

Indonesia

The workers resurgent

DITA Sari, president of Indonesia's independent trade union centre PPBI, and some 19 other leaders of the radical People's Democratic Party are in jail, together with Muchtar Pakpahan, the leader of another independent trade union organisation, the SBSI. All face charges of "subversion" which carry the death penalty. There is evidence that they are being tortured.

Dita Sari and some other activists were arrested when 20,000 factory workers in Surabaya, east Java on 8 July marched to demand wage rises. The other arrests have come in a military clampdown after up to 200,000 people took to the streets in Indonesia's capital Jakarta on 27 July, rioting and clashing with police and army in the country's biggest street protests since the 1965 coup which brought in the current military regime. Maybe 100 people were killed in the riots.

In the 1965 coup, the biggest non-ruling Communist Party in the world, with some two million members and 300,000 activists, was wiped out. Over half a million people were slaughtered. Half a million more were jailed in the following years, without charge or trial, and 1.4 million more were kept under surveillance by the military, on suspicion of PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) sympathies.

Since then Indonesia, a nation of nearly 200 million people, has been kept under tight control by the military regime of General Suharto. Cities and manufacturing industry have grown. Jakarta now has 12 million people. While oil was by far Indonesia's main export in the 1970s and early '80s, about half of its exports now are manufactured goods. But in the hundreds of new factories, wages and conditions are poor relative even to other Third World countries. Average wages are about 28 US cents (40p) an hour, lower even than China (34 cents), and much lower than Malaysia (\$1.80) or South Korea (\$4.93).

Conditions in a working-class suburb of Jakarta are described by an Australian socialist. "In front of the houses ran open

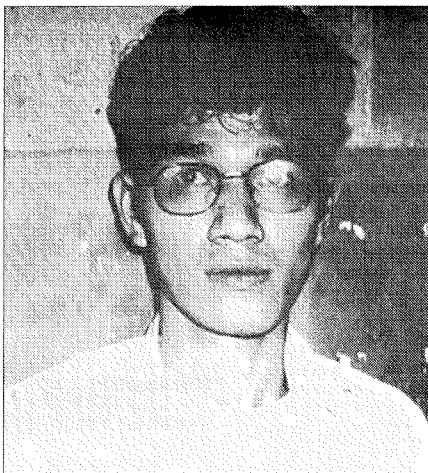
drains that seemed to be filled with raw sewage. The smell was overwhelming. Small, roughly built houses crowded together, their balconies sagging over the streets draped with washing. Women washed clothes in doorways and hundreds of children played in the dirt, often climbing into the drains to use them as toilets. Many had rashes or the big glazed eyes of malnutrition. I visited the room which was the home of four young women [factory workers] about 17 to 20 years old. It was about two metres square, and the women slept on the damp, sloping floor..."

In these conditions, student radicals have taken the initiative to launch new trade-union groups like the PPBI, independent from the government-controlled fake unions, the SPSI. Linked to the PPBI is a new radical party, the PRD (People's Democratic Party), now forced underground by repression. The PPBI was set up in October 1994, and since then has led a number of strikes. It demands an increased national minimum wage; the right for workers to organise outside the SPSI, to speak out, to demonstrate, and to strike; and an end to military intervention in labour disputes.

It urgently needs aid from the international labour movement. Unfortunately the official organisations of the working class in neighbouring Australia, the ACTU (Australian TUC) and the Australian Labor Party, remain allied with Suharto's machine. The ALP government in office from 1983 to 1996 laid great stress on opening out Australia towards Asia — but by that they meant building commercial and military alliances with regimes like Suharto's. The ACTU continues to support the government-run "trade unions" in Indonesia, and to shun the new independent trade unions.

Indonesia was the jewel in the crown of Holland's colonial empire from the 17th century to 1942. The Dutch mainly siphoned off tribute rather than vigorously promoting capitalism. From independence in 1949 to the 1965 coup, the veteran nationalist Sukarno ran a populist regime with himself as arbiter between the three elements of a so-called "Nasakom" alliance — secular nationalists, Islamists, and the Communist Party (PKI). The 1965 coup crushed the PKI, ousted Sukarno, and led to a military regime which calls itself the "New Order."

The "New Order" is a sort of soft totalitarianism. The economy is "crony capitalism", based on private profit, but where riches follow political influence rather than political influence following riches. Independent trade unions, opposition political parties, and opposition publications, have occasionally been tolerated, but the army intervenes everywhere,



Budiman Sudjatmiko, chair of the PRD

controlling the National Assembly, acting as a parallel police force even in the smallest village, arbitrarily repressing whenever it sees fit.

Necessary caution is thus part of what limits the public demands of the PRD: parliamentary democracy, independence from Indonesia for East Timor, and better conditions for workers. However, the PRD's chief international ally, the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) in Australia, which is free to express its ideas openly, also goes no further than calling for "people's power" and democracy in Indonesia. The theory behind this is the old Stalinist idea that revolutions in economically underdeveloped countries like Indonesia must proceed in two stages, with the first, "democratic", stage being completed before the second, "socialist", stage can start.

Both the PRD and the DSP support Megawati Sukarnoputri for president. Megawati is the daughter of Sukarno, and until recently was leader of the PDI, one of the two tame opposition parties maintained by the regime. The rioting on 27 July was sparked by events following the regime's intervention to oust Megawati from the top of the PDI and replace her by someone more pliant. Yet she is no radical, but rather more like an Indonesian equivalent of the Philippines' Cory Aquino or South Korea's Kim Young Sam.

The US government wants democratic reform, of a sort, in Indonesia. It wants a less corrupt, personalised and erratic capitalist administration, implementing IMF free-market policies. Megawati Sukarnoputri could well be the instrument for this programme, and bring with her substantial sections of the military and the business elite.

Even limited democratic reforms would be an improvement for the workers. But they must and will aim higher.

As the crisis unfolds in Indonesia, the workers' struggles will not remain neatly

confined to a "democratic stage." The idea will also be raised that the workers create the country's wealth, and that they, not any capitalist or bureaucrat, should control it. The workers' struggles should not be cut down to fit into the role of back-up force for a bourgeois democratic "stage" or for leaders like Megawati.

The workers have the social weight to achieve more. And if their mobilisation is artificially restricted by dogmas about first being auxiliaries to complete the "democratic stage" before they can raise their own independent demands, then that will undermine the fight for democratic reform, by crippling the main social force that will fight for democracy. That is what happened in the run-up to 1965: the Communist Party, the PKI, limited itself to critical support for Sukarno and left its people unprepared and defenceless when the army butchers came for them.

Two other dangers face the reviving Indonesian workers' movement. Indonesia is 85% Muslim. The Chinese minority, four per cent of the population, controls around 70% of private enterprise. The military regime has kept religious and racial tensions under a heavy lid. If the workers' movement can offer only pallid democratic formulae, then social rebellion may be channelled into Islamic or anti-Chinese blind alleys, and the "democratic stage" of the struggle will not be democratic at all.

The tirades by Indonesia's military dictator Suharto against "communism", however, reflect his uneasy awareness that even a massacre like that of 1965 can not wipe out a political tradition as deep-rooted as that of the PKI. What he can stop is open discussion of socialist strategy in Indonesia, and of the lessons of the 1965 tragedy.

That makes it more important for supporters of the Indonesian workers' movement in other countries to provide space for that discussion.

Colin Foster

● Fax letters of protest to the Indonesian Minister of Justice, Uahi Utoyo Usman S.H., on 00 62 21 525 3095, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Alatas S.H., on 00 62 21 380 5511. Send copies to the Indonesian Embassy, 38 Grosvenor Square, London W1, and to Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASINET), which will forward them to the PPBI. Contact ASINET on 00 612 9690 1381 (fax) or asiet@peg.apc.org (e-mail). For latest information, consult ASINET's World Wide Web page on <http://www.peg.apc.org/~asiet/>. Contact TAPOL, the Indonesian human rights campaign, at 0181-771 2904 (phone), 0181-653 0322 (fax), or tapol@gn.apc.org (e-mail).