intimidating and preventing labor union activities, which is a violation of the law. P1 P4 refers to Surat Peringatan (Warning Letter) 1 to Surat Peringatan 4, sent by the company to her. It is likely that the company warns her not to leave work to conduct labor union activity during working hours, and stated that they will deduct her wage.

[2] A system of forced work implemented during Dutch colonialism in Indonesia - a common phrase to use to emphasize high, intense workload.