

Indonesia: The struggle against underdevelopment

Saturday 15 December 2007, by [SARI Dita Indah](#), [STRAUSS Jonathan](#) (Date first published: 11 October 2007).

Dita Sari, who is head of the advisory council of the National Liberation Party of Unity (Papernas) and also a member of the advisory council of Indonesian National Front for Labour Struggles, spoke to *Green Left Weekly* during the Latin America and Asia Pacific International Solidarity (LAAPIS) forum, held in Melbourne from October 11-14, about the struggles of Indonesian workers.

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Sari explained that the main industrial campaigns of workers in Indonesia at the moment are against government attempts to reduce the severance payments of workers who receive higher wages, which the workers believe is discriminatory, and to make sacking workers easier. But, she said, Papernas is also trying to persuade the workers to take a more political approach and to win them to the party's broader campaigns.

Sari said: "One of Papernas' main campaigns is to overcome underdevelopment and push to build the national economy and industry, relying more on our national economic resources, rather than being dependent on foreign investment. We want the workers to support this economic program and put their immediate demands into [its] framework.

National development

"We think that if the national economy depends too much on foreign investors, then labour conditions will get worse. [Those] investors want liberalisation and 'labour flexibility'.

We want the workers to realise this is not just about the immediate demands in the factories, but also about how the workers could contribute and play a significant role in protecting our national industry."

This part of the Papernas program, Sari said, compelled it to consider the possibility, if the party's work would benefit, of limited tactical alliances with owners of small and medium-sized businesses. "They are also harshly attacked by foreign investment and the government's policy. Their distribution and their networks are being smashed to make way for foreign investment."

Sari explained that building the national economy meant introducing a broader range of controls on corporations and resetting the country's economic orientation.

"Everyone in political power", she argued, "must make sure all the contracts with mining companies,

especially in oil and gas, which is our main energy source, are reviewed". Taxes on such companies should increase. "What the companies should do for environmental protection should be included, so should their social responsibilities — what they should spend for schools and building infrastructure in that area. The government's responsibility for cost-recovery, especially for the oil companies, should be less, because the companies take more for this and pay less in royalties. Also, there should be no human rights violations, especially towards indigenous people."

Sari said: "One of the most important things is the transfer of technology. Western companies operate in our country for many years, but they don't want to transfer the technology. They make us dependent on their technology. In five years or 10 years there should be a transfer of technology. This should be included in the contract."

Sari also argued for a concentration on improvements in agriculture. "You must produce at least the basic food that you eat. You can't just import." The cost of the imported produce is one concern, as is the threat of outright destruction of many sectors, including rice and corn growing. This policy would also tackle unemployment, which is primarily in rural areas.

Sari compared agricultural development with that of textile, clothing and footwear production. "There's already too much of those. This change of economic orientation is very important."

The existence of a very pro-neo-liberal government, Sari said, was a major obstacle to overcoming these problems. "It says yes easily to many proposals from international financial institutions, and foreign governments and corporations."

Papernas also faces more immediate problems in its campaigning. Sari said: "Many of our campaigning activities, our conference and even internal meetings are attacked, sometimes physically, by so-called Islamic groups."

Social fragmentation, especially in the movement, is also a barrier to campaigning. "Everyone is scattered. Everyone is busy with their own issues, their own meetings and day-to-day activities, like it's business as usual." Sari said breaking through this was a challenge. "We keep banging on those doors. We keep saying 'come on, come on, come on' to the social movements."

"But right now", Sari continued, "we're also focusing on building the party, and building a coalition with another party, which is not left, revolutionary or progressive, but to some extent can accept our program, so that we can campaign through its structures, with its mass base, giving them an understanding of our program, and organising and campaigning among the masses in that framework."

"Before we were focusing on campaigning among the social movements. But we found the social movements were very fragmented and sometimes very sectarian and apolitical. What we are trying to do now is campaign for our program among the mass bases and structures of this Islamic party that we are targeting for a coalition."

Reaching the masses

"We are looking for tactics to reach the masses. The masses are not only in the social movements and their groups. Most of the masses are not touched by the social movements. We are thinking about how to find a way to reach the masses: in what way, what is the instrument, what media, what's the bridge to the masses? Then we saw this opportunity with the Islamic party that offered us a coalition."

“They are much bigger than us. They have 14 seats in the parliament, 190 seats in local parliaments and 2.8 million who vote for them. Working inside them will give us a way to go to the masses and get our message heard.”

Speaking at the LAAPIS forum Sari had raised the idea of a transformation from a social movement into a political movement. She explained this meant two things: “In the social movement itself, there should be an effort made by us so they can change the way they think about politics. You cannot just become a pressure group that mobilises every time [US President George] Bush or the WTO comes. You can’t just do that, demonstrating every time there’s a new government policy. You may have to move forward to a more political movement.

“And there is working to — seek other possibilities of making alliances and pushing them to become more politicised. We want to say that the social movements are not the only possibility for alliances and addressing the masses.”

At the conference, Sari noted “in terms of the new tactics that we are trying in terms of building the left and making the left heard and get a solid base, we [can] explain our ways and our tactics, and the political and social dynamics in Indonesia. We can have input, criticism and ideas from comrades all over the world about our ‘controversial’ tactic.”

Sari explained that the tactic of the coalition with the Islamic party has proved controversial. Sari said that she wanted “to remind comrades that [the People’s Democratic Party — the main group that has formed Papernas] made an alliance with the bourgeois Gus Dur regime, which had a more democratic character. There was a lot of criticism against us at that time and even now.

“We have this new way, which we think suits our struggle. We want other comrades to hear, to understand and debate about it.”

P.S.

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