

5 Books On The Politics Of Indonesian Labor

Friday 19 May 2023, by [GUAN Yiyun Tom](#), [IZZATI Nabiyla Risfa](#) (Date first published: 12 May 2023).

Public Books and the [Asian Labour Review](#) have partnered to exchange an ongoing series of essays and interviews about and for workers' movements around the world. Today's conversation, "[5 Books on the Politics of Indonesian Labor](#)," was originally published on April 12, 2023.

In the series "Five Books on Labour," the *Asian Labour Review* (ALR) learns what books inspire labor scholars and activists. The idea for this series comes out of discussions to create a bibliography of labor history, thanks to what has already been produced by the [Society for the Study of Labour History in the UK](#). This specific format is inspired by the book recommendation site [Five Books](#) and the Indonesian radical magazine *IndoPROGRESS*'s section "[Batjaan Liar](#)."

Here, ALR talks with Nabiyla Risfa Izzati, a labor law lecturer and a doctoral student researching gender and gig work in Indonesia. The interview is conducted by ALR's contributing writer, Yiyun Tom Guan.

Asian Labour Review (ALR): Please tell us about yourself. What have you worked on in the past, and what is your current project?

Nabiyla Risfa Izzati (NRI): I am a labor law lecturer in the Faculty of Law at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta, and currently on study leave for my PhD in the UK. I have researched Indonesian labor law in general, and now my PhD research topic is on gender and work in the gig economy.

Specifically, I study the experience of female gig workers in Indonesia. I look at it from the perspective of labor process theory and how their experiences differ from their male counterparts. Because my background is mainly on gender and work, I have chosen to study female workers in precarious positions, such as informal workers and domestic workers.

ALR: Let's start with the first book on your list, *Surplus Pekerja di Kapitalisme Pinggiran* (Surplus Workers at the Margins of Capitalism) by Muhtar Habibi.

NRI: *Surplus Pekerja di Kapitalisme Pinggiran* is one of my favorite Indonesian labor books. It was written by Dr. Muhtar Habibi, a lecturer in the Faculty of Social and Political Science at UGM. Most of the Indonesian labor force now works in the informal sector, which are way more precarious in comparison with the formal sector. This book is terrific because it discusses the history behind why we have so much precarious work in Indonesia.

It talks about class relations, capital accumulation, and the informal proletarianization that has taken place in Indonesia since the 1980s. We have so many young people nowadays, but the government is not prepared for this demographics. Therefore, Indonesia has a surplus of people who are willing and able to work but cannot find it. This surplus labor makes the labor market more

competitive, and people who cannot compete are easily pushed into the informal economy.

For example, we have a Job Creation Law (*Undang-Undang Cipta Kerja*) that has been widely criticized. But the government insists on pushing it through, and they claim that this is the only way to make investors come to Indonesia and create more jobs. They don't really care about the protection of workers, because the workers are dispensable. Because there are so many people, if you don't want the job there are always new workers that are willing to do the job, even with lower wages and taking on even harder work.

ALR: How would the Job Creation Law address this problem?

NRI: The government believes that foreign investors are not coming because the Indonesian labor law is too restrictive. Past governments have tried to replace it with more business-friendly laws several times, but they failed. This government slipped this revision of labor law into the Omnibus Law, a document that is more than 1,000-page long and contains numerous other laws. Most of the revision pertains to the deregulation of labor protection.

Academics have pointed out that labor protection is not the main reason for lack of investment in Indonesia—the main reasons are corruption and unclear industrial policy. There are so many other problems, but revising labor law is just the easiest thing to do since you “only” sacrifice the workers, not the “big guy” up there.

ALR: This segues really well into your second book, *Precarious Asia*. Can you tell us about this book? Since it is a comparative study of Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia, do you think the process you just described is specific to Indonesia? How do the different trajectories in industrialization in all three countries come into play?

NRI: The problem of precarity in Indonesia was what made me choose this book. Putting Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea together was not a comparison that is often made. People are familiar with how big the Japanese and South Korean economies are, but Indonesia is a rising power in Asia with a large labor force, and it's very rarely being talked about.

Yet, I previously thought Indonesia's size was the biggest factor in the informality of its labor force, but because of *Precarious Asia*, I realized that is also the same case with Japan and South Korea. I always thought now that they are very mature industrial countries, so they don't really have this problem anymore. They do, yet their governments tried to fix it.

The book discusses how the governments in South Korea and Japan supported and protected certain industrial sectors, forming powerful conglomerates that did maintain job and economic security. They also tried to push through their industrialism with technology.

It's interesting to read the book as an Indonesian. In a way, with the Job Creation Law, the Indonesian government is trying to imitate Korea and Japan to strengthen the formal sector. However, the book sheds light on the fact that any type of industrial policies done in Japan and South Korea cannot get rid of informality 100%.

Especially given the surplus workers, there will always be people who work in the informal sector, for example: care workers. If the industrial policies don't protect them, they will be treated as second-class citizens. And ignoring their precarity, the book argues, contributes to an increasingly high level of inequality.

ALR: And care work is very gendered, too.

NRI: Yes, the stereotypical gender segregation in certain types of work is quite similar in Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. Across Asia, care workers and domestic worker are basically female jobs. The patriarchal culture is still very strong in those three countries, just like in other parts of Asia.

ALR: Let's jump into the third book, **Labor and Politics in Indonesia** by Teri Caraway and Michele Ford.

NRI: *Labor and Politics in Indonesia* presents excellent research on what happened with Indonesian labor unions. The millennials, those in their 20s or 30s, in Indonesia are cut off from labor movement of the past. We don't really have a historical remembrance of trade unionism in Indonesia. Historically, trade unions in Indonesia were very strong in the Sukarno period, because of their role during the war for independence. They shaped the Constitution of Indonesia. It then got erased during Suharto's New Order (*Orde Baru*) era because of the stigma of labor unions being associated with communism.

During New Order, Indonesia still had trade unionism, but it was only one federation (*Federasi Serikat Buruh*) that was basically controlled by the government. So therefore, de facto, we had no trade unions, and no labor movement to speak of. When the New Order period ended, it also ended the suppression of labor unions. We had a new trade union law in 2000 that made it easy for labor unions to form. Unfortunately, progress has stalled in recent years.

ALR: Max Lane's *An Introduction to the Politics of the Indonesian Union Movement* complements Caraway and Ford's book well.

NRI: I think so. Max Lane's book discusses why the labor union movement in Indonesia cannot really hold its momentum. An important aspect Lane dissects is the struggle of ideology within the Indonesian labor movement from *Reformasi* until now.

The central question of the book is: who are we as the Indonesian labor movement? After the loss of its identity during the New Order period, the current labor movement struggles to recover its identity.

One of the very interesting insights I got from the book is that after the end of the New Order the labor movement in Indonesia never got any momentum—the majority of the people did not see labor unions as the ones who ended the New Order period—because the one who got the glory was the student movement. The people didn't feel like they owed anything to the trade union movement. Because the law itself is not really helping the trade unions to foster, what happened in the past 20 years has made the trade union movement in Indonesia very fragmented.

Lane also discusses the "Go Politics" development within the labor movement. He lays out how its leaders decided to go into politics and create labor parties, something that has manifested in the new Labour Party (*Partai Buruh*) that will compete in the 2024 election. Just like Caraway book, it suggests that labor unions need to actually use politics to boost the labor movement, instead of just being used by politics. As shown in the past few years, the politicians are only using the labor movement as vote banks, and they are always left behind after the election ends.

ALR: Your last selection, *Menolak Tunduk: Cerita Perlawanan dari Enam Kota (Refusing to Bow: Stories of Resistance from Six Cities)*, seems very unique.

NRI: It is part of a series called *Buruh Menuliskan Perlawannanya* (Workers Writing their Struggle), created by Lembaga Informasi Perburuhan Sedane (Sedane Institute for Labor Information, or LIPS). I always recommend this book to everyone because it's very important to read about the

struggle from the perspective of the workers.

Most of the writers in the book come from formal sectors, like manufacturing and the metal sector, where the labor movement is the strongest. They talk about their daily struggles, union busting, the problem with wages, and also the gendered problems of female workers.

I highly recommend it because this is the book that can capture the struggle from the eyes of the workers. As academic researchers, no matter how hard we try, we still see things from our very privileged positions.

There are discrepancies even with the idea of organizing: as academics we may think forming unions now is very easy. In Indonesia, you only need 10 people, go to the Ministry of Manpower, and then you make it legal. We have a tendency to see it this way, without acknowledging how hard it is for them just to make ends meet. It's not easy to go to their supervisor and tell them "we're forming a union."

ALR: Given your research interest in gender and care work, are there books that have particularly inspired you on those topics?

NRI: I didn't include them in my recommendations because they are not specifically about Asia, but yes: *Woman and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* by Susan Ferguson, and *Patriarchy of the Wage* by Sylvia Federici. Those are always my go-to books for a gender perspective when we're talking about labor and industrial relations.

Patriarchy of the Wage is the one that inspired me the most. It is a classic book on gender and work, but *Woman and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* is a good addition because it's more contemporary, and discusses how far we have come in the past few years and the issues that we still need to push forward.

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