

# The Reborn of Labor Party as the Union's Modes of Engagement in Indonesia Contemporary Politics

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Abstract: The declaration of Labor Party on October 5, 2021, marked a new chapter in the engagement of unions in Indonesian politics. The development of the engagement of unions since the Reformation began through the street politics. Next, since the direct regional head elections were introduced, unions took advantage of the opportunity to negotiate their interests with regional head candidates. Furthermore, unions took part in the electoral politics contestation. The absence of political party that represents the interests of workers directly forces them to form alliances with the existing political parties. In the latest circumstances, unions re-declared the Labor Party, which had been participated in the first three elections in Reformation era but failed to get a seat in the national parliament. This article argues that the reborn of the Labor Party cannot be separated from political developments in contemporary Indonesia, which is marked by the decline in the quality of democracy, so that unions are increasingly excluded from the political decision-making process.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian Labor Party (PBI) was founded in early November 1945 from a union organization called the Indonesian Workers' Front (BBI) under the leadership of Sjamsoe Harja-Oedaja. PBI chose to be involved in the diplomatic process and armed struggle to defend Indonesia's independence at that time. However, PBI was unable to become a party that truly represented the interests of the workers' group (Wisesa, 1988).

The period between 1950 and the late 1960s was marked by the emergence of various federations of trade unions that were affiliated with or became under bows of political parties, such as the Central Indonesian Labor Organization (SOBSI) and the PKI, the Indonesian Muslim Workers Union (Sarbumusi) and NU, the Association of Indonesian Islamic Labor Unions. (Gasbiindo) with Parmusi, the Central Labor Organization of the Republic of Indonesia (SOBRI) with Murba, and the Central Indonesian Self Employment Organization (SOKSI) with the military (Launa, 2011). The trade unions compete to influence the state.

Under President Sukarno, workers occupy a special position because they play an important role

as a unit that has social or political power to create pressure. For Sukarno, one way to improve the welfare of the workers was to provide space to increase the struggle of the workers themselves. This concept is called *politieke toestand*. At the celebration of Labor Day in 1966, Sukarno conveyed the importance of the role of workers in fighting against the capitalists who gave birth to imperialism and colonialism. Sukarno's alignment with workers was reflected in several policies issued (Afrianto, 2021).

Table 1: Labor policy under President Sukarno

Year	Policy
1947	Require the company to pay compensation to workers who have work accidents or suffer from work-related illnesses
1948	Regulate labor rights regarding working hours, holidays, and exemption from work obligations on Mayday
1954	Regulate the terms of the work agreement between workers and management
1960	Prohibit workers in vital companies and agencies from striking

During the New Order era, the union could not exist because it was faced with an authoritarian

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regime. The New Order regime did not provide space for civil society groups to be actively involved in political processes. The government used a strategy of exclusionary corporatism through the formation of the All-Indonesian Workers Union (SPSI) as the only recognized union organization. In practice, SPSI was only an extension of the New Order regime in controlling the labor movement.

Table 2: Labor policy under President Suharto

Year	Policy
1968	Removing the Mayday as Labor Day because it is considered related to Marxism and Leninism
1969	Establish National Wage Research Council to advise the government on wage principles
1973	FBSI (later became SPSI) was established as the only labor organization in Indonesia
1992	Establish regulations on the implementation of social security for workers

The fall of Suharto in 1998 opened up opportunities for unions to exist and form political parties or trade unions. This was made possible after the government guaranteed the rights of labor unions by ratifying the ILO Convention No. 87 of 1948 through Presidential Decree No. 83 of 1998. As a result, the style for unions changed from the previous monopolistic and corporatist nature to more and more trade unions appearing. Unfortunately, the ease of forming labor unions has actually made workers' groups fragmented and split.

This fragmentation has an impact on the effectiveness of the labor movement in managing its relationship with employers and the government. The fragmentation made the labor movement in post-Reformation Indonesia unable to maximize the political situation that gave space for freedom of association. The weakness of the labor movement is a phenomenon in the Southeast Asian region, which is caused by the industrialization process and the role of the state which limits the labor movement. In fact, the labor movement is getting more and more structural pressures in the current era of globalization, which is marked by faster global capital movements and labor market flexibility. (Temple, 2005).

In addition, the fragmentation of labor movements also resulted in the absence of a single Labor Party that could exist in Indonesian politics. Although several parties that identify themselves as labor parties have existed and participated in elections, in fact these parties have not been able to mobilize all elements of the workers to support the existing labor parties, so that none of them has ever succeeded in reaching the national parliament. The 2021 is marked

by the re-declaration of the Labor Party. This article will answer why the party was declared again and what it has to do with the context of workers' involvement in politics in Indonesia. Previously, it will be explained the forms of involvement of unions in politics in post-reform Indonesia.

## 2 STREET POLITICS, PARTY ALLIANCES, AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

There are three primary ways that unions act to achieve their goals in Indonesia after reformation: street politics, party alliances, and collective bargaining. These ways are carried out in three stages of development. In the initial phase, unions voiced their demands through street politics. This method was adopted because there were no political parties representing workers. The next phase is marked by getting involved in electoral politics. This opportunity was opened when direct regional head elections (*pilkada*) were implemented in 2005. *Pilkada* provided space for workers to negotiate their interests with regional head candidates at the local level. The next phase, the workers' groups increasingly involved themselves in electoral politics. This involvement has been seen since 2009 when the workers were running for the legislature. Given the rules in Indonesia that do not allow members of the legislature to nominate independently, these workers must look for available political parties to nominate themselves. (Caraway & Ford, 2020).

In post-Suharto era, no other civil society actor rivalled labor in 'street-level politics' (Juliawan, 2011). Street politics became the choice of unions to show their resistance to a flexible labor market system. An increase in the minimum wage and a change to a more favorable working status are demands that are often expressed and have been achieved, although still limited. In addition, street politics also contributes to the formation of workers' collective identity. However, this street politics got a backlash from businessmen, by blocking street actions using the shields of paid thugs and formal officers. (Habibi, 2013).

An example of the involvement of unions during the *Pilkada*, occurred in the 2017 DKI Jakarta *Pilkada*. At that time there was an alliance between workers in Jakarta and one of the candidates during the *Pilkada* period. Candidates promise the realization of pro-labour programs if elected, meanwhile workers are willing to become candidates' autonomous

political machines. The alliance is set forth in a mutually agreed political contract. This shows that there has been a programmatic exchange of political distributions during the regional elections (Amiruddin, Subono & Syamsudin 2020). According to Juliawan (2010), the street politics and alliances with political elites are a "playing politics" strategy carried out by post-reformation unions.

Political contracts between workers and politicians during elections are interpreted in two ways. First, labor is considered a promising political commodity so that political actors are willing to agree to the wishes of the workers if the actor is elected as a leader in the election. Second, workers try to play the role of a catalyst and show their existence by giving birth to political contracts for potential leaders (Afrianto, 2021).

One of the labor representatives who managed to win a parliament seat was Nyumarno who was elected to the Bekasi DPRD in 2014. Nyumarno's candidacy was initiated by the Go Politics Labor movement which was initiated by one of the labor union groups, the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers Union (FSPMI). Nyumarno's presence in the DPRD has succeeded in producing various pro-labour policies, such as the 2016 Manpower Local Regulation, JasTek assistance for honorary workers, the budget for health insurance, to advocating for the working class in various forms of impromptu inspections to companies that have problems with their workers. (Nagara, 2019).

The political context in Indonesia under President Jokowi (2014-present) is marked by the aggrandizement of executive power and the disorganization of civil society groups, thereby narrowing the space for unions to influence policies. Various policies that were not profitable for the union were born in this era, starting from Government Regulation Number 78 of 2015 to Law Number 11 of 2020 about Job Creation (Caraway, 2021). As a result, workers' group protests various developments, such as farmer protests cement factories in Central Java, coal mines in Sumatra, and gold and copper mines in East Java were unsuccessful (Wischermann, Dang & Sirait, 2022).

Therefore, the union responded to the situation by reforming the Labor Party as a tool to fight for its interests. The Labor Party has become a new mode of engagement from unions in contemporary Indonesian politics.

### 3 METHODS

This article employs a qualitative method as it explains the new union's modes of engagement in contemporary Indonesia politics by re-declared the Labor Party (*Partai Buruh*). Qualitative research is a process of scientific research that aims to understand and explore a problem or phenomenon coming from human or social interactions (Cresswell, 2013). This article answers the question why the unions in Indonesia re-declared the labor party amidst the recent development of Indonesian political context. The data is collected by reviewing literature sources and information including scientific articles, books, research reports, thesis and dissertation, and news related to the labor and politics in Indonesia.

### 4 THE REBORN OF LABOR PARTY AS THE NEW MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

After the Reformation, there were eight political parties that identified themselves as labor parties that competed in the three elections (see Table 1). However, the vote gain was very small and none of these parties managed to win a seat in the DPR (see Table 2). The best achievement of these labor parties was the success of 22 legislative candidates who were elected in various regions through the Social Democratic Labor Party (PBSD) in 2004. The inability of the labor parties to gain seats in the national parliament has resulted in the exclusion of unions in the political process. there is. Therefore, according to Faedlulloh (2019), building a labor party is an important agenda in the democratization process in Indonesia.

Table 3: Labor party in three elections since 1998

Election 1999	Election 2004	Election 2009
Party (%)	Party (%)	Party (%)
PBN (0,11%)	PBSD (0,56%)	PPPI (0,72%)
PRD (0,07%)		PB (0,26%)
PPI (0,06%)		
PSPI (0,06%)		
PSP (0,05%)		

Table 4: Labor-based party total votes

Election	Total Votes	Percentage
1999	365.205	0,35%
2004	636.937	0,56%
2009	1.010.828	0,97%

The failure of labor parties in Indonesia shows the contradiction between the availability of opportunities and the immaturity of social movements into political movements. In this regard, the labor movement is not yet ripe to become a political movement, and its collectivism base is still narrow due to limited resource mobilization and the weakness of identifying classes as constituents. This shows the failure of the transformation of the labor movement from state co-optation to an independent labor movement.

The need for a labor party is increasingly important considering that the issue of the labor movement in Indonesia is no longer just an issue of increasing wages but is also developing progressively towards issues that are identical to the new-left movement, such as labor going politics, anti-neoliberalism, gender, human rights, democracy, citizenship, to public policy (Zuhdan, 2014).

The development of science and technology known as industry 4.0 contributes to making the position of workers and laborers disadvantaged. Industry 4.0 influences the disruption of the status of employment relationships, from the status of permanent employment relationships, contracts and outsourcing to the status of freelance and precariat relationships. In addition, it also has an impact on the normative rights of workers in the form of unclear wages, social security, and the continuity of workers' careers (Triyono & Marcelawati, 2021).

On 4-5 October 2021, the Labor Party held its IV Congress in Jakarta and elected Said Iqbal and Ferri Nuzarli as President and Secretary General of the Labor Party. For the labor movement, the party is a necessity as a political tool to strengthen the struggle of the workers, farmers, and other elements of the people (partaiburuh.or.id, 2021). This time, the Labor Party was reborn because of the Cipta Kerja Law which was considered detrimental to the workers and profitable to investors. With this party, the workers' group wants to fight through parliament, not just through the streets (Putri, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic situation and the Cipta Kerja Law have made work status even more flexible. Prior to the Cipta Kerja Law, jobs that could be outsourced were limited to five types of supporting work (non-core business), namely cleaning services, food/catering services, security personnel or security guards, supporting services in mining and oil, and worker transportation services. The existence of the Cipta Kerja Law allows all jobs to be outsourced, including core-business. As a result, workers become vulnerable because there is no job security, protection guarantee, and other rights as workers, and it is

increasingly difficult to be appointed as permanent workers. Another impact that harms workers is the reduction in severance pay, making it easier for workers to get laid off (PHK), until the minimum wage increase is kept below the annual inflation rate so that it has an impact on the purchasing power of workers. (Theodora & Sucipto, 2022).

According to data from the Ministry of Manpower, around 29.4 million workers throughout Indonesia have experienced various rights violations due to the pandemic (Triatmojo, 2021). Many companies use the reason for the pandemic as an excuse to violate workers' rights in various ways, from laying off workers, cutting salaries, to doing massive layoffs.

Based on the data above, this article argues that the reborn of the Labor Party in Indonesia is a response to state policies that are considered not in favor of the interests of workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the policies that were not pro-labour were born due to one of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the union's strategies such as street politics and alliances with political elites. The Covid-19 pandemic has limited people's mobility, thereby limiting opportunities for unions to carry out street politics to voice their demands and interests. Meanwhile, alliances with political elites are also not an effective strategy to incorporate working class agendas into state policy.

Törnquist (Sumandoyo, 2017) argues that many unions are involved in short-term populist movements of elite transactional politics, instead of forming autonomous political blocs that reach out to broad demands since changes in economic and social rights and welfare policies among workers in vulnerable conditions. In addition, the efforts of members of the union who participated in the contest through electoral politics also still had a limited impact. The reason is that they do not offer an alternative roadmap independent of the dominance of its union leaders who are drawn into short-term sectoral political tactics.

The partiality of government policies that are not pro-labour cannot be separated from the current political developments in Indonesia. One of them is the party system in Indonesia which is becoming increasingly unrepresentative by marginalizing voters who are on the left and right ends of the Indonesian political spectrum. These voters are Islamist, liberal-progressive, leftist, and working-class voters (Mietzner, 2020).

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The reborn of the Labor Party in Indonesia is a continuation of the union's mode of engagement in politics, after using street political strategies, making alliances with political elites, and running for electoral politics. Although labor parties have failed in several elections, this choice was made because the three strategies above are currently no longer effective in responding to government policies and attitudes, especially after the Cipta Kerja Law was passed.

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