

The role of NGOs in representing workers on the issue of OHS in Indonesia

5.1 Introduction

Labour movements, not governments nor employers, drive improvements in occupational health and safety (OHS) (Donado and Klaus 2012). Trade unions have had a significant and historic role to play in lobbying, campaigning, and mobilizing workers to build pressure for higher OHS standards in the workplace and in state regulation. However alongside unions, other organisations have also driven the momentum for regulatory change and offered assistance to workers with OHS issues and concerns (Tattersall 2011). In the context of developing states, non- government organisations (NGOs) have long played a role in the representation and provision of voice for workers as union proxies. Arguably, they have filled a gap in workplace and labour market representation in these nations but have so far had limited success in improving OHS outcomes (Ford 2006).

This paper seeks to identify and assess the strategies and ‘repertoires of action’ of a labour NGO in the developing state context of Indonesia. The NGO under observation is of special interest because it concerns itself with the specific issue domain of OHS by seeking to raise general social and worker awareness of health and safety standards and practices but also by offering direct support to workers and advocacy on their behalf. Although it does not, as trade unions do, seek to organise and mobilise workers as a membership-based organisation, it seeks to coordinate and mobilise a broad social coalition – comprised of unions, workers and various other interested parties - in order to raise awareness of issues relating to OHS, as well as affecting change in the workplace through seeking to influence state regulation and norms around enforcement of OHS law.

In the developing state contexts, non-union organisations have been established as a representative mechanism for workers since the second half of the last century (Ahmed and Potter 2006, Howell 2015). Known as labour NGOs, these groups tended to be generalist in nature and often acted as a proxy for unions in the social and political context of oppressive state regimes – such as the New order Suharto regime in Indonesia- who were hostile to the presence and functioning of independent trade unions (Ford & Gillan 2016). The issues these labour NGOs represented workers on were defined by their experience of oppression and the large pool of informal workers in the economy and thus focused on the right to organise, better wages and job security (Ford, 2006).

The political changes in Indonesia over the last 20 years have created a more democratic space for workers to establish trade unions. However there remains limits on their influence and challenges to their capacity to operate (Saifullah 2020). Subsequently NGOs continue to exist. The analysis below will consider the case of LION (Local Initiative for OHS Network), an NGO, which since its inception in West Java in 2010, has been working at educating and informing workers on the specific issue of workplace health and safety. LION does not seek

to represent or organise workers as a traditional union would. but seeks to build networks of potential allies in order to educate workers and reform the regulatory structure around OHS, an issue which to date, has been overwhelmingly absent from the employment relations discourse in Indonesia (Markkanen 2004). LION also spearheads an anti-asbestos campaign in Indonesia, where chrysotile use is extensive and is proving to play a part in a growing number of occupational diseases (Apheda Website 2019).

This study will seek to understand the role LION plays within the context of representing workers in the Indonesian construction industry. It will do this by identifying and analysing the strategic activities it undertakes in attempting to establish OHS as a legitimate issue in Indonesia, worthy of broader societal engagement and action.. In conclusion the study will illustrate that there remains a role for issue specific labour NGOS in the Indonesian context, not just as a representative mechanisms for workers, but as a key driver of a broader labour agenda.