

# Dita Sari: The story of a political activist

Sunday 23 September 2007, by [ASAP](#) (Date first published: September 1997).

## Contents

- [Trade union established](#)
- [Increasing worker militancy](#)
- [The role of students](#)
- [A year of struggle](#)
- [A remarkable political life](#)
- [The women's question](#)
- [Self-determination for East](#)
- [Dita's trial](#)
- [Regime's propaganda fails](#)
- [Defiant in prison](#)

Dita was born in Jakarta on December 30, 1972, but grew up in Medan, North Sumatra, where her father worked. After her parents were divorced in the early eighties, she returned to Jakarta. In 1991, she enrolled at the prestigious University of Indonesia to study law. In an interview where Dita talks about this period in her life she said "I was like most other students: apolitical and wanting only to enjoy life". She admits that during her early years at university, she spent most of her pocket money on ice cream and chocolates.

Dita's first involvement in politics began in December 1992 when she attended a campus demonstration. The demonstration was called in support of human rights and organised by the then underground Students in Solidarity for Democracy in Indonesia (SMID). Dita remembers: "I realised that although it was a student demonstration, it was not just about the rights of students, but rights for all people. Education is a human right, although in Indonesia it is so expensive that the poor people can't send their children to school or university. I started to realise that the issues revealed by the students must also be the issues of the people."

A week later she was approached to join a SMID political class in Central Java. She remembers that at the time she was unclear about politics. It was through these classes that she came to understand the real political situation in Indonesia.

As part of her political education in SMID, Dita would often visit factories to talk with the workers and spend the weekends living in their quarters. It was during this time that Dita developed a talent for communicating, which earned her considerable respect among workers.

After many years of organising workers in an illegal trade union and leading strike actions, Dita decided to leave university. She explains her motivation for taking this courageous step. "I don't believe in law any more. Law here is without any real content. I could not stay any longer, sitting at a university desk and listening to all that empty talk. I think my trade union work is far more important, and this is where I wish to concentrate my activities and my energies."

## **Trade union established**

The organising work of student activists such as Dita soon led to the establishment of the Indonesian Centre of Labour Struggle (PPBI) which, at that time, was still forced to work underground. Along with the Indonesian Trade Union for Workers' Prosperity (SBSI) and the Free Trade Union Solidarity (SBMS), PPBI became the third independent workers' organisation to be established in Indonesia since 1965.

PPBI was founded in Ambarawa in Central Java on October 22-23, 1994. More than 100 delegates attended representing workers from factory committees based in Jakarta, Tangerang, Bogor, Yogyakarta, Semarang, Solo, Salatiga, Surabaya and Medan.

The process of building factory committees had been going on for at least five years prior to PPBI's founding congress. Former students as well as young workers formed support groups which later became factory committees. These committees led local struggles for better wages and conditions in a number of factories and by 1994, PPBI estimated it had a following of between 10,000 and 15,000 workers.

The congress adopted the slogan "Fight against oppression — gaining prosperity for workers". PPBI adopted both a general program and a program of political demands.

The key elements of the general program included fighting for increased wages and allowances, improved working conditions and health standards, the end of the government's cheap labour policy, the right to establish independent worker organisations, free assembly, free speech and the right to strike, the repeal of anti-worker regulations and laws, an end to military intervention in industrial disputes, direct involvement of workers in all policy formulation which affects them, and an end to discrimination against women workers and child labour.

Specific demands included a national minimum wage of 7000 Rupiah (A\$3.30) per day, the repeal of regulations which allow workers to join only the government controlled yellow trade union, SPSI (All Indonesian Trade Union), a progressive taxation system that applies only to incomes above one million Rupiah (A\$660) per month and the implementation of minimum redundancy payments. PPBI also called for the establishment of a democratic and independent court system that would strictly implement sanctions against employers who violate workers' rights.

The first year after PPBI's formation was very eventful. On September 28 and October 24, 1994, the PPBI led a strike at the Swiss Bakery plant of 250 workers in Jakarta where workers were demanding to be paid the minimum wage. Troops from Kodim (district military command) broke up the strike and later intimidated workers in their homes. On October 25, 200 PPBI workers at the Plastindo plastic factory at Semarang, East Java, went on strike. They were demanding an end to unequal wages between men and women workers, a reduction of working hours from eight hours with no break to eight hours with a one-hour meal break, an increase in food allowances and provision of a transportation allowance. On October 26, following threats by the local Kodim, PPBI members held a joint demonstration with SMID outside the Semarang provincial parliament. Other strikes in the Jakarta industrial area of Pluit by textile workers were also held in early November demanding that the minimum wage be paid.

## **Increasing worker militancy**

In commenting on the dramatic increase in labour militancy in Indonesia, Dita said in 1995 "We have had 800 strikes during the past three years. Many of these strikes were spontaneous. PPBI's role has

been to direct these strikes into political action rather than just asking for higher wages. We want to give a more political and revolutionary direction to the struggle. PPBI is attempting to give the democratisation issue a class meaning. It's not just because of [president] Suharto. It's not just because of the military, but also because there is the oppressor and the oppressed. There is the capitalist system and the workers".

After initial PPBI demonstrations were attacked by the military, they began to take up the role of the military in protecting the state's interests. As well as the undemocratic nature of the regime, PPBI's demands included opposition to the dual social and political role of the military, an end to military intervention in industrial disputes and broader issues of military repression and violence. "It depends on how you respond whether you can gain the political benefits from any action", says Dita.

In a 1995 interview, Dita expressed her optimism that the union movement would continue to grow. She pointed to the strong grassroots base that had been built saying that if there was a military crackdown, she felt that others would continue the work. She commented that "the workers need to get to know you, become familiar and understand your program before they will take action with you".

Dita said, "A crackdown can have an impact on the radicalisation process. Sometimes if you don't have enough consciousness, you retreat because you are afraid of being beaten again by the military. In other cases, it makes you stronger." In Dita's opinion, most of the time their comrades came through the experience more determined and militant. She said at the time, "through the repression we can select the militants, the most militant [activists]".

## **The role of students**

Dita argues that building an independent student movement is critical to building the broader struggle against the dictatorship. Historically, students have always been at the forefront of the democratic movement. Students led an election boycott campaign in 1971 - the first elections since the military coup staged by Suharto in 1965. By the early 70s, student demonstrations were already taking up issues of state sanctioned corruption and economic mismanagement. In 1974, massive student demonstrations in Jakarta were broken up by the military resulting in eight deaths and hundreds of arrests. Over the next few years, student demands became stronger and clearly anti-militarist and called on Suharto not to stand for re-election. In 1978, hundreds of students were arrested and all political activity on campus prohibited. As a result, in the 1980s student activity moved off campus and they began working in solidarity with worker and peasant struggles, particularly mass evictions to make way for mega- projects and tourism. Between 1987 and 1990, a number of joint actions were held against land seizures, such as the Kedong Ombo dam project. It was during these experiences that many students were radicalised and began to link the appalling working and living conditions experienced by Indonesian workers to the role of the military and the massive conglomerates owned by the Suharto family and its hangers-on.

Uniting students and workers

Speaking of both the student and worker movements, Dita argued that "We have to unite them, the theoretical understanding of the students and the militant experience of the workers. Alliances between students and workers are becoming broader, and are increasing". Dita outlined how this was done, "in many cases the alliances were built following the unionisation of a factory and subsequent strike action. If the capitalists do not meet the workers' needs after several days of strikes, then we organise an alliance with the students because maybe if we get an alliance with the students we will be stronger and the masses realise they are not alone".

Because of the level of repression, the worker and student movements had been forced to operate underground for eight years. With the rise of workers' struggles and the establishment of independent trade unions like PPBI, the aim was to bring the struggle out into the open, to fuel the radicalisation. Broader political demands were raised by PPBI, taking up issues such as the democratisation of Indonesia, the repeal of the five political laws which restrict ordinary people's involvement in Indonesian politics and the dual role of the military in civilian affairs. Speaking about this process Dita said that: "because the movements have had little experience in open political work, they are taking some time to adjust to activity on the radical democratic level".

## **A year of struggle**

Because of her activism, Dita has been detained by the military many times. Like so many other women activists, she has been beaten, harassed and sexually abused while in detention.

In January 1995, she took part in a strike by 1500 employees of PT Ganda Guna Indonesia during which she was arrested along with a number of SMID activists. On May 1, the same year, Dita led the first May Day commemoration to be organised in Indonesia since Suharto seized power and she was detained for 24 hours. A few months later, while she was leading a demonstration by 12,000 workers from the Great River Industries garment factory complex, she was sexually abused by police. The authorities tried to intimidate her by accusing her of "spreading discontent among the workers" or by ordering her in for questioning. Dita would just ignore the "request" saying, "I don't want to comply with any prohibition they would put on me".

1995 was marked by frequent strikes and demonstrations by Indonesian workers. Dita had this to say about that year, "1995 was a remarkable year for the workers' struggle in Indonesia. We gave the authorities a New Year's greeting by striking at the Ganda Guna Indonesia factory on January 10 and we gave them a Christmas greeting with a workers' strike at Sritex on December 11 and 14."

The "Christmas greeting" refers to a strike by 14,000 workers over wages and conditions at the PT Sritex factory in Solo, central Java. Troops from the elite military battalion Kopassus — who are at the forefront of the repression in East Timor and receive military training in Australia — were mobilised against the strikers. The strike had lasted nearly ten minutes when the military moved in, beating, chasing and arresting workers. Despite attempts by Dita to calm the strikers and maintain their spirits, when the military attacked a second time, many panicked. Refusing to be intimidated by the sheer number of armed troops in front of them, she was able to lead workers to the city square.

Once in custody, instead of being taken to Jakarta, the Solo district police sent Dita and her comrades to the Semarang District Police. From Semarang they were then sent to the next police district in Pekalongan. At no time were they given food, drink or medical attention for their injuries. Between them they only had 20,000 Rupiah (AU\$10) and Dita decided to give the money to Garda — who had suffered a serious head injury — to buy a bus ticket to return to Jakarta for medical attention. The others asked "what we will do?". Dita replied "we'll go back to Sritex and participate in the strike once again with the workers".

On December 14, Dita was back with the striking workers in Sritex where she was arrested by the same police who arrested her just a few days before. As they dragged her away, one of the officers commented "we give up on you".

Again in April 1996, Dita led a workers' strike from eight factories in Surabaya, East Java. The strike was a success, and lasted for a week despite being attacked by the military. After the strike, Dita caught the economy class train back to Jakarta and as usual, it was crowded with people and

animals. During the journey her wallet was stolen. She remembers “I was almost in tears because of my wallet. I thought the thief must know I am a poor woman. But suddenly I stopped and realised that the thief might be poorer than me, and they stole because of economic mismanagement under the Suharto regime.”

On June 19 Dita was again leading a demonstration of 5,000 workers from Indoshoes and Kingstones, two large multinational textile manufacturers in Jakarta to the national parliament. While the owners of the factories stalled the negotiations until the following day, the workers decided to occupy the parliament overnight to continue their protest. During the night the military arrived and dragged the workers out of the parliament building, forced them into a truck and took them away. Unable to do anything to stop the military, Dita was distressed over the situation for the workers. At the police station, the workers were interrogated and intimidated into ending the protest, then bundled back into the trucks and taken back to the factories for the start of the working day.

On July 8 of that year, Dita was arrested again.

Along with 25 other PRD activists and five workers, she was arrested by the military while leading an action by 20,000 workers from ten different factories in the Tandes industrial zone of Surabaya. Personal accounts of the event say that many workers put their own lives at risk when they tried to encircle Dita and others to prevent their arrest

With the exception of Dita, Coen Husein Pontoh, leader of the PRD affiliated National Peasants Union and Mohamed Sholeh, head of the SMID Surabaya branch, the others were released. A few days later, the authorities announced they would be charged with “disturbing public order and security”. All three remained in jail until they were tried and sentenced.

After the military crackdown which followed the massive rioting in Jakarta in protest against the military attack on the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) headquarters, the original charges were dropped and all three were charged with subversion. Despite the fact that Dita was already in jail by July 27, the prosecution alleged that she, along with Sholeh and Coen, were the “masterminds” behind the riots and that they had tried to overthrow the government. Within days of the riots, eleven other PRD members were captured and charged with the same offence.

Shortly after her arrest, Dita’s mother died of a heart attack. The authorities would not allow her to attend the funeral.

### **A remarkable political life**

Dita has led a remarkable political life. As a trade union leader representing the PPBI, she visited Australia twice once in December 1994 and again in March 1995. During the first visit she spoke at the Indian Ocean Trade Union conference in Perth, Western Australia. During her second, she spoke at the International Women’s Day march and rally in Perth. She also addressed a number of public meetings and press conferences around Australia. At the International Workers Movement conference Dita sought endorsement for a PPBI petition in support of East Timorese students who were occupying the US Embassy in Jakarta. Delegates from COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), KMU (Philippines), unions from Nepal, South Korea and Thailand agreed to sign the petition.

In her speech she called on the ACTU to pressure the Australian government to stop training Indonesian troops and supporting the Indonesian government in general and specifically in its

occupation of East Timor. The ACTU, closely affiliated to the Australia Labour Party which was in government at the time, "declined" to respond.

However, other Australian unions were supportive, including the CFMEU and the PKIU and the Maritime Union, which has long history in Indonesian solidarity dating back to the fight for Indonesian independence from the Dutch. The CFMEU wanted to put a motion to the ACTU regarding repression in Indonesia and East Timor. Dita also received support from the shearers breakaway union in Victoria, the Shearers and Rural Workers Union, who could well appreciate the difficulties of setting up an independent union.

During her visits she also campaigned for self-determination for East Timor. She was the first Indonesian to speak on a public platform with the Australian journalist, author and film maker, John Pilger and East Timorese community leader, Gina Soares.

### **The women's question**

Speaking at the International Women's Day rally in Perth during her second visit to Australia, Dita highlighted the position of women workers in Indonesia. "Women workers suffer from the worst conditions of all: wages less than \$1.50 per day, no health insurance and no transport or meal allowance." But, she said, "women are becoming an increasing percentage of workers on strike. There are many signs that in Indonesia women workers are on the move."

She spoke of the oppression faced by women in Indonesia, the exploitation of women as workers, the influence of Islam and of the courage of those who struggle against it. Union movements, she said, also work with organisations that focus on women's issues. "Women of the world, unite!", she told the rally.

Talking about her experiences with women workers, Dita describes one particular situation she experienced. "In north Jakarta we organised a committee of workers in a slum area. Most of the bravest, most militant and disciplined organisers there were the women. It is a very hard area; many unemployed people make trouble for the workers, asking them for money and harassing the women as they walk past. The women have to be strong both emotionally and physically. Secondly, north Jakarta is closer to Jakarta so the more liberal and free culture of the city lessens the patriarchal consciousness that exists among the workers; most of them come from villages where women are very tied to the family. Thirdly, the women in the area are organising because they have nothing to lose. Most of them come from poor peasant backgrounds. Many hundreds of women come to the city to look for a better life, but still they receive a bad one."

As well as the risk of imprisonment and torture for organising workers, a number of Indonesian activists have been murdered for their part in leading strikes. One of the most infamous and brutal cases was that of Marsinah, a women activist who led a strike at the PT Catur Putra Surya watch factory in Surabaya.

On May 8, 1993, three days after the strike, Marsinah's body was found in a remote hut next to a rice field 200 kilometres from the factory. The medical examination found that she had died as a result of injuries inflicted during torture. Wounds on her neck and wrists indicated that she had been tied up, severely beaten and raped with a blunt instrument before being killed.

Although there was considerable circumstantial evidence that she had been kidnapped and killed by the military, in 1994 nine managerial personnel and security guards from the factory were tried and convicted of the murder. All of the defendants claimed that they had been tortured in order to

extract confessions.

On April 4, the government's own human rights commission was forced to issue a statement saying that it had found a number of irregularities in the way the defendants were arrested, detained and interrogated. On May 5, 1995, all nine were released. No member of the military has ever been tried in connection with the murder.

On April 30, 1994, Titie Sugiarti, a labour activist at PT Kahatex in Bandung, West Java was found dead floating face down in a waste pond near her living quarters at the factory. Suspicious circumstances surrounding her death lead many to believe she was murdered for her role in planning a strike. To date, no one has been arrested or tried for the murder.

Dita also led the debate on the women's question within PPBI, encouraging women workers to have the courage to stand up for their rights, be bold in their demands and become involved in the broader democratic struggle.

Within the PRD, Dita also led the way in educating its members on the role of women in the party. She encouraged women activists to become leaders in the PRD's affiliated mass organisations working with students, workers, peasants and the urban poor — and to become leaders within the party itself. For many women activists, Dita became an example of the leadership role that could be played by women — despite the pressures on women to refrain from political activity. This was not an easy task. The economic and social conditions in Indonesia make it extremely difficult for women to break away from their traditional roles. A women's status is largely derived from their role as wife and mother. Even more so than men, women workers are expected to be subservient, polite and not to stand up for their rights. Single mothers and sex workers are shunned, contraception is scarce and expensive and abortions illegal unless a woman is married. Dangerous and unhygienic backyard abortions are often the only resort.

Sexual harassment is common, especially in the workplace where employers can use their power to arbitrarily sack women to discourage them from taking any action. Demands for basic rights such as maternity and menstrual leave are becoming increasingly common in strikes. Speaking of these obstacles, Dita consistently asserted that "it's part of our struggle to resist this pressure from the bourgeois life style".

### **Self-determination for East Timor**

Dita Sari has also been at the forefront of the campaign for self-determination in East Timor. She was involved in education campaigns in the factories, explaining to Indonesian workers the real situation in East Timor and the need for workers to build solidarity with the struggle. Dita was instrumental in the PPBI taking up the demand for self-determination in East Timor in all its public actions. Many workers supported this, particularly during the Sritex strike where many of the workers had been brought to Java from East Timor to work in factories owned by Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, Suharto's eldest daughter.

On December 7, 1995, more than 100 members from the PRD, PPBI and SMID, together with East Timorese youth, occupied the Dutch and Russian embassies to commemorate the anniversary of Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. It was the first time Indonesian and East Timorese activists held joint actions to focus the spotlight in the Indonesian press and public on the demand for Indonesia to withdraw from East Timor. The action involved 58 Indonesian and East Timorese activists including Budiman at the Russian embassy and 29 Indonesian and 27 Timorese activists at the Dutch embassy. All those in the embassies were arrested and later released. Another nine people were arrested

while attempting to enter the Russian and Dutch embassies.

Dita had the role of liaison officer between those in the Dutch embassy, the media and authorities. In an interview Dita explained that the December 7 embassy sit-ins were part of a campaign to raise awareness among Indonesian workers, students and farmers about the similarity between their struggle for greater freedoms and the repression and violence experienced by the East Timorese. She said, <169>The bullets which riddle the bodies of Maubere patriots are the same bullets which kill Indonesian pro-democratic activists<170>.

For several months prior to the action activists in the PRD and its affiliated organisations had been building an East Timor solidarity campaign in Indonesia.

Both embassy occupations began around 4.20am. Shortly after, large numbers of military and police surrounded the embassies. A number of other Timorese activists, not associated with the PRD occupations, were arrested on the same day. Amnesty International reported that one person had been arrested on his way to Jakarta and another outside the Thai embassy. Fifty others were arrested outside the French Embassy. Unlike other recent embassy occupations, the protesters were not requesting political asylum. Dita told the press that this was quite intentional. <169>The actions were specifically designed to pressure the government to address our demands and to promote an awareness in Indonesian society of the plight of the East Timorese people.<170> Placards and banners erected at the embassies took up similar demands.

Budiman Sudjatmiko, president of the PRD and arrested at one of the embassies, said after his release that the PRD would not give up its campaign against the Indonesian government's occupation in East Timor.

At both embassies, hired thugs were mobilised to attack and intimidate the demonstrators. They yelled pro-integration slogans, abusing and threatening the activists inside. Many were armed with knives, clubs and sticks. Violence erupted at the Dutch embassy after youths began throwing rocks and then forced their way into the building. By that time the activists had been taken inside by embassy staff for protection. During the confrontation, eight activists and four embassy staff were injured. This incident took place while security personnel stood by, as they did during a second attack, at 5pm, which resulted in more injuries.

The next day under pressure from embassy staff, activists negotiated with the military and reached an agreement for them to be taken by bus to the nearby Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation. Police prevented the bus, which arrived at 6pm, from entering the embassy grounds and forced the demonstrators to walk through the abusive crowd of youths outside. And then contrary to the agreement, five police forced their way onto the bus just before it departed. The bus did not reach its destination. Instead protesters were taken to the army intelligence headquarters for interrogation. Most were released the next day.

Many activists later spoke of Dita's enormous courage at this time.

Dita also participated in the formation of the People's Democratic Union in 1994, which went on to become the People's Democratic Party in 1996. At that time, the union's central platform had two main political demands: the repeal of five repressive political laws which restrict participation in political life and the abolition of the dual function of the military. In October 1995, Budiman Sudjatmiko and Dita jointly put forward the same demands during the formation of the "Indonesian Opposition" coalition. Dita was also elected to head up the mobilisations section of the Independent Election Monitoring Committee (KIPP) which was established in early 1996. During the extraordinary congress of the People's Democratic Union in April 1996, the People's Democratic



Party was founded, Dita was nominated as a candidate for the position of chairperson along with Budiman Sudjatmiko. Although not elected, in accepting the nomination, Dita said she “didn’t want to deny any organisational task that is set for me”.

A few weeks later the PPBI held its the third annual conference and in recognition of her political activity, leadership and courage, Dita was elected the organisation’s chair.

In mid-1996, when thousands were rallying at the PDI headquarters in central Jakarta in support of ousted PDI chair, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Dita frequently made contributions to the free speech forums. She soon became a popular speaker and many found inspiration in what she said. Following her arrest and in the days leading up to the July 27 military attack on the PDI headquarters, Dita became a major topic of discussion and many expressed their sympathy and solidarity with her.

### **Dita’s trial**

On April 7, 1997 Dita and Coen arrived in court to present their defense speeches prior to sentencing. Defiant as ever, Dita handed out flowers to the judge, prosecutor and the hundreds of supporters packed into the public gallery. She then read the PRD Manifesto, punctuated by frequent shouts of support and applause and threats by the judges to expel “troublemakers”. When she began reading a statement detailing the PRD political struggle, people began singing the popular song of struggle, “Hymn of Blood”. As she neared the end of her speech, tears began flowing down her cheeks. Now silent, many of those in the gallery were also in tears.

After she had finished and the proceedings were adjourned, Coen raised his fist and led the activists in singing the Hymn of Blood again. Most people were seen to be in tears, including Dita, Coen and their families. This was followed by the singing of more songs and chants of “Free our comrades”. Dita and Coen were led out of the courtroom.

Outside people gathered putting on headbands and raising posters with the slogan “Democracy or Death!”. East Timorese youth, students and Megawati supporters joined the group as several activists made speeches. Despite the large number of troops and police present, speeches continued and activists handed out leaflets.

When the session resumed, Coen read his defence statement, followed by that of the defence lawyers. Dita was dragged out the back door to a waiting van. Before being forced inside, she raised her fist shouting, “Long live the PRD! Long live democracy! Long live the Maubere people!”.

Similar scenes were repeated on April 22 when Dita and Coen were sentenced.

Both arrived wearing red headbands reading “Democracy or Death!” but were prevented by security officers from greeting the large crowd that had already gathered. As they entered the court, the crowd surged after them shouting “Long live the people! Long live democracy! Long live the PRD and PDI! Long live Dita, Coen”. Dita and Coen replied with cries of “Long live Megawati! The elections are illegitimate! Without Megawati, boycott the elections!”. Again Dita handed out flowers but when she tried to hand out leaflets calling for a boycott of the May 29 elections, intelligence agents snatched them away.

When the chief judge read out the sentences, the crowd responded with shouts of “The court is rigged”. Dita stood up and led the crowd in singing the Hymn of Struggle", after which she and Coen were led to a waiting van. Before being forced into the van, Coen was able give a speech calling for an election boycott. As soon as they were driven away, security forces moved in and dispersed the

crowd.

## **Regime's propaganda fails**

The regime's efforts to use the trials to justify its assertion that Dita and other PRD members were behind the July 27 riots, "that they are communists bent on overthrowing the government", was a spectacular failure.

Even before the trials began, the PRD had won a major victory. Despite Suharto publicly accusing them of masterminding the riots, the formal charges made no mention of this. Adding to the regime's embarrassment was a report from its own National Human Rights Commission which stated that the riots were caused by the attack on the PDI offices, and that the government-installed PDI leader Suryadi and the military were at fault.

Accusations that the PRD are communists were also dropped. Only in the last few weeks of the trials — when the prosecution presented "expert" witnesses — did the issue resurface. Even then, the prosecution was forced to retreat to focussing on the fact that the PRD's manifesto fails to mention the state ideology, Pancasila, as its basic principle, as is required by law.

In summing up the case against Dita Sari, the best the prosecution could do was conclude that, in collaboration with other PRD members, she had formed an illegal political party with the aim of bringing about a people's multi-party democratic system.

Dita's lawyers appealed the sentence and it was reduced from six to five years.

## **Defiant in prison**

Dita and Coen were imprisoned at the Madaeng prison in Surabaya. But even there she continued to be active. Only months after arriving she led a demonstration by women prisoners against prison corruption. Similar complaints led to a number of minor riots which culminated in June 1997 in what the Indonesian press described as the biggest prison riot in Indonesian history, involving almost 600 prisoners.

Prisoners used molotov cocktails to set fire to the registration and administration buildings, kitchen, canteen and a number of cell blocks. After "partying" on food and drink taken from the prayer house canteen, metal bed frames and a flagpole were used to smash through the inner main prison gate.

By the time troops arrived to try to regain control, they had already smashed a metre-wide hole in the outer gate. Troops fired over the prisoners heads and bombarded them with tear gas. The prisoners responded by setting more buildings alight and by throwing bottles at prison guards and soldiers. Although they were able to prevent any of the prisoners from escaping, they were unable to regain control until the next morning.

Forty-one people who were suspected of being the ringleaders were taken to police headquarters. Many, including Pontoh, were badly beaten during the interrogations. The remaining prisoners had to be evacuated from the now uninhabitable prison to others nearby.

The authorities immediately accused Dita and Coen of "masterminding" the riots, claiming that it was only after they had arrived that prisoners had begun rioting. They were never able to find any evidence to support the claim and no charges were ever laid.

Dita was moved to a smaller, more isolated prison called Kebon Waru in the small east Javanese city of Malang. Dita is the only political prisoner in Kebon Waru and it is far more difficult for friends and family to visit. Unlike other prisoners, visits are restricted to 30 minutes and even then, family members are often not even allowed to see her. She has no access to newspapers, radio or television except for cartoons. Kept in isolation she is not allowed to have contact with other prisoners. These conditions mean that her situation is far more difficult than for the other PRD prisoners'. Dita Indah Sari's story does not end here.

Her prominent role as an activist, a feminist and a trade unionist has won her respect not just within the Indonesian democratic movement, but in the hearts of millions of ordinary Indonesians. Other women activists in the PRD continue her work knowing as Dita did, that they too, face the risk of imprisonment, torture and even death. Her international profile has helped highlight the plight of Indonesia's workers and inspired people from around the world to become involved in building solidarity with their struggle.

---

**P.S.**

\* From ASAP:

<http://www.asia-pacific-action.org/southeastasia/indonesia/publications/ditasari/ditasari.htm>