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Abstract

Academic studies of local politics in post-Suharto Indonesia focus on the emergence of coalitions between parties and candidates, arguing that the entrenched and dominant role of political elites has effectively excluded non-elite interests from the electoral arena. The question, then, given the very real and serious obstacles to popular participation, is: what possibility is there for non-elite actors to engage in a meaningful way in electoral politics? One example of an attempt at such engagement can be found in the industrial city of Batam, where the local branch of the Federation of Indonesian Metalworkers Unions set up a purpose-specific structure to promote the political interests of its members in successive local executive and legislative elections. This paper argues that, despite the ultimate failure of the union’s electoral experiments between 2004 and 2009, the process of ‘learning by doing’ embedded in them presents a significant challenge to analyses that discount the possibility of substantive popular participation in electoral politics.

Keywords: labour movement; elections; popular participation; Indonesia

Academic studies of Indonesian local politics following decentralization have focused on the entrenched and dominant role of political elites and the decisive role of money politics. As Mietzner and Aspinall (2010, p 15) point out, this body of work emphasizes the self-reinforcing nature of the multilayered chokehold over Indonesia’s political system by the wealthy. Scholars argue that local and provincial elections are dominated by existing power brokers, including New Order-era bureaucrats, business players and criminal elements (Bünste, 2008; Robison and Hadiz, 2004; Hadiz, 2010; Sidel, 2004; Vel, 2005), who maintain power through ‘backroom deals and internal party horse-trading’ (Buehler, 2010, p 272). In some cases, voters have some capacity to leverage inter-elite fissures (Buehler, 2009), and occasionally unlikely candidates – such as the handful of highlanders who stood in the Papuan gubernatorial elections in 2006 (Chauvel, 2009,
p 314) – emerge. But, ultimately, election outcomes continue to be determined largely by non-
democratic factors.

A key reason cited for the emergence of such a pattern is the short-term, utilitarian nature of coalition-building between political parties and electoral candidates, resulting in alliances void of a shared political philosophy, policy agenda or values.¹ For example, in their account of elections in the district of Gowa in 2005, Buehler and Tan (2007, p 65) found that candidates had formed relationships with parties on an ‘ad hoc basis, often as a result of personal, not political, bonds and only shortly before the elections’, and that those relations often disintegrated soon after. Surprisingly, little reference is made to parties or their platforms in those candidates’ campaign materials. Buehler’s (2009) broader study of the role of political parties in 10 district head contests in South Sulawesi confirms that, although parties played a role as ‘gatekeepers’ in deciding who could contest elections, they had little influence over election outcomes, which instead depended on candidates’ personal networks. Similarly, Mietzner (2008, p 129) concludes that the relationship between parties and candidates in the gubernatorial elections in North Sulawesi was primarily determined by financial considerations and not by candidates’ ‘loyalty to the party, ideological affinity or commitment to carry out the party’s political agenda if elected’.²

The representative function of political parties is an obvious casualty of this politics of convenience – a fact nowhere more evident than in parties’ failure to represent the interests of industrial labour (Hadiz, 2010, pp 144–152). In one of the very few analyses of labour’s role in local politics, Hadiz asserts that democratization has benefited working class organizations, but that the labour movement is ‘too weak and fragmented to be regarded as a significant enough social force for elites to seriously co-opt’, and thus continues to have no political influence. This assessment rings true for the first half a decade after the fall of Suharto, when there was little engagement between organized labour and political parties (Ford, 2005), and for areas where few people were employed in manufacturing or other formal-sector industrial occupations. However, it fails to acknowledge the substantial and repeated overtures made to prominent labour activists in the industrial heartlands of Java and Sumatra, which began shortly before the 2004 general election, or trade unions’ own electoral experiments since that time.

Although many trade unionists have continued to reject the approaches of enterprising party officials, a significant number of labour activists did begin seriously to consider direct engagement in electoral politics from 2004 (Ford and Tjandra, 2007). Among this number were some who were driven primarily by opportunism, either for themselves or their organizations.

¹ See, for example, Buehler (2007), Carnegie (2009), Hadiz (2010); Mietzner (2008), Sulistiyanto (2009) and Ufen (2008).

² Mietzner argues that this phenomenon was fuelled by the fact that parties were impecunious following the 2004 national elections
Others had come to realize that local governments had the power to shape decisions about areas of policy that affected workers, and that in areas of industrial concentration, worker-citizens potentially had the power to shape local government. The political experiments that resulted from this dramatic change in trade unionists’ attitudes towards formal politics did not increase the number of worker-representatives in Indonesia’s local and national parliaments. But, in some cases at least, they succeeded in raising awareness of a labour constituency and creating space within formal politics for the discussion of that constituency’s sectoral interests. These were admittedly baby steps, but they demonstrated that organized labour had begun to take seriously its potential role as a champion of non-elite engagement in the political sphere.

This article establishes the significance of trade union political campaigns through a close examination of the case of one particular union, the Federation of Indonesian Metalworkers Unions (FSPMI), in the industrial parks of Batam, an island on Indonesia’s border with Singapore and Malaysia.3 Drawing on data collected during intensive periods of fieldwork in Batam and Jakarta in May 2007, April 2010 and May 2012, building on a much longer period of studying organized labour, it describes and analyses the Metalworkers’ attempts to promote the interests of industrial labour in the electoral processes at different levels of government.4 The article argues that, while not particularly successful by any objective measure, the Metalworkers’ electoral experiments between 2004 and 2009 represented a significant step towards greater non-elite participation in electoral politics and offered both encouragement and important lessons for other non-elite groups seeking to engage in the political sphere.

Re-engaging with formal politics

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4 More than 100 interviews were conducted with union leaders at the national, local and plant level, as well as several more with labour NGO activists, members of the Municipal Assembly who were sympathetic to labour and local manpower bureaucrats. Members of the Metalworkers Union interviewed included national president, Saïd Iqbal, and vice-president and key political strategist, Ridwan Monoarfa, as well as local activists. Representatives of the Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions and its affiliates, the Metal, Electronics and Machine Workers Union, along with the Tourism Workers Union, were interviewed, as well as members of the National Workers Union; the Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mining, Oil, Natural Gas and General Workers Unions; and the Federation of Independent Workers Unions. I also had the opportunity to attend a number of meetings and workshops of the Metalworkers Union in Batam and national meetings on trade union engagement in politics involving high-level representatives from several trade unions. This article was completed as part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project entitled ‘The Re-emergence of Political Labour in Indonesia’ (DP120100654). Fieldwork was conducted in 2007 as part of a joint project with Surya Tjandra (funded by AIGRP), in 2010 with funding by the University of Sydney’s Special Studies Program, and in 2012 with ARC funding. Thanks to Nicola Edwards for research assistance, to Robert Cribb for drawing the map of Batam’s electoral districts, and to Edward Aspinall and Teri Caraway for their comments on an earlier draft of the article.
Although organized labour has a long history of political engagement in Indonesia, the single state-sanctioned trade union allowed during Suharto’s New Order (1966–98) was strictly prohibited from developing links to political parties or becoming involved in electoral politics in other ways (Hadiz, 1997; Ford, 2009). With the exception of the Indonesian Centre for Labour Struggle, which was closely linked with the then-unregistered Democratic People’s Party, the ‘alternative’ trade unions of the late New Order period also publicly rejected the possibility of ties with political parties, as did the labour non-governmental organizations which at that time largely drove the independent labour movement (Ford, 2009).

Most trade unionists remained firmly opposed to political trade unionism in the early years after the fall of Suharto – indeed, as Törnquist (2004, p 392) has observed, ‘wage labourers, and many trade union activists too, [did] not see any relation between struggles in the workplace and those over politics’. Although fissures in the ‘no politics’ stance appeared as early as the 1999 General Election, when four of the 48 parties that participated claimed to represent the interests of labour (Ford, 2005), labour’s long structural isolation from politics was only seriously challenged after 2004, when branches of major political parties began courting local labour figures as candidates and as vote-winners. In addition to wooing large trade unions, local party functionaries approached labour NGO activists and high-profile members of smaller NGO-sponsored unions to run as candidates in the industrial centres of Greater Jakarta, East and West Java, North Sumatra and Batam (Ford and Tjandra, 2007). Then in the lead-up to 2009, party approaches extended to the national level with the central executives of a number of parties wooing the central executives of major unions in an attempt to establish ‘political contracts’ under which union candidates were run in exchange for members’ votes. This phenomenon was spearheaded by the Prosperous Justice Party, which established a labour NGO called the Indonesian Labour Foundation for this purpose. However, many other parties also approached trade unions, including large established parties such as the Golkar Party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, the United Development Party and the National Awakening Party, but also smaller or newer parties, such as the Christian Peace and Welfare Party, Gerindra and Hanura.

Some larger trade unions actively campaigned against these advances. Others ignored them at an institutional level while allowing individual members to run, in some cases requiring union office-bearers to resign from their substantive posts before doing so. Others still responded proactively as institutions to party pressure. One strategy, adopted by the National Workers Union, revolved around national-level deal-making but very little direct institutional involvement at the grass roots. A second approach, adopted by unions affiliated with the Confederation of

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5 The extent to which trade unions engage in the political arena or have ties to political parties varies greatly from country to country and across different periods of history. Trade unions were historically extremely influential in the political systems of many European countries, the legacies of which were transferred to many of their colonial possessions and reflected in the contemporary politics in Australia, India and much of Latin America. Indonesia’s strong tradition of politically engaged trade unions was disrupted by the anti-Leftist purges of 1965–66. For details of the Indonesian case, see Hadiz (1997) and Ford (2009).
All-Indonesia Workers Unions (the legacy union of the Suharto period), was to engage locally but not nationally. The Metalworkers, by contrast, responded at both levels, with the central executive striking deals with different parties in different locations, at the same time as local branches maintained considerable independence with regard to political strategy. Most strikingly, in the case of the Batam branch, the decision was made to establish Jas Metal (an acronym that literally means the Metalworkers’ Network of Knots) as a structurally independent organization with an exclusively political mandate.

The Metalworkers and Jas Metal

Established in 1999 by former members of the Suharto-era Metal, Electronics and Machine Workers Union, the Metalworkers Union is one of 91 trade union federations registered at the national level in Indonesia. Official government records show that in 2005 the Metalworkers had over 82,000 members in eight provinces (Departemen Tenaga Kerja dan Transmigrasi, unpublished document, 2005). Four years later, this total had reached a little over 116,000 members, some 18,525 of whom were based in Batam. The vast majority of members belong to the federation’s two largest member unions – the Electrical and Electronics Workers Union and the Automotive, Machine & Components Workers Union. The Metalworkers has been a leading force in the Congress of Indonesian Trade Unions, the second-generation breakaway from the official union federation of the Suharto period to which most internationally affiliated unions belong. It is also affiliated to the International Metalworkers Federation, which helped facilitate its establishment and is one of several international trade union donors from which the Metalworkers Union now receives support.

The Metalworkers Union is in some ways a typical ‘mainstream’ union of the post-Suharto period, as it is primarily concerned with developing effective workplace bargaining procedures and consolidating its industrial presence. In other ways, however, it is defiantly atypical. The federation quickly developed financial independence after it adopted a centralized dues structure very different from the branch-dependent structure commonly used by Indonesian unions. This approach has enabled the central executive to take a proactive role, both on the national stage and in consolidating internal union matters through measures such as funding full-time regional advocacy and legal officers responsible directly to the federation. As a result, the Metalworkers

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6 According to the most recent comprehensive survey by the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, in 2005 there were just over 3.4 million trade unionists and some 11,852 company-level unions in Indonesia (Departemen Tenaga Kerja dan Transmigrasi, unpublished document, 2005).


8 For an account of FSPMI’s internationally funded gender programmes, see Ford (2008). Note that in 2012 the International Metalworkers Federation amalgamated with Global Union Federations responsible for other kinds of manufacturing to form a new Global Union Federation called IndustriALL.
stands out administratively as one of a very few Indonesian unions capable of systematic, regular collection and processing of membership data. The sidelining of hierarchically nested branch structures created direct lines of responsibility and communication from the central to the local levels within member unions. When combined with specialized and relatively intensive service provision, this structure has enabled the federation’s central leadership to work intensively with union officials and members at the company level to create a sense of belonging in the union, which in turn has enhanced the federation’s industrial power.

The Metalworkers has also taken the lead among unions in the political arena. Initially, like the central executives of most other mainstream unions, its leaders took a firm stance against institutional involvement in politics. This position shifted in response to a series of regional revolts against its no-politics policy. Although the Batam branch was not the only branch to experiment politically at the local level after the 2004 elections, its response offered by far the most explicit challenge to the ban on institutional engagement in politics, prompting significant debate at the national level about the federation’s approach to politics.

In order to get around national policy, activists within the branch established Jas Metal, an ‘ad hoc structure’ designed to function as ‘a medium for the channelling of the political aspirations of Metalworkers members in the context of the legislative elections … to vet prospective candidates, to mediate political interests, to facilitate the placement of those prospective candidates, [and] monitor and supervise their progress’ (FSPMI Kepri, 2008). Political engagement, Jas Metal’s founders argued, is a natural activity for trade unions that cannot be divorced from workers’ democratic struggle for their rights. Logically, then, trade unions must not only participate in and seek to influence discussions of public policy, but also recognize and harness the electoral power of their membership (Jas Metal, 2009, p 3).

The Metalworkers was by no means the only union in Batam to work with political parties during this period; nor was Jas Metal the sole conduit for the Metalworkers’ participation in the political arena. However, the existence of Jas Metal makes the case study of the union’s Batam branch a particularly salient one with regard to the question of non-elite engagement in electoral politics.

**Local engagement, 2004–2006**

As in other industrial centres, trade unionists in Batam first became interested in engaging politically when approached by parties anxious to access the voting blocs they believed trade unions represented. Of the 240,509 Indonesian citizens employed in Batam City in 2007, 9

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9 Many of the smaller unions, particularly those that had grown with the support of the student left, were in principle much more open to political engagement. However, with the exception of the National Front for Indonesian Workers’ Struggle, none was big enough to attract the interest of established political parties or had the resources to mount its own sustained political campaign.
164,476 people (65% of whom were female) worked in secondary industries (BPS Kota Batam, 2009, p 78). This unusually high concentration of blue-collar formal sector workers made Batam an obvious target for party strategists thinking about the labour vote.

In the 2004 national legislative election, the Social Democratic Labour Party, led by Muchtar Pakpahan, the labour lawyer who had established the strongest of the alternative trade unions of the late Suharto period – the only one of the 24 parties listed on the ballot paper to claim to represent labour – received well over twice its national average, at 1.4% of the vote in Batam City (BPS Kota Batam, 2009, pp 35–40).10 In the municipal assembly elections of 2004, the party received 2.5% of votes cast, which, while still tiny, was sufficient to secure one seat in the local assembly. Although there was little support for the Social Democratic Labour Party amongst unionists,11 the Metalworkers and other unions worked closely with the elected labour representative, Karles Sinaga, and with other sympathetic members of the municipal assembly, including the Peace and Welfare Party member Rudy Sembiring, a pastor in the Batak Lutheran Church, and National Mandate Party member Setyasih Prihelina on a number of labour issues. The election of Karles and unions’ subsequent engagement with elected politicians prompted discussion amongst unionists and political parties regarding the electoral potential of the labour vote. It was obvious to all concerned that, in a region so dominated by industrial workers, labour was a constituency that could have a defining impact on the outcome of local (but also national) elections.

The first subnational election to occur in Batam after 2004 was the Gubernatorial Election of 30 June 2005, which was also the first such election in the history of the newly formed Kepri province. The central government had appointed Ismeth Abdullah, the former head of the Batam Industrial Development Authority, as Governor in 2004 when the 2002 decree on the formation of the new province came into effect.12 He and running mate Muhammad Sani represented the Golkar Party and the Prosperous Justice Party, with the support of several other parties including the United Development Party and the Democrat Party. A second pairing, consisting of Rizal Zen and Firman Bisowarno, was nominated by the National Awakening Party. The third pairing, Nyat Kadir and Soerya Respationo, was nominated by the National Mandate Party and the

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10 In the 1999 General Election, four of the 48 parties that participated claimed to represent the interests of labour. A fifth registered with the Department of Justice and Human Rights, although it did not contest the election. The Leftist People’s Democratic Party also ran in 1999. For more details, see Ford (2005).

11 In Batam, as elsewhere, most politically oriented trade unionists were unwilling to support PBSD because of its close links to the Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Labour Unions and the ethnic and religious dominance of Christian Batak in both organizations (Interviews, Batam, 2010). In interviews conducted in 2007 in Batam, Surabaya and Medan, members of the confederation also identified this as a barrier to wider support.

12 For background on the formation of Kepri province, see Ford (2003).
Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle. Prominent trade unionists lined up behind each of the teams. The Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions, the most experienced political operator in the labour movement at that time, pledged the support of its membership to Ismeth’s team in return for a building in which to house its secretariat, which it was subsequently given (Interview with Secretary of the KSPSI Batam Branch, 15 April 2010).

As part of this broader process of lobbying trade unions, the political parties supporting each team began working through party members with connections to the Metalworkers to seek the support of individuals within the union elite. As a result, different politically active members within the ranks of the union gave their support to all three nominees, an outcome that prompted deep reflection after the election, leading to the decision that it was necessary to present a united front in their efforts to influence formal politics. At the same time, however, the union’s national president, Thamrin Mossi, had made it very clear that he disapproved of such politicking, telling local activists that it was the central executive’s decision whether or not the union would engage politically. In response, local activist-members sought a way to participate in electoral politics that would not openly defy these instructions. Their solution was Jas Metal, established in November 2005 with the express purpose of promoting the political interests of the union in the Batam mayoral election scheduled for February 2006.

The first public event hosted by newly formed Jas Metal was a panel discussion to which all mayoral candidates and their running mates were invited to discuss their position on labour issues. Four party coalitions had nominated mayoral teams. The first of these was nominated by the National Mandate Party and the Democrat Party; the second by the National Awakening Party and the Peace and Welfare Party. The third team had the support of the Golkar Party, the Prosperous Justice Party, the United Development Party, and the United Democratic Nationhood Party. The fourth was nominated by three Sukarnoist parties – the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, the Marhaenist Indonesian Nationalist Party, the Vanguard Party – in conjunction with the New Indonesia Alliance Party and the Social Democratic Labour Party. Three of the teams attended the Jas Metal forum. After consulting with plant-level union executives, Jas Metal then engaged in further discussions with candidates and, ultimately, a political contract was signed with Ahmad Dahlan and Ria Saptarika, the team supported by the Golkar Party and the Prosperous Justice Party. Jas Metal then made the contract public, and used its cell structure to mobilize grass-roots support from within the membership of the Metalworkers.

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13 A number of small parties also supported the second and third pairs. For a detailed discussion of the 2005 gubernatorial election, including a description of the candidates, see Choi (2007b, pp 334–336).

14 For a detailed discussion of the 2006 mayoral election, see Choi (2007a).

15 As part of this deal, Jas Metal was promised a building, which never materialized.
Ahmad Dahlan and Ria Saptarika went on to receive 41.4% of the primary vote. Activists estimated that only 20–30% of Metalworkers members followed their directive, a figure that satisfied neither Jas Metal nor the mayoral candidates. Even so, they were encouraged by this outcome, which they felt had given them preferential access to the winning pair once in office, allowing them to lobby for local policies that better served the interests of industrial workers in the workplace, but also in the broader community. Emboldened by these early experiments, activists within Jas Metal began to imagine the possibilities not only of deepening their relationships with political elites, but of Metalworkers members themselves running for office. Ahmad Dahlan and Ria Saptarika went on to receive 41.4% of the primary vote. Activists estimated that only 20–30% of Metalworkers members followed their directive, a figure that satisfied neither Jas Metal nor the mayoral candidates. Even so, they were encouraged by this outcome, which they felt had given them preferential access to the winning pair once in office, allowing them to lobby for local policies that better served the interests of industrial workers in the workplace, but also in the broader community. Emboldened by these early experiments, activists within Jas Metal began to imagine the possibilities not only of deepening their relationships with political elites, but of Metalworkers members themselves running for office.

**Jockeying in the lead-up to 2009**

When Jas Metal activists turned their attention to the 2009 national legislative elections, it was immediately evident to them that they would require a very different approach. In the earlier local and provincial elections, candidates drawn from the party elites looked to trade unions in the hope that they could deliver a voting bloc, and Jas Metal’s role was limited to evaluating party proposals and then mobilizing support, much as described in the literature on elections in post-Suharto Indonesia. By contrast, the legislative elections presented an opportunity for grassroots trade unionists – the archetypical non-elite political actor – to run for election themselves on multi-candidate party tickets.

By early 2007, initial overtures had been made by and to a number of parties. Work with plant-level union officials also intensified, although activists remained unclear about precisely how the Metalworkers would approach the electoral campaign. In the meantime, the central executive’s attitude towards formal politics had shifted significantly when federation President Thamrin Mossi was replaced by Said Iqbal in November 2006. Soon after the new national executive was elected, Vice-President Ridwan Monoarfa, who also headed the Metalworkers’ largest affiliate, the Electrical and Electronics Workers Union (which in 2010 accounted for 16,484 of the

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16 In part, this problem was a consequence of low worker participation in the poll. Choi (2007a, p 337) found that the turnout in the main industrial estate of Muka Kuning, at around 28%, was much lower than in other areas of Batam, which was, in turn, much lower than other areas in the province.
federation’s 18,525 members in Batam) began working closely with local activists to formulate a political strategy for 2009.17

For several months, heated debates raged within the local union elite regarding the pros and cons of various possible political alliances. A number of key activists had a strong preference for an exclusive deal with the Prosperous Justice Party, which had wide appeal among labour activists in Batam more generally because of the party’s active involvement in labour issues. Some Metalworkers members were formally aligned with the party. A much broader group was attracted by its focus on policy and intensive mode of grass-roots engagement, which closely mirrored the approach that had been so successful within the union itself. In addition to negotiations with the union elite, party activists were already actively recruiting the grass-roots members through mosques on the industrial estates. As one trade union activist observed, the Prosperous Justice Party ‘started early because it really wants to prepare its cadres from the beginning – after all, it prides itself on being a cadre party’. In addition to the Metalworkers, the party had strong links with a number of other unions, but particularly with the Reformed Pharmaceutical and Health Workers Union. Its head, Suriadji, who was at the time also the local Congress of Indonesian Trade Unions representative, was a card-carrying member of the Prosperous Justice Party with close links to the Batam branch of the party’s labour NGO, the Indonesian Labor Foundation. He later ran as a candidate for the party in the 2009 election for the provincial assembly.

Among the Metalworkers, the push to work exclusively with the Prosperous Justice Party was opposed by another group within the local union elite, with encouragement and support from Ridwan. This group strongly resisted the alliance on the grounds that an alliance with a single party would not only alienate members whose political loyalties lay elsewhere, but would expose the Metalworkers to accusations that it had been co-opted. Although Ridwan’s frequent and intensive engagement with Metalworkers activists in Batam and his position as head of the Electrical and Electronics Workers Union meant that his opinion carried considerable weight, the question of political alliance remained unresolved when on 5 May 2008 Jas Metal was reconvened to elect a new committee and begin planning in earnest for the elections in 2009.

Jas Metal’s aims for the 2009 electoral cycle were deceptively simple: to recruit its best known members to run as candidates and to ensure that they were elected.18 In order to achieve these objectives, the committee identified a number of steps: to map the concentrations of workers domiciled in Batam; to negotiate with political parties for places on party tickets for Metalworkers candidates; to campaign amongst the membership for support; and (somewhat

17 Ridwan’s intensive engagement with the Batam branch of the Metalworkers coincided with a project by the Solidarity Center in the region, which encouraged union members to engage with issues of public policy such as monitoring local government budgets.

18 See FSPMI Kepri, 2008.
optimistically) to supervise successful candidates once they took their seats in parliament (Jas Metal, 2009). By 3 June, a dozen local unionists had put their names forward as potential candidates. As a result of its constitution, which deemed that committee members (the director, adviser, steering committee and organizing committee – in total 20 people above the enterprise level within the structure of the Metalworkers) could not themselves run for election, none of those nominated held a formal position within Jas Metal. This conscious decision to separate candidates from Jas Metal officeholders sent a clear message that its purpose was to promote the political interests of its constituency and not self-interest.

On 4 June, a formal communication was released containing 10 names. Nine of those had appeared on the original list. The tenth name was that of the new union president, Said Iqbal. Ultimately, nine candidates were accommodated, including Iqbal, who was allocated the number two position on the Prosperous Justice Party’s Kepri ticket for the national legislative assembly. Of the local Jas Metal candidates, two ran in the Batam electorate for the provincial parliament, one for the United Development Party and one for the Peace and Welfare Party. The remaining six entered the race for the Batam Municipal Assembly (see Figure 1). Four of the Metalworkers candidates in the municipal assembly race ran on the United Development Party ticket. The fifth ran for the Golkar Party and the sixth for the National Mandate Party. A number of other Metalworkers members ran independently of Jas Metal in the provincial and municipal races. In total, 10 candidates from the Metalworkers ran in three of Batam’s four electoral districts, two each in Districts 2 and 3 and six in District 4. In addition, Jas Metal gained the support of Hardi Selamat Hood, who ran for the Regional Representative Council (Jas Metal, 2009, p 5).

At the same time that Jas Metal was developing its strategy, the Metalworkers’ central executive in far-off Jakarta was busy making its own arrangements for Batam. Having decided that it needed actively to manage local involvement in the 2009 elections, the central executive conducted a survey of the political potential of the regions that had expressed interest in engaging politically in an attempt to identify likely partners. It then made representations to the leaders of a number of parties at the provincial and national levels. As Jas Metal was approaching the local branches of the United Development Party, the Peace and Welfare Party, Golkar, the National Mandate Party and the Prosperous Justice Party to discuss the possibility of political contracts mandating candidate support for worker issues and trade union candidate placement on party tickets, Iqbal – who describes himself as being sympathetic to the Prosperous Justice Party but not a party cadre – was engaged in discussions at the national level to broker a deal. In addition to his own position as number two candidate for the party on the Kepri ballot for the national House of Representatives, under the agreement several Metalworkers candidates were to stand for the party in the provincial and local assembly elections.

According to Iqbal, national leaders in the Prosperous Justice Party had agreed during the course of these negotiations that the trade union would decide who would represent it on the ticket. But when Jas Metal activists approached local party leaders, they were told that the party would choose which Metalworkers candidates would be accommodated. Without consulting Jakarta, Jas
Metal terminated discussions with the Prosperous Justice Party and struck a deal with the United Development Party. Angry at the insurrection, Iqbal distanced himself from Jas Metal in Batam and issued a formal instruction reinforcing the structural separation between the Metalworkers and Jas Metal, and explicitly banning the use of the union’s symbols in its campaign.

Figure 1. Electoral Districts in the Batam Municipality

A period of considerable tension ensued, but the conflict was ultimately quarantined within the trade union elite and a compromise was eventually reached – a fact of great significance, given the propensity of unions, like other Indonesian organizations, to split at the first sign of conflict. For its part, Jas Metal agreed to promote all Metalworkers candidates regardless of their party affiliation or whether they had been nominated through Jas Metal. In return, Iqbal agreed not to interfere with the arrangements that Jas Metal had made locally. Jas Metal went on to sign a formal political contract with the United Development Party in January 2009, which specified the electoral district and position of the four Metalworkers members who were to run on the party ticket. Meanwhile, Iqbal offered to withdraw from his candidacy under pressure from other members of the central executive, who were increasingly concerned about the message sent to union members by the president’s decision to run as a Prosperous Justice Party candidate.
However, after a period of internal negotiation, the Metalworkers’ central executive agreed that he could run.

The protracted stalemate over strategy took a toll on Jas Metal, leaving it just three months to prepare its candidates and lobby the union membership to support them at the ballot box. In combination with political inexperience, this setback seriously undermined Jas Metal’s ability to mount an effective campaign, and therefore its capacity to deliver votes to the United Development Party. At the same time, however, the experience of confronting political and strategic differences within the union provided an important reality check for Jas Metal activists. This experience, along with major setbacks during the course of the campaign proper, very much challenged their resolve.

The fallout

The Metalworkers were among the most prominent labour actors in Batam, but other trade unions also campaigned during the lead-up to the 2009 polls. At the provincial level, a candidate from the Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions, the legacy union of the Suharto era, ran for the Indonesian Employers and Workers Party and, as noted earlier, the local Pharmaceutical and Health Union chief stood as a candidate for the Prosperous Justice Party. These individuals were joined by three candidates from the Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Workers Unions (the confederation that grew out of the alternative union established by Muchtar Pakpahan in the 1990s), two of whom ran for the Labour Party, the latest incarnation of the Social Democratic Labour Party, and a third for the National Mandate Party. The National Mandate Party candidate, Bambang Yulianto, who had previously been the head of the Labour Party and the regional coordinator of the Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Labour Unions, had left both the party and the union as a result of internal conflict, but at the time of the election was still identified as a trade union candidate. At the district level, the Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions fielded seven candidates for several parties. A fourth candidate from the Confederation of Indonesian Prosperous Labour Unions, representing the Labour Party, also participated in the district race (see Table 1). A number of other trade unionists ran without official support from their organizations. For example, although the National Workers Union did not formally engage in the election, two senior officials ran for the Concern for the Nation Party.

Several questions emerge from an analysis of the overall performance of trade union candidates in the 2009 municipal assembly elections. Though still influential, by the time of the election, party ticket position was no longer decisive. However, at the time tickets were put together, ticket position was everything, as votes determined the number of candidates who made it into parliament from a particular party, but list order dictated who those candidates would be.
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<th>Name</th>
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<td>P. Buruh</td>
<td>1 / 5</td>
<td>2 / 5</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>669</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Electoral District 2</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahyu Dianasari</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>3 / 7</td>
<td>6 / 7</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>2,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yudhi Asvianto</td>
<td>FSPMI</td>
<td>PPIB</td>
<td>4 / 12</td>
<td>4 / 12</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2,918</td>
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<td>Imam Santoso</td>
<td>KSPSI</td>
<td>P. Demokrat</td>
<td>4 / 10</td>
<td>5 / 10</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>12,124</td>
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<td>Sukiryo</td>
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<td>PKPI</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>3 / 10</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>2,843</td>
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<td>Ery Istiawan</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>4 / 7</td>
<td>5 / 7</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>6,471</td>
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<td>Ridel Manik</td>
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<td>PRN</td>
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<td>3 / 4</td>
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<td>1 / 3</td>
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<td>8 / 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agus Sriyono</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>3 / 13</td>
<td>7 / 13</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>4,903</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bambang Mulya</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>5 / 13</td>
<td>6 / 13</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>4,903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agus Wibowo</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>P. Golkar</td>
<td>9 / 12</td>
<td>6 / 12</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>5,225</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bekti Purnama</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>5 / 14</td>
<td>11 / 14</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>8,463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikson Sitorus</td>
<td>FSPMI</td>
<td>P. Pelopor</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>2 / 10</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sayuti</td>
<td>FSPMI</td>
<td>PMB</td>
<td>3 / 6</td>
<td>5 / 6</td>
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<td>1,060</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mulyono</td>
<td>KSPSI</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>6 / 14</td>
<td>10/14</td>
<td>333</td>
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<td>Syaiful Badri</td>
<td>KSPSI</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>12 / 14</td>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>8,463</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setia P. Tarigan</td>
<td>KSPSI</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>13 / 14</td>
<td>8/14</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>8,463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Party acronyms used in this table are as follows, in the order that they first appear: Labour Party (P. Buruh); United Development Party (PPP); New Indonesia Alliance Party (PPIB); Democrat Party (P. Demokrat); Indonesian Justice and Unity Party (PKPI); Achipelagic Republic Party (PRN); Party of Indonesian Businesspeople and Workers (PPPI); Struggle for a New Indonesia Party (PPIB); Golkar Party (P. Golkar); National Mandate Party (PAN); Vanguard Party (P. Pelopor); Sun of the Nation Party (Partai Masyarakat Bangsa, PMB).

Source: Raw data were drawn from local documents issued by the Electoral Commission. Information on trade union candidates was collected from internal trade union documents and interviews with representatives of the Federation of Indonesian Metalworkers Unions (FSPMI), the Confederation of All-Indonesian Workers Unions (KSPSI), the Confederation of All-Indonesia Prosperous Labour Unions (KSBSI), the National Workers Union (SPN), the Reformed Pharmaceutical and Health Workers Union (FSP FARKES Reformasi), the Labour Party and the Prosperous Justice Party, conducted in April 2010.
As Table 1 suggests, although political parties sought out or agreed to accommodate trade union candidates, they were generally assigned mid- to low-ranking positions on party tickets, which at the time would have meant that they could deliver votes without having a serious chance of being elected. Even trade union candidates who were long-term party cadres were positioned well down the list. The shift to open party lists meant that individual candidates now needed, as individuals, to attract sufficient votes to be elected – a change that favoured worker candidates. Naturally enough, however, it also meant that parties shifted responsibility for (and the expense of) campaigning to the individual. As a consequence, in Batam, trade union candidates received little support from the parties and, even with the help of their unions or of Jas Metal, had little chance of competing against far wealthier and better connected candidates.

The situation was quite different, however, in relation to Iqbal’s bid for a seat in the National Parliament, where the change in regulations regarding ticket position gave him a real chance at electoral success. In Iqbal’s case, the freeing up of party ticket order meant that there was a real possibility that he would out-poll the local party cadre who had been allocated first position on the Prosperous Justice Party ticket. This change brought a distinct shift in party attitudes towards his candidacy, particularly within Kepri itself. Iqbal was forced to rely on his union’s resources in Batam, but also on the island of Bintan, where the provincial capital is located. The lack of party support meant that he failed to make inroads on Kepri’s many other smaller islands, ultimately cheating him of victory.

The second question that emerges concerns the strategy of running multiple candidates in single electoral districts. As Table 1 shows, this outcome did not simply reflect the different political stances of different trade unions, or even of Jas Metal and unaligned Metalworkers candidates. Nor was it just a means of accommodating the different political interests of trade union members and unaligned workers by running candidates on a variety of party tickets, as Jas Metal activists claimed. The fact that multiple candidates from the same trade unions ran for the same parties in District 4 suggests that it was also the result of a different kind of politics of accommodation – namely, the need to ensure that trade union activists who wished to run under the Jas Metal banner had a chance to do so, as well as a recognition that Jas Metal simply did not have the power to prevent unaligned Metalworkers members from running. As the data for District 4 show, multiple trade union candidacies resulted in a nine-way split of the 1,821 trade union votes. Although less dramatic, the results from Districts 2 and 3 demonstrate how the split trade union vote deprived a clear trade union front runner of valuable support, particularly in the open list environment. With fewer candidates, the trade union vote could have been much better targeted, even in the absence of better worker mobilization.

19 The lack of support from local branch members can also be attributed in part to the incapacitation of Edi Zanur, the head of the party’s Department for Workers, Farmers and Fishers and founder of the Indonesian Labor Foundation. Zanur fell into a coma and lost his sight at a critical period in the campaign, and thus was unable to ‘socialize’ Iqbal’s candidacy among local party elites in Kepri (Interview by Caraway and Ford, Jakarta, 31 May 2012).
### Table 2. Jas Metal/Metalworkers Candidates in District 4 by Administrative Sub-District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Union</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Bulang</th>
<th>Galang</th>
<th>S. Beduk</th>
<th>Sagalang</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agus Sriyono</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bambang Mulya</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>231</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agus Wibowo</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>P. Golkar</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>214</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bektî Purnama</td>
<td>Jas Metal</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nikson Sitorus</td>
<td>FSPMI</td>
<td>P. Pelopor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>299</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sayuti</td>
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<td>PMB</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>KSPSI</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>KSPSI</td>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total votes cast in sub-district (all parties) 4,491 6,466 29,759 48,229 88,945

Votes cast for trade union candidates 42 35 861 883 1,821

Votes cast for Jas Metal or FSPMI candidates 22 14 541 571 1,148

Votes cast for Jas Metal candidates 17 10 429 361 817

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Votes for trade union candidates as % of overall vote</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>2.05</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes for Metal or other FSPMI candidates as % of overall vote</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Votes for Jas Metal as % of overall vote</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jas Metal + FSPMI as % of votes for trade union candidates 52.38 40.00 62.83 64.67 63.04

Jas Metal as a % of votes for trade union candidates 40.47 28.57 49.83 40.88 44.86

Source: Raw data was taken from local documents issued by the Electoral Commission.

A third related question regards overall coverage. The Metalworkers and the Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions ran candidates in three of the four electoral districts, all three of which have a significant population of workers as a result of the spread of industrial activity on Batam. District 2 is home to the Kabil Industrial Estate on Batam’s east coast and District 3 to the industrial and shipbuilding district of Tanjung Uncang. The largest industrial estate, Batamindo Industrial Park, is located in Muka Kuning in District 4. In terms of party ranking, union candidates did quite well in Districts 2 and 3. However, the only district in which trade
union candidates received over 2% of overall votes was District 4.\textsuperscript{20} As Table 2 shows, within that district, trade union votes in general, and Metalworkers votes in particular, were very much concentrated in Sei Beduk and Sagalang, the subdistricts containing and adjacent to the industrial park.

Just as the running of multiple candidates in a single district diffused the concentration of votes, this multi-district strategy unnecessarily diffused trade union resources. If trade unions had been able to agree to campaign together but delegate responsibility for each of the three industrial districts to a single trade union, they could have maximized trade union candidates’ chances of being elected. For example, if the Metalworkers had focused on District 4, where it attracted over 60% of trade union votes, it might have been able not only to gain many more votes in its industrial heartland, but also to improve its performance in the subdistricts of Bulang (which takes in the islands west and immediately south of Batam Island) and Galang (which is centred on the islands of Rempang and Galang to the southeast). Alternatively, given concerns about party affiliation and member choice, trade unions could have collaborated to run multi-party trade union tickets in each district involving a single candidate from each major trade union and promoted in joint campaigns.

Ultimately, none of the trade union candidates was elected at the municipal level in the 2009 election. Even the Labour Party failed to maintain the seat it had won in 2004, despite running a total of 21 candidates in the four electoral districts. And, in the end, the only Jas Metal candidate to be elected was Hardi Selamat Hood, who won a seat in the Regional Representative Council with 36,636 votes. Iqbal performed remarkably well in the national legislative election, falling just 3,974 votes short of the number received by the successful Prosperous Justice Party candidate, despite the lack of support from the local party structure and the fact that the electorate covered the whole of the Riau Archipelago, much of which is not industrialized.\textsuperscript{21}

\section*{Conclusion}

The Batam experience does not provide a basis on which to repudiate claims that Indonesian politics continues to be a game dominated by a powerful elite. Indeed, quite the opposite: as Iqbal’s experience in the national race suggests, even the brightest and best connected candidates the trade union movement has to offer continue to struggle against entrenched power structures in ways that echo the findings of studies of national and regional contests across Indonesia. However, the Batam case does challenge the more strident claims made about non-elite

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} Trade union candidates attracted 1.45\% of votes in District 2. The Labour Party’s union candidate in District 1 received just 0.34\% of votes, and candidates from the Metalworkers and the Confederation of All-Indonesia Workers Unions just 0.45\% in District 3.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} Kepri’s three seats in the national parliament fell to candidates from Golkar, the Democrat Party and the Prosperous Justice Party, in that order. The Labour Party received 0.67\% of valid votes cast, or well over double the percentage achieved nationally (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, 2009).}
disempowerment. Moreover, in determining that they would support union candidates but not themselves run, these non-elite actors moved beyond their personal interests in an attempt to develop an institutional base – a rare act in a political context famously dominated by personalized interests.

Used to wielding considerable influence in their own domain, Jas Metal activists struggled bitterly with the realization not only that their authority meant little within the political pecking order, but also that workers’ willingness to follow trade union directives in the workplace did not automatically translate beyond it. As they openly admitted, their failure to mobilize the worker vote sufficiently in 2009 was as much a product of political naivety and lack of preparedness on their own part as of gatekeeping by political elites (Interviews with 2009 legislative candidates, Batam, April 2010), a fact that in itself challenges the strongest versions of the thesis of elite dominance. Importantly also, they demonstrated resilience. Upon failing in the 2009 legislative elections, they picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and returned to the political battlefield armed with the knowledge they had gained through previous campaigns. And while Jas Metal activists underestimated the tightness of existing political circles and the level of grassroots mobilization required actually to generate a voting bloc, they did succeed in engaging political elites in public debates around worker issues and, in reaching agreements with a range of political parties, managed to do so without splitting the trade union.

Given that political change is ultimately as much about process as about short-or even medium-term outcomes, this willingness to ‘learn by doing’ is extremely significant not only for our understanding of the Indonesian labour movement, but also for broader analyses of contemporary Indonesian politics. It is not surprising that trade union activists had very little sense of how to mobilize the labour constituency or that the labour constituency proved so difficult to mobilize in a context where ordinary citizens were long told that they had no agency in the political sphere. Nor is it surprising that party elites are reluctant to embrace more fully a class of outsiders with nothing to contribute financially to the party. Given these factors, what is in fact surprising is that the Metalworkers and other unions developed any traction at all.

It is important not to overstate the political influence of trade unionists on Batam’s political climate or, indeed, the extent to which the Batam experience was representative of trade unions’ level of political engagement in the country as a whole. At the same time, however, the Batam case as described here necessarily challenges accounts that seek to brush aside the potential to

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22 After just a few months, Jas Metal had regrouped and turned its attention to the 2010 gubernatorial elections, organizing a televised debate, complete with viewer polling, on labour issues. With the exception of Aida Ismeth, the wife of former governor Ismeth Abdullah (who was arrested in the February of that year on corruption charges), all candidates agreed to participate. Jas Metal subsequently signed a political contract with the winning team who, once elected, asked the Metalworkers to nominate a technical expert to serve on the governor’s staff.
encourage greater grass-roots participation in electoral politics and the significance of failed attempts to do so.

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