

PPBI: A New Indonesian Left Trade Union Federation

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***Direct Action.* Under the theme “Unite against capitalism and the regime that supports it, build a united national labour movement that is progressive, militant, democratic and independent”, on July 9, 76 labour union representatives from around the country gathered in the Jakarta satellite city of Bogor for a three-day congress to establish a new union federation, the Indonesian Labour Movement Union (PPBI).**

Attending were representatives from the North Sumatra Trade Union of Struggle from Medan, the Mining Trade Union Workers Challenge from Sanga-Sanga in East Kalimantan, the North Palu Labour Forum from Central Sulawesi, the Cross-Factory Labour Forum (FBLP) from North Jakarta, the Solidarity Alliance for Labour Struggle (GSPB) from the West Java city of Bekasi, the Politics for the Poor-Indonesian National Front for Labour Struggle (FNPBI-PRM) from Jombang and Mojokerto, East Java, the Independent Indonesian National Front for Labour Struggle (FNPBI-Independent) from Surabaya and Madura, East Java, GSPB BPT Mikro from Majalaya, West Java, the Garuda Trade Union (SBG) from Sumedang, West Java and representatives from Yogyakarta currently in the process of building local trade union groups.

Also present were observers from the Political Committee of the Poor-People’s Democratic Party (KPRM-PRD), the Political Union of the Poor (PPRM), the Student Struggle Centre for National Liberation (Pembebasan, formerly LMND-PRM) and the Perempuan Mahardhika (Free Women) National Network (JNPM), as well as individual trade union activists.

International crisis

Following the congress opening and speeches by organisational representatives, the congress’s first plenary session, on the national and international situation, was chaired by Bangun from the SBG. Presentations were given by KP-PPBI general chairperson Ata Bin Udi and Budi Wardoyo, a member of the PPRM National Executive Committee and deputy chairperson of the GSPB. Both presentations outlined capitalism’s shameful exploitation of the Indonesian people’s wealth through low wages and poor working conditions.

Ata outlined how the regime of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono serves the interests of capital, and none of the government’s policies side with the interests of working people. The government and its political allies sell off the country’s wealth and leave the people to be exploited. Ata noted that this is happening not only in Indonesia but also in other capitalist countries, with the crisis having a huge impact through growing unemployment. The people of these countries are also fighting back, in Greece, the US, Britain, France and China, and in almost all parts of the world.

Budi Wardoyo added that although there has been resistance in every corner of the country, this has been largely unsuccessful due to the lack of unity between the movements.

Women workers

In the discussion that followed, the problems facing women workers were raised, with participants saying these cannot be separated from the broader issue of women's liberation. Women workers are oppressed by both the patriarchal culture and capitalism, which takes advantage of patriarchal culture to exploit women. Women receive lower wages than men and suffer sexual harassment in the workplace. The low level of feminist consciousness in trade unions restricts women workers' participation and is the reason that women's interests are not accommodated. Women workers also find it hard to organise because they carry the extra burden as unpaid domestic workers. This is why women hold few leadership positions although they are the majority of trade union members.

Also raised were the threats facing Indonesia's national industry and workers being unwilling to join unions because they do not trust the pro-employer "yellow" unions. The session ended with the conclusion that the Yudhoyono government consistently bows to the interests of capital and Indonesian workers cannot depend upon it for change.

Socialism

The evening session was devoted to a discussion on program and strategy, beginning with the organisational program. "Our principal program is to create a society that is just, equal, prosperous and modern, and in order to realise this we must replace the powers that be. Such a society is a representation of the socialist system. Socialism is the only solution to the problems facing the ordinary people", said the first speaker, Dian Trisnanti, adding that realising socialism requires replacing those in power.

This sparked a lively debate, with speakers from the floor agreeing that although the current regime cannot be trusted and must be overthrown, due to the limited strength of the labour movement it would be better to prioritise day-to-day problems faced by workers. Others said that, while workers can take up immediate demands, they should not abandon the main program of overthrowing the regime.

Trisnanti responded by explaining that workers should struggle with the perspective of replacing those in power and building socialism, because it is only with workers and people's power that such change can come about. Without such a perspective, workers will restrict their struggle simply to fighting for decent wages and workers' rights.

Wardoyo, the second speaker, agreed, saying that in addition to the main program there were other strategic programs such as building national industry, which would be funded primarily by abolishing the foreign debt, seizing the assets of corrupters, and a progressive taxation system. The more immediate program to overcome the destruction of the country's productive forces would include decent wages, free education and health care, the repeal of the labour law, the abolition of contract labour and outsourcing, the investigation of cases of sexual harassment against women workers and subsidies for ordinary people. The discussion continued to the following day.

Uniting and broadening

The July 10 afternoon session was devoted to strategy and tactics. Wardoyo explained that uniting and broadening the KP-PPBI's organisational structure should start from factory unity in one company, unity based on sectors of production, regional unity and political unity with women workers. External unity is political unity based on struggles of other workers. In order to broaden this reach, the regions must aim for a geo-political reach.

Questions were raised by several participants, a woman worker from Medan asked how they can win a particular struggle, explaining that after 12 months of fighting against their company over

arbitrary mass sackings they were still unable to win. "Unity", replied Wardoyo. A struggle in only one factory is futile. A local struggle just in Medan will not bear fruit. The struggle must unite with other factories, if necessary throughout Indonesia.

Trisnanti gave the example of 2006 in Jakarta, when hundreds of unions occupied the Department of Labour and Transmigration until employers gave in and accepted the workers' demands. Factories that had closed and dismissed workers were forced to reopen.

Yellow unions

Jumisih, a woman worker activist from FBLP in North Jakarta, related their experience of building local unity. "We worked on building unity, distributing leaflets, we even succeeded in leading this local unity. The one deficiency was that we always failed to accommodate [all the workers], mostly because the majority of workers in the area had already joined yellow trade unions."

Wardoyo responded by saying that we must continue to campaign against yellow unions, providing evidence of how they sell workers out, showing that we consistently defend workers' interests. It is not impossible to win workers from the yellow unions if we understand and are aware that unity between workers is important, including in local disputes.

After 12 hours of discussion, at 9pm participants moved on to the organisational session. After the submission of several proposals, it was decided to call the new organisation the Indonesian Labour Movement Union or PPBI, which would be a federation without eliminating the original organisations. The congress will be the highest body, followed by a national presidium made up of representatives from each labour organisation. Below this would be a national leadership board and regional presidiums of trade union representatives.

The PPBI's principle would be popular social democracy with two slogans of struggle: "Unite, take power, build national industry under people's control", and "Abandon the fake trade unions and build a united labour movement that is progressive, militant, democratic and independent".

On the final day the congress elected the PPBI's first national leadership board: general chairperson Ata Bin Udi, general secretary Budi Wardoyo, education and propaganda department head Dian Septi Trisnanti, advocacy department coordinator Sulaeman and staff member Hari, women's equality department coordinator Jumisih and staff member Sanik, and secretarial and finance department head Ikin Proletariat.

The congress was the result of an ongoing consolidation by left-wing activists expelled from the People's Democratic Party (PRD) in 2007, who went on to form the Political Committee of the Poor-People's Democratic Party (KPRM-PRD).

In November 2008 former members of the PRD women's organisation held a congress to re-establish the Perempuan Mahardhika National Network. A meeting earlier in the year in Bandung agreed to establish the Indonesian Labour Movement Union Preparatory Committee (KP-PPBI), a precursor to the PPBI. In March youth activists from Politics of the Poor-National Student League for Democracy held a congress in Yogyakarta to establish a new national student organisation, the Student Struggle Centre for National Liberation (Pembebasan, Liberation).

By Dian Trisnanti, in Jakarta

