

# Success and Unionism among Indonesian Factory Workers in Tangerang and Cikarang

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## Abstract

The article discusses the meaning attached to the ideas of success and personal development among a group of migrant factory workers and unionists in two satellite towns on the outskirts of Jakarta, Indonesia. In particular, it looks closely at the life experiences of a factory worker, two unemployed migrants and a union leader and it illustrates their narratives of hard work and “luck” in the quest for personal growth. It explores the various social networks that sustain life among factory workers while focusing specifically on the role of unionism as a symbolic and material resource to navigate through the precariousness and hardship of salary work and unemployment.

**Keywords:** anthropology, migration, success, factory work, unionism, Indonesia

«Goodbye and *sukses*»

## Introduction

In this article I focus on the meaning attached to the ideas of “success” (*sukses*) and personal development by a group of migrant factory workers and unionists in the two satellite industrial towns of Tangerang and Cikarang, on the outskirts of Jakarta, Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> I will introduce the stories of Encum, an active mother and a factory worker, of Suseng and Tora, two unemployed migrants in their twenties, and of Suratni, the leader of a union joined by Encum, Suseng and Tora.<sup>2</sup> My aim is to demonstrate how the desire for success and the quest for personal development seem to clash with

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1 I draw from fieldwork conducted between December 2009 and May 2010, as part of the requirements for an MA in Anthropology. I thank Professor Alessandro Lupo for supervising the project and his mentorship and Silvia Vignato and Matteo Alcano for comments of previous drafts of this article. I am also very grateful to Yanti for guiding me through unionism and across the workers' neighborhoods.

2 Over the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed some eighteen factory workers, a couple of unemployed youngsters and four union leaders. I took up residency where Suseng used to rent a bed and also joined as many union activities at the organization offices in Depok (Jakarta) as it was possible (focus groups, workshops, holiday parties).

the misfortunes experienced in life by these factory workers and to illustrate how Encum, Suseng, Tora and Suratni navigate through the hardship and contradictions of factory world.

### **Tangerang and Cikarang: industrial areas and life in hell**

Tangerang and Cikarang are located about forty kilometers from the downtown area of Jakarta, in the greater metropolitan conglomerate of Jabodetabek which includes a population of over twenty-five million inhabitants. They have been at the heart of the Indonesian industrial system since the export boom of the 1970s (Mather 1983) and, nowadays, most of the cookies, tires and clothes sold in the country, as well as export goods such as footwear, are manufactured in these areas. In these two satellite towns manpower is ensured by the massive and constant flow of job seekers from the rural areas; to accommodate these incoming workers, local land owners have reconverted some of the existing structures or have built new barracks, flats (*kostrakan* or simply *kos*) and small row houses around the emerging industrial plants (Warouw 2006). This situation has proven to be quite effective from many points of view: employers have a large amount of manpower to draw forces from, workers are able to live within a thirty-minute range from the factory while local inhabitants become richer and more prestigious thanks to the business of renting rooms. Current Tangerang, for instance, is made of big size firms—like PT Panarub, an Adidas major contractor of 11,500 workers (Connor and Dent 2006) or PT Mayora, a well known Indonesian food brand—smaller workshops (of a few hundred employees each) and a great number of small housing units.

While connected to Jakarta by public transportation, Tangerang and Cikarang feel distant from the capital city, as my informants suggest. Laborers spend a great deal of time traveling from their houses to their workplaces by bus on a daily basis, but rarely travel downtown. Most of them have never even traveled through Jakarta, as they have relocated from the Banten and Jawa Barat provinces straight to the factory areas. Those who have joined a union, however, may visit the city more frequently and on special circumstances, such as the demonstrations held in front of the Parliament House or in the case of a meeting at the union branch of Depok, in South Jakarta.

The organization and structure of these industrial areas reflect in my informants' living conditions and personal stories.

Encum, 34 years old and mother of three, wakes up early six days a week, hops on a minivan, reaches her workplace, works in shifts and returns home late at night: her life revolves around the borders of Tangerang. She rents a two-bedroom house which is part of a line of twenty similar buildings in the back of the main road. Each family has very limited private space: twelve square meter rooms and small forecourts which leave virtually no space to

hang clothes to dry or to park a motorbike. The residential area on the whole seems overcrowded, with no vegetable gardens or trees. The main arteries, such as Jalan Mohammad Toha, where the Panarub gates are located, or the intersection between Tangerang canal bridge and Jalan Merdeka, where Encum travels every day, are jammed with traffic. For instance, Encum is very concerned about the chaos of public transportation especially when she remains stuck in traffic for almost an hour on her way home from work, as she worries she might lose some valuable time to do house chores. Like many laborers, Encum complains about the place she lives in. Sure her house is at a close distance from her work place, but she dislikes her windows overlooking a wall of concrete, the constant noise of the neighbors' televisions and the vehicles driving by, the low ceilings and the lack of ventilation or the inefficient garbage collection system on her street.

In the words of Suseng, a single 29-year-old man who lives in a *kostrakan*, life is unpleasant because he must share house facilities and commodities (the toilets, the mattresses, the rice steamer and the television) with at least ten people and must always stand in line and wait a while to eat, bathe and watch television.

According to my informants and my experience of living in the same quarters with Suseng, *kostrakan* and row houses are not only dormitories where people rest between shifts. When Suseng meets with his roommates at night, eats fried food (*gorengan*) and watches boxing matches on television, he feels like he is part of a family. He shares with the other members of his house his fears about unemployment and exchanges tips on how to behave and become successful. As shown by Warouw (2008), these extended families (*kekeluargaan*) gather migrants with different ethnic backgrounds and set a bond of solidarity between members. Solidarity is expressed for instance through help in repairing a television or a motorbike but also through support in the case of more significant events, such as the time the neighbors rushed to find a midwife for pregnant Encum. Furthermore and in times of unemployment, neighbors help each other taking care of basic needs, such as food and shelter.

From a general point of view, Encum and Suseng use the word *kampung* to talk about the neighborhood they live in. The word *kampung* is quite ambiguous as it can both refer to a rural group of nearby houses or to an urban block of barracks; this means, for instance, that Encum maintains to have been raised in a "traditional *kampung* in Banten Province" but also uses the word *kampung* to describe the one-kilometer area of the residential block where she lives. Moreover, *kampung* is also the name of the smallest unit of the political division in the Jabodetabek towns, with its appointed formal leaders, public health-care dispensaries, day and night authorized markets, bus terminals and precise borders, often marked by entrance iron gateways. Living in a *kampung* 'away from home' often means to be invisible. Workers

have little room or time to gather outside their homes: they rush from their houses to their workplaces and then return home, spend little time running errands or hanging out at the local food stalls, while the streets are generally populated by local inhabitants: people who profit from renting homes or residents who work in retail, bus drivers, pensioners or simply unemployed folks.

When complaining about their living conditions, Encum and Suseng juxtapose the noise, the heat and the pace of Tangerang to their village of origin. As suggested by Warouw (2008), who conducted research in the same area, workers often contrast the hell-like living environment of the industrial area with the “places of natural purity” that are the rural areas they come from and long to visit during their annual leave. Encum, for instance, dreams about her village, where the space is cleaner, quieter at night and almost seems free of physical constraints, as she maintains.

### **Narratives of *sukses* and “luck”**

When I first met Encum, she described herself as a committed mother—strong enough to balance her demanding work at the sewing bay with her family duties and her activity as a union representative. She insisted proudly on her ability to run her family and her contribution to the house income, as she earned more than her poorly-specialized husband and had a long-term contract at a small garment firm in Tangerang. Also, Encum would talk a lot about numbers: fees, rent, food expenses, transportation costs, and bragged a little about the goals she set for her children and her children’s education: a good diet with little fried food and good private schools. Indeed, Encum’s story is one of success. When she attends meetings at the union she is regarded with esteem, respect and admiration by the other members and peers. As a migrant village girl, she arrived in Tangerang in 1996 looking for a job. After being hired by a local clothing manufacturer, she married a man from her region and the two had three children, who were 17, 11 and 2 years old at the time of my research in 2010. Since then, she has worked steadily for the same employer: she is one out of one hundred of a total of over six hundred employees to hold a long-term contract and works eight hours a day under a production target of seven hundred pieces per shift. Her salary averages around 1,200,000 Rupiahs a month (around 100 Euros), while her husband, who works on a short-term contract, only makes around 900,000 Rupiahs a month (around 70 Euros). Thanks to her income, she and her husband are able to pay rent, afford their children’s tuition and even save some money to buy a motorbike on monthly installments, a television, two mobile phones and some basic furniture.

Suseng and Tora share a similar story. They both moved from Banten to avoid ending up as street beggars or having to carry out odd jobs, dreamed

of starting a career as skilled workers and possibly a family and were eventually hired. However, they both lost their job after becoming injured at work: Suseng developed a severe skin burn from dyeing garments with toxic chemicals while wearing only plastic sandals and Tora lost three fingers while handling a soldering tool at the LCD televisions assembly line. Soon after these events, Suseng and a dozen co-workers in his same medical condition stood up in front of their supervisor and asked for cleaner floors and adequate shoes, a demand which caused them to be fired, while Tora approached a union lawyer to sue the Japanese high-tech corporation in the hope of obtaining a fair compensation for her permanent handicap. Such dramatic experiences in the factory changed the life course of these two workers, who had arrived in town seeking fortune and eventually ended up joining a union. Both Suseng and Tora still dream of changing their lives for the better, as they await what they imagine would be a considerable amount of money in compensation damages. In a way, they feel as though their success has been “delayed” or postponed to a near future and that they still have the chance to make their parents back in their home village very proud. As Suseng often repeats, “I have already been lucky once. I was a migrant guy coming from nowhere, but the factory management picked me out of hundreds of applicants. Why shouldn’t I be that lucky again?”

Suratni is a full-time unionist. Her family is from North Sumatra but she was born near Jakarta. She leads a small-scale independent union with the intent to fight for the recognition of factory workers and their rights and to obtain benefits and health insurance: she leads rallies in central Jakarta with great fervor, teaches about factory labor and provides union members with a network of connections through hospitality and festive gatherings. In 2010, Suseng, for instance, was living in an accommodation provided by Suratni’s union.

### **Somebody else’s dreams: expectations and anxieties about work**

Behind these stories of success there lie expectations, anxieties, and fears.

Encum recounts about her family and her local community’s expectations when she returns home once a year. Everyone, she maintains, expects her to have become “richer and richer” every time she visits her village. For this particular reason, she cares a lot about looking well-off, wears nice clothes and shares stories about the good education she is providing to her children. However, she complains that her family and friends only understand a little of the costs of living in Tangerang and the difficulty of saving money. Behind a facade of personal success, Encum hides her worries and preoccupations about making ends meet and about her husband’s precarious job. She knows that people in her village do not grasp the difference and the implications of long-term and short-term contracts, nor do they understand

the logic of seniority that regulates work and salaries. In their eyes, hard work alone will lead to fulfill the dream of a better life and Encum, with her story, looks to everyone as if she is on the right path to success. She does not want to disappoint her “audience” and continues to play the part of the good working mother, acting like she is convinced that she is fully rewarded by and satisfied with her job.

Suseng feels the shame of being unemployed, unable to be hired and not in the position to find a new job. He fully depends on the solidarity of the union that he has joined, which, as I mentioned, provides him with accommodation and material support while he is looking for employment. Suseng spends his time chatting with people from his neighborhood, collecting information about job vacancies and exchanging conversations with other union members, while with time he has become more and more disillusioned about the chances of receiving a good compensation from his former employer. Needless to say, he also feels he is too old to get a new job and suspects people have started to think of him as a lazy and unsuccessful person.

Similarly, ever since her accident, Tora has been living with her brother and her brother’s wife, who are also factory workers in Cikarang. She feels ashamed that she cannot work and that she imposes on her family. To alleviate this sense of inadequacy, she has promised her brother a share of the compensation she expects to receive from the trial for punitive damages. Because hospitality does not come for free, her brother continues to pressure her into working harder with her lawyers to obtain the money and reprimands her for being too naïve.

### **The ethics of working hard**

From the very first idea about migration to the successful quest for a job, little or no room for decisions is left to the workers. Children are pushed to venture out in the competitive work arena of Jabotabek by their parents. Every year, thousands of newcomers arrive in the satellite towns to find a job and in most cases must compete with the second generation of migrants who were born and raised in urban areas and have better connections to access job interviews (Warouw 2006). Those who succeed in getting a job are scrutinized by their families back home and must send remittances, but are also kept disciplined by their peers, who encourage them to work harder and put more effort. Local contractors, chiefs of *kampung* and employers as well engage in a rhetoric of personal development and stimulate the new workers towards a certain work ethic based on long hours and loyalty, while reminding them to avoid strikes and union activities.

Encum, for instance, recounts that her parents encouraged her to work diligently eight hours a day plus overtime in a hot warehouse because they thought that that kind of behavior would make her more valuable. Suseng’s

roommates advise him to be more self-disciplined in order to find a job: they urge him to make a decision about his future. Overall, the underlying idea is that spending long and arduous hours at the factory is a necessary effort towards the construction of a more stable future. Such an idea is first forged within the family and the community of origin and then reiterated all along the lines of the migration path and at the destination as well.

When signing their first contract, workers like Encum feel like the winners of a race between peers. In a competitive field like that of factory work, being hired is not something that is taken for granted: the number of unskilled workers exceeds the offer of job positions by a great margin. Finding a job is often a matter of being at the right place at the right time and workers feel they can easily be dismissed, replaced and see their fortunes fluctuate in a matter of days. In a context of uncertainty and precariousness, the imperative of hard work seems to sustain the stories and the life experiences of my informants, no matter the task at hand.

### **Tumbling down and the limits of the body at work**

Torn between the quest for personal development, success and the need to fulfill the expectations of their families and community, migrant workers also experience the limits of their own physical bodies that are put under strenuous work conditions.

Tora, who uses a rubber pink prosthesis to replace her missing fingers, looks more like a chronic invalid than a laborer: she is also much more familiar with health insurance policies than with assembly line duties. During the meetings with her lawyers, Tora focuses on quantifying the amount of money she has lost on potential salaries since she was forced to leave work. However, she is also ashamed of wearing a prosthesis, with everything that this means to her in terms of future job opportunities and personal life. Before her accident she considered herself as an attractive young woman with a brilliant job position at a high-tech factory and wanted to work hard for a couple of years before settling down and starting a family. Now she sees no work future, she is concerned about hiding her arm under long sleeves and feels ugly, undesirable and miserable—in work and in life. She knows she will have a hard time being hired by another manufacturing company while her future hangs on the generosity of her former employers.

Encum admits she suffers from sharp pain: her body is sore (*sakit*) and sitting at the sewing table for eight hours a day is an agony that results in even worse back and knee pain. In her words, her work life and her life in general have been unhealthy and reflect on her physical condition: she mentions riding in cramped minivans, short breaks, sitting in a stooping position, endless shifts, low ceilings, the hot temperature inside the factory and the humidity of her home as factors contributing to her sickness. Encum recalls

that when she was in her twenties all these elements mattered much less and she could easily bear working regular shifts and even overtime with less fatigue. At thirty-four, she has to take Paracetamol to cope with the physical pain at work. She is also worried she is too young to retire, although she knows well that her employer does not even offer a proper retirement plan to his employees.

### **The limits of the market**

Alongside the limits of their own bodies, migrant workers have a certain knowledge and awareness of the real limits of the flow of the global market and its impact on their quest for social mobility.

The labor market of Jabodetabek is very articulated. There are many job-hoppers who change employer very often. Warouw (2008) underlines how factory boys and girls in Tangerang understand their jobs as temporary, a transition between life in the village with its small occupations and a much more desirable employment in the world of the middle class. In line with these observations, Saptari (2008) shows how the famous PT Mayora laborers who went on strike were employed elsewhere before being hired by the food-processing company. Encum herself has progressively become interested in leaving the sewing bay and finding a better position as a unionist or as a paperwork employee.

From a general point of view, it is difficult to attach a given job to a given person. Job offers oscillate following a particular demand and employees might switch from one job to another within a short period of time, if they are lucky enough to find one: for instance, PT Panarub began hiring employees as the demand for shoes increased exponentially right before the 2012 London Olympics. Conversely, the factory where Encum works has had to freeze overtime work and fire dozens of employees after suffering the downturns of the 2008 financial crisis which saw many of its competitors relocate production to cheaper locations such as Vietnam.

Furthermore, as Naafs (2012) has shown for the satellite industrial town of Cilegon (Banten), the work market has profoundly changed since the fall of Suharto (2012, pp. 50–51). The economy focus is shifting from heavy industry (Cilegon was, for instance, the biggest steel-processing district in Southeast Asia) to the trade and service industry because of the collapse of those export-oriented industries which under Suharto enjoyed state protection from foreign competitors. In Cilegon—and also in Tangerang and Cikarang—it is getting progressively harder to find a job in a factory while new opportunities in the trade and services sectors are mushrooming. This phenomenon has two basic consequences: people with limited education who arrived in Jabodetabek as unskilled migrants (much like all my informants) have slim chances to switch from factory labor to office work because

they don't have a proper secondary school diploma.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, many remain stuck in a situation of unemployment (like Tora or Suseng) and more often of underemployment, which means that they take odd and short-term jobs that bring in an intermittent salary far below minimum wage, while others drop out of the industrial labor market and end up as street vendors.

### **Beyond the *kampung* and into unions**

Against this background Suratni set up her independent union.

Free unionism in Indonesia started in 1998, after the fall of Suharto. Before that date, the state interfered in the only existing legal union (SPSI) by appointing state officers at the head of the organization and sending the Army to repress any dissent that would rise in the factories. This occurred frequently during the last year of Suharto's presidency (Ford 2001, p. 101). The state-driven idea of endless national and personal development through industrial labor was not persuasive by the late 1990s: workers, especially during the weak political leadership that followed the events of 1998, began to express discontent and to demand higher salaries. Thanks to a less repressive political climate, new NGOs such as the Jakarta-based LBH were created to protect the workers' rights. Most unions today come from little NGOs that dealt with labor and which merged together and re-established themselves as unions, like in the case of SBJ (Ford 2001, p. 112).

Suratni defines herself as the grassroots leader of one of the many trade unions (*serikat buruh*) active in the Jabodetabek area. She feels she speaks for the workers and thinks a union's main goal should be to protect its members from their employers. Looking after the workers entails offering legal assistance, organizing public protests and networking with similar organizations in Southeast Asia (Suratni for instance works closely with a Thai association). More intimately, Suratni and her union provide a shelter where workers and aspiring workers can turn to and expose their issues, denounce injustice, get free or low-cost legal aid and in general be welcome among a group of friends. As highlighted by Ford (2004) the idea of the union organization as a shelter is quite common to many other NGOs in Indonesia.

Generally speaking, the majority of factory laborers do not join unions: many are occasional workers and do not see a union as an option. Suratni,

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3 Most of Naafs' female interlocutors come from Cilegon's indigenous families or are second generation migrants, born in that area. They had good education, secondary school diploma or beyond, and wish to work as secretaries or as sales and promotion girls in a mall (like Ramayana and Matahari). These cohorts of youth also have a cosmopolitan and consumer-based lifestyle and do their best not to look rural and unsophisticated (*kampungan*) (2012, p. 50). None of my interlocutors belongs to this group of people; at best Encum's sons, who were born in town and are likely to receive higher education, may be compared to Naafs' cohorts.

for example, recounts numerous workers who decided not to join her union in fear of being fired. The early strikes of 1999 at PT Panarub against Ramamusa, a private health care provider that offered very low-quality services to sick employees and pregnant female workers, for example, were left deserted by the workers. The same can be said about the 1999 PT Mayora strike: at the time, the employees who wanted to come out and protest were scared off by the corporation's police (Saptari 2008).

For those who decide to join a union, however, such affiliation provides a network beside that of the *kampung* and that of the family. At the parties held at the union branch in Depok, Encum, Tora and Suseng feel like peers. They are among people who share the same life conditions of living in a satellite town and who know perfectly how difficult it is to be able to afford a decent room or to find a new job. It is during these occasions that they feel more at ease and free to express their feelings: Encum doesn't need to appear rich in the eyes of anybody, Tora doesn't have to lie about her trial and Suseng can relieve the stress of looking for a job, even if for a moment.

When they are among other members of the union, Encum, Tora and Suseng don't need to appear successful and don't have to fool their "audience" about the outcomes of their life in a satellite town. All this is very far from the behavior they must adopt while with their demanding relatives or active companions, as I have demonstrated. There is more: by hanging out with unionists like Suratni and the senior members, the three migrants learn to attach new meaning to what they believe are the more unpleasant and negative aspects of their life. Tora and Suseng are not simply unlucky individuals but "victims of unfair dismissal". As for Encum, she suffers not only because her body is aging, but also because her supervisor wants to keep production costs low and won't let her take a break. Saptari suggests that it was precisely such common communication about labor rights and minimum wages that brought together the PT Mayora striking workers (2008, p. 34).

### **Concluding remarks**

Speaking of post-1970s capital-labor models, Ong (1991) highlights how the Asian market is a place of flexible accumulation and of mixed economies based on free-trade zones, subcontracting firms and sweatshops. She also argues that "instead of direct labor-capital confrontations, we discover workers' resistances in *workers'* oppositional tactics, embodied desires and alternative interpretations" (p. 296, emphasis mine). Encum, Tora and Suseng experience tensions and contradictions in their lives. On the one hand, they are under the direct (Tora) or indirect (Encum and Suseng) gaze of their relatives and roommates who expect them to accumulate material wealth through hard work. Indeed, only "hard work" is seen as the key to "become

someone” and it becomes part of the individual’s disposition towards life. On the other hand, my informants have experienced unemployment, more or less from personal experience, and have become aware of the risks and precariousness of the work market. They acknowledge that a prosperous future might not be just around the corner, that job offers are limited and that work does not always allow them to provide for themselves and their families.

The workers I have talked to continue to focus on their ambitions, on their idea of individual success, but to navigate through the contradictions of factory work they have leaned on unionism and its networks of support on multiple levels. In terms of life expectations, they have learned to attach a new meaning to the idea of “luck” and “bad luck”—one that is more grounded in their actual experiences of unfair treatment at the workplace. They know they can make use of the union’s material and legal resources, for example, to improve their life conditions: Encum aims to leave the factory and apply for a white-collar job, Tora hopes to be compensated and Suseng gets free housing while seeking a new job. These networks encompass the set of relationships that are established at the *kampung* or through a person’s family and foster a new sense of belonging in the midst of uncertainty and exploitation.

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