

Women and the plight of the Indonesian working class

Sunday 23 September 2007, by [PERKINS Julia](#), [SARI Dita Indah](#) (Date first published: 11 March 1995).

Dita Sari, general secretary of PPBI, came to Australia on the invitation of the Perth International Women's Day Collective and spoke at the IWD rally on March 11, where she highlighted the plight of women in the third world economically, socially and politically. She also spoke at a forum organised by the Democratic Socialist Party on "Rebuilding the Women's Movement", discussing the need to build a broad and inclusive women's movement which could reach the widest possible range of women. Speaking to Julia Perkins from Green Left Weekly, she outlines some of the issues and ways forward for women in Indonesia, as well as the plight of the Indonesian working class.

You have come to Australia particularly for International Women's Day. Can you talk a little about the kinds of issues women in the third world, particularly Indonesia, face today?

Our marriage law has been adopted from the Muslim religion, allowing men to have a number of wives and depriving women of equal rights. This law clearly sees women as second class citizens. Patriarchal consciousness is still very strong in Indonesia. Women are still seen as not as important as men.

Since the development of capitalism in Indonesia the number of women entering the work force has significantly increased. The share of women in the labour force today is around 40%, mainly on the land and in factories. The exploitation women workers face under capitalism is reinforced by patriarchal consciousness in society generally.

We hope that with the further development of capitalism and thus further exploitation of women under this system, as well as changing political conditions in Indonesia, there will be real opportunities for protest.

What kind of oppression do men and women workers suffer in Indonesia?

Foremost, people suffer serious economic oppression. Workers receive only \$1.50 a day, and they suffer terrible work conditions. There is a general lack of political freedom, which prevents people from responding to atrocities and speaking out about the truth — atrocities such as those occurring in East Timor and West Papua.

What role does the PPBI see itself playing in raising workers' consciousness and fighting these conditions?

In 1994 Indonesia had 1130 strikes. This showed us how powerful the working class is, even though

these were very spontaneous strikes. The PPBI tries to unite the working class with their different issues.

Actions and demonstrations will naturally bring out the most politically conscious workers. The PPBI will help give them a more rounded and deeper political education. At all demonstrations and actions, the PPBI distributes its literature explaining the reality of conditions and ways to combat them. The literature explains the leading role a free and independent union such as the PPBI can play in direct confrontation with the military dictatorship.

There was a rally earlier in the year fighting for better working conditions, led by women comrades of the PPBI. The women's NGO groups consequently approached the PPBI female comrades, recognising the necessity for both kinds of organisations to work together, particularly around women's issues. Can you talk a little about this?

The rally was an alliance action between workers and students, led by female comrades. We wanted to show the women's NGOs that struggle will select its own leaders, and to bring the women's NGOs in closer alliance with the working class. Also we wanted to raise consciousness of women's own oppression within the PPBI by coming in closer contact with these NGOs. It is naturally a very dialectical relationship between both types of organisations.

What is the relationship between the PPBI and the other independent union in Indonesia, the SBSI?

We do not have a concrete program detailing work to be carried out jointly, primarily because the PPBI was set up only five months ago and the SBSI is currently consolidating its situation since the arrest of [SBSI leader] Mochtar Pakpahan. When I get back to Indonesia I think it will be very important to develop a program for work together. One of the roles of the PPBI will be to keep the SBSI to the left on issues of concern.

These unions act as a voice for the working class. It is good to show the government the political bargaining power of the working class.

When was Mochtar Pakpahan arrested?

He was arrested last year about three months after the Medan riot and he was sentenced to three years. The Medan riot involved 40,000 workers and was a very inspiring event for the workers. It also opened the eyes of the liberals and the democrats in our country, showing them the potential strength and the obvious bravery of the Indonesian working class. What strategy does the PPBI have for raising the consciousness of workers and what kinds of demands are raised at rallies?

Because of such severe economic oppression, the main demands raised are economic ones — for meal allowances and transport allowances. Democratic demands need to be raised as well, demands for political freedom. Most of the workers have seen the kind of political repression suffered by those who try to speak out — we must relate to their experiences. We must make our demands make sense to the workers. The demand for the right to build a free union against military repression needs to be communicated to the workers.

Can you talk a little about the democratic movement within Indonesia in solidarity with East Timorese independence?

There is little open support within Indonesia for East Timor. Our organisation is in support of all oppressed peoples. Therefore we must be vocal about our support for the people of East Timor. Twenty years of invasion and killing in East Timor must stop. We must increase the pressure against

the actions of the Indonesian government. We want to have the East Timorese peoples' concerns as our concerns also. We must relate their concerns to the concerns of the Indonesian working class. After all, we have approximately 300 East Timorese workers inside Indonesian factories — particularly in Jakarta and probably other areas as well.

We have helped to set up an alliance in solidarity with East Timor. It consists of the PPBI, the SBSI and East Timorese people. Through this organisation, we hope to convince Indonesian society that support for East Timor does not only come from the international arena but from inside Indonesia as well.

What is the level of political consciousness within Indonesia?

People have been deprived of complete and true information about what has really been going on in East Timor. They don't know, so often they don't care. And if they do want to ask questions or even speak out against the atrocities, they are scared. They do know that many people have been killed inside East Timor and they know very well how the Indonesian military reacts to strikes and protest in Indonesia.

Also, the nationalist sentiment spread by the Indonesian government confuses people. They try to convince the people not to listen to outside information, stressing the "self-determination" of the Indonesian peoples to decide their own views on such matters. The people become convinced that such international viewpoints will destroy the "unity" of the Indonesian government and cause chaos.

What sorts of alliances are built with the peasantry? Is the political consciousness of the peasantry high?

Their political consciousness is quite low. The poorer peasantry generally work on small, very isolated plots. Solidarity among the peasantry is consequently very low as well. When the government comes and actually takes their land, there is cohesive rebellion. In Katamando there are many peasants with land, and they range from those with very small plots to those who are relatively well-off. The divisions between the poor, middle and rich peasantry are obvious in this area, as are the problems associated with any kind of unity between the three sections.

There are problems with building alliances between the poorer peasants and the working class and students as well, due to different interests. We have to raise the consciousness of the working people first so they will come to the peasantry.

While you have been here, you have been meeting with representatives from trade unions, increasing communication with unions in Australia.

In Perth I have met with a number of unions, informing them of the conditions suffered by Indonesian workers. There are many things that the Australian union movement can do to support the Indonesian working class. And Australian workers do have a direct interest in supporting our struggle. Australia has 320 companies in Indonesia, and in order to compete with Indonesian workers, the Australian government has proposed lowering the wages of Australian workers. The question of raising the wages and working conditions of Indonesian workers is completely avoided. The interests of workers in Indonesia and Australia are directly linked.

The unions in Australia have a lot of members, and they can really influence the government politically and economically when they want to. History has shown us this. Resolutions and actions in solidarity with Indonesian workers organised by the unions are extremely worthwhile and very

important.

On your last trip, was it the case that a number of unions you visited were very supportive of resolutions being passed in support of East Timorese independence?

They passed resolutions in support of East Timor and against the arrest of Mochtar Pakpahan. These examples show how strong the unions can be if they want to be. They can instigate political campaigns against the Indonesian government. They can do that and have real effects if they want to.

They can influence Australian society. For example, if I am not mistaken, one union in Perth has 200,000 members. There are so many things they could be doing in the interests of both the Indonesian and Australian working class with those kinds of resources.

It is supposed to be a free country in Australia — you can say what you want, you can build your own organisation and you can say the truth. There are so many things to do and so many opportunities, I think it is the union movement which has the responsibility to do that and build solidarity between Indonesian and Australian workers.

The ACTU must have a clear line in support of the independent unions of Indonesia if they are truly in support of the Indonesian people.

P.S.

* Green Left Weekly interview with Dita Sari, 1995.