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Indonesia:

# Social struggles in Indonesia, women workers and the Left

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**Despite high economic growth rates, massive poverty persists in Indonesia. And while the fall of Suharto's "New Order" dictatorship in 1998 drastically enlarged democratic space in the country, old representatives of the dictatorship are making a come-back. The army remains a powerful political player and democratic freedoms are under attack. We publish here an interview with activist Zely Ariane on how the Indonesian Left is trying to find a new way forward. Questions by Wolfgang Alles and Alex de Jong.**

**Indonesia saw at the end of 2013 one of the biggest working class movements of its younger history. What happened?**

Yes, it was the largest one, in term of scale and determination, since the dictatorship of Suharto took power in 1965, 1966 after a massacre of 500.000 to 1 million communists, leftists and sympathizers.

The strike happened for several reasons. First, unions have started to contest the cheap labor policy. They asked for a 50 per cent increase of the national minimum wage in 2013. They had already won 40 - 60 per cent increases on average in 2012. The Indonesian national minimum wage is the third lowest in South East Asia, after Cambodia and Myanmar and is almost the same as that of Vietnam. In Asia it is the fourth after Pakistan. The battle for a raise in the minimum wage happens every year in the run up to the determining of the minimum wage by national and local governments in November. It's always an important battle but for the last two years activists also succeeded in building a national movement around it.

Second, the call for a national strike and the strike itself united almost all of the important trade unions in Indonesia. It broke the barriers between different kinds of unions and build a common campaign for all workers. It, temporarily, put aside old disagreements and criticisms. For the leftist trade unions it was important to support the call from the second biggest trade union in Indonesia, the Indonesian Trade Union Confederation (KSPI) and to work together to expand the call and organize the strike nationally. In only one month, the organizing alliance (National Conference of Labor Movement - KNGB) succeeded in bringing together movements in 20 provinces, 150 regencies and 40 industrial zones. There's no exact data of the strike in 2013, but it is believed to have involved 2,5 million workers from all over Indonesia.

Third, there is an increasing level of workers militancy and movements against the employers and the state. The relative freedom of unionism in Indonesia since 1998 is important, even though many labor activists are still criminalized, and some of them were jailed. Thousands of factory level unions were established (more than 12.000 according to Said Iqbal, the president of KSPI) there are hundreds of federations, and four confederations. In 2009 it was noted that more than 8 million people, or 9 per cent of all the labor force in the formal sector, is unionized in some way. There has been no survey yet, but there are reports that thousands of workers joined unions or established new ones in the last two years.

**What is the role of women workers?**

In every trade union they're active and at the forefront, together with their male counterparts. Labor-intensive manufacturing industries, which are mostly contractual based (such as electronics, footwear, leather, textile, garment, automotive, food and beverages, and chemical industries) are the dominant industrial sectors in Indonesia. And women are dominant in those sectors, particularly in garment and textile.

In those sectors women have been struggling against many obstacles put up by patriarchal norms and against obstacles in the union as well. Women have to return home late after all the meetings, the distributing of leaflets, organizing discussions, negotiations etc, and then they still have to do all the domestic work. Many women workers are prepared to sacrifice since they understand that the movement is important. And being active in the union is also an opportunity for them to feel free, to gain confidence and escape from the domestic burden, even if only temporarily.

In the garment and textile industries in the Nusantara Bonded Industrial Zone (KBN) in Cakung, North Jakarta, for example, where of 100.000 workers 95 per cent are female, only one federation (Across Factory Labor Federation - FBLP), is lead and managed by a majority of women workers; the others are still led by men. FBLP is the smallest federation in the zone but is famous for its determination and militancy in defending workers and women workers rights. It is also famous for being the only consistent labor federation in that zone, free from corruption and bribery by the bosses. FBLP lead the garment and textile sectors strike in the zone on 2010 and 2013.

In the whole of Indonesia, there are only two women workers leading trade unions: Jumisih, the chairperson of FBLP, and Nining Elitos, the chairperson of Congress of Indonesia Unions Alliance (KASBI). FBLP is the only federation in Indonesia that advocates for, and is heavily involved in, defending specific women worker's and LBT's rights. Together with the women's organization *Perempuan Mahardhika* (Free Women) they campaign for specific women and LBT demands.

### **What are their special working conditions?**

Women-dominated sectors such as the textile and garment sectors are the lowest paid sectors since it is considered low-skilled work, even though the work is very labor intensive. Women are still considered as earning only secondary incomes. The food and beverages sectors are similar. In the age of labor market flexibility, we hardly find any permanent status in these sectors. After the significant increases of the national minimum wages since 2012, these workers were the first who experienced "suspension" of the wage increase. The Indonesian government has given bosses in manufacturing industries the opportunity to apply for a "suspension" of the wage increase on the basis of supposed "financial inability" to fulfill their obligation. So now, even though the minimum wages rose with 40 per cent and 30 per cent consecutively, most workers in those sectors still receive the same amount as in 2012.

In KBN Cakung particularly, for many years women workers experienced the so-called "skorsing" system which basically means unpaid overtime. Bosses and manager set a particular target of production for a 8 hours working day, and if the workers can't accomplish the target they need to work more hours, without payment. They work more than 48 hours a week, and often work overtime during weekends to earn a bit more money for living. To earn a little more, some bake simple foods to sell in the factory or sell electronic vouchers for mobile phone credit. Many of them had their bankcards confiscated by moneylenders who take most of their earnings.

In many cases there is no paid leave for maternity. Women workers are laid off because of pregnancy and maternity, there is no breastfeeding corner, no reproductive health checks, no clean water, air, or toilets. The workers live in slums-area in rooms of 6 or 8 square meters. They live there for decades, even with family.

We conducted a limited survey in 2012 among KBN workers on sexual violence and found that at least 1 out of every 5 workers had experienced one form or another of sexual violence. It is common knowledge that many contractual women workers experience sexual abuse when they apply for a job or want to renew their contract. Among the leadership and organizers of FBLP, most have experienced some sort of sexual violence. Some of them had to bear a child from rape, were victim of polygamy without legal marriage, were victim of domestic violence for more than 15 years, were forced into marriage, etc.

Workers in those factories produced things they could never afford, like clothing for brands like Zara, Gap, Old Navy,

Victoria's Secret, La Senza, PINK, JCP, Kohl's, C&A, H&M, Express, Mango, Limited, American Eagle Outfit, Under Armour, Juicy Couture, Justice, Adidas, Reebok, Abercrombie & Fitch, Hollister Gilly Hicks and Walmart.

### What are their forms of resistance?

I'd like to concentrate on the experience of women workers in KBN Cakung, since we work with them on a daily basis. In KBN direct action and strike have since a long time been the main methods of struggle. It has been very difficult to rely on lobbying and negotiations since the bosses and government get away with breaking agreements and laws. There are hardly any Collective Labor Agreements at the factory level. The "skorsing" system and the violations of working periods in the zone are clearly against the labor law, and the labor ministry and office know it. But without direct action there will be no change this situation.

Jumisih and FBLP organizers play important leadership-roles in KBN Cakung. They are always in the front line of any protest in the zone. They confront and negotiate with the police, security and the bosses, but also help women workers deal with violence at home and in the factory.

But they can't organize direct action and strikes everyday. FBLP has continuously worked hard to build confidence among workers, no matter their working status. They distribute leaflets and a bimonthly bulletin called *Worker's Voice*, organize regular "mimbar bebas" (open platforms for workers), theater performances, movie screenings, a community radio, etc. These are all aimed at raising the confidence and consciousness to fight and at the same time to provide a platform to be creative, self-aware human-beings, not "just" submissive factory workers. Now they are preparing to be able to force the company to have a CLA.

### What about their organizations?

Strong organizations are needed to confront the systemic problems of the workers. As the consciousness of the specificity of women oppression increased, we understood the need for an autonomous women movement that links various struggle against exploitation and oppression. All women leaders in FBLP are members of *Perempuan Mahardhika*. FBLP comrades help build *Perempuan Mahardhika* and recently supported the formation of the first LBT group in Cakung area, called *Pelangi Mahardhika* (Mahardhika Rainbow).

They also formed a community radio called Marsinah FM, as a tool to reach more women workers and convince them to join the union and fight for worker's welfare, and to get involved in the struggle for women's rights. Marsinah FM has helped women workers to develop skills as journalists, broadcasters and technicians.

FBLP was initiated in 2009 and has branches in two cities in Central Java. They are open to joining with other federations or confederations as long as it would support the campaign that they have built. They are aiming to be a less hierarchical union, and promote initiative from their rank and file members.

### Can you tell us about your educational work?

Since 2009 *Perempuan Mahardhika* has organised a "Feminist School" for female students. We trained ourselves to be able to integrate a gender analysis with the class question and to analyze women's specific oppression. We developed a course dealing with the daily-life problems of women, with issues of gender, sexuality and reproductive rights, women and religion, and the systemic characters of women's oppression. The course includes an introduction to the history of the women's movement, and how to organize for change.

In the last two years we also developed a feminist course for women workers, with a similar module but more specifically oriented to women's rights in the work place, discussing women's double burden, women and the workers movement, and how to integrate women's issues in work place movements. Our dream is to further expand this course in the future.

Through this course, we succeeded to train the FLBP women leadership in integrating women's specific demands and struggles in their trade union activities.

### **Which are the current projects and campaigns?**

In relation to the struggle for women's liberation, the first month since its foundation (March 2013), my organization, *Politik Rakyat* (People's Politics), has made it a priority to defend feminism by strengthening its politics of women liberation. The attacks of the Indonesian capitalist regime and right wing movements against women rights are increasing. Our work is to build the consciousness of women workers as women and as workers and to support the fight against sexual violence. We are helping to organize a campaign against sexual violence. We work towards building the movement in such a way as to have a real participation of women at the grass root level. The struggle against sexual violence is a priority but we also build the movement for women's right in general. We work with *Perempuan Mahardhika*, the Accross Factory Labor Federation (FBLP) union, women workers community radio Marsinah FM radiostation, and Jakarta Volunteers Against Sexual Violence (Relawan KawanKu).

For the coming Mayday, the Joint Committee of Popular Politics for Marsinah (abbreviated as Marsinah Torch) has called on all popular movements to support a convoy of people from Jakarta to Porong, East Java, starting on May 1 to May 10. Marsinah was a woman worker found dead, sexually abused and tortured, in 1993, after she paid visit to the army command and asked them their reasons for detaining her fellow workers for organizing a strike to demand a pay rise. The convoy will go to the place where she worked. Several Marsinah Torch committees have been established in Central Java.

The factory where Marsinah used to work in Porong, Sidoarjo, East Java, was destroyed in a mud-flow caused by gas drilling by the company PT Lapindo Brantas. At the time, Lapindo Brantas was owned by Aboerizal Bakrie, one of the richest men in Indonesia and chairman of the Golkar party and its next presidential candidate. Golkar was the party of Suharto. By ending the convoy in Porong the organizers aim to show solidarity to all the victims of the mud-flow and demand responsibility from the bosses of Lapindo, as well as to keep the memory of Marsinah as a worker's hero and demand justice for her.

We're aiming to establish links among worker's struggle in Java island, to maintain the momentum of the workers movement and to campaign for more welfare and democracy for all people.

### **The workers movement in Indonesia seems to be growing but so far this has not found any political expression. Why is this? What can you say about the relationship between the workers movements and the organized political Left?**

There are attempts to give a political expression to the workers movements worth mentioning. The first is the "workers go political" approach of FSPMI, the metal workers union. They encourage their members to be parliamentary candidates for any political party that agrees with a platform put forward by FSPMI. The agreement includes that the FSPMI candidacy will only obey the union, and not the political parties on whose ticket they are running. This in fact is not a new approach, several workers and even Said Ikbai himself, the chairperson, did the same in the last election in 2009 but they failed to win any seats. The difference today is that such candidacies are part of a more coordinated plan, and aren't just individual initiatives.

But their “workers go political” campaign is actually quite un-political: basically, they are saying more workers should be involved in politics and be candidates but they don't raise demands regarding what those worker-candidates should do. Some of those candidates are very sincere in their commitment to defending the interests of workers but the parliament is dominated by bourgeois politicians with a lot of experience and power. Without any program and without a strong workers party that can back them up, even the most sincere workers-candidate will either be co-opted or be isolated and made irrelevant.

Workers, and in particular FSPMI rank and file members, are increasingly militant and their class-consciousness is growing but this campaign will only result in the loss of valuable activists.

There is also an attempt by *Rumah Rakyat Indonesia* (RRI, Indonesian People's House), a political initiative by KSPI “also joined by FSPMI” to create a space for workers to discuss politics. There are continuing discussions that workers need their own party but Indonesian law makes it extremely difficult and expensive to be recognized as a political party and participate in elections. RRI so far has not developed any serious plans to overcome this and some of the major forces that support RRI have chosen to follow the “workers go political” approach instead.

And then there are the radical, “red” unions that are linked to various left-wing political groups. Those have formed a front called Joint Secretariat of Labor (Sekber Buruh), but this front has so far not succeeded to grown into a insignificant political outlet for workers. The groups that form Sekber Buruh are often quite inward-looking and they have failed to draw in support from other layers. The radical left is far less organised than for example KSPI and is unable to form an alternative leadership. In August last year, Sekber Buruh published a Manifesto against the 2014 elections and they recently launched a call to “resist bourgeois elections” but they don't have significant activities to, for instance, organize a boycott..

I personally don't think a call to reject elections is the best propaganda, in a country like Indonesia where even bourgeois democracy is weak it can even be a danger. But it is difficult for the left to develop slogans that can relate to the increasing distrust people feel toward the established parties and give this distrust a progressive direction. The number of people that bothers to vote is declining. Among some intellectuals and students there is some talk to try and politicize abstention but there is nothing concrete so far. The major problem is that we, the left, failed to provide a political alternative in a context where there is a great potential for such an alternative, even larger than parts of the left sometimes think. But this failure is admitted only hesitantly. Without real political project on the ground, without ongoing activities and participation by all the groups within Sekber, its programs will remain largely propaganda. At the moment, Sekber is only capable of holding periodic protests, not build a real movement.

This failure is made worse by the fact that in elections established parties have succeeded in co-opting many activists as candidates. Some of these former activists are pure opportunists but others are sincere. Since all the attempts to build a political alternative have failed and new laws have made this even more difficult in the meantime, good activists turn to the mainstream parties.

The turn-out for presidential elections is higher than for parliamentary elections. In 2004, the current president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known as SBY) was elected because people were eager to see a new face in politics. But since then, the enthusiasm for elections has declined. Of the many, often militant, protests around the country only very few find any echo in the parliament.

Since there is no political alternative, people's disappointment can go two ways; abstention or support for individual candidates that manage to present themselves as new and somehow better on the tickets of established parties.

The only left force that was able in the past to be visible on the national level was Partai Rakyat Demokratik (People's

Democratic Party, PRD). In 1999, 2004 and a few years before the 2009 elections it tried to form an alternative political party but it failed. The PRD has now adopted a nationalist discourse and some of its activists support right-wing parties like those of the former generals and Human Rights violators Prabowo and Wiranto.

So, the left in general has no significant political outlet anymore.

**The Governor of Jakarta, Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, is one of the prominent candidates for the presidential elections in July. With his populist image he has attracted quite some support. Can the workers expect anything from him?**

Joko Widodo is a product of the discontent I described. So far, he has managed to keep his credibility as a man of the people - not because he has taken progressive steps on social-economic issues or even because of his politics, but because he is not corrupt and takes more distance from the Suharto regime and its remnants than the other presidential candidates. A few independent left activists have joined his campaign.

But the workers' movement in Jakarta and its satellite cities that led the strike last year has seen Jokowi side with the bosses and oppose the demand for a 50 per cent increase in the minimum wage. And Human Rights activists are skeptical about Jokowi's capacity to resolve a number of major Human Rights violation cases. Right from the start, Jokowi had been promoted by media like the *Financial Times* and the *Economist*. In office, he has proved to be a friend of big business. If he wasn't, he wouldn't now be the candidate for the PDI-P, the second largest political party in the country.

But compared to somebody like Prabowo, another prominent presidential candidate, Jokowi suddenly seems a lot more appealing. Prabowo is an ex-army general who is responsible for Human Rights violations in East Timor when the Indonesian army organized a campaign of bloody violence there at the turn of the century. Before that, he organized the "disappearing" of left-wing activists in the 1990s and he is a major capitalist himself.

If the election turns into a race between him and Jokowi, it will certainly attract more attention and foster even more illusions in Jokowi. The Indonesian elite is so corrupt and ridden with remnants of Suharto's 'New Order' regime that any candidate who takes his distance from them and is seen as being free from corruption can win significant support from the people. Such illusions are dangerous but it is interesting to see how people's overblown expectations of him are at the same time creating difficulties for Jokowi – to only way for him not to shatter those illusions in the future is to confront the army that is protecting Human Rights violators and political crooks, but he is not able to do that. In 2001, the president was Gus Dur, a moderately progressive liberal, and many people hoped he would confront the New Order remnants but he betrayed their hopes. I don't think Jokowi or anybody from the political elite will succeed where Gus Dur failed and really confront the New Order remnants and army.

Politik Rakyat is trying to build various outlets for the popular classes to speak for themselves. We're not in favor of the call of other Left groups to campaign on the platform of "reject the elections", we rather seek to build up a wide campaign around people's issues and build a network of people's initiatives. We want the people, mainly the workers and women we work with, to create popular political initiatives – no matter how small those are – and to put forward their own demands. The Marsinah Torch campaign is one example. We realize we are in a difficult political situation, we need to confront the illusions people have in somebody like Jokowi. Meanwhile, New Order representatives are making a political come-back. We need a political alternative and we have to build and maintain an independent political position of the popular classes. The capacity for self-organization has developed enormously, amid all limitations given in the existing democratic space, and we have to build on that.

**Some prominent political supporters of Suharto's New Order regime are making a political come-back, army**

**officers are playing a prominent role in politics and progressive organizations are harassed by far-right groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Pemuda Pancasila. Do you think the so-called democratic space is shrinking and that the gains of "Reformasi" are in danger?**

Yes, for sure. This has been happening for sometime, since Gus Dur stepped down in 2001 and Megawati came to power. Already starting then, political figures associated with the Suharto regime and the army made a successful comeback. SBY, who as an ex-general has ties to the New Order regime, won the elections in 2004 and 2009 and now there is a serious discussion to declare Suharto and general Sarwo Edhie, an important organizer of the massacres of 1965-1966, national heroes. Ex-generals like Prabowo and Wiranto formed their own political parties to run in the 2009 elections and both won significant numbers of seats. It feels like the familiar faces of Suharto's regime are back.

SBY failed to bring to justice those who organized the killing of the most well-known and well-respected Human Rights activist, Munir, who was murdered in 2004. It's commonly accepted that army and intelligence officers organized his murder. This was followed by the ignoring of the National Human Rights Commission's recommendation to further investigate the 1965-1966 mass killings and recognize these as gross human rights violations. Any time the army is accused of Human Rights violations, the case hits a brick wall.

The come-back of New Order politicians and army goes together with new laws that limit democratic rights, such as the bill on mass organizations that requires you to have a permit to set up a mass organization and hold activities. There is a bill on 'social conflict' that enables the army to be used during demonstrations or land conflicts, there is a proposal to organize a new state militia (a 'state-defense reserve component') and to use the army to protect the security of investments. Considering women's rights, more than 350 "moral" and religious bylaws on the provincial and municipal levels regulating women's social behavior have been passed. There are laws on what women are allowed to wear, at what times women are allowed to be outside of their homes, if they can be in male company in public et cetera.

We have to resist such anti-democratic laws and at the same time we have to campaign against the threats and activities of vigilante groups as FPI and Pemuda Pancasila. We can't rely on the law to put them in prison for attacking Christian churches, peace demonstrations, LGBT's or other minorities. That is because those groups are related in one way or another to Indonesia military in the first place, they do the dirty work of the army generals and politicians.

**The movie *The Act of Killing* has made the Pemuda Pancasila militia famous, clearly showing their ties with important politicians. Can you say anything about the impact of this movie on Indonesian society? Has it helped to break the taboo on "1965"?**

The most important thing is that the movie succeeded in introducing the dark history of Indonesian society and politics back in 1965-1966 to ordinary Indonesians, particularly to young people. While there are still no official screenings in Indonesian theaters, the organizing of semi legal screenings is widespread and still ongoing. I think it has not destroyed the taboo yet, but it helped to challenge the general acceptance among the youth of the New Order's version of the history of the 1965-1966. The movies also confronts people with the difficulty of bringing the murderers to justice, due to the pro-New Order nature of Indonesian politics.

A grass-roots campaign for justice for Munir has some success among young people, and this movie deals with closely related subjects like role of the Indonesian army in politics. Indonesia sees more than ever young people starting to question the official interpretations history. They do this through art, music, writings, protest actions, et cetera. That's an important step forward, even if we can't really speak of a movement yet. The continuing line from the 1965 killings to the impunity of Human Rights violators and the daily repression of social protests by the police

and army today needs to be made visible so the role of the army can be challenged.

### **Finally, what can people do to support your fight?**

The first and foremost thing is keeping in touch and updating yourself about our struggles. There is always something immediate or urgent that you can follow up in solidarity in your respective countries.

But right now there are two important initiatives that need support. First is the Marsinah FM community radio station in Cakung, North Jakarta. FBLP doesn't have enough money for maintaining the work and the infrastructure, let alone to develop it further. They are now working to expand themselves to Internet radio streaming but need support. You can contact them through [freshreborn@gmail.com](mailto:freshreborn@gmail.com). FBLP collects membership fees but this isn't enough. They have started producing various merchandise and a bakery to raise funds but they still need support.

Second is to help the campaign of Marsinah Torch by spreading the news and if possible donate.

Please contact the committee for the Marsinah Torch campaign at: [obor.marsinah@gmail.com](mailto:obor.marsinah@gmail.com). If want to donate you can send money through our paypal account or Bank transfer to BANK CENTRAL ASIA (BCA) KCP TEBET TIMUR, Jln. Tebet Timur Dalam Blok GG No.97, Jakarta Selatan Jakarta, 12820, ACC No. 62-90-28-37-34, Acc Holder: Titin Wartini, SWIFT CODE: CENAIJJA.