

Hightide for the Indonesian workers movement

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Throughout 2011 and until now, we are seeing new wave of workers radicalization. The momentum started when thousands of workers mobilised under the banner of the Social Security Action Committee (KAJS), demanding that the law on Social Security Provider (BPJS) would be passed mid 2011 [1]. Beside debate on the pro and cons of the law between workers organisations, mobilisations proved to be an effective way of pushing the demand and the draft law was passed after an occupation of the parliament [2]

Early July 2011, at least 8000 Freeport McMoran worker's went on strike [3] for almost 4 months. It was the first time in Indonesia's post-Reformasi era that workers here went on strike. Workers blocked supply vehicles, mobilised their families and communities, asking for wage increases beyond the minimum wage. Eventhough they did not win their main demand, their strong message of determined resistance and the demand for a living wage left an impact on Indonesian workers.

This was followed by movements around the talks on the national minimum wage , end 2011 and early 2012. At least 300.000 workers were mobilised in 7 industrials zone in Bekasi district, West Java Indonesia 27th January 2012. Their protests culminated in a three day spontanous strike and a highway blockade [4]. Similar mobilisations continued in neighboring industrial areas such as Tangerang, Karawang and Purwakarta around Jakarta. Similar outbursts of struggle were seen in Batam, an industrial province near to Singapore that is famous for its free trade zone, and in several industrial zones in East Java. More than ten thousands of workers took to the streets [5].

The movement did not stop there. After the struggle for a decent wage, thousands of workers from Bekasi zone rallied against the fuel price hike in March 2012. Following student mobilisations in most of the big cities in Indonesia, workers from different trade unions showed played an important role in the mobilisations against the hike, showing considerable determination. Their involvement in such numbers in such a way a new development. The movement succeeding postponing the fuel price hike: after a dramatic parliamentary session the government decided on midnight 30th March 2012 to delay the hike [6].

The struggle continues

Tens of thousands of workers again rallied in the streets to commemorate Mayday 2012 [7]. Demands for a living wage, against outsourcing and contractualisation, and for lifelong social security were among the most popular ones. On 12th July 2012 thousands of supporters of the Indonesian Trade Unions Confederation (KSPI) launched a campaign for the abolishment of outsourcing and against low wages under the acronym HOSTUM [8]. But the real start of this was movement in Bekasi.

From some time after mayday 2012, throughout June, July, August and until now the call been resulted in daily spontanous strikes in different factories and economic zones. It started as a call to the rank of file of the KSPI to mobilise and give solidarity to each other, but nobody could prevent spontaneous support from workers from other unions.

Over 4 months the pattern of mobilisations took the form of what is called “geruduk” or support mobilisations: actions in support of workers whose negotiations with management had stalled in order to pressure the bosses to give in. The main demand is for permanent employment for contract workers. But once the struggle starts, workers demands can easily radicalize and cover almost all immediate problems they face: low wages, layoffs, union busting, etc. Support is coming from different sectors, especially from workers who already won fixed contracts. Through Facebook group and using Blackberries ,workers and activists distribute minutes of negotiations and gather support [9].

There is no official data so far on how many workers have won permanent employed because of these activities. One source says it has been 40.000, but another names 18.000 workers. Regardless the number of workers that directly benefited from these struggles, one thing for is sure: they create a new feel of solidarity among workers, regardless their union affiliation. The slogan ‘solidarity without limits’ is becoming reality.

In this context the Indonesian Assembly of Workers Employees (MPBI), on August 2012 called for a strike between September and Oktober in order to demand the abolishment of outsourcing and wage increases [10]. KSPI is one of the leading confederations among that established MPBI. They called for a national strike of one million workers in 14 districts, and Bekasi zone is the heart of the mobilisation.

The call is supported by the Joint Secretariat of Labor (SEKBER BURUH), which consists of radical ‘red trade unions’ that are not members of MPBI. Sekber argues that the 1 million strike can only be a succes if the strike involve as many as trade unions as possible. But MPBI only relies on itself, especially on KSPI, ignoring many independent federations that could have been approached to joint the call. And the the ‘one million strike’ could turn out to be noting more than bluff. SEKBER understands the importance of the campaign and the ongoing radicalization in Bekasi, in which it plays an active part, and that is why it supported the call.

Challenges

The call for a strike is in itself important. It’s the first call for a national strike against low wages and outsourcing in the country. Since the Central Electricity Meter Readers Officers Alliance won their case in the Constitutional Court to partly abolish two articles in Labor Law on contractualisation last year [11], and the wave of ‘geruduk’ solidarity in Bekasi since the last 4 months, this call has gained real momentum.

The only worrying sign is the fact that MPBI has not yet decided on a date for the strike. It would not be the first time KSPI raises radical sounding demands but settle in negotiations with the bosses for far less. In different moments KSPI spokesperson said that they are not out to abolish outsourcing as such but are in favor of a moratorium as suggested by the Labor Minister [12], or limiting outsourcing to certain types of works, etc. It’s is not the first time they formulate radical demands, in order to mobilise rank and file’s support, only to settle for the the minimum in negotiations with the government.

Sekber Buruh, together with different local and factory-based unions in Bekasi, is working hard to maintain and deepen the radicalization in Bekasi push KSPI to unite with other unions. With or without KSPI, Sekber Buruh will try to maximize its role in this process. There’s good hope real committee of workers movements across different industrial zones can result from this wave of struggles.

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P.S.

* <http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2012/09/a-new-wave-of-workers-struggles-in.html>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://indonesiansocialsecurity.blogspot.com/2011/08/indonesian-workes-demand-for-better.html>.

[2] <http://www.icem.org/fr/7-Asie-Pacifique/4745-Indonesia-Passes-Provisions-to-Implement-Social-Security-Law?la=EN>

[3] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/thousands-of-freeport-workers-strike-in-papua/450850> and http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?page=print_article&id_article=2403

[4] [4] <http://kprm-prd-english.blogspot.com/2012/02/recent-labor-struggle.html>

[5] <http://libcom.org/news/strike-wave-indonesia-02022012>

[6] <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/jakarta-braces-for-massive-fuel-price-hike-protests-friday/508096>

[7] http://directaction.org.au/issue23/indonesian_workers_demonstrate_on_may_day

[8] <http://workingindonesia.wordpress.com/2012/07/11/july-12-day-of-action-to-reject-outsourcing-low-wages/>

[9] There's no english news cover for this activities, but one of the example of this is: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/09/04/workers-union-takes-450-hostages-bekasi.html>, and the impact: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/09/06/union-violence-bekasi-deplored.html>

[10] <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/08/07/govt-urged-end-outsourcing.html>

[11] http://www.mahkamahkonstitusi.go.id/index.php?page=website_eng.BeritaInternalLengkap&id=6360

[12] <http://www.theindonesiatoday.com/news/people-news/people-photo/item/298-govt-opts-for-suspension-of-outsourcing-system.html>