

A Spent Force?

Indonesia's Labour NGOs Six Years after

Reformasi¹

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On Saturday 5 February 2000, a mass meeting was held in an industrial suburb of Greater Jakarta.² Over 400 women and a handful of men were crammed into a rented building. They were workers from an export garment factory producing leisurewear for a well-known multinational corporation, who had gathered after finishing their shift. The workers sat patiently in the stifling humidity, waiting for the small group standing to one side of the hall to address them.

Part of that small group had arrived earlier by car from a more salubrious suburb. They were better dressed than the shop stewards with whom they spoke. After a short time, they stepped back and the shop stewards (mostly men) began to address the assembled workers. They reminded the workers of the events leading up to the meeting, explaining that their company had been sold, and the new owners had asked workers to sign change-of-status forms before the old company had formally ceased to operate. In some sections of the factory, workers were forced to sign the forms immediately. In others, workers were permitted to take them home and read them before signing. By signing the forms,

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² I attended this meeting during my second major period of doctoral fieldwork.

workers recognised the new owners as their employers and accepted certain changes in their terms and conditions.

Workers had been unhappy about the disparities in their treatment and about the proposed changes in their working conditions. A strike was held and union representatives met with management and officials from the Department of Manpower.³ They made four demands: that workers must remain employees of the old company until it was officially closed, that they not be forced to sign the forms and not be punished for going on strike, and that negotiations continued. Management had given the workers until Monday 7 February to present a formal statement of their demands. Meanwhile, the company had continued to implement changes to the company structure, and workers' representatives had been visited in their homes by thugs sent by the company to 'encourage' them not to make trouble.

A low, angry mutter spread through the building. The organisers called the meeting to order and explained their proposed formulation of the demands to be presented to Management. After considerable negotiation, the meeting voted to accept the revised text. In a second vote, the workers agreed to stage another strike if the new company owners did not accept those demands by close of business the following Monday. The visitors were then asked to address the meeting. Although they had worked with the stewards days before the meeting to decide on the wording of the demands, they limited their speeches to words of encouragement to the strikers and their leaders. They congratulated the workers on the advances they had made since establishing a plant union, and spoke about how much easier it was for workers to organise since President Suharto had fallen from power. The meeting closed with a rousing rendition of a ballad about workers' struggles for their rights. The workers streamed out of the meeting hall. A small group remained behind with the meeting organisers and the visitors to plan their negotiation strategies.

At 5:00 pm on Monday 7 February 2000, the stewards sought out the labour activists who had attended the meeting two days before. The negotiations had failed, and the workers had gone on strike. One of the activists, a lawyer, sat down with the group and asked what had happened. Together they analysed why the unionists' negotiation attempts had failed. Management had tricked them into wasting time on small issues, and had confused them by accepting their demand that workers continue to be employed by the old company. The lawyer explained that they could avoid being tricked if one worker acted as an observer, then described strategies that could be used to redirect the negotiations if Management strayed from the issues at hand. She suggested that the unionists keep notes when meeting with Management, and ask company representatives to sign those notes so they could not later deny what they had said. The group then performed role-plays of different negotiation scenarios.

³ Department of Manpower is the official Indonesian translation of *Departemen Ketenagakerjaan* (Depnaker), later *Departemen Ketenagakerjaan dan Transmigrasi* (Depnakertrans, Department of Manpower and Transmigration).

Three days later, the unionists again met with the lawyer for advice. The strike was not yet over. They worked through the events of the previous three days and again revised their negotiation strategy.

These events were by no means extraordinary. Plant-level union organisers around the world consult labour activists from outside the factory for advice about strategy and tactics. The difference lay in the status and affiliations of those labour activists. In most countries, shop stewards consult members of the trade or industry union to which they belong. In the 1980s and 1990s in Indonesia, they consulted activists from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) concerned with labour. These labour NGOs played an key part in the reconstruction of the Indonesian labour movement because Suharto's New Order government's narrow approach to industrial relations prevented workers from pursuing their interests within the official union (SPSI) and prohibited them from organising meaningful alternatives within the official industrial relations system. The first labour NGOs were established by disenchanted unionists and human rights activists between 1978 and 1985. By 1991, labour NGOs had become the major proponent of labour rights and independent workers' organisations. They continued to dominate the Indonesia's alternative labour movement until the collapse of the New Order in 1998.

Labour NGOs' role as the principal advocate for workers' rights during this period seemed to allow NGO activists, and the workers with whom they came in contact, to step beyond the constraints of traditional unionism. However, their position was inherently ambiguous. Although labour NGOs' support for labour was widely acknowledged in Indonesia, they were not recognised as a legitimate part of the labour movement. Rather, they were characterised as institutional 'outside intellectuals' that were, at best, a partial and temporary substitute for 'true' unions organised by workers, for workers.⁴ Labour NGO activists' implicit acceptance of the status of the union as the sole legitimate organisational vehicle of labour concerns, and of their own position as outsiders, was demonstrated when legislative and policy restraints on labour organising were significantly loosened after the end of the New Order.⁵ Although most did not abandon their interest in labour issues, they responded to the opening of new opportunities for independent unionism by pulling back from their dominant position in the labour movement.

This paper examines shifts in labour NGO activists' attitudes towards their involvement in the labour movement in the six years after the fall of Suharto, using data from a longitudinal, interview-

⁴ For a full explication of my argument about labour NGOs' status as outside intellectuals, see Michele Ford, "Labour Ngo as Outside Intellectual: A History of Non-Governmental Organisations' Role in the Indonesian Labour Movement" (Unpublished PhD, University of Wollongong, 2003).

⁵ B.J. Habibie was President of Indonesia from May 1998 to October 1999, when Abdurrachman Wahid became President as a result of negotiations after the June 1999 General Election. Wahid was replaced by Megawati Sukarnoputri at the end of July 2001.

based study conducted between 1999 and 2004.⁶ It is divided into two sections. The first focuses on changes in the relationship between labour NGOs and the labour movement between 1999 and 2001. The second examines follow-up data collected in 2003 and mid-2004. The paper argues that although labour NGOs' role has necessarily changed, they are by no means a spent force. It concludes that labour NGOs are likely to continue to play a significant role in the contemporary Indonesian labour movement for many years to come.

Finding a New Space: The First Three Years after the Fall of Suharto

NGOs fulfil a range of functions related to labour in a range of very different national contexts.⁷ Many of these functions lie outside the traditional ambit of unionism. In many contexts, NGOs have sought to address work as part of workers' overall life experience, which enables them to organise groups considered 'unorganisable' by unions, including overseas labour migrants, domestic and child labour, people employed in the informal sector and outworkers.⁸ However, in others, including that of New Order Indonesia, labour NGOs have also taken on functions traditionally associated with trade unions, such as the organisation of industrial workers or the lobbying of government over social policy issues such as the minimum wage and occupational health and safety.

⁶ In-depth interviews were conducted in Indonesia with worker-activists, unionists and labour NGO activists on five different occasions during this six-year period. Details of interview location are included in the bibliography.

⁷ In recent years, labour NGOs and other non-traditional forms of labour organization have been the subject of empirical work in some national settings, including Guatemala, Mexico, Korea and the Philippines. See AMRC, *Minju No-Jo, South Korea's New Trade Unions: The Struggle for Free Trade Unions* (Hong Kong: AMRC, 1987), Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval, "Globalization and Cross-Border Labor Organizing: The Guatemalan Maquiladora Industry and the Phillips Van Heusen Workers' Movement," *Latin American Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (1999), M.L. Cook, "Regional Integration and Transnational Labor Strategies under Nafta," in *Regional Integration and Industrial Relations in North America*, ed. M.L. Cook and H.C. Katz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Michele Ford, "New Forms of Labour Activism: A Southeast Asian Perspective". In *Proceedings of the Refereed Stream of the AIRAANZ Annual Conference*. Noosa. 3-6 February 2004, Steven McKay, "The Squeaky Wheel's Dilemma: New Forms of Labor Organizing in the Philippines" (paper presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington, DC, 4-7 April 2002), Heather Williams, "Mobile Capital and Transborder Labor Rights Mobilization," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999).

⁸ See for example Debashish Bhattacharjee, "Organized Labour and Economic Liberalization in India: Past, Present and Future," in *Organized Labour in the 21st Century*, ed. A.V. Jose (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 2002). Dan Gallin, *Trade Unions and Ngos: A Necessary Partnership for Social Development, Civil Society and Social Movements Programme Paper Number 1* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2000).

In New Order Indonesia, labour NGOs generally concentrated on either grassroots organising or research/policy advocacy, although a significant number were involved at both grassroots and policy levels. At a grassroots level within the industrial sector, labour NGOs conducted education programs; established community workers' groups; and provided legal aid and logistical support and encouragement for strike actions. Some even trained *gerilya buruh* (worker guerrillas) to take over some of SPSI's plant-level units. Grassroots labour NGOs were successful in developing a relatively high level of activism amongst the workers with whom they came in direct contact. However, their small numbers and the oppressive situation in which they worked meant that they reached only a small proportion of workers. Research and policy advocacy NGOs attempted to improve the situation of industrial workers at a different level. They documented the living and working conditions of factory labour and lobbied the government and multinational corporations individually and cooperatively against military involvement in industrial relations, and for workers' rights, increases in the minimum wage, improvements in occupational health and safety and changes to labour legislation.⁹

Developments in the early post-Suharto period had a profound effect on the labour movement in general, and on the position of NGOs in particular. The first three years after the fall of Suharto were a period of rapid change. Although conditions were still difficult for labour organising, it was a 'period of opportunities, of transition'.¹⁰ Concern about labour's failure to adequately grasp the opportunities presented by *Reformasi* was widespread.¹¹ As one worker activist observed, 'after Suharto stepped down, an opportunity opened up, but workers haven't had the capacity (*kapasitas*) to take it'.¹² What workers did have, however, was a much stronger position with respect to the state. As one NGO activist noted:

There's been a big change in the consciousness of workers about getting together. Before, people censored themselves (*mensor diri*). Now workers are beginning to be able to meet people like us in their homes. Before, to meet workers, we had to steal opportunities (*nyuri-nyuri*). Now workers look for education themselves—we don't have to go looking for them.¹³

⁹ Labour NGOs' domestic initiatives were complemented by cooperation with international NGOs and labour organizations. They took part in international NGO forums and had extensive links with labour groups in other Asian countries, including the Philippines and South Korea, as well as labour and other activist groups in Europe, Australia and North America. For a detailed account of labour NGOs' activities in the late Suharto period, see Ford, "Labour Ngo as Outside Intellectual: A History of Non-Governmental Organisations' Role in the Indonesian Labour Movement".

¹⁰ NGO Interview AE.

¹¹ Edward Aspinall, "Democratisation, the Working Class and the Indonesian Transition," *Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs* 33, no. 2 (1999).

¹² Worker Interview AJ.

¹³ Worker Interview AA.

The easing of structural and policy constraints on trade union registration and operation during the Habibie interregnum brought NGOs' suitability as an alternative channel for labour organising increasingly into question for workers and NGO activists alike. Although activists recognised that changes in the industrial relations climate demanded different approaches from all labour NGOs, there was little consensus about what those new approaches should entail.¹⁴ Indeed, many labour NGO activists struggled to reposition themselves in the first few months after the fall of Suharto. As one activist commented, the 'problem was that NGOs didn't get together, they just rushed into the post-Suharto period'.¹⁵

Although informants reported that there was a crisis of identity (*'krisis identitas'*) amongst all labour NGOs after *Reformasi*,¹⁶ the changes in the labour arena in post-Suharto Indonesia affected policy and grassroots labour NGOs differently. Policy NGOs, in particular, were initially unsure of how to proceed in the new era of uncertainty, when boundaries and campaign targets were unclear and previously successful methods no longer seemed to work. Grassroots labour NGOs began by embracing the opportunities brought by *Reformasi* rather more confidently. However, in the longer term, the process of transition proved to be much more challenging at the grassroots level, where decisions to promote the formation of independent unions had far-reaching consequences for grassroots labour NGOs, than at the policy level, where many NGOs concerned with labour issues quickly returned to the techniques and strategies that had been successful before 1998.

Policy Labour NGOs

Paradoxically, the opening-up of the polity and media reduced policy labour NGOs' effectiveness as advocates of workers' rights in the first few months after the fall of Suharto. Previously vocal labour NGOs failed to capitalise on opportunities to exert pressure on a transitional government vulnerable to domestic and international demands for change. Some policy NGOs and NGO activists who had been previously very influential in the labour arena began to diversify their interests in response to what they saw as national priorities (and the priorities of donors), while the public voice of the policy activists who remained committed to labour issues was effectively drowned out by other, more pressing, concerns.¹⁷ One empirical manifestation of this development was the change in the level of press coverage of labour affairs. In contrast to the late New Order period when labour was a dominant

¹⁴ See Michele Ford, "Challenging the Criteria of Significance: Lessons from Contemporary Indonesian Labour History," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 47, no.1 (2001).

¹⁵ NGO Interview AL.

¹⁶ NGO Interview BI.

¹⁷ NGO Interview AA, NGO Interview AS, NGO Interview BO. Even ACILS undertook a crisis monitoring program which had little to do with its core focus on labour.

issue in the daily press, there was a marked decrease in media coverage during the Habibie interregnum. In the early months after the fall of Suharto, issues surrounding the organisation of labour were notably absent from public debate. Press coverage of labour issues focused overwhelmingly on migrant workers, strikes, wages and mass layoffs, and the dramatic increase in the number of registered unions in that time attracted surprisingly little commentary.¹⁸ Newspaper reports referring to labour NGOs, particularly those citing labour NGO activists' opinions on industrial labour, remained scarce for the remainder of 1999, although reports of NGOs' involvement in demonstrations and strikes gradually reappeared, and NGO commentary on female migrant labour and child labour was frequently reported.¹⁹

When explaining their reservations about the future of labour activism in Indonesia, activists from policy NGOs pointed to the decline in 'public interest' in labour issues, the breakdown of inter-NGO forums and the fragmentation of labour representation as the sources of their pessimism in 1999.²⁰ There nevertheless remained what one policy labour NGO activist called 'a *politics of representation* [English in the original] where NGOs still thought their voice was the voice of the workers'.²¹ There was some continuity between campaigns in the late Suharto period and the Habibie interregnum. Although the Commission for the Renewal of Labour Law (KPHP), the major vehicle for policy advocacy in the last years of the New Order, effectively ceased to operate in the early months after the fall of Suharto, the Women's Group for Workers' Justice (KPKB), which was established in 1997, remained active.²² The major new cooperative campaign during the Habibie interregnum was

¹⁸ There were only twenty-three articles included on union formation between June 1998 (when Convention No.87 was ratified) and the middle of May 1999 in the *Problema* newspaper clipping series. Most of those dealt with the split in FSPSI. The four 'labour' parties which qualified for the June 7 election also failed to raise the media profile of labour: in the same range of *Problema* collections, the labour parties were the subject of only eight articles.

¹⁹ One extended opinion piece on industrial labour that did appear during this time was Wimar Witoelar, "Pungki Indarti, Warga Yang Tertinggal Kaum Buruh," *Waspada*, 27 June 1999. The next opinion piece of this length authored by an NGO activist to be included in the *Problema* clipping service (there had been a number written by academics in this period) was Haneda Lastoto, "Buruh Indonesia Dalam Regim Kapitalisme Global," *Pikiran Rakyat*, 29 April 2000. At the time the article was written, Lastoto was the director of LBH Bandung.

²⁰ NGO Interview AA, NGO Interview AC, NGO Interview AF.

²¹ NGO Interview AC.

²² Its members included LBH APIK, LBH Jakarta, Sisbikum, YFAS, IPJ, Akatiga, and Bhakti Pertiwi. KPKB produced a series of information sheets on labour issues. See for example "Buruh Dan K3 (Kesehatan Dan Keselamatan Kerja)," (Information Sheet produced by the Kelompok Perempuan untuk Keadilan Buruh: n.d.).

coordinated by the Committee for Action on 1 May (KASM).²³ In addition to arranging demonstrations on 1 May, KASM was involved in campaigns against labour legislation at other times.²⁴

By mid 2001, most policy labour NGOs had renewed their focus on public advocacy over issues including Labour Day,²⁵ the appointment of Bomer Pasaribu,²⁶ the shortcomings of the draft trade union law,²⁷ minimum wages²⁸ and the arrest of the worker activist Ngadinah.²⁹ Although the techniques used in these campaigns were similar to those used before the fall of Suharto, one

²³ See "Tidak Benar, Tanggal 1 Mei Identik Dengan Komunis," *Suara Bangsa*, 1 May 1999. See also "300-Strong Rally to Laud Labor Day," *Jakarta Post*, 3 May 1999.

²⁴ KASM was comprised of a range of unions and labour NGOs, including Akatiga, ELSAM, IPJ, LDD, LBH APIK, LBH Jakarta, YFAS, Solidaritas Perempuan, Sisbikum and Bhakti Pertiwi. "Komite Aksi Satu Mei Tolak Keputusan Menteri Tenaga Kerja Transmigrasi No.78/2001 Hasil Persekutuan Pengusaha Dan Pemerintah," (Pamphlet produced by the Komite Aksi Satu Mei: n.d.). For accounts of 1 May 2000, see "Peringatan Hari Buruh Sedunia 1 Mei: Ribuan Buruh Demonstrasi," *Kompas*, 2 May 2000, "Peringati Hari Buruh Sedunia: Ratusan Buruh 'Long March' Tugu Proklamasi-Bunderan Hi," *Kompas*, 1 May 2000, "Peringati Hari Buruh, Pekerja Diajak Mogok," *Surya*, 1 May 2000, "Thousands of Workers Mark Labor Day," *Jakarta Post*, 2 May 2000.

²⁵ See "Buruh Akan Gelar Aksi Nasional," *Suara Merdeka*, 27 April 2000, "Peringatan Hari Buruh Sedunia 1 Mei Di Berbagai Daerah: Diwarnai Unjuk Rasa Menuntut Kenaikan Upah," *Kompas*, 2 May 2001, "Peringatan Hari Buruh Sedunia 1 Mei: Ribuan Buruh Demonstrasi.", "Peringati Hari Buruh Sedunia: Ratusan Buruh 'Long March' Tugu Proklamasi-Bunderan Hi.", "Peringati Hari Buruh, Pekerja Diajak Mogok.", "Thousands of Workers Mark Labor Day." May Day campaigns continued in 2002, when Minister for Manpower Jacob Nuwa Wea encouraged employers to grant workers a holiday, but noted that workers must request permission from their employers to take time off worker to hold a demonstration because 1 May was not a national holiday. See "Unjuk Rasa Buruh, Antara Harapan Dan Kenyataan," *Kompas*, 1 May 2002.

²⁶ "500 Buruh Gelar Doa Keprihatinan Dan Tuntut Menaker Bomer Dicotot," *Suara Merdeka*, 4 December 1999, "500 Buruh Riau Unjuk Rasa Anti Bomer Pasaribu," *Media Indonesia*, 1 November 1999, "Kredibilitas Bomer Dipertanyakan," *Media Indonesia*, 1 November 1999. See also "500 Buruh Riau Unjuk Rasa Anti Bomer Pasaribu.", "Dosa-Dosa Bomer Dibongkar Icw," *Rakyat Merdeka*, 31 October 1999, "Fpspi Imbau Masyarakat Dukung Mennaker," *Kompas*, 30 October 1999, "Kredibilitas Bomer Dipertanyakan.", "Mennaker Ditolak, Mennaker Menjawab," *Kompas*, 28 October 1999.

²⁷ See "Ruu Serikat Pekerja Masih Diskriminatif," *Kompas*, 21 June 2000.

²⁸ See for example "Fpspi Dan Lbh Mengecam Umr, Pengusaha Minta Pengertian," *Kompas*, 23 February 2000, "Suara Buruh: Umr Tak Mencukupi Untuk Hidup Layak," *Kompas*, 25 February 2000.

²⁹ Ngadinah was arrested for mobilising workers in an export footwear factory. Her case was the focus of a sustained NGO campaign. See for example "Detention of Labor Activist Suspended," *Jakarta Post*, 25 May 2001. Meanwhile, some research and policy NGOs, including Akatiga, made plans to become directly involved in training for trade unionists and other labour NGOs.

important difference between the cooperative forums active during the Wahid presidency and those of the Habibie interregnum and the New Order period was the extent to which unions were involved. Whereas in the past, cooperative efforts had involved policy and grassroots labour NGOs, they now included a number of labour unions with labour NGO connections and FNPBI. The three best known of these were KASM and KPKB, which continued to operate in the Wahid period,³⁰ and the NGO and Workers' Forum for Workers' Justice (FBLKB), which was active from the end of 1999 to the middle of 2001.³¹ Labour legislation continued to be a major focus for labour NGOs after Abdurrachman Wahid was deposed: a new NGO-worker forum called Committee Against the Oppression of Workers (KAPB) was established soon after Megawati assumed the presidency in mid-2001.³²

Grassroots Labour NGOs

The NGOs that sponsored grassroots workers' groups were initially generally better placed to take advantage of the window of opportunity offered by *Reformasi*.³³ However, decreases in real wages and mass layoffs of factory workers during the early months of the Habibie interregnum forced them to question the efficacy of their community-based workers' groups. In interviews, some grassroots labour NGO activists commented on the personal feeling of loss they experienced when it became obvious

³⁰ See "Aksi Bersama Satu Mei 2001," (Pamphlet Produced by the Komite Aksi Satu Mei: 2001), "Satu Mei Hari Buruh Sedunia: Hancurkan Politik Perburuhan Orde Baru," (Pamphlet Produced by the Komite Aksi Satu Mei: n.d.).

³¹ The labour NGOs involved in FBLKB, were YLBHI, LBH Jakarta, LBH APIK, YFAS, Sisbikum and its child labour affiliate KOMPAK, ELSAM, ISJ, Akatiga, and Bhakti Pertiwi. FBLKB focused particularly the draft laws on the Guidance and Protection of Labour and the Resolution of Industrial Disputes. See "Ruu Serikat Pekerja Mengebiri Hak Buruh: Tolak Sekarang Juga!," (Pamphlet produced by Forum Buruh dan LSM Untuk Keadilan Buruh: 2000). See also "Tanggapan Forum Buruh Dan Lsm Untuk Keadilan Buruh (Fblkb) Atas Rancangan Undang-Undang Penyelsaian Perselisihan Industrial (Ruu Ppi)," (Jakarta: 2000). SBSI was also active in lobbying on labour legislation. At the end of October 1999, SBSI set up a team to examine six draft laws – *RUU Serikat Buruh*, *RUU Peradilan Perburuhan*, *RUU Jamsostek*, *RUU Pemutusan Hubungan Kerja*, *RUU Pengupahan dan Kesejahteraan*, *RUU Perjanjian Kerjasama*. See "Sbsi Kerja Maraton Garap Enam Rancangan Undang-Undang: Muchtar Gosok Politisi Rombak Nasib Kaum Buruh," *Rakyat Merdeka*, 31 October 1999.

³² Again, its members included a number of unions as well as labour NGOs including Akatiga, IPJ and its parent organisation ISJ, LBH Jakarta, LBH APIK, LDD, YFAS, PBHI, Sisbikum, Solidaritas Perempuan; Bhakti Pertiwi and YLBHI, as well as three NGO alliances, namely *Komite Aksi Satu Mei*, *Konsorsium Pembela Buruh Migran Indonesia*, and *Jaringan Mitra Perempuan*. See Komite Anti Penindasan Buruh, "Ruu Pphi: Dibuat Bukan Untuk Dan Oleh Buruh," (Statement on the Formation of Komite Anti Penindasan Buruh: 2001).

³³ NGO Interview AD, NGO Interview AW, NGO Interview AZ, NGO Interview BN.

that their carefully nurtured workers' groups and networks were under threat.³⁴ Conversely, new opportunities to organise in the workplace forced grassroots labour NGOs to shift their focus and develop a range of new strategies to encourage the growth of workers' organisations in factories—a task for which many were ill-prepared. Yet while most interviewees expressed frustration at their inability to take full advantage of new opportunities for factory-based organisation, they were ultimately confident that they could continue to help workers in the long process of forming authentic labour unions in the factories, or by a combination of factory and community approaches.

Grassroots labour NGOs found it increasingly difficult to maintain their old practices in the changing environment of post-Suharto Indonesia:

NGOs began to get nervous about their position. I think this nervousness was because NGOs had been very slow to analyse the situation. You could say that they were not ready for the fruits of their efforts—workers have begun to have a critical attitude towards NGOs and are experiencing the euphoria (*eforia*) of organising independently. NGOs' attempts to maintain their position in the changing situation has pushed them to adopt strategies that are not appropriate responses to the broader issues.³⁵

As another respondent noted, 'there was a clear transformation in ideas about the role of labour NGOs':

Lots of NGOs that used to run education courses and organise workers have sponsored the formation of trade unions. They've deliberately made agreements with them about who will handle what. For example, while education should be the function of the trade union, NGOs agree to handle it for the time being because the unionists aren't capable yet (*belum mampu*) of doing it.³⁶

Most NGO and worker activists acknowledged that conflict between workers and NGOs became much more evident after the fall of Suharto.³⁷ As opportunities to meet and organise became more easily available, workers increasingly resented what they perceived as NGOs' attempts to control them. Significantly, conflict came to focus on the rights of workers to have their own organisations free from NGO 'interference'. One NGO activist, for example, reflected a little ruefully on the success of NGOs' attempts to educate workers. 'NGOs taught the workers so that they'd be clever. But after they

³⁴ NGO Interview AC, NGO Interview AW.

³⁵ NGO Interview BP.

³⁶ NGO Interview AL. Also NGO Interview BU.

³⁷ NGO Interview AA, NGO Interview AL, Worker Interview AD, Worker Interview AJ, Worker Interview AS.

became clever, they could think for themselves, and they started to be critical.’³⁸ Another complained, ‘There is tension about NGOs’ involvement. Some workers now see it as intervention (*intervensi*).’³⁹ According to yet another, ‘While NGOs still want to help, workers now have their own bargaining power. It was never like that before.’⁴⁰

For some worker activists there remained a blurring between unions and NGOs. According to one worker activist involved in an NGO-sponsored trade union, ‘workers think we’re the NGO, and we’re treated like gods (*didewakan*)’.⁴¹ Increasingly, however, NGO activists argued that ‘grassroots labour NGOs’ role was being taken on by trade unions’, which had assumed the tasks of ‘educating workers and mobilising’.⁴² The difference, according to one activist, was that:

Before the fall of Suharto, NGOs helped workers directly. Now they act as facilitators who help to maintain the unions. Now they should be focused on pushing unions to create a common perception about what the labour movement should be.⁴³

Activists believed the new situation required the development of a ‘cooperative relationship’, in which ‘unions were set free (*lepas*), and NGOs acted as a transitional bridge’.⁴⁴ Some NGO activists believed this task required them to become more visible. According to a member of Bhakti Pertiwi, which had operated clandestinely during the Suharto period:

We used to organise underground. We were very *low-profile* [English in the original]. People didn’t know about Bhakti Pertiwi. They just knew us as individuals. After Suharto fell, we started organising our worker groups into a union. At first we were a bit hesitant about appearing in the open, let alone declaring a union. We were scared that the situation would change again. But then we decided we had to just take the risk.⁴⁵

Many NGO activists were cautious about workers’ ability to run unions without assistance. Union organisers’ lack of skills was a common theme in the responses of grassroots labour NGO activists,

³⁸ NGO Interview AA. At one training workshop I attended, one of topics addressed was worker activists’ strategies for handling NGOs.

³⁹ NGO Interview BK. One concern for some NGO activists was the growing number of NGOs who claimed to be involved in labour issues, but whose motives were unclear. NGO Interview AH, NGO Interview BG.

⁴⁰ NGO Interview AT.

⁴¹ Worker Interview AC.

⁴² NGO Interview AA.

⁴³ NGO Interview BH.

⁴⁴ NGO Interview BI.

⁴⁵ Interview with Bhakti Pertiwi Activist on 14 February 2000. Permission was sought and granted for attribution of this quotation.

which emphasised both the realities of trade unionism in the early post-Suharto period and NGOs' reluctance to fully relinquish their 'guiding' role. Reflecting on problems with the new unions, one NGO activist commented that:

You have to remember that most worker activists were born after there was last a real union in Indonesia. The new trade unions are like someone who puts up a doctor's plaque but tells the patients when they arrive that the doctor is still in training (*masih sekolah*).⁴⁶

This concern was reflected in grassroots NGOs' relationships with the fledgling unions. One technique used by a number of labour NGOs to encourage the unions to take more responsibility was the formulation of formal Memoranda of Understanding, which documented the level of funding and other support the union could expect. Commenting on one such case, one respondent noted that:

We have a clear commitment to make workers capable, to empower them. It's not just a theory. We've proved it. We developed organisations. We told workers they had to prove themselves, but we also told them we'd help them if they needed it. But that has a limit. If we think that they're capable, we'll leave them. Finished. Even now we've established an MOU [Memorandum of Understanding, English in the original]. We didn't have anything like that before.⁴⁷

More generally, the ability to organise in the workplace has demanded a renegotiation of power structures and programs. As a worker activist observed in early 2000, 'the NGO stepped back (*mengambil jarak*), and now deals more with higher-level issues (*masalah ke atas*). We deal directly with the workers.'⁴⁸ According to another, 'after 1998, the role of [name of associated NGO] changed. They were less directly involved, and supervised more (*lebih mensupervisi*).'⁴⁹

As one NGO activist noted, workers began to assume more responsibilities. 'We used to invite them to discussions, now they run their own. They can even run training sessions themselves.'⁵⁰

⁴⁶ NGO Interview AK.

⁴⁷ NGO Interview AP. At least one other NGO established a formal Memorandum of Understanding with its associated trade union around this time. NGO Interview BA.

⁴⁸ Worker Interview AC.

⁴⁹ Worker Interview AD. Having used the word *mensupervisi*, this respondent corrected him/herself, saying 'not supervision, really, consultation' (*bukan supervisi sebetulnya, konsultasi*). Cognates of the word 'supervision' emerged frequently in my second round of interviews, along with more familiar words such as guiding (*membimbing*).

⁵⁰ NGO Interview AT.

However, according to another NGO activist, ‘it still becomes obvious in tight situations that the NGOs remain in control’.⁵¹ As a third respondent noted:

If anything goes wrong, or they need something, they run back to the NGOs. Many unions have an NGO as their *patron* [English in the original]. In that sense not much has changed. It’s just become more formalised. NGOs are still dominant.⁵²

A fourth NGO activist, echoing the sentiments of many of his colleagues, observed that ‘conflict will increase if the [NGO-affiliated] unions want to stand on their own, but the NGOs still want to *dominate* [English in original]. But for now the unions still need the NGOs’.⁵³

Many worker activists acknowledged their continued reliance on NGOs. According to one, for example, ‘if we’re stuck, we ask them for help’.⁵⁴ However, the right to organise meant, according to another, that ‘now there are opportunities for us to speak directly about issues that concern us, although we’re not always ready to use them’.⁵⁵ Permitting workers to speak for themselves presented a challenge to labour NGOs. Some NGOs ensured that workers participated in discussions:

Before, only NGOs discussed workers’ issues. Now, we send workers to seminars and workshops. They should be there—we just go with them if the invitation is made out to us. The workers are the ones who have an interest in this (*berkepentingan*).⁵⁶

Not all labour NGOs made this transition smoothly. As one NGO activist observed, whilst workers were eager to make connections with other worker groups, associated NGOs were often still reluctant to allow such connections to be formed.⁵⁷ In interviews, worker activists also described this reluctance. For example, one respondent said—in the presence of an NGO activist—that labour NGOs ‘should not shut their doors to members of other unions’.⁵⁸

Funding also became an increasingly important point of friction between grassroots labour NGOs and workers’ groups. On the one hand, NGO activists argued that NGOs ‘can’t expect unions to deal with a lot of money yet’.⁵⁹ On the other, they complained that ‘if we ask them to show where the

⁵¹ NGO Interview BI.

⁵² NGO Interview AA.

⁵³ NGO Interview AL.

⁵⁴ Worker Interview AH.

⁵⁵ Worker Interview AC.

⁵⁶ NGO Interview AZ. Similar sentiments were expressed in NGO Interview AQ.

⁵⁷ NGO Interview AL.

⁵⁸ Worker Interview AH. In this context, ‘other unions’ referred to unions sponsored by other NGOs.

⁵⁹ NGO Interview AO.

money has gone, it can seem like domination (*dominasi*’.⁶⁰ According to one NGO activist, ‘NGOs still have a high level of control because they have access to funds. Some interfere with the selection of union officials.’⁶¹ In a different vein, another respondent noted that workers no longer had to accept NGOs because those NGOs no longer had a monopoly over funding opportunities:

Workers know when NGOs are right or wrong. They make it clear when they’ve been impoverished (*dimiskinkan*) by NGOs who are just looking for funding and so on. They’re not scared to ask questions now that they’ve realised that they can perhaps access that funding themselves.⁶²

The tension between NGO-sponsored unions’ continued need for assistance and their subordinate relationship with their NGO sponsors was an ongoing challenge for both parties during this period.⁶³

The major questions facing grassroots labour NGOs at the end of the Wahid presidency were whether their involvement in the labour movement would continue, and, if so, what shape it would take. These concerns were neatly summarised in the comments of one of the NGO activists interviewed:

Some NGOs will last, and others will disappear. In other words, many of the roles they have taken on—and are still doing now—will be taken over by unions. In that sense they’re temporary. But they’ll survive if they take on more specific roles: for example, producing education modules and teaching union officials how to use them. That would take a lot longer if unions did it themselves. There are some things that will still need an *expert* [English in original]. That’s what the NGOs can do. For example, providing information about occupational health and safety, and advocacy in the sense of identifying the issues. NGOs can also undertake political functions.⁶⁴

However, the majority declared that NGOs must eventually stop performing the ‘union functions’ they had undertaken for more than a decade.

⁶⁰ NGO Interview BL.

⁶¹ NGO Interview BI.

⁶² NGO Interview AT.

⁶³ NGO Interview BU, NGO Interview BV. There were many cases of conflict between grassroots labour NGOs and unions during this period in North Sumatra and throughout Java.

⁶⁴ NGO Interview AL. Also NGO Interview AE, NGO Interview AJ, NGO Interview BD.

A Spent Force? Labour NGOs Six Years On

Three years into Megawati's presidency, the labour NGO community were overwhelmingly pessimistic about the state of organised labour in Indonesia. One respondent commented that 'the condition of the labour movement has weakened, perhaps because people were exhausted by the euphoria of 1998'.⁶⁵ Respondents complained about the increasing weakness and fragmentation in the union movement.⁶⁶ As one respondent noted:

The Indonesian labour movement is badly fragmented (*terfragmentasi berat*)...By the year 2000, there were about 30 federations, and now in 2004 there are 86 federations..These days, there are a lot of unions that are really just a name plaque (*papan nama*), although many also really do have a strong membership basis. It's a pity that the national arena is controlled by unions that are just name plaques.⁶⁷

Another compared the current movement unfavourably with that of the Suharto period, observing that, 'If you compare it with the labour movement of 1980-1999, the Indonesian union movement is currently very weak. Besides being divided (*terkotak-kotak*), unions that were formed after 2000 generally have their own agenda.'⁶⁸ Likewise, according to a third respondent, 'Mutual suspicion between unions is really common...Unions' different interests have also contributed to the weakening of the labour movement. Unions don't seem to realise that their lack of unity is always going to be exploited by anti-worker forces.'⁶⁹

Two other respondents raised May Day 2004 as an example of the weakness of organised labour and the lack of unity within the movement. According to the first, 'May Day celebrations were not as widespread, and they only attracted a few people. Actually, most of the people who attended May Day were students rather than workers. This happened everywhere – in Medan, Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang and Surabaya.'⁷⁰ According to the second,

As a whole, the [condition of the] labour movement can be seen from the momentum of the last May Day. On May Day, unions didn't have a united command for their action. In Jakarta, there

⁶⁵ NGO Interview CE.

⁶⁶ NGO Interview CA, NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CC, NGO Interview CD, NGO Interview CE, NGO Interview CF. Unionists interviewed in mid-2003 and mid-2004 also echoed this view. Worker Activist WA, Worker Interview WB, Worker Interview WC, Worker Interview WD.

⁶⁷ NGO Interview CF.

⁶⁸ NGO Interview CB.

⁶⁹ NGO Interview CC.

⁷⁰ NGO Interview CE.

were separate rallies at the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout, the Department of Manpower, Parliament House and the Presidential Palace...The issues they raised ranged from the parliamentary elections, the presidential election to urban planning issues, as well as specific labour issues, including a rejection of contract labour and of Laws No.13/2003 and 2/2004.⁷¹

Respondents were more divided over the ongoing role of NGOs in the labour movement. Some respondents, who identified 'labour NGOs' exclusively as those working at the grassroots level, argued that the role of NGOs has contracted as unions have taken on functions previously executed by the NGOs themselves.⁷² However, most argued that NGOs had repositioned themselves rather than decreased their role.⁷³ According to the NGO activists interviewed, this has occurred in two discrete ways. First, NGOs working at the grassroots level have continued to shift their focus from organising and training activities that directly involve workers to activities designed to strengthen and/or support the unions.⁷⁴ Many of the strategies adopted by grassroots labour NGOs seeking to strengthen unions are little different from the strategies used by those same NGOs with informal workers' groups in the late Suharto period, such as the provision of facilities (such as a meeting room, photocopying or a telephone) or money. Less tangible services, such as 'facilitation', differ to varying degrees from the implicit and/or explicit control exercised over workers' groups by the NGOs that sponsored them before the fall of Suharto. Second, as indicated in the previous section, other grassroots labour NGOs shifted their attention towards policy advocacy and/or networking activities.⁷⁵ Yet whilst some grassroots and policy NGOs have ceased to be involved in labour-related activities, others have taken their place. As one respondent noted:

More and more NGOs are concerned with labour issues, both NGOs that function as a research bodies and those that do organising or advocacy work...With regard to organising, a number of NGOs that no longer have a relationship with international funding bodies have actually become more intensively involved with, or even dissolved themselves into, workers' organisations. Conversely, there are a lot of new labour NGOs...that would reject being categorised as NGOs, but are doing the work of NGOs, that are organising widely and intensely. A lot of these grew

⁷¹ NGO Interview CA.

⁷² NGO Interview CA, NGO Interview CC.

⁷³ NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CD, NGO Interview CE, NGO Interview CF, NGO Interview CG.

⁷⁴ NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CC, NGO Interview CG.

⁷⁵ NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CC, Worker Interview WD. It should be noted here that international donors are much less willing to fund labour NGOs' research and advocacy activities now than they were before the fall of Suharto. In one example, the Dutch aid organization NOVIB, which very actively funded a number of labour NGOs before the fall of Suharto, has recently withdrawn its funding for a number of labour research programs. NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CH.

out of student groups established after 1998. With regard to advocacy, a number of activists previously associated with LBH Jakarta have established the Trade Union Resource Centre. So we can say that the role of NGOs has grown, although ironically, the results of their work in the field belies this increase, because the quantity and the quality of the labour movement is decreasing.⁷⁶

When asked about the factors that encourage NGOs' continued involvement in the labour movement, respondents pointed to NGOs' commitment to labour issues,⁷⁷ 'historical links' between particular NGOs and unions,⁷⁸ the 'synergy' and/or 'symbiosis' between unions and NGOs,⁷⁹ and the ongoing inability of workers' organisations to meet all their own training, funding and other needs.⁸⁰ Conversely factors identified that discourage NGOs' continued involvement included the absence of a common focus on which to create a shared platform, because of divisions within the union movement,⁸¹ and egotism: both factors to which the lack of cooperation between NGOs in the Suharto period has often been attributed.⁸² According to another respondent, obstacles to cooperation stemmed primarily from the 'different characteristics of NGOs and unions', where 'NGOs are not mass organisations. They operate on the basis of strategic issues according to their institutional mandate. Conversely, unions are mass organisations whose every move should contribute to the consolidation and development of their organisations', and to past experience, when joint campaigns had 'been disappointing, because the plans agreed upon had not been implemented consistently'.⁸³ 'Different interests' and 'lack of trust' were identified by four other respondents as inhibiting NGO-union cooperation.⁸⁴

On the question of NGOs' future in the labour movement, respondents were surprisingly united. The two unionists interviewed in June 2004 commented that NGOs would continue to have a role, so long as they 'treated unions as equal partners' and 'acted as a supporting system rather than doing the work of unions'.⁸⁵ NGOs respondents agreed that NGOs' future in the labour movement depended on 'mutually agreed, clear roles' for each, under which 'NGOs no longer dictate to the unions'.⁸⁶

⁷⁶ NGO Interview CE.

⁷⁷ NGO Interview CG, NGO Interview CA.

⁷⁸ NGO Interview CF, Worker Interview WD.

⁷⁹ NGO Interview CA, NGO Interview CC, NGO Interview CF.

⁸⁰ NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CE, Worker Interview WC, Worker Interview WD.

⁸¹ NGO Interview CB.

⁸² NGO Interview CC.

⁸³ NGO Interview CA.

⁸⁴ NGO Interview CE, NGO Interview CF, Worker Interview WC, Worker Interview WD.

⁸⁵ Worker Interview WC, Worker Interview WD.

⁸⁶ NGO Interview CG, NGO Interview CC.

Respondents identified this role primarily as comprising activities as a facilitator for union activities,⁸⁷ in the policy arena⁸⁸ and in developing international networks.⁸⁹ These responses suggest that little has changed in labour NGOs' perceptions about their position during the Megawati presidency. If anything, the union movement's failure to consolidate the gains labour made in the Habibie interregnum has strengthened their conviction that they have a future in the labour movement.

Conclusion

In relinquishing their role as the principal advocate for workers' rights, labour NGO activists have accepted the constraints of traditional unionism. However, this has not meant that labour NGOs have abandoned – or been abandoned by – the labour movement. Despite some initial obstacles to policy NGOs' ability to speak for labour, the fall of Suharto and the subsequent liberalisation of Indonesia's polity and labour relations regime demanded relatively few significant changes in policy NGOs' approach to labour issues, other than those prompted by changing donor priorities. Whilst the liberalisation of Indonesia's regime of labour regulation forced grassroots NGOs to fundamentally reconsider their role, they, too have continued to be engaged in a wide range of activities involving workers and unions. Although relations between labour NGOs and unions are often fraught, labour NGO activists suggest that they will continue to contribute to the reconstruction of the Indonesian labour movement for many years to come. Given the ongoing structural weaknesses of organised labour in Indonesia, their contribution is unlikely to be rejected.

⁸⁷ NGO Interview CF.

⁸⁸ NGO Interview CA, NGO Interview CB, NGO Interview CC.

⁸⁹ NGO Interview CF.

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