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Benih Mardeka and plantation workers in East Sumatra, 1916–1923

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Abstract

This study aims to explain and analyze an advocacy done by Benih Mardeka newspaper regarding the conditions and exploitation experienced by plantation workers in East Sumatra. East Sumatra from the late 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century underwent a considerable change from an ancient wilderness into a prosperous plantation industry. This change also emphasized the establishment of Dutch colonialism in colonial population. This colonial dominance is portrayed from the conditions and exploitation of workers on plantations. A discriminatory situation on plantations made life for workers a misery. This study uses historical methods that include heuristic, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The results showed that Benih Mardeka newspaper consistently voiced the advocacy for plantation workers by highlighting the cruelty of plantation owners and the injustice of the Dutch colonial government. News headlines in Benih Mardeka often raised an issue concerning *poenale sanctie* implemented by plantation owners. The poor living conditions of plantation workers were of effective propaganda material for Benih Mardeka to criticize both the colonial government and the plantation owners. Eventually, it can be concluded that Benih Mardeka remained consistent in voicing the advocacy for plantation workers in East Sumatra.

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Introduction

The development of the plantation industry in East Sumatra in the mid-19th to early 20th centuries not only improved the economy of the Dutch colonial state, but also had an impact on the demographic growth in the region. Such increase in population was due to the incoming workers to meet the needs of the plantation

industry. The plantation workers were migrants, most of whom came from China and Java. Subsequently, the number of plantation workers far exceeded the number of local residents. They became separate entities in the plantation industry community in East Sumatra. This was due to the exclusivity of plantation workers as a result of the strict supervision from the plantations. Moreover, Mohammad Said used the term “state within the state” to denote the exclusivity of plantations (Said, 1990, pp. 49–52).

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Capitalization in the plantation belt of East Sumatra resulted in feudal culture, which had implications for socio-culture of workers. This feudal relationship was exploited, giving birth to what was called part of the proletarian process. Plantation workers kept trying to move to find spaces in conveying their interests and inequality they experienced. The conditions of workers were conveyed through socio-press movement which was certainly highly restricted by the entrepreneurs. The reason was the exclusivity of plantations created by plantation entrepreneurs (Stoler, 2005).

In the early 20th century, there was a change in the Dutch colonial policy from liberal politics to ethical politics. This was a breath of fresh air for the improvement of the life of colonizers. The most influential practice of the ethical politics was education for the indigenous population. The educational policy for the indigenous population gave rise to the emergence of modern elites in colonial society (Van Niel, 1984). This modern elite brought movement of change, improvement of life, and advocacy of the indigenous population through national organizations. One of the ways to convey such ideas was through mass media. In East Sumatra, the development of the press played a significant role in voicing the interests of the people. Broadly speaking, there were two functions and roles of the media or press in East Sumatra. The first was a tool to support and perpetuate the power and interests of plantation companies and colonial government authorities. The second was to criticize the plantation business activities and colonial government policies in East Sumatra. One of the loud and consistent presses in advocating plantation workers in East Sumatra was Benih Mardeka newspaper (Agustono et al., 2021).

Based on the aforementioned background, this study focuses on the advocacy made by Benih Mardeka newspaper to plantation workers in East Sumatra. The main question raised in this study is the advocacy to plantation workers, especially the *poenale sanctie* problem that exploited plantation workers. Therefore, the industrialization of plantations and the conditions and exploitation of plantation workers in East Sumatra will be explained. This study takes the scope of plantation areas in East Sumatra. The major theme of this study is the history of newspapers and plantation workers based on research on archives, newspapers, documents, and literature. This study will explain the industrialization and dynamics of plantation workers in the late 19th century until the early 20th century and the exploitation of workers. In addition, this study will also explain the Benih Mardeka newspaper as a media that advocated plantation workers. In its movement, Benih Mardeka

performed action and agitation in advocating against the exploitation and practice of *poenale sanctie* on plantation workers.

Literature Review

Several studies on workers in East Sumatra describe conditions of the life of workers, relationship between workers and entrepreneurs, culture in labor market, as well as economic, political and legal changes that governed the life of plantation workers. Some studies that seriously raise labor issues are Breman (1997), Devi (2004), Stoler (2005). They try to describe the life and exploitation experienced by plantation workers in East Sumatra and the practices and relationships between entrepreneurs and the government in perpetuating power over workers on plantations. With the exception of Devi (2004), their studies have not given a place for the advocacy made by newspapers to plantation workers. Devi's (2004) study explains several movements and advocacy made by indigenous political figures, but does not give a place for local movements in East Sumatra.

The local labor movement in East Sumatra plantations is indeed difficult to carry out due to the exclusive life of Plantationers, which is guarded by the plantation companies. The defense movement began to revolve around the Cities brought by the educated middle elite. Reid (2012) stated that the heterogeneity of the Cities in East Sumatra made this become a national issue which was discussed by the public, including the issue of plantation workers' exploitation, although the interests of this educated middle elite were difficult to exert influence on the exclusive plantation workers (Reid, 2012, pp. 89–92).

Public discourse on the issue of plantation workers' exploitation was launched by the press as a medium to convey the people's aspirations. In East Sumatra, the press is divided into two, namely, supporting the interests of entrepreneurs and the colonial government while the other one is spreading the seeds of nationality and criticizing plantation capitalism and the government in East Sumatra (Agustono et al., 2021, p. 139). The spread of nationalism occurred in line with the economic, political and demographic developments of East Sumatra. Samri (2011) explains that the heterogeneity of the East Sumatra population is a fertile ground for the development of the press in the search for national identity (Samri, 2011). Identity as a colonized nation was championed by the Benih Mardeka newspaper. Agustono et al. (2021)

stated that the Benih Mardeka newspaper had an influence on political movements in East Sumatra and spread the seeds of independence in various articles and publications (Agustono et.al., 2021).

Methodology

This study uses the historical method which consists of four stages, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. In the heuristic stage, primary and secondary sources are collected. The primary source is the archives of the Dutch colonial government, which are traced to the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia, Jakarta. Meanwhile, secondary sources are in the form of press briefs from the Dutch colonial government, newspapers, namely, Benih Mardeka, and *De Sumatera Post* along with books and journals obtained from the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia, Jakarta. After the heuristic stage, the next stage is source criticism. Source criticism is divided into external and internal criticism. It aims to verify the sources used in the writing. The next stage is interpretation, namely, the interpretation of the facts that have been found both in the form of analysis and synthesis. In this study, the analysis used is qualitative analysis. The final stage of this process is historiography, namely, the process of writing as a historical construction.

Results and Discussion

Industrialization and Plantation Workers

The opening of the private plantation industry in East Sumatra in the mid-19th century was inseparable from changes in colonial economic and political policy in the Dutch East Indies. Such policy change was strongly affected by the situation and developments taking place in the parent country, the Netherlands. In the mid-19th century, there was a change in economic-political policy from conservative to liberal. This change resulted from the victory of the liberal political elite in the Dutch parliament in 1854 (Devi, 2004, p. 35). The impact of the victory of the liberal political elite on the colonies was the change from economic policy of *culturstelsel* into a liberal economy, which opened up private investment as much as possible to the colonies.

Another policy that boosted industry and expansion of foreign capital into East Sumatra was Agrarian Law (*Agrarisch Wet*) in 1870. The expansion of foreign capital

to East Sumatra was pioneered by J. Nienhuys, a Dutch tobacco businessman, in 1863. At first, Nienhuys managed a plantation in Java. Persuaded by Said bin Abdullah Bilsagih, an Arab who claimed to be a relative of the Sultan of Deli, Nienhuys went to Deli to buy and cultivate tobacco in this region. Although initially somewhat disappointed with the small tobacco farming production, Nienhuys decided to ask permission from his boss in the Netherlands to open a tobacco plantation in Deli. Finally, the first 75 hectares of experimental plantation was opened in Deli (Perret, 2010, p. 180).

A major problem encountered by Nienhuys was workers. Local residents, consisting of Malays and Karonese, were not willing to work on the plantation. In 1865, Nienhuys made an attempt to bring some Javanese pilgrims and students from Penang as workers. However, the amount of tobacco sent to the Netherlands was only 50 bales at a price of f. 0.48 per half kg. Nienhuys then brought in 120 Chinese workers from Penang. Chinese workers could produce 189 bales of tobacco to be sent to the Netherlands. The quality of shipped tobacco leaf was indicated by high auction prices. The price of the auction ranged from f. 0.42 to f. 2.51 per half kilogram (Pelzer, 1985, pp. 54–55; Said, 1990, p. 32).

During the pioneering period of plantation industry, 120 Chinese workers, called *laukeh*, were first brought in from the Straits Settlements. They were selected as workers in tobacco plantations because they had been known to be painstaking, diligent, precise and disciplined in processing, maintaining, and producing tobacco commodity. After the arrival of Chinese workers at the beginning of the pioneering period, the entrepreneurs used the *laukeh* to recruit other Chinese workers in the Straits Settlements. Efforts to recruit Chinese workers were often made by means of deception and coercion (Said, 1990, pp. 75–77). For the time being, plantation entrepreneurs could solve worker problems in East Sumatra.

Such a large-scale recruitment of Chinese workers from the Straits Settlements made the British colonial government on the Malay Peninsula worried about a shortage of workers for the survival of their plantation and mining industries. Therefore, the British colonial government spread the word that there were cruel practices committed by plantation entrepreneurs in Deli. In order to protect Chinese workers from cruel practices of entrepreneurs and deception of brokers, the British colonial government in 1876 established a bureau called the Protectors of Chinese to protect the Chinese. Its employees were given ranks and placed in Penang and Singapore (Devi, 2004, p. 71).

In order to respond to such condition, the entrepreneurs had to rack their brains and find other ways to get workers who would work on their plantations. Finally, workers were directly recruited from China, namely, South China. Several regions in Southern China for the recruitment were Swatow, Kwangtung, Kwangsi, Hainan, Fukien, Hunan, Fu Chow, and Amoy (Hamdani, 2012, pp. 85–87). The recruitment employed several methods such as by sending special intermediaries (*kheh-tau*) and workers who had long worked (*laukeh*) to their home regions to recruit new workers (*singkeh*) and bring them to the plantations (Bool, 1903, pp. 7–8).

Furthermore, Chinese workers were mobilized by the Immigration Bureau. The Immigration Bureau was established by a group of plantation entrepreneurs called DPV (*Deli Planters Vereniging*). An effort made to increase the recruitment of Chinese workers was by sending an interpreter employee named Hoetink to China in 1886. The costs were borne by large plantation entrepreneurs in East Sumatra. Hoetink was instructed to investigate ways and efforts to increase the emigration of Chinese workers to plantations in East Sumatra (Bool, 1903, p. 8). Afterwards, Hoetink also played a significant role in the issue of plantation workers in East Sumatra. In 1904, he was appointed as the first workers inspector to take care of worker issues such as employer violations, worker abuses, and other problems (Algemeene Secretarie: Seri Grote Bundel Besluit [AS GB-Bt.], No. 1145). In line with the transition of some tobacco plantations to other commodities, especially rubber, the workers recruited also underwent a transition. In the beginning, tobacco plantation industry employed many Chinese workers because they were very good at processing tobacco leaves. However, the recruitment of Chinese workers was costly. Therefore, plantations entrepreneurs began to bring in workers from Java towards the 20th century.

The plantation industry in East Sumatra strongly emphasized profits obtained from the employment of cheap workers. After the first decade of the 20th century, Javanese workers began to dominate in plantations in East Sumatra. Some factors making Javanese workers becoming the majority in East Sumatra were lower costs of recruitment than Chinese workers; Javanese workers recruited mostly brought their wives or children so that they could be used as female workers whose wages were lower than male ones; and wages for Javanese workers were calculated based on daily work so that it was more efficient in the production system than Chinese workers who used a wholesale system (Breman, 1997, pp. 64–67).

Another driving factor was the rapid growth of the

Javanese population from the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. This situation resulted in many Javanese lacking agricultural land and living in poverty, so the Dutch colonial government urged the emigration of Javanese people to other regions (Pelzer, 1948, p. 189). The methods of recruiting Javanese workers were not different from the recruitment of Chinese workers. The recruitment process was done by spreading agents, commonly called *werek*, to remote villages in Java. The prospective workers were gathered at the worker-seeking agency in Semarang. They were sent to the Port of Belawan through an office in Semarang, (Janssen & Bool, 1939, p. 24).

Many deceptive practices were carried out by these worker-seeking agencies. Such practices were not only experienced by prospective workers who were poor and uneducated, but also by the wealthy and educated people. However, when plantation inspections came looking for workers who were deceived, they said they liked to live on plantations. Harsh working conditions and poor morals made workers reluctant to return to their place of origin. This situation was experienced by many Javanese women who were deceived into signing contracts as plantation workers. They did not want to return to Java because they were ashamed at becoming a disgrace to their families in Deli. In addition, most female workers on plantations also became prostitutes, or if they had a “good” fortune, they could also be *nyai* or concubines of the European staff (Joenoos, 1918).

The workers recruited by worker-seeking agents or bureaus were usually advertised to attract plantation entrepreneurs in East Sumatra. Sometimes the announcements in these advertisements offered workers like offering merchandise. Sometimes workers advertised were full of praise that the worker was skilled, young, and healthy. However, some advertisements even offered labor together with livestock (Van den Brand, 1902, pp. 44–46). On the other hand, the plantation entrepreneurs kept striving to increase the recruitment of Javanese workers. One of these recruitments was in 1911, establishing a worker-seeking bureau in Java using agents spread around many places. This Bureau was established thanks to the initiative of the DPV. In 1919, the bureau was officially named *Algemeen Delisch Emigratie Kantoor* (ADEK) or the Deli General Emigration Office. After some time, the agency changed its name to *Vrij Emigratie DPV en AVROS* (VEDA) or Free Emigration of DPV and AVROS. This change was due to the agreement between the company association which joined the DPV and AVROS for the recruitment of Javanese workers (Kolonisatie Committee, 1920; Janssen & Bool, 1939, p. 65).

Exploitation of Plantation Workers

The situation on the plantations developed a relationship and rigid hierarchy between workers and plantation entrepreneurs. The multi-racial characteristics of the plantation community further aggravated such condition. Like the order in colonial society, the conditions of the community on plantations showed more or less the same characteristics. The characteristics of colonial society were pluralistic, segmented based on nation groups, racialistic, European and non-European economic dualism, and social, economic and political domination by the colonials (Kartodirdjo & Suryo, 1991, p. 149). The hierarchy created on plantations was inherent in all aspects of life in it. The most striking situation was the pattern of settlements between workers, employees and European staff as well as plantation entrepreneurs. The pattern of settlements within plantations placed European housing at the center and at the highest level, while workers occupied the lowest strata of life (Devi, 2004, pp. 126–127; Stoler, 2005, pp. 4–5).

Worker settlements can be divided into two types, namely, permanent settlements and temporary settlements. Permanent settlements were usually called colonization, characterized by the form of stage, stone floor, equipped with wells, and feces disposal covered with boards (Anonymous, 1927, pp. 12–13). The temporary settlements were located in the center of a tobacco plantation and moved every time a new planting was made. Barrack-shaped temporary settlements were equipped with ventilation for the light that could enter. In the center of the barracks, a public kitchen was built to provide food for workers. Bathing and drinking water supplies were built around barracks and controlled annually by the plantation (Alkema, 1929, pp. 49–50).

The structure of power and hierarchy in plantations clearly put plantation workers in the lowest social class. The rapid development of plantations and the prosperous life of plantation entrepreneurs further confirmed the imbalance between entrepreneurs and plantation workers. The plantation entrepreneurs were employers whose commands had to be obeyed and the workers were like slaves in the hierarchy. The difficult and hard life of workers was still compounded with inadequate wages. Records from plantation entrepreneurs stated that before World War I Javanese worker wages ranged between f. 0.35 to 0.38 per day. Female worker wages were even lower, f. 0.28. Chinese worker wages were different from Javanese workers. They were paid based on the amount of care and harvest of tobacco plants because they used a wholesale system. At that time, the wages of Chinese

workers were approximately f. 10 for every 1,000 tobacco trees (Janssen & Bool, 1939, p. 81).

Inversely proportional to wages or salaries received by workers, a foreman or *tandil* received from f. 25 to f. 50 every month. Sometimes the foremen also obtained gifts from assistants. The large amount of the foreman's salary and their privileges were an attempt to captivate and widen the conflict between foremen and workers. This was due to by jealousy of workers towards the foremen. Workers also could not defend themselves if the foremen were intimidating and cheating. This was because the foremen held full power in estimating the amount of tobacco at the end of the harvest season, determining the price of basic needs, and serving as an intermediary to the plantations (Devi, 2004, pp. 121–123).

The dependence of life experienced by workers on plantations was shown by their very hard living conditions and poorly physical exploitation. With insufficient wages for their lives, many also took reckless acts such as theft, deception, selling their wives and children (Anonymous, 1920c). In addition, plantation workers were also trying to find entertainment and pleasures of life. Such entertainment included gambling, smoking opium, and doing prostitution. All of this resulted in debt and deterioration in health and welfare (Kartodirdjo & Suryo, 1991, p. 151).

Entertainment in the plantation was held after payday. Wages were paid by the plantation entrepreneurs at the beginning and mid of the month, usually on the 1st and 16th of each month (Middelbare Koloniale Landbouwschool Deventer, 1921, pp. 25–26). Afterwards, there were night market, shows and other crowds. In these activities there were gambling, prostitution and free sale of opium (Devi, 2004, p. 131). In terms of gambling, the plantations deliberately legalized and usually placed the bookies in the crowd. In addition to gambling in the crowds after payday, Chinese workers gambled in their groups, called *kongsi*. *Kongsi* was a labor system of Chinese workers which consisted of a group of about 50 workers. They gambled in their barracks. The type of gambling was in the form of a dice game (Algemeene Secretarie: Seri Missive Gouvernement Secretaris [AS GB-MGS], No. 4955). With their small wage, the plantation workers tried their luck in gambling, but many of them became more miserable and life more difficult because of debt which resulted from gambling (Anonymous, 1920d).

The poverty experienced by plantation workers was also driven by the practice of prostitution. After payday, many workers looked for women to satisfy their sexual desires.

This practice was also an impact of the plantation situation in which the ratio between the number of men and women was unbalanced. Some reports mentioned that the ratio was four men to one woman. On the other hand, female workers had little choice on plantations and most of them engaged in prostitution (Kooreman, 1902, pp. 32–33).

The main factor for women working as prostitutes was the very low wages. At the turn of the 19th to 20th century, the wages of female workers were only half that of men (Stoler, 2005, p. 49). In fact, data from the brochure of van den Brand indicated that a plantation paid on average f. 2.5 every month to their female workers. This amount was very low, even to meet basic living needs in East Sumatra. The brochure of van den Brand mentioned that with a very small wage, female workers could not buy *sarongs* for themselves (Van den Brand, 1902, pp. 66–70). This practice made female workers the lowest and most weak in hierarchical position (Baay, 2017, pp. 152–154). In addition, the practice of prostitution was also used by plantations to attract workers who would come to work on plantations (Hesselink, 1992, p. 219).

The plantation entrepreneurs argued that the practice of prostitution occurred because of the moral depravity of the women themselves. They stated that basically women who were recruited to work only wanted to be prostitutes. They liked to spend income from prostitution for fun and jewelry (Van den Brand, 1902, p. 70). The pressure of life and the low wages received by female workers gave them no choice but to become prostitutes.

Female workers not only satisfied the sexual desires of male workers, but also Europeans on plantations. The female workers were made to be *nyai* by assistants on plantations (Locher-Scholten, 1992, p. 270). This was based on the rules on the plantation that assistants were prohibited from getting married during the work period of up to 5 to 7 years. Workers were taken as *nyai* from taking care of all the household needs of the assistant to satisfying their sexual desires (Baay, 2017, pp. 154–158).

Exploitation and violence were commonly experienced by plantation workers. Plantation entrepreneurs tended to use violence in order to discipline workers. This led to authoritarianism. Plantocracy culture significantly deviated from the pattern of modern industrial relations (Kartodirdjo & Suryo, 1991, p. 146). An attempt to maintain the conditions of workers who were bound by the plantation work system and were certainly cheap was by urging the government to issue labor regulations. Lobbies and efforts were made by

plantation entrepreneurs. The central figure for such efforts was J.T. Cremer, an administrator of NV. Deli Maatschappij. As a result, a labor regulation for regions outside Java was issued in 1880. This regulation was called *koelie-ordonnantie*. This labor regulation (*koelie-ordonnantie*) served as the basis for the sustainability of plantation industry in East Sumatra, especially in terms of employment. In general, it regulated rights and obligations between entrepreneurs and workers. The employment relationship between the employer and the worker was established through a written contract and had to be registered to the local government after the workers arrived at work. The rights and obligations of workers consisted of wages that had to be routinely paid, housing and health care facilities, written permission from the employer to go out from the plantation, complaints to the local government, working hours for ten hours a day with a duration contract for 3 years. If the worker was found violating the contents of the contract, a penalty would be imposed. Penalties for workers included fines, incarceration, and unfree labor in state projects without pay (Devi, 2004, pp. 114–115; Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië, 1880).

The employer's great power in applying the sanctions for workers was widely known as *poenale sanction* (penal sanction). It was the right held by the employer to give punishment to workers who did not follow orders. The employer seemed to act as security police and court judges. Penalties that were widely applied to workers were beating and confinement (Anonymous, 1920a). Based on the report of the prosecutor sent to investigate labor in East Sumatra in the early 20th century, the beating was done using a stick that was always carried by an assistant. Workers who suffered and received the punishment were mostly Javanese workers. The plantation believed that workers should be disciplined, beaten and punished physically because they would not understand the work if they were not treated in such ways (AS GB-Bt., No. 1076).

The confrontation between plantation workers and European staff occurred in a harsh plantation atmosphere. In addition, tortures to workers were also common in plantations. Punishment was supposed to be carried out through litigation. In the early 20th century, there were only four district courts in *afdeelingen* (administrative region equal to regency or district) in East Sumatra (Bremen, 1997, pp. 172–173). Great distance between plantations and inadequate legal infrastructure resulted in the absence of supervision for plantations that committed violations. Some of the punishments that were often imposed by entrepreneurs on workers included drying

in the hot sun, binding on trees all day, confining, drowning pregnant female workers inducing miscarriages, and beating workers who claimed to be sick (AS GB- Bt., No. 1076).

Punishments imposed on workers were not supposed to happen if entrepreneurs obeyed the rules contained in the labor regulations issued by the government. However, weak government supervision and considerable entrepreneurs' power made it difficult to enforce. The labor regulations underwent several changes, and there were also several additions. In addition to *koelie-ordonnantie*, a number of labor regulations were also regulated in such a way as stipulated in the *Staatsblad van Nederlandsch-Indië* (1880, no. 133; 1889, no. 138; 1891, no. 17; 1911, no. 540; 1915, no. 421). However, these regulations still allowed entrepreneurs to have enormous power over their workers.

Efforts to Advocate Plantation Workers

In the early 20th century, the press movement which advocated the conditions of the plantation workers was slow, or even stagnant. Before the outbreak of the World War I, colonial sources recorded that no indigenous press had seriously advocated this problem. The press movement tended to be ordinary and left far behind the conditions in Java (Schadee 1917, p. 52). This was understandable because the press movement was affected by the development and movement of national organizations. In Java, the press movement was affected mainly by the development of the organizations of Boedi Oetomo, Sarekat Islam, Indische Partij, and the Indonesian Communist Party (Hoogerwerf, 1990, p. 143).

In East Sumatra, the press movement in general had two forms in showing existence and voicing interests. As a tool to convey the aspirations of society, the press had only begun to develop since the late 19th century (Said, 1976, p. 83). The first form of press in East Sumatra was as a tool to perpetuate the power and interests of plantation entrepreneurs and the colonial government. The second form was to mobilize the seeds of nationality and advocacy towards the living conditions of plantation workers as the largest population group in the region.

East Sumatra, a plantation area, was expanding rapidly in economy, politics, and culture. It had become a place for spreading national ideas driven by the local press. The heterogeneity of the population in the cities of East Sumatra facilitated the spread of Malay as the daily spoken language of the people. In addition, the growth of the plantation industry and the exploitation of plantation

workers in East Sumatra became fertile ground for spreading nationalist propaganda and political movements. The media movement that carries national ideas and changes in East Sumatra is "Benih Mardeka" (Agustono et. al., 2021). This Malay-language newspaper was first published on November 20, 1916 with the motto "*Orgaan oentoek Menoentoet Keadilan dan Kemerdekaan*" (Said, 1976, p. 83). The chief editor of the Benih Mardeka newspaper is Mohamad Samin, a teacher from Minangkabau who also serves as Commissioner of Sarekat Islam for the East Sumatra region. Benih Mardeka played a role in debating the situation and life of plantation workers and put forward demands for eliminating the *poenale sanctie* practice in their articles (Agustono et al., 2021, pp. 144–146).

The issue of the life of plantation workers, especially *poenale sanctie*, was continuously a subject of debate between the press supporting plantation capitalism and those who paid attention to plantation workers. One example was the polemic between *Sumatra Post* and Benih Mardeka. According to the editor of *Sumatra Post*, Mohamad Samin, the editor of Benih Mardeka and leader of the East Sumatra Sarekat Islam, was inconsistent and double-faced in the case of *poenale sanctie*. In the Sarekat Islam meeting in Medan, M. Samin stated that *poenale sanctie* was still needed and could be abolished in the next 7 years. Nevertheless, there were some rules that had to be revised by the colonial government such as raising wages, reducing working hours, imposing labor tax on the plantations. On the other hand, at the Central Sarekat Islam congress in 1918 in Surabaya, M. Samin emphasized to immediately abolish *poenale sanctie* (Anonymous, 1918a). Samin was present at the congress as a representative of the Sarekat Islam of East Sumatra and editor of Benih Mardeka (Anonymous, 1919). This was an official and absolute decision of *Sarekat Islam* in East Sumatra branches. He argued that the terrible life of the workers was caused by the *poenale sanctie*. Furthermore, it was not only the *poenale sanctie* that had been abolished but also the contract labor system in East Sumatra, although these measures could paralyze the plantation industry (Samin, 1918).

The *Sumatra Post's* coverage stating M. Samin's attitude towards *poenale sanctie* was based on one of the meetings of Sarekat Islam in East Sumatra branch. After that, however, there were several meetings discussing this issue again. A joint meeting was also held by Sarekat Islam and Boedi Oetomo, whose chairman was the editor of *Soeara Djawa* newspaper, R. K. Mangoenatmodjo. He had a different view with M. Samin about the abolishment of the *sanction poenale* (Anonymous, 1918a).

Eventually, in the joint meeting M. Samin was able to persuade and convince R. K. Mangoenatmodjo about the immediate abolishment of *poenale sanctie* (Anonymous, 1918d).

The *Sumatra Post*'s coverage of M. Samin's views that *poenale sanctie* was still needed for the sustainability of the plantation industry was quoted by a member of the people's council, Ketner. Ketner's speech at the people's council surprised members of the council from Sarekat Islam such as Abdul Moeis and H.O.S. Cokroaminoto (Said, 1990, pp. 141–142). This issue was immediately protested strongly by M. Samin. The objection was published in Benih Mardeka on July 27, 1918. He wrote that the development of East Sumatra was not supposed to be achieved with the sweat and blood of plantation workers. In addition, Benih Mardeka also stated that the *Sumatra Post* was inconsistent in seeing the *poenale sanctie* issue and had wrongly accused M. Samin. The information used by the *Sumatra Post* was inaccurate (Samin, 1918).

The different views of the figures of the movement in East Sumatra made the management of the Central Sarekat Islam come to East Sumatra in February 1919. This visit was also to attend the congress of Sarekat Islam in East Sumatra branch. This figure was Abdul Moeis, who stated that the *poenale sanctie* was veiled slavery. In addition, various assaults by workers against entrepreneurs occurred due to the bad temperament and character of the plantation entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs were supposed to provide reasonable assistance to their workers, so that workers could maximize their work. In his speech, Abdul Moeis stated that plantations would be more developed without *poenale sanctie* (Said, 1990, pp. 144–146).

Benih Mardeka's view on the implementation of *poenale sanctie* in East Sumatra was shown in the publication on December 14, 1918. The publication stated that Sumatra was the land of the future but not for the indigenous population. Sumatra was the future for plantation entrepreneurs with *sanction poenale*, which shackles contract workers. This region generated considerable revenue for the government, but the revenue was not used for the benefit of its population. In addition, slavery that had been abolished in the Dutch East Indies was untrue because apparently it was still taking place in East Sumatra. The slavery took place because of the implementation of *poenale sanctie* on the plantations (Anonymous, 1918a).

Benih Mardeka criticized the Dutch colonial government, which was deemed providing facilities to plantation entrepreneurs by implementing the *poenale sanctie*. This practice jeopardized the indigenous

population because it contained slavery elements. The Dutch colonial government was accused of being unfair because it favored the plantation entrepreneurs. The government was supposed to be able to be present and not favor one side only. The labor regulation was deemed to favor entrepreneurs in order to sustain the plantation industry (Anonymous, 1920a).

Efforts to improve the fate of plantation workers had been made since 1914. The poor life of plantation workers and the treatment and exploitation of plantation entrepreneurs made people want to improve the fate of plantation workers. In 1917, Sarekat Islam together with Boedi Oetomo held a joint meeting to discuss worker conditions and the implementation of the *poenale sanctie*. Suggestions and input were discussed to improve worker conditions. Moreover, this movement received a letter from Suardy Surianingrat, who was in the Netherlands, that stronger measures related to this problem had to be taken. One of them was sending demands to the lower house in the Netherlands (Anonymous, 1920e).

An effort made by the editors of Benih Mardeka in improving the lives of plantation workers was a visit to one of the plantations. The editors of Benih Mardeka who made the visit were Mohamad Samin, Ismail, and Mohamad Joenoes. They visited the plantation owned by G. L. J. D. Kok at Timbang Deli. This visit aimed to find a perspective in raising the level and improving the welfare of plantation workers. The results of this visit were used as material and input in the Congress of the Central *Sarekat Islam* in Surabaya in 1918. The visit by the Benih Mardeka, whose aim was to improve the lot of plantation workers, was mocked by the Dutch media in Java. The Dutch media thought that the Benih Mardeka did not understand the sustainability of the plantation industry and its workers (Fox, 1918).

Benih Mardeka initiated collaborative actions with several indigenous press and movement organizations in East Sumatra. Such collaborative actions were taken by following the conditions and propaganda existing in Java. One of the efforts was publishing brochures related to the conditions of plantation contract workers. In addition, fund was raised from each member of the organization for f. 0.50. The fund was managed by Sutan Parlindoengan, the editor of *Pewarta Deli*, R. K. Mangoenatmodjo, the editor of *Soeara Djawa*, and Mohamad Joenoes, the editor of Benih Mardeka. Further actions and movements were controlled by Sarekat Islam (SI) and Boedi Oetomo (Anonymous, 1918c).

The efforts to improve the welfare of plantation workers in East Sumatra were conveyed by Benih Mardeka based on the suggestions of M. Samin in the

Sarekat Islam meeting of the East Sumatra branch. The suggestions were as follows: *Poenale sanctie* had to be abolished; A minimum worker wage was f. 0.60 per day; The maximum work hours for workers was 8 hours a day; Workers were allowed to break or terminate the contract; Workers who had worked for 15 years would receive pension; Workers who wished to reside were given land with their own title; Worker punishment was tried by district courts; Female workers who were 7 months pregnant until 40 days of delivery were not allowed to work, and their wages were not deducted; Every child of workers would receive education and; Gambling was not allowed on plantations (Anonymous, 1920a).

The proposal to improve the lives and welfare of workers was delivered by Mohamad Samin in a speech at the general meeting of Medan-Deli Sarekat Islam on February 17, 1918. Basically, the speech condemned the violence and persecution of plantation entrepreneurs towards plantation workers (Anonymous, 1918b). The proposal was based on the injustice of the Dutch colonial government towards the indigenous population. Mohamad Samin stated that the colonial government had handed over the indigenous population to become victims of plantation capitalism. The plantation entrepreneurs were given a legal freedom to force their laborers to obey their orders. If workers did not obey their orders, physical punishment would be imposed (Anonymous, 1920b).

While Mohamad Samin was serving as the editor-in-chief of Benih Mardeka in 1916–1918, there were many articles and reports that demanded the abolishment of *poenale sanctie*. In addition, he also requested that the regulations of *koeli-ordonnantie* be amended and revised. The speech by Mohamad Samin was eventually taken over as a proposal for a resolution of the Sarekat Islam general meeting. The contents of the speech condemned and demanded the abolishment of *poenale sanctie* in addition to other matters and problems (Said, 1990, p. 138).

Conclusion

The exclusivity of plantation workers and the strict supervision of plantation entrepreneurs resulted in very little discussion about the conditions and exploitation of the lives of plantation workers. Initially more oriented to commercial value, the press was later transformed by Benih Mardeka, that loudly voiced the conditions and issues concerning justice and demanded equality in

order to obtain the rights of plantation workers in East Sumatra. Benih Mardeka played a vital role in the movements and dissemination of national awareness and advocacy of plantation workers. Despite the friction between indigenous press figures related to this movement, Benih Mardeka broke down and loudly voiced the advocacy towards the plantation workers.

Benih Mardeka consistently voiced the advocacy of plantation workers by highlighting the cruelty of plantation entrepreneurs and the injustice of the Dutch colonial government. The issue of poor living conditions of plantation workers became the main propaganda material for Benih Mardeka, which was effective in criticizing both the Dutch colonial government and the plantation entrepreneurs. Finally, it can be concluded that Benih Mardeka remained consistent in voicing the advocacy towards plantation workers in East Sumatra.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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