

Linking political and economic struggle

Bulletin: What major challenges face unions in Indonesia?

Dita: Right now, although we already have freedom of association, we still face another problem. When trade unions want to apply to be registered they have to adopt criteria set by the government. This is sometimes difficult, because we have to adjust our union's principles to what the state ideology says they should be. You cannot register as a union if your basic principles are different from the state ideology. Our basic principle is a popular social democracy. When we put that principle in our constitution the government said that it could not register us and could not recognise this organisation as a union because it doesn't fit the criteria the government put forward.

The second major challenge is that after the economic crises and all the privatisation programmes, we lost some of our members - especially in the manufacturing areas because lots of the companies have gone bankrupt. We lost members, contact persons and we even lost our organisers that we had trained for months when they lost their jobs. As the union, we have very limited funding and resources and we cannot pay for the organiser's daily needs or his family. We can only pay for transport and lunch. If the organiser is not ideologically strong

Tanya van Meelis interviews Dita Sari,, chairperson of the National Front for Indonesian Workers' Struggle.

enough he will say I prefer my family and look for another job. The organising worker has no income. Most of the workers who have lost their jobs go back to their villages.

The third challenge is that because a lot of members have lost their jobs it is very easy for the employer to weaken the activity of the union. The employer can say 'if you want to keep your job - behave well. If you don't, if you become an activist, then it is easy for us to dismiss you because lots of other workers need this job'.

The employers used this to blackmail workers. So the workers now hesitate to be more active in the union because they are afraid they will lose their jobs.

Bulletin: If there is an organiser in a job and he/she is dismissed, can you not get him/her back in at all?

Dita: The company does not usually dismiss one, but implements massive dismissals - like 20 to 30. The company says it is doing it because it is almost going

bankrupt, but the company also does it because it wants to clean out activists. It just dismisses all the union's activists, but of course it doesn't say it is because you are a union activist. The company always says that it is dismissing because it must be efficient.

Bulletin: Can the union organise a general meeting for workers in the factory?

Dita: Yes, but not an open one, so we usually organise meetings in a worker's house. We choose a bigger house that can accommodate 40 to 50 people and we make verbal invitations. We usually hold meetings like this once or twice a week. We cannot hold open meetings in the factory or in a workplace because union activists will be identified by the company. This creates a problem.

Even if you are a registered union, it doesn't mean that you can represent your members when they have disputes with the employers. Registration doesn't mean anything, so an employer can say we don't want this worker to be represented by that union and we don't want to negotiate with you. We can keep on striking but it doesn't solve the problem because people want negotiations to take place.

People in Indonesia want unions to register, so of course we undertake the process and experience all the difficulties of registering. We sometimes have to wait six months to one year before the registration papers come. But when it comes to practice, the companies still recognise the old yellow union as the best representative of the workers.

Bulletin: Were there debates around registration and the thought that you shouldn't register because if you register you might be co-opted?

Dita: After the opening up of space and the introduction of democracy in Indonesia, the government said that you can set up unions in the workplace, but you must be registered. We applied to be registered because there are some illusions among the working class that registered unions operate more effectively.

There is a big illusion among the masses about unions' legal status – this illusion has been created by the government so that the working class thinks that it is safer for them to join a union that has been registered. But registration won't lessen repression. The only advantage is that you can show journalists the piece of paper saying that you are registered, and then publicly say that the government is still repressing us. This gives us more legitimacy – it puts us in a better position.

Bulletin: What conditions do workers face? What's the workplace like? What are hours of work?

Dita: Workers usually work seven to eight hours a day with half an hour break. Some will start at seven and end at three, some start at nine and end at five. We work from Monday to Saturday, so Saturday is not a free day, but the workers only work for five hours on Saturday. They sometimes work two hours overtime because it increases their income. Some workplaces provide meal allowances and provide transportation. Usually the companies who provide such allowances started to give the allowances after the workers had gone on strike. In other workplaces the workers don't get any of these allowances – they just get the basic minimum salary per day. So it depends on how strong the union in that workplace is and how regularly the workers strike. Many companies have dismissed workers or cut allowances because of the economic crisis.



'Do the political struggle as well as the economic struggle.'

Because workers are paid so little, three to four of them usually share one little room. Usually, they don't have a bathroom inside their room - they have a public toilet which they have to pay to use. The public toilet is often not open 24 hours a day but is only open until 10 o'clock at night.

Bulletin: *How important is it to look at culture in trade union activities?*

Dita: We believe right now that there must be some other way to approach workers when organising them - we cannot just approach them in a conventional way like we always did before - using leaflets, publications, public meetings. Some workers are quite afraid

when we hand them the leaflets - political leaflets - but they are more open if we introduce them to and ask them to join singing, theatre and poetry making. My union centre has set up an official programme that says to every regional union 'try to create or set up a theatre group amongst your members. It doesn't matter how bad it is, how unprofessional. Just go through the process. Do whatever you can as long as you have a theatre group in your regional level'.

Bulletin: *How are workers responding?*

Dita: They like it. They think it is much more interesting than leaflets. Sometimes we also try to provide leaflets that have cartoons with captions - they provide lots

of information for workers with a low level of education.

The cartoons have clear words and pictures - you can look at a picture and clearly see the military, other workers. We have others with pictures of students with books and spectacles. So the workers can recognise characters very easily and they laugh. But they keep the cartoon in their room and look at them again because they are funny.

The cartoons educate workers and are relaxing. We are trying to improve our approach to workers so that they will be more attracted to the union.

Bulletin: Can you tell me about EPZs in your country?

Dita: We have EPZs in West Java and in East Java. One of the biggest EPZs (in West Java) has a very large cement factory and factories supporting the cement factory. That EPZ has very bad working conditions. Workers are not provided with proper masks.

The cement factory creates pollution all around - when workers hang their clothes on a line to dry in the morning, they find the clothes full of dust in the evening. People's roofs are grey and most of the workers have problems with their lungs and breathing.

Bulletin: Are you targeting EPZs for membership?

Dita: Yes, we have been organising in West Java for the last three years - there are 15 000 to 20 000 workers working in that EPZ. But we have not succeeded in getting any industrial action there.

In other places which are smaller (with about 1 000 workers) we have succeeded in industrial action and setting up unions. In Indonesia, we have to have industrial

action first before we are able to set up a union.

When workers embark on industrial action, we identify who arranged the action, who the leaders are. We speak to them and get them to become union officials. Workers all have grievances and they will take action by themselves - then you go and pin-point the leaders. We also help the workers who are embarking on action - we ask them to identify the problems, help them investigate, offer solutions, ask them what they expect us to do. We also encourage them to take action and back it up in terms of security, legal aid, money, negotiation tactics and pamphlets. Then they see that we are serious about helping them.

Bulletin: What key issues do you mobilise workers around?

Dita: The key issues are wages and conditions in the factory. But of course my union's principle is to not only stand for economic struggle but also for political struggle. We think the political struggle is as important as the economic struggle. So besides wages and occupational health and safety and working hours, rights of women workers etc, we also take up issues like the role of the military. We say to the workers, where else do you see the military at union negotiations?

Right now in Indonesia we are trying to organise very big demonstrations because the new minister of labour is one of the leaders from the old yellow union in Suharto's era. We want to educate workers about this minister of labour - how he will become a tool of the capitalists and pass labour law that favours them. We have to challenge his position because he is part of the old forces. That's how we try to also raise the workers' consciousness beyond the issue of the workplace.



'Education, especially ideological education, is very important.'

Bulletin: *Can you explain the problems you face when organising where there is a very negative attitude towards communists?*

Dita: Sometimes the government uses the issue of communism against the labour movement. This is very effective if it touches the Muslim ground because the Muslims always picture communists very negatively - this is because government propaganda has painted a picture of communists as atheists who don't believe in God, don't have any sense of morality, as

people who are always violent, always trouble makers. When the government relates labour and communism, people see the labour movement as part of the communist way of getting back into Indonesia. People hate the communists ideologically, so the military doesn't even have to bother with labour because the Muslim civilians are always trying to attack us, stop us from continuing to embark on action. The Muslims have a slogan that 'Communist blood is allowed'. When we make leaflets and put them on the wall, the Muslims tear our leaflets off the wall or hang their own leaflets over ours

Bulletin: *How do you ensure that you remain independent and democratic?*

Dita: We have a congress every two years. It is our biggest body and makes our strategic decisions. Between congresses we have a national council every year. It follows up on congress's strategic decisions. We have a national membership meeting every six months, with delegations from each of the regional unions - usually two or three from each regional union. They come with a mandate from the shopfloor. They gather together and evaluate what we achieved over the last six months and make

recommendations. We look at what has and has not been implemented from congress.

The national office has a regular meeting every Saturday and there are regular meetings in the regions every Saturday as well. We base our organising work in territorials - so we set up regional unions in the different regions. These regional unions are autonomous - we provide them with support and national programmes.

The regions vary in their ability - they experience different levels of repression and different conditions. Some are more progressive and better educated than others depending on their history. While they have autonomy they do not have complete autonomy - education still comes from the national centre because we think that education, especially ideological education, is very important. We take up national issues and programmes, like abolishing the political role of the military, a 32-hour working week, a referendum for east Timor. Each region takes up the programme but uses its own tactics. Regions can also run their own campaigns, as long as they are on the same political line as the central office and advancing our principles.

Bulletin: How have activities by unions outside Indonesia been able to support your struggle?

Dita: Well, since I got out of the prison, I have gone to countries like Australia, England, the Netherlands, Belgium, and South Africa. I have been explaining what has happened in Indonesia.

The situation in our country has been very well publicised - more than ever before. This has made people from other countries aware of what is happening. They have sympathy and want to help the

struggle to establish independent unions. Some unions have sent solidarity messages. Some provide us with financial support, material support, books and equipment. Because the situation is more open now, people are more confident to give us support.

Bulletin: You were sentenced to five years in jail for your union activities. How did you get released early?

Dita: I was released two years early when the president, Habibbi, decided to release me. I was also given amnesty as a result of international pressure. Many unions from all over the world took up the issue of my imprisonment and applied pressure to the government to release me. My government also wanted to improve its reputation, so it had a strong political reason for releasing me.

Bulletin: Your union decided to split from the political party and be independent. What informed your decision?

Dita: We based our decision on our historic experience. We had been affiliated to a political party but it caused a problem because of different levels of consciousness. Each member of the union must also become a member of the political party, but of course, the level of consciousness is different when you are in a union that is a mass-based organisation and when you are in a party which is a cadre-based organisation.

This difference has created gaps so we decided that we must be independent. When we broke our affiliation with the party, it caused some problems. Some workers developed an anti-party consciousness - they did not see the need for the party. But being independent does

not mean that you don't have any relationship with a political party. Right now we are trying to set up a new kind of relationship between the union and the political party - it is not an open relationship, it is more a conspiratorial relationship. The party makes sure that we have a political consciousness and take up our political responsibility.

We, as the union, push the party to take up workers' issues and look at what is happening to the working class. We push them to be more on the side of the workers and work more among the working masses than with other sections of society. That's the kind of dialectical relationship we are trying to build, but it is hard right now because the level of political consciousness among the workers is still low. Workers won't accept all the programmes we are running. They accept programmes like the anti-militarism programme. But workers did not accept a programme we had on disqualification of certain political parties during the last elections. Workers cannot understand disqualification, they cannot even pronounce the word disqualification, so it is very difficult to mobilise them.

We keep on informing each other (the political party and the union) and seeing where the union can contribute. We have weaknesses, and we have strengths that affect the level on which we can contribute. One problem is that there are 48 political parties in Indonesia and each political party has its own campaign. This confuses workers.

The different parties like to talk but they do nothing about wages. We don't



'We have weaknesses, we have strengths.'

need a political party like that. We try and introduce workers to a political party, but the workers don't want the party, so it is a question of educating workers now. We need to tell workers that a trade union is not a revolutionary organisation - it can be very radical, very militant but not revolutionary.

Unions are reformist and only a party can be revolutionary because it contains the most progressive sections of each sector. It is not only limited to the working class. This knowledge makes me realise we have to work with a political party, otherwise when we talk about globalisation we are only talking about economic power.

But power is not only economic power, it is political power as well. We can only contest this economic and political power through an institution that is not based in

one sector. We need to link across sectors if we are to contest this power. But the unions must still remain independent.

Bulletin: *What still needs to be done to build internationalism?*

Dita: During our union's last congress we believed that the idea of internationalism among the workers was very low and we blamed ourselves for that. We could not blame anyone but ourselves because it is our job, the union's job, to develop workers.

We can't expect workers to have that kind of consciousness just like that. We then set up a department of international relations in the union. But we do not see it as a separate department - it is integrated into each and every department - like the department of education, organising, development and even the department of funding. So all work in the union has an internationalist character and understanding.

All publications have an international analysis of issues. For example, when we discuss militarism we also look at how the military is financially backed by capitalist countries like America. We relate people's daily wages to issues of imperialism. Workers are still at a very early stage of understanding globalisation and how it affects them.

Bulletin: *You met South African unionists at the last conference. What shifts do you see emerging in the South African unions?*

Dita: Since I met South African unionists, you have more people in power, in government. That has created a problem because the government's policy is not in line with what the working class wants - especially its policy on privatisation. This

has created a problem with trade unions who have activists in government positions. If you are not careful it can create a lack of faith - workers won't see you as an organisation for their rights.

Now, a union cannot control its members, but a political party can control its cadres. The political party can keep cadres in line. The political party has strong ideological principles and a strong revolutionary understanding - it must control its members and make sure that they are implementing the party's principles.

A union can develop political consciousness among workers, but it will always play a very limited role in politics. Even in Russia during the revolution, trade unions played a very limited role. They always had to look to the party for revolutionary action.

Bulletin: *What message do you have for workers generally?*

Dita: Just do the political struggle as well as the economic struggle. Don't narrow your struggle just behind the demands of wages, but also try to relate every economic problem to a political approach and an internationalist approach.

We are trying to do this in all our education work in Indonesia. We say that we will link economics and politics, no matter how much money we have to spend - we don't care as long as our workers have the best education that we can provide.

We put so much into intensive education, because what workers read they practise. We feel that we will have failed if our workers are not doing in practice what they read, because when they practice, that's the time when we can see whether we are succeeding or not. ★