

Indonesia's New Workers Party: Ambiguity in Labour Politics

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The formation of a new Workers Party backed by the country's labour unions signifies a new trend in Indonesian politics.

In August 2021, a new Workers Party (Partai Buruh, PB) [was formed](#). The structure of the party was formalised through a [congress](#) in October 2021. [Four union confederations](#), 50 trade union federations and a women's fishermen and farmer group are listed as founding organisations. Said Iqbal, the President of the Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia (KSPI, the Indonesian Trade Union Confederation), one of several unions supporting the PB, was elected President of the PB.

The PB is now registered but has yet to pass the difficult verification test to be able to offer candidates in the elections in 2024. This test requires parties to have offices in all provinces and in 75 per cent of the total regencies and cities in the province concerned. It would also need to have offices in 50 per cent of the number of sub-districts in the district and cities concerned, as well as 1,000 members in each district and city. Another requirement is that there is a party member for every 1,000 members of the total population of each district and city. 30 per cent of all local leadership must be women.

The more fundamental contradictions relate to the industrial and political context. First, it must be noted that between 2014 and 2022, the union movement suffered major defeats on questions of wages and conditions. [Between 2010 and 2013](#), following well-organised and militant industrial campaigns, the union movement managed to push through legislation providing for a health insurance scheme and substantial minimum wage rises. At the end of 2013, following a strong counter-offensive by some employers, the main campaigning unions, including the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI), changed strategy by signing a "Declaration of Harmony" with employers, police, and the Ministry of Labour. Since then, the KSPI, and other major unions, such as the All Indonesia Confederation of Trade Unions (KSPSI) and United Confederation of Indonesian Labour (KPBI), have relied more on trying to intervene in electoral politics to get the outcomes they wanted while retreating from the militant industrial campaigning of the 2010-2013 period. In 2019, the KSPI and KSPSI, the country's two largest unions, supported presidential candidates Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo respectively. Most recently one official from within the KSPI, Obon Tabroni, was elected to the national parliament under the banner of Prabowo's party, Gerindra.

The formation of the PB represents a new phase in this process, whereby trade unions such as the several unions supporting the PB seek to get the outcomes they want by fielding political parties. It is taking place just as the union movement has faced another defeat. In 2021, the unions took the [Job Creation Law](#), which removed many protections for labour, to the High Court. The High Court decided there were procedural failures regarding the legislation and ordered that the Law not be implemented until the procedural flaws were overcome. On 8 June this year, [revisions were passed](#) in Parliament aimed at overcoming these flaws. Said Iqbal [threatened strike action by three million workers](#), but he has so far failed to make good on the threat.

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The defeats for the union sector, as represented by the passing of the Job Creation law and now the extra-enabling legislation, and the much lower wage increases of the past eight years, have meant that the political rhetoric of the PB has had to become very oppositional. Said Iqbal [has been quoted](#) calling for the “ending of the oligarchy’s greed who seek protection under the armpits of those in power”. This rhetoric is in tune with the general sentiment amongst the broader social opposition.

The opposition to the Job Creation Law alone puts it at direct odds with the government. Its [13 central “struggle issues”](#), basically calling for a redistribution of wealth and a “welfare state”, essentially means that it is a party with a platform outside the consensus among the current parliamentary parties.

If the PB were to seriously campaign on these issues, it would mean a qualitative change in Indonesian electoral politics which has no genuine opposition political parties. Seven of the current nine parties in Parliament are in the government. The other two parties, the Demokrat and Justice and Welfare Party (PKS) parties, have not opposed any of the governing coalition’s key priorities.

While no three million-strong demonstration has yet eventuated, the PB did organise between 30,000-60,000 workers to attend a [May Day Fiesta](#) on 14 May in Jakarta’s biggest sports stadium. The Fiesta rejected the Job Creation Law and advocated its eight [key “welfare state” demands](#). The demands called for, among other things, the rejection of low wages, ending labour hire or outsourcing in core production work, and instituting protections for domestic workers, ship crews and migrant workers. This event also featured supporters of the Law, such as the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and the Police. On 15 June, PB mobilised between 5,000-10,000 workers for a demonstration outside Parliament. This demonstration raised five demands, including again changing the Job Creation Law. However, the [other four demands](#) were all [focussed on aspects of the electoral laws](#) that make it difficult for the PB to get verified. Having turned from industrial campaigning to putting all their eggs in the electoral basket makes electoral questions crucial for unions in the PB.

The KSPI and KSPSI’s strong support for Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo in 2019, and their willingness to work with existing parties, means that some sections of the social opposition remain dubious of the PB’s oppositional stance. A key independent union, KASBI, as well as [several smaller militant unions](#), have remained separate or sceptical as have other social opposition activist groupings. These groups also advocate similar welfare state reforms as the PB. Friendly photo opportunity meetings between the PB leaders and President Widodo, as well as changing from [opposition to the new national](#) capital to [supporting it and heaping praise on the President](#), have also raised similar doubts. It is too early to assess how the PB will develop. There are still ambiguities about the oppositional stance of the PB, reflected in the fact that not all the civil society social opposition and some unions support it. However, for the first time in decades, a party has emerged formed with the backing of the countries’ largest unions. This represents the beginning of a new stage in political developments in Indonesia which stage will no doubt be marked by further zig zags and contradictions.

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