INDONESIAN LABOUR SINCE SUHARTO: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE REGION

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Since the mid 1980s, Indonesian labour has gone through a turbulent period of restructuring and reformation, as the industrial relations landscape was transformed, firstly by the government’s export-oriented industrialisation strategy and then again when the political edifice of President Suharto’s New Order came crashing down in 1998. Scholarly interest in Indonesia’s industrial working class peaked in the 1990s, when factory workers struggled for the right to organise in the factories and on the streets, at a time when public protest was a dangerous strategy. In this period, Indonesians wrote a number of PhD theses on the subject of labour. The book published from the most influential of these was written by political scientist Vedi Hadiz at Murdoch University in Australia and is now the seminal work on organised labour during the New Order period (1997). Other Indonesian scholars who completed English-language PhD and Masters theses on labour-related issues in these years, included anthropologist Ratna Saptari (1995) in the Netherlands, and scholar-activists Sri Kusnayati (1998) and Nori Andriyani (1996) in Australia and Canada respectively. Sutanta (also known as Sutanto Suwarno), a Department of Manpower official, also completed his PhD in the United Kingdom (1997). These students re-established the tradition of Indonesian scholars and scholar-bureaucrats from an earlier era, most notably Tedjasukmana (1958) and Hasibuan (1968).

Indonesian labour also caught the attention of non-Indonesians in the 1990s, particularly postdoctoral students in the United States of America and Australia. US scholars working on Indonesian labour at this time include political scientist Doug Kammen’s widely-cited work on strikes (1997) and Bama Athreya’s anthropological study of a workers’ community in urban Jakarta (1998). Theses completed in Australia on contemporary Indonesian labour in the 1990s included Peter Hancock’s study on industrial workers in West Java (1998) and Jennifer Grant’s Masters thesis on industrial relations reform (1995). There were very few edited collections on labour compiled in the last decade of the New Order period, notable exceptions being the proceedings of the Australian National University’s Indonesia Project’s annual Indonesia Update for 1993 (Manning 1993a), a series of academic lectures on labour given at Monash University (Bourchier 1994), and a conference volume produced out of Murdoch University (Lambert 1997), all from Australia. Journal articles about Indonesian industrial relations written in this period, including pieces by Chris Manning (1993b), Michael Hess (1997) and Michele Ford (1999), which were also sourced from Australia. The fall of Suharto saw a flurry of publishing on organised labour’s role as a force for democratisation, by established labour specialists, such as Hadiz (see for example Hadiz 1998), and democratisation scholars like Edward Aspinall (1998) and Olle Törnquist (2004). In 2001, American Dan La Botz published a widely cited semicolonial book on the labour movement after the fall of Suharto (2001). More recently Teri Caraway and Michele Ford, whose PhD theses were on the feminisation of factory work and the role of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the labour movement respectively (Caraway 2002; Ford 2003), have written about unions, industrial relations, industrial disputes settlements and labour politics in the post-Suharto period (see for example Caraway 2003, 2004, 2006 forthcoming; Ford 2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2006 in press).

What is missing from this picture and almost inevitably from all but the most specialised studies of Indonesian labour, is the growing body of academic and semi-academic literature on labour produced in Indonesia itself. In the 1990s, the labour activist press was prolific, but there was little Indonesian-language academic literature to cite, with the notable exception of M.M. Billah’s Masters
thesis (1995), and a few undergraduate theses on labour produced in Indonesia itself. In the 1990s, the labour activist press was prolific, but there was little Indonesian-language academic literature to cite, with the notable exception of M.M. Billah’s Masters thesis (1995), and a few undergraduate theses.

Although labour relations still struggles to find a home in Indonesian universities, sociology, law and politics departments are increasingly open to the academic study of labour — not least as a new generation of activists-turned-scholars seek postgraduate qualifications in Indonesia and abroad.

Theses written at Indonesian universities are difficult to access through public channels, and there are no specialist academic labour journals published in Indonesia. Semi-scholarly journals like the high quality labour journal Sedane (published by Fauzi Abdullah’s Lembaga Informasi Perburuhan Sedane) and Akatiga’s Jurnal Analisis Sosial (which, although not dedicated to labour, has run a number of special issues on labour-related topics) offer a more accessible site for publication of academic articles in Indonesian. However, these too are seldom cited in the English-language literature. Even more absent from English-language bibliographies is the literature on Indonesian labour and industrial relations coming out of other Asian countries, most notably South Korea and Japan, as most scholars writing on Indonesian labour in English read Indonesian, and not other Asian languages. Of particular note in this category are Jeon Je Seong, who wrote a PhD in Korean on the labour movement in East Java, but does not write in English, and Kosuke Mizuno, who has published some work in English (2005, 2006), but writes primarily in Japanese. This collection seeks to begin to bridge that gap. It had its genesis in a series of panels on Indonesian labour at the Fourth International Symposium of the Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia, held at the University of Indonesia in July 2005, in which a dozen or so papers on labour-related topics were presented. Eight of the ten contributors to this collection, including both of the special issue editors, presented papers in Indonesian at that conference. Of the papers that followed, those by Indrasari Tjandraningsih and Hari Nugroho, Jeon Je

Seong, Endang Rokhani and Kosuke Mizuno were contributed, reviewed and edited in Indonesian, before translation into English. With the exception of Hari Nugroho and Muhammad Mustofa (both University of Indonesia academics), all the Indonesian contributors began their involvement in labour issues as activists but have since undertaken postgraduate work on labour-related topics. Indrasari Tjandraningsih (Akatiga) completed a Masters degree in the Netherlands, and Endang Rokhani (formerly with Pelayanan Buruh Jakarta), a Masters in labour sociology at the University of Indonesia under the supervision of Hari Nugroho. Surya Tjandra, formerly of Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (LBH) Jakarta, lectures in labour law at Atma Jaya University, while running a labour NGO called the Trade Union Rights Centre (TURC). He is enrolled in a PhD in labour law in the Netherlands. Jafar Suryomenggolo, also from TURC, is currently completing his postgraduate studies in labour history at Kyoto University. All of these contributors have a significantly more substantial publication record (academic and non-academic) in their first language than in English

Outline of the Special Issue

The collection begins with two pieces that examine the process through which labour law reform has occurred and the substance of that reform. In the first article, Surya Tjandra examines the substance of labour law reform after the fall of Suharto. Situating his discussion within an historical overview of Indonesian labour law, Tjandra challenges Teri Caraway’s argument that unionists have indeed succeeded in maintaining the protective elements of the pre-Reformasi labour regime (see Caraway 2004). The second article, by Jafar Suryomenggolo,
examines how unions participated in the process of labour law reform. Suryomenggolo argues that their involvement represented a major breakthrough, as it was the first time unions had an opportunity to participate in labour policymaking in over three decades.

At the same time however, he points to the extent to which unions’ level of involvement was determined by the state, and the difficulties unionists experienced in making full use of the opportunity presented to them because of their still-growing institutional capacity. This he argues, affected the outcomes of the labour law reform process.

The third article, by Indrasari Tjandraningsih and Hari Nugroho, shifts our focus from the politico-legal framework of the post-Suharto period to a broader discussion of the values promoted by that framework and their impact on the labour market and on trade unions. Tjandraningsih and Nugroho argue that, given the strength and variety of actors promoting the concept, and the depth of its influence on industrial relations processes, flexibility — as currently experienced in Indonesia and indeed globally — is best described as a regime rather than a strategy. They conclude that this flexibility regime not only has the potential to seriously undermine the strength of unions, but that unions are in fact a primary target of the regime.

The fourth and fifth pieces in the collection focus on the factory-level experiences of unions in Indonesia. These contributions are highly significant given the lack of focus on plant-level union activities in the existing literature. Jeon JeSeong’s article, which draws both on his doctoral research and more recent fieldwork, focuses on processes of grassroots union renewal within Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (SPSI) Maspion Unit 1, a workplace unit associated with the All-Indonesia Workers Union SPSI, the government-sanctioned union of the Suharto period. In it, he argues that grassroots unionists had managed to effect union renewal within SPSI by drawing both on the national and regional-level structures of SPSI and on the support of LBH Surabaya, a local labour NGO. While ultimately this strategy failed because of the incapacity of LBH Surabaya to continue supporting the union, Jeon is optimistic that the case of SPSI Maspion Unit 1 demonstrates the potential for working-class renewal and cross-class alliances. In her research note, Endang Rokhani presents us with three plant-level studies of cases in the Tangerang region where multi-unionism has developed. Rokhani’s study, which is the first plant-level study of multi-unionism since it was permitted under Trade Union Law No.21 of 2000, argues that the ability of unions to co-exist within a single workplace cannot be generalised since it is heavily influenced by personalities, organisational history and the nature of the workplace itself.

The next research note by Kosuke Mizuno, returns to the question of labour law reform and its impact on industrial relations practice, in this case the impact of Law No.2 of 2004 on Industrial Disputes Resolution. Whereas Suryomenggolo emphasised the process through which the labour laws were drafted, Mizuno concentrates on the way in which this particular law is implemented. In doing so, he provides a close comparison of the new industrial disputes resolution processes with those of the New Order, arguing that while in some ways the new system is fairer, it is ultimately still open to government intervention and ambiguous on the key issue of the right to strike. The final contribution, a research note by

Muhammad Mustofa, examines another aspect of law enforcement — the role of the police in industrial disputes. Drawing on data collected in a 2003 survey conducted on behalf of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Mustofa argues that although police officers’ understanding of basic labour rights is
improving, systemic corruption and long-established patterns of intervention in labour issues are major obstacles to the fair and effective enforcement of laws protecting workers’ rights.

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