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Indonesia

“We Are The Working Class”?: Indonesia’s Labour Party and the Limits of Reformist Politics

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When more than 50 Indonesian labour unions gathered in Jakarta on 5 October 2021 to establish the Partai Buruh (Labour Party), it appeared to mark a historic moment: workers organising their own political vehicle to challenge an oligarchic system that had stripped away their rights. Yet from its inception, the party embodied a contradiction. Led by union bureaucrats with histories of elite collaboration, the Labour Party promised working-class independence whilst its president courted the very politicians who had passed anti-worker legislation. It claimed to represent the marginalised whilst maintaining "deafening silence" on human rights abuses and democratic backsliding. The 2024 elections exposed this hollowness: the party secured less than 1 per cent of votes, failing even to enter parliament. More damning still, its leadership subsequently embraced the authoritarian Prabowo government it had supposedly opposed. The Labour Party's trajectory reveals not workers' power, but the dangers of reformist politics in an oligarchic state—and why most of Indonesia's revolutionary left now declares that the Workers Party has "failed to become a political vessel for the oppressed people."

Introduction

On 5 October 2021, exactly one year after Indonesia's controversial Omnibus Law on Job Creation was passed, more than 50 labour unions gathered in Jakarta to formally establish the Partai Buruh (Labour Party). This marked a significant moment in Indonesian politics: the revival of a workers' political party after years of fragmented labour representation and defeats at the hands of a political establishment dominated by elites with roots in the authoritarian New Order regime [1].

The party's formation was driven by a stark realisation amongst union leaders that traditional tactics—mass demonstrations, general strikes, and lobbying—had failed to prevent the passage of legislation that fundamentally undermined workers' rights. The 2020 Omnibus Law on Job Creation, a sweeping 812-page piece of legislation, had relaxed rules on firing workers, expanded outsourcing without restrictions, weakened severance protections, and extended overtime limits, all whilst reducing environmental safeguards and threatening indigenous land rights. Despite massive protests that drew hundreds of thousands of workers onto the streets, the law passed with minimal consultation from labour unions or civil society groups.

Historical context: Labour politics in post-Suharto Indonesia

The Partai Buruh represents the latest attempt to build working-class political representation in Indonesia's electoral system. The history of labour-based parties in the post-Suharto era has been one of repeated failure. After the fall of the authoritarian regime in 1998, labour activist Muchtar Pakpahan established the National Labour Party (Partai Buruh Nasional), which competed in the first democratic elections in 1999 but attracted only a tiny fraction of votes. The party competed again in 2004 as the Social Democratic Labour Party and in 2009 as the Labour Party, but failed to secure any seats. In 2009, it garnered just 0.25 per cent of votes—approximately 265,000 ballots.

This electoral weakness reflected deeper structural problems. Indonesia's labour movement emerged from decades

of repression under Suharto, during which all unions were forced into a single state-controlled organisation. The legacy of this control has been a fragmented labour movement with over 100 specialised unions and multiple competing confederations. Of Indonesia's approximately 127 million workers, only 2.7 million are registered union members, and these are scattered across numerous organisations with competing political allegiances.

Party structure and founding coalition

The 2021 revival drew support from several major labour confederations: the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI) with 2.2 million members, the Confederation of All Indonesian Workers' Unions (KSPSI) [\[2\]](#) with 3 million members, and several smaller confederations. The core initiator was the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers' Unions (FSPMI), which represents 300,000 workers primarily in the automotive, electronics, and manufacturing sectors concentrated in the industrial zones around Jakarta and Bekasi.

To expand beyond its industrial union base, the party aligned itself with farmers' organisations, fishers' groups, informal sector workers, domestic workers, migrant workers, online transportation workers, teachers' unions, and urban poor movements. With more than 80 million workers in Indonesia's informal sector—representing 60 per cent of the workforce—the party aimed to build a broad coalition of the marginalised.

Said Iqbal, president of both the KSPI confederation and the FSPMI metal workers' union, was elected unopposed as party president at the founding congress. Born in Jakarta in 1968 to parents from Aceh, Iqbal began his working life in 1992 at an electronics factory in Bekasi District. His experience with poor working conditions drew him into labour organising, and after the fall of Suharto, he helped establish the FSPMI, eventually becoming its president. Under his leadership, the KSPI organised major national strikes and demonstrations, including protests against outsourcing practices and minimum wage violations.

Political platform: Towards a welfare state

The Labour Party's programme centres on what it calls a "welfare state" agenda, directly challenging the neoliberal economic policies that have dominated Indonesia since the 1990s. The party's key demands include:

- Rejection of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation and restoration of labour protections that existed under the 2003 Labour Law
- Ending the system of unlimited contract renewals that keeps workers in precarious employment indefinitely
- Abolishing outsourcing for core production work whilst maintaining direct employment relationships
- Establishing a living wage rather than the current minimum wage, which covers only 82 per cent of basic needs
- Adequate severance pay protections
- Humane working hours with limits on overtime

- Menstrual and birthing leave enshrined in law
- Universal social security coverage including health insurance and pensions
- Protection for domestic workers, ship crews, and migrant workers who currently lack legal safeguards
- Agrarian reform and food sovereignty

The party's demands extend beyond traditional labour issues to encompass broader social justice concerns, reflecting its attempt to position itself as a voice for all marginalised groups rather than narrowly representing unionised industrial workers.

The 2024 elections: High hopes, disappointing results

The party's registration for Indonesia's 2024 parliamentary elections attracted considerable attention from commentators and civil society activists. For the first time in decades, a party backed by the country's largest unions would compete in national elections. The party claimed it could mobilise 10 million members across 25 provinces and needed approximately 7 million votes to surpass the 4 per cent threshold required to enter parliament.

However, the election results on 14 February 2024 proved deeply disappointing. According to the official count from Indonesia's Electoral Commission, the Labour Party secured only 0.62-0.73 per cent of the national vote—well below the parliamentary threshold. In Jakarta, where the party had its strongest organisational presence, it performed slightly better but still failed to gain significant traction.

The party's electoral strategy faced numerous challenges. Committed to rejecting "money politics"—the widespread practice of vote-buying that dominates Indonesian elections—Labour Party campaigners distributed pamphlets and engaged in door-to-door canvassing without offering cash or gifts. Residents repeatedly asked why party workers hadn't brought rice, cooking oil, or other necessities that other parties routinely provided. Some voters scoffed at candidates who "couldn't enrich themselves," revealing how deeply transactional politics has penetrated Indonesian electoral culture.

A survey of 709 workers in Central Java found that none of the surveyed workers supported the Labour Party, instead aligning with mainstream parties such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and Gerindra—the same parties that had supported the Omnibus Law. Workers' votes fragmented across the political spectrum, with the top five parties chosen by working-class voters being Gerindra (20.1 per cent), PDI-P (17.3 per cent), Golkar (10.7 per cent), the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (8.5 per cent), and Nasdem (7.2 per cent).

Contradictions and critiques from the left

From its inception, the Labour Party has faced sharp criticism from more radical elements within the labour movement and the Indonesian left. Critics point to fundamental contradictions between the party's rhetoric and its leadership's political practice.

Most problematically, Said Iqbal's history of collaboration with political elites has raised questions about the party's genuine commitment to opposition politics. In both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Iqbal campaigned for Prabowo Subianto, a former general under Suharto's regime with a controversial human rights record. Iqbal allegedly expected to be appointed minister of manpower in a Prabowo government. After Prabowo's defeats, Iqbal quickly pivoted to expressing support for President Joko Widodo, participating in friendly photo opportunities and initially supporting Widodo's controversial plan to relocate Indonesia's capital.

During the 2024 presidential campaign, whilst the Labour Party officially maintained that it could support none of the candidates because all backed the Omnibus Law, party leaders reserved the right to change policy if circumstances shifted. After Prabowo's victory, Iqbal declared that the party and KSPI would support the Prabowo-Gibran government, prompting accusations of inconsistency from party members. At a May Day event in 2025, Iqbal claimed that 95 per cent of workers supported President Prabowo—a statement far removed from oppositional politics.

Furthermore, the appointment of Andi Gani, president of the KSPSI confederation and a Labour Party supporter, as special staff to the national police chief for labour affairs has raised concerns about co-optation. Critics argue that these developments demonstrate the "trade union bureaucracy" remains fundamentally oriented towards accommodation with the political establishment rather than building genuine working-class power.

Internal tensions have emerged between two streams within the party: the "Iqbal stream" that prioritises lobbying and negotiation with elites, and the more oppositional Political Committee (Kopolnas) stream associated with the Confederation of United Indonesian Workers (KPBI) that advocates for continued mass mobilisation and civil society activism.

Significantly, some of the most militant unions have remained outside the Labour Party entirely. The Congress of Indonesian Unions Alliance (KASBI) [\[3\]](#), which represents a key part of Indonesia's independent labour movement, stayed away from the party. KASBI's scepticism stems partly from distrust of Said Iqbal's political history—including his 2014 statement that "human rights are not important to workers" when defending his support for Prabowo Subianto, a man accused of serious human rights violations during the Suharto era. KASBI activists also question whether electoral politics within Indonesia's oligarchic system can deliver meaningful change, or whether it inevitably leads to co-optation.

In May 2025, the divisions within Indonesian labour manifested dramatically in two separate May Day events in Jakarta. The Labour Party, under Said Iqbal, participated in a state-aligned event held at the National Monument with President Prabowo, military commanders, police chiefs, and parliamentary leaders on stage—an event that looked more like an official state ceremony than a workers' demonstration. Meanwhile, KASBI and 35 other critical civil society groups organised the Labour Movement with the People (GEBRAK) coalition [\[4\]](#), holding an oppositional protest outside the parliamentary building. GEBRAK's demands went beyond workplace issues to include repeal of the Law on the Armed Forces, opposition to military interference in civilian affairs, and a denunciation of "capitalism, oligarchy and militarism" as "the enemies of the working class." This split reveals a fundamental divide in the Indonesian labour movement between those pursuing accommodation with state power and those maintaining an oppositional stance.

Left-wing organisations including the Socialist Union (Perserikatan Sosialis) issued a manifesto during the 2024 elections calling on the Labour Party's left wing to maintain an independent position and avoid collaboration with pro-Omnibus Law politicians. They argued that the party risked becoming just another vehicle for elite interests rather than a genuine force for working-class transformation.

Far left critiques: "The Labour Party has failed"

By 2025, disillusionment of anti-capitalists with the Labour Party had deepened. The Indonesian People's Movement (Solidaritas Perjuangan Rakyat Indonesia, SPRI) [5] issued a scathing assessment declaring that "the Labour Party has failed to become a political vessel for the oppressed people. The Labour Party has actually compromised with the powers it was supposed to fight. Instead of becoming a tool for the working-class struggle, it submitted to the logic of parliament and the elite."

The SPRI critique represents a broader frustration amongst Indonesia's revolutionary left with both the Labour Party and the trajectory of the once-radical People's Democratic Party (PRD). The PRD, which emerged from student movements in the late 1980s and played a heroic role resisting Suharto's dictatorship—with leaders like Budiman Sudjatmiko serving long prison sentences—had itself undergone a rightward shift. In 2021, the PRD merged into the Just and Prosperous People's Party (Prima), which subsequently aligned itself with President Prabowo Subianto's government. This represented, in the words of SPRI activists, "a betrayal of the spirit of the people's resistance."

The far left argues that Indonesia now faces an "alternative political vacuum" with no parties that "truly represent the voices of the poor, workers, farmers, fishers, and the oppressed." They contend that "all the major political parties and those claiming to be 'left' have been co-opted by the elite system." This analysis extends beyond mere electoral failure to encompass a fundamental critique of reformist politics: that any attempt to work within Indonesia's oligarchic parliamentary system inevitably results in co-optation and betrayal.

These groups call for building a new party that would differ fundamentally from the Labour Party model. Rather than being led by trade union bureaucrats with histories of elite collaboration, it would be grounded in mass movements—labour, farmers, indigenous peoples, students, and environmental activists—united under a strategic framework explicitly aimed at challenging capitalist power. Such a party would not "adapt" to elite politics but would "shake the status quo," standing "at the forefront with the oppressed people, not the owners of capital."

The Socialist Union's 2024 manifesto articulated a maximalist programme that goes far beyond the Labour Party's reformist demands: nationalisation of strategic assets under popular control, redistribution of national wealth, liberation of women from sexism and sexual oppression, full equality for traditional communities and youth, environmental protection, support for international solidarity and self-determination, and elimination of foreign debt for all Third World countries. Critically, they called for "national industrialisation to develop productive labour for the welfare and progress of the ordinary people"—a programme of economic sovereignty that challenges Indonesia's dependent relationship with global capitalism.

Within this far left perspective, the Labour Party's emphasis on achieving a "welfare state" within the existing capitalist framework represents inadequate reformism. They argue that Indonesian capitalism, dominated by oligarchs with deep roots in the Suharto era and increasingly integrated into global supply chains, cannot be reformed to serve workers' interests. Only a revolutionary transformation that breaks with imperialism and establishes popular democratic control over the economy can genuinely address the working class's needs.

The critique extends to the Labour Party's failure to take clear positions on issues beyond immediate workplace concerns. The far left notes that the Labour Party maintained "deafening silence on the most controversial issues" including President Widodo's manipulation of democratic institutions to install his son Gibran as vice president, Prabowo's well-documented human rights violations during the Suharto era (including his alleged role in the disappearance of activists like poet Wiji Thukul), and ongoing repression of West Papuan independence movements. For revolutionary socialists, a genuine working-class party must link labour struggles with broader fights for democracy, human rights, national sovereignty, and anti-imperialism.

Yet the far left's own organisational weakness complicates these critiques. The revolutionary groups remain small, fragmented, and lacking mass base—a reality acknowledged in their constant calls to unite social resistance with a common political strategy. The PRD's trajectory from militant opposition to government alignment reflects not merely leadership betrayal but the immense pressures facing left organisations in a political system where money dominates, repression remains possible, and co-optation offers material rewards. The question remains whether a more radical alternative can be built without either retreating into sectarian isolation or succumbing to the same accommodationist pressures that have compromised the Labour Party.

Structural obstacles: Why labour parties struggle in Indonesia

The Labour Party's difficulties reflect broader structural obstacles to working-class political representation in Indonesia. Several factors combine to create a hostile environment for labour-based parties:

Low union density and fragmentation: Despite the large workforce, less than 2 per cent of Indonesian workers belong to unions, and these are divided across more than 100 organisations with no unified confederation to channel collective action.

Patronage politics and money culture: Indonesian elections are characterised by endemic vote-buying, with established parties distributing cash, rice, cooking oil, and other goods to voters. Parties refusing to participate in this system face massive disadvantages, particularly when voters have been conditioned to expect material benefits in exchange for votes.

Elite domination of political space: Until 2024, virtually all parties in parliament traced their origins to the New Order period or were vehicles for elite figures. The electoral system privileges parties with massive financial resources for television advertising, celebrity candidates, and elaborate campaign infrastructure.

Lack of strong unifying figures: Indonesian political culture continues to emphasise strong individual leaders. The Labour Party has struggled to produce a charismatic figure who can command broad appeal, whilst Iqbal himself carries political baggage from his previous elite alignments.

Poverty and false consciousness: Extreme wealth inequality and persistent poverty have fragmented the working class, preventing class-based political mobilisation. Many workers identify more strongly with middle-class aspirations or religious/ethnic identities than with their class position. This “false consciousness”—where workers vote against their material interests—helps explain why so many supported parties that passed anti-worker legislation.

Gender and patriarchal structures: Women workers, who dominate labour-intensive industries such as garments and textiles, face particular vulnerabilities under the Omnibus Law. The expansion of outsourcing and contract work disproportionately affects women, who are often the first laid off and have less bargaining power in a patriarchal society. Yet the Labour Party has struggled to centre women's concerns or develop distinctly feminist political perspectives that address the intersections of class and gender oppression.

A partial victory: Constitutional Court ruling

In October 2024, the Labour Party and several union confederations achieved a significant legal victory when Indonesia's Constitutional Court granted 21 of 71 petition points in their judicial review of the Omnibus Law. The court ruled that workers must be given priority over foreign workers in employment, that fixed-term contracts cannot exceed five years, that workers are entitled to two rest days per week rather than one, and that termination of employment can only occur through an order from an industrial relations institution.

Said Iqbal declared the ruling "a monumental victory for Indonesian workers," though critics noted the decision came through judicial channels rather than mass mobilisation or electoral power. The court ordered the government to enact a new law within two years, but President Prabowo Subianto established a Labour Welfare Council comprising union leaders to "advise" on labour affairs—a mechanism that could facilitate lobbying but also risks further co-opting labour leadership into elite decision-making structures.

Future prospects: An uncertain path forward

The Labour Party's trajectory remains deeply uncertain. Its failure to secure parliamentary representation means it has no direct legislative power and must rely on extra-parliamentary tactics—the very methods party leaders claimed had failed in 2020. Nevertheless, the party continues to organise demonstrations and campaigns, including protests demanding fairer public housing policies and opposing anti-worker provisions.

Some analysts suggest the party could grow if it maintains organisational discipline and continues mobilising at the grassroots level in preparation for the 2029 elections. The sting of the Omnibus Law continues to galvanise sections of the labour movement, and the party's willingness to reject money politics—whilst electorally costly—could eventually build credibility amongst voters disgusted with corruption.

However, the contradictions within the party leadership may prove insurmountable. The gap between the party's radical rhetoric about being "the working class" and its leaders' accommodation with elite politics undermines its claim to represent a genuine alternative. If the oppositional forces within the labour movement—represented by coalitions such as the Labour Movement with the People (GEBRAK)—decide to form their own political party, Indonesia could see competing labour-based parties that sharpen rather than resolve the movement's internal contradictions.

The Indonesian working class remains without effective political representation in the electoral sphere. The dominant parties in parliament—whether nominally left like PDI-P or right like Gerindra—all support neoliberal economic policies and have demonstrated little commitment to protecting workers' rights. The Labour Party's emergence represents an important attempt to challenge this consensus, but it is very unlikely that members will overcome the structural obstacles and purge its accommodationist leadership tendencies.

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[1] The New Order refers to the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, which ruled Indonesia from 1966 to 1998. The regime was characterised by political repression, military dominance, and the subordination of civil society organisations, including trade unions.

[2] Although KSPSI claimed 3 million members, the confederation's leadership did not initially support the party's formation, with its president Elly Rosita Silaban expressing scepticism about the conditions for labourist politics in Indonesia.

[3] KASBI (Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia) was formed in 2005 by 18 labour unions and has maintained a more militant and independent stance than the larger confederations. KASBI has engaged in direct action campaigns, including strikes against multinational corporations.

[4] GEBRAK (Gerakan Buruh bersama Rakyat) represents oppositional unions and civil society groups that reject alignment with state power and continue to emphasise mass mobilisation and protest tactics.

[5] SPRI is a coalition of radical left organisations in Indonesia advocating for a militant, democratic alternative that unites social movements under one strategic framework focused on genuine people's power.