



Book Review

Labor and Politics in Indonesia Teri L. Caraway *and* Michele Ford (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020*)

Olle Törnquist

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BOOK REVIEW

Labor and Politics in Indonesia Teri L. Caraway and Michele Ford (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press* 2020)

Indonesian trade unionism during the Sukarno era was extensive but often an accessory to party political priorities. Under Suharto, there was murder and repression and the few remaining unions were depoliticised and subordinated to the authoritarian regime. With fledgling export-led industrialisation in the 1980s, young dissenting labourers raised their voices. But researchers (including this reviewer) who suggested the new activists might play a vital role in the struggle for democracy were proven wrong. Co-ordination among labour associations and with other progressive groups was not a priority. So, short of an alternative, labour activists lost out during the Asian economic crisis. Even after Suharto, there were therefore good reasons to be pessimistic about a labour-based alternative to elite democracy. Organisations were weak and divided. Their bargaining power in the workplace was low and their labour market power almost non-existent. Co-ordination with other social movements and civil society organisations remained poor. The attempts to build labour parties failed and there was no other sympathetic party to link with. Most scholars concluded that labour organisations were just as weak and irrelevant as the politically marginalised pro-democrats in civil society, except when of use to dominant elites and oligarchs. And, the argument concluded, only the latter were setting the pace and worthy of study. Mysteriously, however, from around 2002, unions began to make a difference, affecting the priorities of the elite and even making some of them interested in striking deals. How did this come about?

Two of the scholars who went against the tide by deeming labour important, Teri Caraway and Michele Ford, have now contributed a pioneering account of union resurgence. Their focus is on the leading unions and their book ignores the more radical groups – the focus of Max Lane’s recent study (Lane 2019) – and overlooks the organisational efforts among informal labour and related social movements. But we are nonetheless provided with the most comprehensive and rigorous inquiry to date of the major dynamics and actors, favourably combining written and oral sources with participatory observations, as well as a survey of workers’ voices.

Having accounted for the already mentioned scant opportunities for labour organisers around 2000, emphasising in particular their weak access to workplace collective bargaining and the absence of an influential sympathetic party, the authors turn to the story of how the unions still managed to move ahead, detailed by case studies in the major industrial regions. The initial advances were most obvious in “national level” campaigns against hostile labour regulations. In this, the activists also benefitted from government instability and sympathetic insiders, especially in the “Ministry of Manpower,” trying to get labour votes for then President Megawati in the forthcoming presidential elections. The main result was the comparatively advanced Manpower Law of 2003 – which took its adversaries almost 20 years to reverse, finally achieved through President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo’s fiercely resisted “Job Creation Law” in 2020. Another step forward related to Indonesia’s extensive decentralisation, which included local tripartite negotiations of minimum wages. To gain influence in the wage councils, with limited numbers of seats, the unions had to network, agree on basic positions and stage demonstrations. With the introduction in 2005 of direct elections of local political executives, moreover, unionists in extensively industrialised districts and provinces

soon realised they could conclude contracts with the politicians likely to take up seats in the wage councils. They delivered votes to successful candidates in return for better wages and other benefits.

The intensively industrialised Batam municipality in the Riau Islands Province, close to Singapore, served as a testing ground, pointing to the importance of union networks to overcome leaders' rivalries. Later, in 2012, the most successful agreement was in Jakarta between unions and then gubernatorial candidate Jokowi. This deal resulted in a 45% wage hike that also affected other local agreements. To some extent, informal labourers also benefitted from the union and better-wage-oriented campaigns, but Caraway and Ford are right in concluding that the major unions did not prioritise social movement unionism.

The major exception was the successful campaign for Indonesia's universal social security programme in 2010–2011. This was based on a policy proposal by progressive parliamentarians and civil society activists, supported in particular by the vibrant metalworkers union and soon by other unions too, as well as human rights and urban poor organisations. The following year, pro-labour parliamentarian and celebrity, Rieke Diah Pitaloka, and anti-graft activist, Teten Masduki, almost won the gubernatorial race in West Java – even though many unionists would have preferred a deputy candidate of their own or had other agreements with the brotherhood Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), and many local non-governmental organisations, who were close to Masduki, also did not deliver votes. In any case, the field was open for improved efforts towards a comprehensive popular agenda. But when new Jakarta governor Jokowi and his deputy Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama did not agree to another round of high minimum wages but suggested other reforms, crucial union leaders returned instead to their basic priorities of better wages and employment conditions for members by combining strikes, major demonstrations and political contracts.

Meanwhile, union leaders' attempts to affect proportional legislative elections were less effective than efforts to influence the direct elections of executives. Given harsh bars against new parties, the only alternative was for competitive union leaders to relate to existing parties, which subordinated them to party priorities and put them at the tail end of their lists of candidates. In 2009, however, a new system of open lists of party candidates in each constituency enabled individual candidates to compete. This certainly benefitted politicians with lots of money, thus increasing vote buying, but also unions who could mobilise support for their nominees. In the early 2014 legislative elections, a heroic attempt was therefore feasible in the industrial city of Bekasi east of Jakarta to co-ordinate union leader candidates in different party lists. Despite the consolidated efforts, however, they got even fewer votes than the number of resident union members and only two candidates were (narrowly) elected. Caraway and Ford's survey of workers' views in Bekasi and neighbouring Tangerang further testifies to the conclusion that there is still no solid labour constituency. And even though there was wider labour support in 2017 (after the authors' surveys) for union leader Obon Tabroni when he ran but lost as an independent in the Bekasi regency (*bupati*) elections, rival union leaders did not provide full backing.

Having returned to basic union priorities and street politics after the successful social security campaign, the narrow loss in the West Java gubernatorial race and the failed talks with Jokowi and Ahok over minimum wages, major union leader, Said Iqbal, instead negotiated a deal with oligarch and former general Prabowo Subianto in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. According to Caraway and Ford, the unions' ability to sustain street-level campaigns after the failed talks over minimum wages, and to strike a deal with a presidential contender, is testament to their success. Indeed, Prabowo even supported unions' struggle against Jokowi's new regulation of minimum wages (reducing unions' chances to

trade votes for higher wages) and helped Tabroni get elected to the national parliament in 2019. But how does one determine success?

Certainly, one may evaluate the extent to which unions make an impact. But do we not also have to consider whether and how they have managed to favour what is generally considered to be their progressive role in resisting elitist and oligarchic forces (such as Prabowo) and paving the way for more or less social democratic oriented policies (about which the unions have had little to say)? If so, Caraway and Ford's consideration of two dimensions of unions' common strategies in terms of "access to workplace collective bargaining" and "alliance with an influential party" – and their conclusion that although these options were not at hand, unions succeeded by way of "policy influence via political allies" and "street politics" – leaves us with two elephants in the room (10–15). One is labour market bargaining power, which in countries like Indonesia calls for alliances with the many informal labourers, the self-employed and professionals. And the other is transformative policies and the ability to negotiate them. In contrast to most of the "contracts" between unions and politicians that Caraway and Ford analyse, these additional dimensions were crucial in the successful broad alliance for the social security reform. Yet the authors do not make much note of it – possibly because broad alliances and policy are not included in their analytical framework. And they also do not engage in discussions with those of us studying why the promising opening for a wider labour movement was closed (such as Djani et al. 2017).

Still, even though these issues and challenges are passed over, Caraway and Ford's book about the major unions' engagement in politics will be an indispensable and standard work in its field and a vital source of knowledge for everyone interested in the wider remaining issues.

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Olle Törnquist
 Department of Political Science, University of Oslo
 olle.tornquist@stv.uio.no

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