

ISSUES

Dita Sari: defying Reebok and Megawati

Sunday 23 September 2007, by [HINMAN Pip](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2002).

She is one of Asia's most significant trade union leaders. Dita Sari, the 30-year-old chairperson of the independent Indonesian National Front for Labour Struggles (FNPBI), achieved notoriety for her refusal to be bought off.

Most recently Sari spurned a lucrative human rights award — US\$50,000 — from the Reebok shoe and sportswear company. “We believe that accepting the award is not the proper or a right thing to do”, she, said adding: “We hope our stand can make a contribution to help changing labour conditions in Reebok-producing companies.”

This year marks a decade since Sari decided to drop her law studies to devote herself to improving the life of ordinary Indonesians. During this time, she has helped launch two trade union confederations (the first, the Indonesian Centre of Labour Struggles, was banned by the Suharto dictatorship), spent almost three years in jail from 1997 for the “crime” of organising a strike, taken part in countless other protest activities and spearheaded, through the FNPBI, a campaign against the Megawati government's collusion with multinational companies, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to impoverish even more ordinary Indonesians.

Reebok picked Dita Sari to receive its 13th annual human rights award because she defied the government and set up an independent trade union. The irony here is that she was arrested and jailed for leading a strike of 5000 workers in West Java who were producing Reebok and Adidas shoes. The workers were demanding a wage rise (from US\$1), for an 8-hour day and maternity leave.

In seven years, not much has changed. According to Sari, the five Reebok companies currently operating in Indonesia, all subcontracted by South Korean companies, pay their workers just US\$1.50 a day. Some 80% of the workers are women who live in poverty while Reebok collects millions of dollars of profit each year. “We cannot tolerate the way multinational companies treat the workers of Third World countries”, she said.

Since the economic crisis hit Indonesia in 1997, workers and small farmers have been forced to bear the brunt of the cut-backs. As well, fundamentalist Islamic militia gangs are still routinely used by employers to attack workers. “The changing of government and leaders does not necessarily bring any changes for workers”, Sari said recently. “Low wages, violations of freedom of association and violence is the picture facing workers today under the Megawati government. Labour practices introduced by the old regime are still alive.”

Sari's union is struggling to halt the government's cuts to subsidies on products such as petrol, kerosene, fertiliser and other basic goods.

Even though the Jakarta governor has instructed employers to lift the new minimum wage to US\$50.50 per month, an increase of some 30%, the employer organisation is refusing to comply. FNPBI organisers, including Sari, have been bashed and arrested for organising protests to pressure

recalcitrant employers.

Six FNPBI leaders were arrested last October and jailed for organising a strike over a large log of claims at a plastic goods factory in Semarang. They were finally sent to trial in January charged with carrying out anti-social acts involving violence or the threat of violence.

In fact, the workers had held peaceful actions and occupations for a couple of weeks and were attacked by police after they had agreed to comply with orders to disperse. The Anti-Oppression Action Committee (KAAP) and the Joint Forum for Justice which includes the FNPBI have called for messages of support to be sent to the FNPBI's central Java office at .

Dita Sari will be a keynote speaker at the Second Asia Pacific International Solidarity Conference at the Sydney Boys High School at Easter. She will be one of a number of Asian leaders to convey solidarity greetings to the detainees at Villawood detention centre on March 31.

See: Dita Sari: [Why I Rejected the Reebok Human Rights Award](#)

P.S.

* From Green Left Weekly, March 20, 2002.