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Street-level Politics: Labour Protests in Post-authoritarian Indonesia

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ABSTRACT Over the past ten years, Indonesia has seen an interesting trend in political action on the part of labour. Once risky activity, street protests have been decriminalised and become a common sight in many parts of the country, especially in urban areas. Industrial workers take to the streets in large numbers to challenge the state and business interests perceived as hostile to their material and political interests. Interestingly, scholars have largely neglected this phenomenon and instead focused on labour’s failure to develop as a meaningful political force. This paper assesses the significance of labour protests and the light they throw on the development of a certain mode of engagement with the post-authoritarian state. It is suggested that the proliferation of protests among workers may sow the seeds of a “movement society.”

KEY WORDS: Labour politics, post-authoritarianism, Indonesia, street protests, movement society

Organised labour in Indonesia has undergone significant changes since the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 and the Asian economic crisis that began in 1997. The combination of these two events has posed the “double challenges” of democratic transition and the resumption of economic growth. Central to this wider reconfiguration of the polity and the economy is the reconstitution of labour relations. On the one hand, workers’ political rights have been introduced along with general freedom of speech and freedom of association, while, on the other hand, the economic downturn has quickly put pressure on these newly found freedoms. In the meantime, state institutions have also been reorganised in a way that allows considerably wider participation. Under these circumstances labour has had to adapt to a shifting political environment where the long-held fear of state authoritarianism has given way to conflicts within the new and tenuously democratic institutions. More than a decade after this process began, it is now highly pertinent to probe the achievements of labour as a political force and the direction and nature of labour politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Research into the post-authoritarian labour movement in Indonesia is still at an early stage. The existing literature is focused mostly on finding the answer to this
single question: why has the labour movement failed to become a significant political force in the post-authoritarian era? The picture that has emerged from answering this question is universally bleak, portraying helpless trade unions in the face of economic constraints and the undemocratic remnants of the old forces. Being overtly cautious of the new democracy, this line of analysis has not done justice to the Indonesian labour movement. It overestimates the ghost of the old dictatorship and underplays the power of budding labour groups. It also tends to gloss over several poignant events in the country’s political landscape for labour. For example, how can we explain the mass mobilisation of workers in their thousands in many cities across the country in May and June 2001, which managed to force the government to reinstate the pro-labour ministerial decree (KepMen Labour Ministerial Decree No. 150/2000) on firing and severance payment? Or, what brought workers onto the streets in record numbers in April and May 2006, when they succeeded in halting the government’s proposal to revise the Manpower Law (Law No.13/2003)? What significance do we attach to persistent protests by workers in various regions regarding the annual settlement of minimum wages? Labour may not yet be an established political force in the Indonesian political landscape, but underestimating its organising power and influence risks missing a significant development in the country’s dynamic power struggle.

This paper aims to assess the significance of Indonesian labour politics by looking at the proliferation of street protest as a mode of engagement with the state and capital since the end of the New Order. It is argued that street protests have become increasingly a routinised exercise in contention, through which labour asserts its influence and contributes to the development of a particular kind of labour-state relations in Indonesia. Special attention is given to the dynamics in those regions where decentralisation and local elections have opened up new opportunities for the inclusion of marginalised people (Rosser et al., 2005). The research is based on fieldwork conducted mainly in two important industrial regions: Medan in North Sumatra and Tangerang in Banten, in January-March 2008 and July-September 2009. The information was gathered mainly through interviews with union officials and labour activists in the two regions and through a collection of newspaper reports housed in the archives of several labour-orientated non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

A Failed Political Force in Post-authoritarian Indonesia?

The aims of this paper closely connect it to a body of literature which focuses on state-labour interactions in a post-authoritarian context. The post-authoritarian context frames a labour movement, which aspires to political freedom and participation in policy making, in the now supposedly inclusive government. As the repression of independent unions gives way to a new era of openness, the right to organise is usually one of the first political rights to be established, along with greater media freedom and multi-party elections under the label of democratisation (Haagh, 2002). The working population harbours aspirations that restored labour rights will give them greater leverage in policy-making circles, which will translate into better welfare.

Democratisation in the late twentieth century, however, coincides with the global reorganisation of capital which has forced labour onto the defensive. The restoration
of labour rights occurs at the same time as a period of neo-liberal economic policies that began roughly in the late 1970s. These policies are an effort to deregulate the labour market and to introduce greater “flexibility.” This is part of a greater agenda to “correct” economic mismanagement and to expand the market economy. These measures, especially in the forms of flexible jobs and decentralised collective bargaining, are often perceived as undermining the newly restored power of labour. Facing such a prospect, labour politics can often be summarised as an effort to negotiate the interplay between political opportunity and increased economic pressures.

Several regions in the world, notably Latin America, the former communist Central and Eastern Europe, and Northeast Asia, have gone through similar periods of political-economic transformation in recent decades, which would provide rich resources for comparison. The scope and space afforded for this paper, however, do not allow an extended review of these examples. Suffice it to say at this point that the literature that deals with these regions reveals three main strategies of engagement between organised labour and the state: labour partisanship in much of the Latin American countries (Levitsky and Mainwaring, 2006; Murillo, 2001; 2005); tripartism or social dialogue in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Borisov and Clarke, 2006; Martin and Cristesco-Martin, 1999); and elitist lobbying in Taiwan and South Korea (Buchanan and Nicholls, 2003; Kong, 2004; Kuruvilla and Erickson, 2002). These strategies aim at consolidating the political power of labour at the highest level of governance to influence policies and to shape a broader political agenda.

In different ways, they all represent a mechanism of interest mediation and a system of policy making. Labour interests are organised and acquire an organisational form in linking up with the decision-making structures of the state; over time this process forms institutionalised patterns of exchanges between labour interests and the state. Labour partisanship is, perhaps, the most straightforward since labour interests are represented by a political party that seeks to control the state and its system of policy formation by contesting elections or joining parliamentary coalitions. Tripartite negotiations require a few well-organised trade unions, preferably holding a representational monopoly, and a strong bargaining position that comes from their control of the labour market. This mode of engagement is organisationally complex because it has to decide first whether labour organisations should compete against each other for representation or simply be licensed by the state for reasons other than competitive selection. It also needs either a strong state that can override resistance to negotiation from employers and resist capture by capitalists or, in the absence of a strong state, some extraordinary circumstance such as war or widespread political instability in which the state gains leverage. For the last strategy, the existence of a representative labour organisation is not fundamentally important because, by definition, the labour elite is not necessarily accountable to labour organisations. Labour leaders do originate from unions or other labour groups but their exchanges with political elites are based more on personal or historical relations developed between the two and not on the organisational capacities of the unions.

Scholars on Indonesian labour scrutinise the political institutions that make up post-authoritarian labour relations, and they soon find out that many crucial
ingredients are simply missing. First, workers are not a solid group after decades of depoliticisation. In fact, the near total repression of labour politics destroyed the capacity of the working class to organise to the extent that it even failed to contribute to the 1997-98 movements which eventually saw the resignation of Suharto (Hadiz, 1998; Tornquist, 2004). There is little sense of community among them as a whole and individual workers are more concerned with their modern consumerist lifestyle (Ford, 2005; Warouw, 2005).

Moreover, labour organisations remained weak even after the ban on independent unions was lifted. The introduction of the new Trade Union Law of 2000 is said to place too much emphasis on freedom of association. Thus, while it abolishes obstacles to independent unionism, the law also facilitates “extreme fragmentation” by setting very few requirements for starting a new union (Caraway, 2006: 222). The subsequent rapid growth of labour organisations is seen as “proliferation rather than consolidation” of trade unions (Hadiz, 2001: 123). Several reports commissioned by the International Labour Organization (ILO) single out the lack of co-ordination among major union confederations, especially at the national level (Quinn, 2003), combined with increased competition and disputes among unions themselves (Kelly, 2002). Weak organisations marred by infighting, splits and “divisive expansion” contribute to undermine workers’ bargaining power in tripartite forums (Tornquist, 2004: 388).

On the electoral stage workers also fail to mobilise as one unified group thus wasting the opportunity to form meaningful labour partisanship. In the 1999 general election, the combined votes of four “labour” parties numbered only 315,826 or 0.3% of the national total and won no seats in the national parliament (Ford, 2005). In the 2004 general election, only one labour party, the Social Democratic Labour Party (PBSD), took part and gained 636,397 votes or 0.56% of the total votes, still failing to win seats in the national parliament. In the regions, however, the PBSD fared better, with 22 seats in various districts and provinces but notably in North Sumatra, where many of its founding members came from. It won 14 seats that were distributed between nine districts in the province and one seat in the provincial parliament.1 In the last general election of 2009, two labour parties collected a total of 0.97% of the total votes.

This paper begs to disagree not with these factual observations, but with the general conclusion that Indonesian labour movements have made no qualitative progress as compared to the situation before 1998. In pursuing this argument, this paper does not suggest a triumphant working class. Far from it; this paper offers a more balanced picture of Indonesian labour movements by describing the political agency of labour groups in less institutionalised modes of action. While in many ways Indonesian labour is not yet an established political force, it has displayed a recurrent pattern that deserves special attention. In the past ten years, industrial workers have been routinely mobilised to take to the streets, mainly to challenge government policies that are perceived as threats to their well-being, but also to show support to other non-labour causes. As will be clear in the course of this paper, this particular strategy is not unique to the post-1998 labour movements; there are a number of qualities that make them different.

This mode of engagement with the state at the street level is fundamentally different from the other three, in that it thrives in the absence or in the non-functioning of official institutions of representation. Where institutions of political power are
perceived to be unresponsive to unrepresented sectors of the population, labour groups in their claims and collective actions provide alternative channels of political participation. This is a strategy that is often categorised as a part of social movements. Street politics force the reconfiguration of power relations in a way that transcends negotiations and the interplay among political institutions (see Peters, 2010). Just when democracy is taking shape and is most concerned with its institutions and procedures, labour groups develop a platform for popular challenges by way of conflicts, confrontations and potentially dangerous disputes.

**Episodes of “Orchestrated Chaos”**

Since the end of the New Order, the phenomenon of public protest has intensified and become almost a daily occurrence, as is shown by a news report (“Sembilan Unjuk Rasa Hari Ini” [Nine Demonstrations Today], Tempointeraktif 10 July 2008), which is worth quoting in full):

Jakarta and its surrounding areas are going to see nine street rallies today . . . .

The first rally is to take place at 09.00-15.00, held by the Alliance of Motherland-Loving NGOs: Gerhana, PWI, PETA, FK, LSM Jakarta, PITON. Around 250 participants led by AM Manaiu and Saut Pakpahan will stage their protest in front of the office of the Ministry of State Enterprises, the office of the General Attorney, and the House of parliament.

The People’s Struggle Front will hold a rally in front of the Presidential Palace, Medan Merdeka Utara Street, Central Jakarta at 10.00. Rudi HB and Daman will lead the protest with around 100 participants.

500 people from the Association of Former and Current Employees of Indonesia Hotel-Inna Wisata are going to stage a demonstration at the office of Jakarta District Attorney and at Graha Inna in Buncit Raya Street, South Jakarta.

Around 100 people from the Society of Indonesia’s Poor People will organise a protest at the office of Exxon Mobil Oil, Wisma GKBI in Bendungan Hilir, and the House of Parliament.

40 people from the Trade Union of PT Organon Indonesia will stage a protest outside the Mayapada Tower in Sudirman Street, South Jakarta.

About 200 residents of Kampung Baru, Lembah Harapan, Pondok Karya, Pondok Aren in Tangerang are going to hold a demonstration at the office of the Tangerang district head.

The People’s Committee for Eradicating Corruption will stage a protest at the office of the General Attorney.

In Tangerang, 5,000 workers of PT Panarub Industri in Mauk Street will also hold a demonstration.
Late in the afternoon at 16.00-17.00 the Solidarity Network of the Family of the Victims of Human Rights Abuses will organise a demonstration outside the Presidential Palace.

The explosion of public protests, or *unjuk rasa* (show of feeling or emotion) or *demonstrasi* (demonstration) or *aksi* (action), is certainly not new or unique to the post-1998 period. Under the New Order regime, there were periods of similar radicalisations: in 1970-72, students and other middle-class groups protested against corruption especially within the state-owned oil company Pertamina and against the “Indonesia in Miniature” pet project of Suharto’s wife; in early 1974, students – reportedly supported by some sections of the military – took to the streets protesting the dominance of Japanese capital in Indonesia, culminating in the “Malari” riots in Jakarta; and the period between the late 1980s and early 1990s was characterised mainly by labour protests (Bresnan, 1993; Lane, 2008; Uhlin, 1997). These previous episodes have certainly left a mark on the collective consciousness of the people, suggesting that public spaces are possible venues for political activism and that the sheer presence of large numbers effects maximum political agitation both in terms of government response and in politicising the public.

The most recent protest phenomenon, however, is different in two respects. First, the frequency of protests is greater than in the earlier periods simply because they have been decriminalised. The New Order regime had little tolerance of dissent; however, a number of protests that took place under the watchful eye of the regime avoided its trademark repression primarily because the organisers came under the patronage of powerful elites from within the regime itself (Aspinall, 1995; Sidel, 1998). In contrast, the Freedom of Speech Law of 1998 marks the change of attitude to dissent and effectively allows members of the public to organise almost any kind of public protest provided they inform the police at least three days in advance. Although there has been some reservation regarding the details, the law, popularly called the *Unjuk Rasa* Law, in principle turns the organisation of protests into a procedural business. Organisers of protests no longer need permission from the authorities, and restrictions apply only to those who work for emergency services and when related to separatism and incitement to hatred on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion.

Second, as the news report quoted above indicates, public protests are no longer the exclusive domain of traditional political elements of society, such as students and middle-class activists. An almost bewildering array of groups of people, from NGOs and trade unions, Islamic militants and community groups, to organisations of enthusiasts and hobbyists, have taken the path of public protest to air their opinions and grievances. The varied nature of these groups is reflected by the names under which they registered their protest actions with the police: the 064035 Elementary School Parents’ Association (*Orangtua Murid SD 064035 Medan*), the North Sumatra Punk Movement (*Gerakan Punk Sumut*), the Anti-Pig Farm Society (*Masyarakat Anti-Ternak Babi*), the Ladies’ Quran Recital Group (*Ibu-Ibu Perwiritan*) and The Medan’s *Ayam Kinantan* FC Fans Club (*Kesatuan Anak Medan Pecinta Ayam Kinantan FC*). People organise to challenge or to mount pressure on the authorities, to intimidate rival groups or simply to campaign for a cause. Many of the groups come together just for the purpose of mobilisation on the
day of protest and never again appear in the records. Previously politically quiescent groups have been encouraged by the new political openness to make explicit statements regarding their issues. It does not mean that they had been completely apolitical previously because a political life, atomised and unorganised, was always in existence. Only now they have become more explicit and public in their political activities and aspirations. Table 1 indicates the extent of public protests.

Previous episodes of public protests may have initiated the people into acts of dissent, but it was the massive student protests and riots in the years leading to the demise of the New Order in 1998 that finally dismantled the power of the apparently invincible state authorities. Thanks to wide media coverage of these protests, people saw their fellow citizens take on symbols of the state, and the fearsome security forces that had gunned down student activists in May 1998 now looked fragile and defensive. People in the regions and provinces quickly adopted similar strategies of mobilisation and applied them to local causes. In one instance, Lane (2008: 175) cites reports of small rebellions in “hundreds of villages throughout the country.” Indeed, a wave of demonstrations, many of which turned violent, erupted, creating and amplifying the impression of political euphoria that has become a key feature of the post-1998 period. Violent post-Suharto conflicts in Aceh, East Timor, the Moluccas, West Kalimantan and many other regions across the archipelago prompted commentators to label Indonesia as “a country in despair” (Van Dijk, 2001), an “unfinished nation” (Lane, 2008) or “on the edge of chaos” (Parry, 2005), as freedom and chaos seemed to arrive at the same time.

Public protests and violent conflicts are two different things, yet they have helped to create an atmosphere of invincibility and bravado among certain elements of society, such as students and factory workers, and to embolden them to take to the streets at the slightest hint of injustice. As one newspaper report puts it, “Today when everybody can speak about anything anywhere, demonstrations seem to be held everywhere” (Kompas, 15 March 2000).

Amidst this euphoria, there have been suggestions that not all public protests are concerned with matters of public interests. Some people question the “genuineness” or “purity” of the motives behind mass mobilisation. In the past, the security forces of the New Order were usually quick to label public protest as “influenced by foreign elements” or “communist tactics” (Hadiz, 1997). Early into the post-1998 period, in the wake of one of the harshest economic crises the country had faced in several decades, the dismissal of public protests, in addition to the old conspiracy scenario, followed a financial logic. Small pecuniary rewards would be enough to hire crowds to stage public protests on behalf of some puppet master (e.g. Warta Kota, 4 October 2000). As will be seen in the course of this paper, labour public protests require a high degree of co-ordination and persistent commitment that cannot be expected from hired crowds. Thus, reports of hired crowds and engineered protests seem to represent more an ongoing distrust of popular politics among elites than the true extent of people’s financial desperation.

Working Class Activism

The working population has had a long history of protest in Indonesia even under the Suharto regime. In particular, they learned about organising strikes that took
Table 1. Public protests in Tangerang city and Medan city, frequency and organising group, 2005-08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tangerang city</th>
<th>Medan city</th>
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<th>Medan city</th>
<th>Tangerang city</th>
<th>Medan city</th>
<th>Tangerang city</th>
<th>Medan city</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005 Workers</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs/community groups</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: These numbers come from notifications to the police by protest organisers as required by law in Tangerang city and Medan city.
place in factory premises; taking their protests to the streets required a new level of militancy, primarily because such a form of action was strictly forbidden. A public protest always risked a swift and crushing response from the security forces and, therefore, needed extremely careful consideration. There were, indeed, a number of high profile street protests by workers, such as the protest by PT Gadjah Tunggal workers in Tangerang in 1991 (Asia Watch on Labor Rights, 1993), and those in Medan in April 1994 (Budiman and Tornquist, 2001; Hadiz, 1997). Both ended in persecution of the alleged ring leaders amongst the workers.

In contrast to this previous trend, in the wake of the reform movement of 1998 public protests by workers have become a common sight with increasing intensity and frequency. To illustrate this point, in the period between 1989 and 1994, Kammen (1997: 125) recorded 2263 incidents of labour strikes nation-wide, while between 1999 and 2004 the Tangerang police records consulted by the author note 2759 work stoppages in the Tangerang region alone. While the combination of economic hardship and the popularity of public protests as described above definitely paved the way for this, later it was almost certainly facilitated by the state recognition of industrial actions as workers’ basic rights, which is enshrined in the Manpower Law of 2003. Under Articles 138 and 142 of the law, strike organisers are required only to notify employers and the local Manpower Office; they are not required to ask permission for their action. There is no need for trade unions to ballot their members on a strike plan; indeed, one does not even have to be representing a union to call for a strike. Moreover, the law prohibits employers from replacing striking workers and from penalising them in any way as long as the strike is lawful (Article 144). In the case of statutory demands, such as minimum wage, severance payment, overtime pay and the like, employers are not allowed to withdraw payment from striking workers (Article 145).

As far as data on labour protests are concerned, the analysis in this section is based on protests that took place in the first six years after the demise of the authoritarian regime (1999-2004). This transition period reveals changes in social and political relations and, therefore, gives us an insight into how power struggles may evolve. The picture of the protests that emerges is unquestionably broad and offers valuable insights into the recent dynamic of Indonesian labour movements. The description in this paper relies mostly on newspaper reports and, where these are unavailable, on other sources, such as local police records and NGO reports. As indicated in Table 2, the combination of these sources provides information about 429 incidents of labour protest, mostly complete with details, such as the identity of the organiser, the estimated number of participants, the venues, the demands, the forms of action and the response by authorities.

The forms of protest vary from a quiet work stoppage followed by sit-ins within the walls of the factory premises to noisy marches through the streets and lengthy occupations of government buildings. In many cases, the struggle starts with unanswered demands or failed negotiations; a demonstrasi then ensues either in the factory compound or in public spaces, such as the streets, urban landmarks or government buildings. It is not very clear if there is a pattern in the choice of “going public” as opposed to keeping it a “domestic,” – a company – affair. In fact, work stoppages, regardless of the venues, tend to involve government officials from the local Manpower Office who try to broker a deal or the police who prevent the strike from
getting out of hand or from spilling over to the streets; in other words, such actions are never completely “domestic.” In addition, the fact that they are reported in the media adds to the public character of the events. While strikes in the factory compound have long been a popular form of labour collective action, strike organisers now face fewer obstacles and have more incentives to bring the crowds onto the streets, into government buildings or to any other public venues (see Table 3).

Main streets in industrial areas, such as Jalan Mohammad Toha and Jalan Gatot Subroto in Tangerang, and Jalan SM Raja in Medan, are not particularly spacious, being only three to four lanes wide carrying two-way traffic without any physical separation in the middle. Street vendors and market stalls line up on the sides of these streets and nestle between shops and factories. In particularly busy stretch of these streets where the pavement is already occupied and where there is stiff competition for space, many vendors actually set up their stalls literally on the tarmac, pushing the traffic out to the middle of the road. Jalan Mohammad Toha and Gatot Subroto are the only two main thoroughfares which connect Tangerang city and Tangerang district. Jalan SM Raja is the main road for the transportation of people and goods between Medan and Lubuk Pakam, the capital of Deli Serdang district. Small wonder that most of the time these streets are congested with vehicles of all sorts, from motorbikes to public minivans to container trucks, all jostling for space.

A typical street protest always involves processions through these major streets with banners, flags and sometimes loud music from a portable sound system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venues</th>
<th>Medan</th>
<th>Tangerang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Parliament (DPRD)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Manpower Office</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor/Mayor/District head office</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory/Shop/Company office</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police station</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In cases of multiple targets in one protest, the venues identified here are the last one, assuming workers visited the main target at the end of the protest. 

**Source**: Newspaper reports.
mounted on a vehicle. The sound system is used mainly for delivering speeches, slogans against employers or the state, and for the singing of popular songs whose lyrics have been modified with labour themes. Although anyone is welcome to give a speech, most of the time trade union leaders grab the microphone. The speeches are about the plight of workers and their demands, which are also written on the banners. At times, striking workers stage some kind of artistic performance in the middle of the road in the form of a role-play with the characters dressed up in extravagant attire and colours, or by carrying figurines with particular symbolism. The symbolism of a dead person in Islamic rituals seems to be quite popular in such street theatres. This usually involves the effigy of a dead person shrouded in white cloth and a makeshift coffin known in Indonesian as *keranda* (see, for example, Suara Indonesia Baru, 30 September 2004). The effigy signifies two things. First, it portrays the death of conscience to the plight of workers, the death of justice or the death of workers whose meagre incomes keep them in perilous existence. This is sometimes accompanied by a description of workers as individuals shackled and weighed down by the iron fetters of subordination and unmet daily needs. Second, workers liken their marginalised status to that of a corpse, a waste, something that can be disposed of without much difficulty once it has passed its useful life. State officials and employers are the main targets of such symbolic displays; they are the perpetrators of these cruelties, who prey on the vulnerabilities of workers. In addition, the public nature of the performances invites members of the public to participate in their interpretation of the world around them.

Workers march on foot or drive in noisy hordes of motorbikes and trucks. When numbers are large, it is inevitable that they block the streets, forcing the traffic to a halt and to the sides while they move very slowly to their final destination. The organisers may attempt to show some restraint by confining the crowds to the slow lane, but these crowds soon move to the middle of the road when the number swells or the road narrows. In truth, blocking the road is not just a consequence of the presence of large numbers in a confined space. This strategy is intended to create maximum disruption to the already busy streets and premises. In effect, this makes the protesting crowd look big and significant. It engages people who happen to be around, creating as much noise as possible and a commotion worthy of a headline in local or preferably national newspapers, and draws attention to the cause – although not always with the desired result of developing public empathy. Toll roads, which are fenced and supposed to be free from any disruption, are not exempt. Between May and June 1999, workers in Tangerang held a sit-in on toll roads on three separate occasions, causing massive traffic jams, again angering motorists (Republika, 26 May 1999, 2 June 1999; Kompas, 4 June 1999). More immediately though, the whole chaotic appearance of a street march presents the protesting workers with an opportunity to bargain with the police who may want to prevent them from reaching their final destination. A potentially riotous crowd in a densely populated area with a lot of businesses and properties requires careful measures in crowd control. Moreover the charred remains of shops and offices left untouched after the May 1998 riots sometimes stand as a backdrop to these protests, reminding the authorities of the possible devastation inflicted by angry crowds (see Hutabarat Lo, 2010; Kusno, 2003).

Most street marches eventually lead to a final destination which is usually a landmark in the city centre. This can be a symbol of the state such as the local
parliament, the governor’s palace or the local Manpower Office, and public places such as the city square, parks or monuments. Typical urban designs in Indonesian cities put government offices in one big compound and often in one corner of the city square. This physical arrangement allows protesters to cover different landmarks quite easily in one round. Once they arrive, the protesting crowds try to get into the compound in great numbers. This is the moment when they sometimes clash with the police who monitor government building courtyards and only permit a small number of delegates to enter. Either from outside the gates or inside, they demand that legislators or government officials come out to meet them so that they can present their petitions. In the meantime, the leaders of the usually peaceful protest deliver speeches and lead the singing and chanting. In most cases, such a protest ends in the late afternoon or soon after their demands are read and handed over to government officials.

Such is the common practice, but innovations do occur. Sit-ins and occupations of government buildings for more than a day have taken place several times. These are conducted to put pressure on government officials to broker a settlement on the protesters' behalf with employers. The occupation goes on until such a settlement is reached or until protesters are forcefully evicted. While staying for two to three days is quite common, Medan saw two particularly long occupations of the North Sumatera parliament building. From early December 2003 to mid-January 2004, the workers of PT Baja Utama Wirasa Inti occupied the parking space of the parliament building for 40 days (Waspada, 17 January 2004). Between August and September 2004 the workers of PT Shamrock Manufacturing Corpora occupied the same place for 25 days (Harian Portibi, 3 September 2004). This mode of action requires a particularly high level of co-ordination, militancy and complicated logistical arrangements. Protests often take turns in staying in the compound in groups big enough to maintain the appearance of a massive crowd and to resist any attempt to evict them by the police or hired thugs.

Street protests are expensive to organise even if it is only for a day. To illustrate, in the Central Java city of Semarang, the National Workers’ Union (SPN) in PT SAI Apparel spent roughly Rp12 million (US$1400) for a protest that involved around 3000 people and lasted one day (interview, Bariyadi, chairman, SPN enterprise unit of PT SAI, 29 June 2009). The most costly expenses are transport by rented trucks or buses for hundreds or thousands of participants (interview, Kodirin, activist of Federation of Virtuous Work Labour Union [FSBKU], Tangerang, 27 July 2009). In typical single-day street protests, workers have to bring or buy their own food, which is readily available from street vendors. Protracted protests present serious financial challenges both for the unions and individual workers as companies refuse to pay them even after only a few days of absence. In such cases the organisers have to provide food for strikers and this is particularly challenging when the number is large. In the case of the occupation by workers of PT Baja Utama Wirasa Inti mentioned above, 138 workers meant supplying at least 50 kg of rice every day. Trade unions are usually in financial difficulties with irregular union dues and very little investment; strike funds that would provide a lifeline in such situations are unavailable. The alternatives are few. They include personal savings of the protesting workers, and these do not last long as they struggle to make ends meet even when they are still receiving wages. Another possibility is to rely on financial
donations from NGOs, non-striking workers and from members of the public who pass by the street in front of the parliament building, as was the case with the PT Baja Utama Wirasa Inti protest. Striking workers also have to make special household arrangements and often to mobilise familial networks to be able to participate in an extended protest (see Saptari, 2008).

In occupying local parliament buildings, protesters invoke the notion of *rumah rakyat* or the house of the people, which has received a new emphasis after more than three decades of rubber stamp parliaments under the New Order regime. In 1999, as the speaker of the new parliament (DPR) that resulted from the first free, multi-party elections following Suharto’s fall, Akbar Tanjung delivered a speech which was loaded with *Reformasi* jargon, “We need to build this institution as a strong house and to make the DPR the house of the people” (*Suara Merdeka*, 7 October 1999). After all, the parliament is called *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* or literally the Council of People’s Representatives. In a way protesters merely claim their rights to be there and in doing so demand recognition of their plight and voices. The same justification is used when they occupy government buildings, especially the Manpower Office. Protesters conduct their daily domestic business as if it was their own home, only now in full view of the public. They use the toilet facilities in the occupied building to bathe and do their laundry. They set up a public kitchen in the courtyard where they cook with open fires. In June 1999 female workers of PT Mayora went as far as draping their underwear to dry across the fence of the courtyard of the Ministry of Manpower (*Pikiran Rakyat*, 9 June 1999; see also Saptari, 2008).

Apart from claiming the people’s space, the act of turning the performance of domestic chores into a public display is meant to ridicule the authorities who often hide behind the facade of cleanliness and orderliness, as displayed in their meticulous attention to the physical appearance of government buildings. Across the country, district heads, mayors and governors seem to be engaged in a competition to build offices that resemble palaces, with high fences and well-kept gardens in outlandish styles, all in the name of appearing “representative” of their authority.5 Workers’ protests thus seriously undermine this carefully presented image, turning it inside out, revealing the reality behind the facade. Government officials do not always take this act of humiliation with equanimity, though. In September and October 2001, the workers of PT Fajar Sun Master, which produces household appliances in Tangerang, occupied the front yard and the facade of the Ministry of Manpower in Jakarta. After more than two weeks, the Minister himself was irritated, ranted at the protesting workers and demanded they leave the compound after he complained about the banners hung in every corner of the compound (*Sinar Pagi*, 9 October 2001).

A comparatively recent innovation has seen some militant union activists conduct a strategy of collective action which they call “sweeping.” This word is used in the original English form to mean literally *menyapu* (to clean by sweeping) while referring to acts of picketing factories that are located along the streets where the protest is taking place.

Hundreds of people on motorbikes on Wednesday . . . morning until noon arrived at and conducted “sweeping” on around 100 factories in Tangerang city and district to demand the factories let their workers leave work . . . . Some of
the protesters . . . banged on the factory gates, terrorised companies by picketing them in large numbers while making loud noise with their motorbike horns and modified exhaust pipes, and forced their way into the factories (Kompas, 4 May 2006).

In conducting “sweeping,” labour activists from outside the factory primarily demand the management of the factory to stop production and to let the workers join their protest or march. The factory itself may not have anything to do with the themes or demands of the original protest, which started elsewhere. Trade unionists also use this occasion and method to warn employers who allegedly mistreat their workers. For example, ABDES targeted PT Smart Glove whom it claimed to have fired 112 workers unlawfully (see Kompas 28 April 2008). Usually non-violent, the sheer presence of a large number of strikers outside the factory gates plays an instrumental role here. Protesters threaten to damage company properties and to harm the security and the managerial staff. This is not an empty threat because in the commotion outside the factory gates, the situation can easily flare up, especially if the factory management fights back (see Harian Global, 18 January 2008). The presence of security forces does not always stop the protesters from carrying out their threat. “Sweeping” is more likely when the number of protesters is large enough to discourage the security apparatus from intervening. If they are overwhelmingly outnumbered and outmuscled by the workers, it seems that the security forces prefer to stand back or to arrive late on the scene. This happened at the “sweeping” of many factories in Tangerang on 3 May 2006 described above; the police showed up late in the day only to receive complaints from the affected companies about the “sweeping.”

Among different trade unions, “sweeping” as a strategy of collective action is not received equally well. Newspaper files pointed to the Network of Labour Alliance in North Sumatera (JABSU) in Medan and Cisadane Labour Committee (KBC) in Tangerang for having conducted “sweeping” at least once. As for other trade unions, the reluctance to adopt this mode of collective action arises primarily from its negative portrayal in the media as an act associated with violence, whereas most trade unions want to be associated with the so-called aksi damai or peaceful protest. In fact, violence rarely manifests itself either because militant activists are prevented from doing so by security forces or the factory under threat yields to their demand of letting out its workers. Still, some trade unions view it as unacceptable because “sweeping” coerces people to join strikes or protests against their will. Some others call it “too radical” and associate such a strategy with “communist” tactics. These unions accuse their “sweeping” counterparts of being infiltrated by non-labour interests; in the story quoted above, a number of unions even suggested that the sweeping was actually conducted by hired crowds (Rakyat Merdeka, 4 May 2006). Those who do engage in “sweeping” justify the strategy as a way to underline the urgency of the issue and to liberate other workers who actually want to join them but for the fear of employers’ oppression.

“Sweeping” is not the only potentially violent form of collective action. The newspaper clipping collection records 15 other incidents of violence attributed to protesting workers. They include the damaging and burning of vehicles, throwing stones at properties belonging to companies, clashes with security forces and, on rare
occasions, attacks on persons. In all instances, however, the violence was contained within the premises where it began and none escalated into widespread violence or riots. In fact, although sometimes they can be unruly and chaotic, industrial protests have been largely peaceful. This is a remarkable phenomenon at a time when conflict and violence seem to have defined the post-1998 political landscape. In a government survey of more than 69,000 villages and urban neighbourhoods across the country in 2002, 7% of the regions in the survey reported local conflict (Barron et al., 2004: 3). A study of collective violence that covers the period between 1990 and 2003 reports 3608 incidents of violence, which resulted in 10,758 deaths (Varshney et al., 2004). The latter study notes that the category of economic conflict, which is defined as conflicts over lands, industrial relations and natural resources, accounts for 12.3% (444) of all incidents and only 0.7% (78) of all deaths. It seems that by providing a space for protest, freedom of expression has certainly helped defuse the anger and frustration of workers, which otherwise would perhaps manifest themselves in aggression when opportunities occur.

The Political Outcomes of Protests

There is actually no way to estimate in numerical terms the success rate of protests with the available data. Outcomes of protests, however, do not consist only of the fulfilment of demands. Considerable arrays of possibilities often present themselves long before demands are met or even negotiated. In the event of workers staging protests at the local parliament, a positive response from legislators or a promise of negotiation with employers often suffices to calm workers. Likewise, when workers condemn the local Manpower Office for not acting on a complaint, the sight of panic and fear that the large crowd instils among government officials makes all the effort worthwhile, even if only temporarily.

In fact, the act of taking to the streets itself bears a symbolic significance that goes far beyond the possible material gains. Having been deprived of a collective identity for decades, workers assert their existence by congregating in large numbers, then disrupting the traffic or occupying government buildings. Such actions force authorities to deal with them as a group and to recognise their collective power, while persuading the general public to pay attention to the hardships that they endure. By occupying government buildings and major streets, workers are able to claim, even if only briefly, ownership of the public space, the city itself, or even one piece of the state; as if they were to say, “The city is ours.” Such actions constitute a display of political power from an otherwise marginalised group in society, showing what they are capable of doing as human agents and as political forces.

Moreover, the street actions of workers help to reconstitute the space of the street as a legitimate locus of populist political actions. As noted by Kusno (2000), urban streets have been used to convey different political messages in the history of independent Indonesia. Under Sukarno’s populist regime (1950-65), the streets of Jakarta were turned into the stage for various performances of popular politics organised by the regime and attended by the masses, such as rallies, speeches and events for the Asian Games and the confrontation with Malaysia. Suharto, in contrast, turned the “revolutionary street into a space of discipline and fear” (Kusno, 2000: 103), where unlicensed activities were considered to be the embodiment of the
forces of criminality upon which the police and military performed their roles. Post-
1998 labour strikes and protests have taken part in turning the space of the street into
a site of political spectacle again; the difference being that, unlike in Sukarno’s days,
now the state is not the only actor directing the performances.

The political message that workers intend to send is amplified by enthusiastic
media attention to noisy street protests, allowing workers some more space on
television channels and newspapers, access to which is commonly limited to the rich
and the famous. Trainee newspaper journalists are sometimes assigned to follow
certain labour groups closely to gain activists’ trust and to learn the jargon of the
street. Indeed, through the media or directly in the streets, workers strive to create
some interpretation of their situation independently of the state and employers. The
slogans written on posters and chanted during protests, the theatrical performances
that are staged in the streets, the wording of the interviews given to journalists, all
tellingly represent their view of the social universe in which they live. They are not
reluctant to criticise the state and other authorities in society, forging a new
vocabulary and a new repertoire of actions in the process; by doing so they offer
some tools for thinking about the state, society or politics in general.

In particular, organised labour has sought to redefine the role of labour outside
the stifling confines of the discourse of creating an investment climate. In the past,
the New Order coined the ideology of “Pancasila Industrial Relations,” which
assigned labour as a member of the same harmonious family with the state and
employers. A more recent call for a competitive investment climate draws on a more
direct economic discourse of labour as a factor of production. The new oppositional
identity wrestles itself free from them and offers its own interpretation of the social
universe in which workers live. Ultimately labour’s oppositional identity challenges
the dominance of the market system as a mechanism of distribution in society. The
demands of trade unions often go against the “wisdom” of the market, forcing the
acceptance of “second best” solutions to industrial disputes and antagonistic
interests between labour and capital.

But, of course, the ultimate rewards are favourable outcomes in financial terms or
in policy changes, and these inspire workers to embark on similar strategies in the
future. This sometimes arises not so much from tangible results as from perceived
victories over capital or government interests. Since the introduction of decentralised
wage bargaining in 2001, trade unions in the regions have taken an increasingly
active part in the campaign for decent and fair wages, either from inside or from
outside the regional wage councils, in the knowledge that every penny in the final
agreed amount is worth fighting for. Union activists referred to this action as
“escorting” minimum wage bargaining, by which they mean picketing the venue of
bargaining, the local parliament and the local Manpower Office. Moreover, high
profile cases of aborted government policies usually followed sustained demonstra-
tions or street rallies: the reinstatement of the pro-labour Ministerial Decree No.
150/2000 on redundancy and severance payment in 2001, the suspension of the
revisions to the pro-labour articles in the Manpower Law in 2006 and, in late 2008,
the cancellation of the so-called Joint Decree of Four Ministries (Surat Keputusan
Bersama Empat Menteri) on a temporary wage rise freeze in anticipation of the
global economic downturn. This sends a strong message to trade unions and workers
that the government, in particular, is relatively prone to popular pressures.
For many rank and file workers, demonstrations are not only about what they seem to be. They may enjoy a day off in the street in a circumstance where holidays are too few and far between. It is sometimes even better than holiday if they can force the management to pay them while on strike. Without undermining the seriousness of their demands, protesting workers, many of them in their early twenties or even younger, take pleasure in congregating with their peers to sing, dance or even court prospective partners. Indeed, when peaceful, the whole atmosphere resembles a picnic more than a protest. A policewoman in Medan keeping watch on the protest by workers of PT Shamrock Manufacturing Corpora in Medan was quoted as saying, “Wow, this looks more like a karaoke session than a demonstration!” (Kompas, 13 August 2004). Nevertheless, at the core of these activities is resistance to low wages, punishing working conditions and restrictions on their freedom. Even if they know that it is going to be a losing battle, they just cannot give up without putting up a fight.

For union officials and labour activists, staging mass demonstrations lends them substantial political leverage and increases their standing in NGO circles. The political leverage comes from the fact that they have shown the capacity to mobilise a large number of people. In a new democracy, where large numbers matter and crowds are guaranteed to intimidate political opponents, individuals who can claim a substantial following stand above the rest. These union leaders and activists usually act as delegates or representatives of protesting workers to meet local government officials. Having repeatedly organised protests, they establish a direct link to local politicians and leaders. Their subsequent high profile prevents police from arbitrarily arresting them. In fact, police may even consult them to find out their next moves and for purposes of crowd control. Newspapers print their statements and ask for inside information in the event of strikes and demonstrations. Employers mark them as troublemakers but would be willing to hire their service to calm workers, given half a chance.

Trade union officials are now more confident that their experience in mobilisation and their exposure in the media have earned them more power to extract more concessions for the movement or to obtain personal favours from elites. In a personal capacity many labour activists and trade union officials have been involved in past elections by playing the role of fixers and middlemen or being recruited to campaign teams or “success teams” in Indonesian political parlance. Their experience in mobilising large crowds and their wide networks of contacts place them in a position to exploit grassroots politics for electoral purposes. This opportunity goes hand in hand with their increasingly high profiles in local political circles, and yet again it fuels speculation whether their latest manoeuvres are for the sake of themselves or the workers.

Demonstrations and street rallies have also helped to unravel one of the most enduring developmentalist alliances in the past. A feature of the New Order regime was the stable patrimonial relationship between political and business elites. This relationship produced economic growth and the expansion of an apolitical middle class which depended on government contracts. This relationship may not have fundamentally changed after the collapse of the regime, but there are signs that this politics-business co-operation should no longer be taken for granted. Continual protests and popular mobilisation against the authorities contribute to a climate of
“ungovernability” and possibly of their delegitimisation. Sustained protests unsettle power holders by agitating them, pitting one section of the elite against the others and forcing them to take a stand on populist issues.

The most publicised rifts between local governments and business emerge in the process of settling minimum wages. Each regional wage council, which is a tripartite institution, meets several times a year to conduct surveys on the market prices of essential needs. The result of this survey makes up the so-called “decent standards of living” (or KHL). Based on KHL rates, the wage council makes a recommendation on minimum wage rates, while considering the rates of inflation and growth and taking into account minimum wages in neighbouring regions. The recommendation made at the district or city level is passed on for approval to the governor of the province. Although governors have the ultimate authority to declare minimum wages, the real power lies with the district or city governments. As representatives of Jakarta, governors would look bad if they rejected recommendations from district heads and mayors. The whole process involves intense negotiations and the local government is supposed to be an arbiter between representatives of the APINDO (employers’ association) and trade union officials. This formal role of the state does not prevent unionists from harbouring suspicions about backroom deals and collusion between government officials and business interests to set wages as low as possible. This is unsurprising, to say the least, given the long history of state-led capitalism. What is more interesting is that business representatives have increasingly accused their government counterparts of sacrificing market rationality for populism by giving in to workers’ demands for a substantial increase in minimum wages. This is more common when a region is soon to have an election. Obviously, incumbent regional heads want to court popular support in preparation for the coming elections and in industrial regions it would be foolish not to appease workers and their families.

Mayor Wahidin Halim of Tangerang city was gearing up for his first direct election in October 2008. The process of setting the minimum wage for 2008 had begun in earnest in October 2007. Two of the four trade unions represented in the council objected to the final recommendations and walked out of the negotiations (interviews, two officials of FSPTSK, 19 and 21 February 2008, and with an official of SPMI, 22 February 2008). The mayor could have simply proceeded with the formality of submitting the recommendation. After all, this had always been done before without much fuss. Instead, after a combination of workers’ show of force in the streets and lobbying, the mayor finally submitted a new recommendation to the Governor of Banten to accommodate the demand of the two unions (Kompas, 28 November 2007). In response, the Tangerang branch of the APINDO filed a lawsuit against this decision in the state administrative court.

Even when minimum wages have been set, pressures from trade unions sometimes make the local government modify the wage rates halfway through the year to accommodate their persistent protests. Local MPs often back this decision because they are concerned with the image of their parties. This creates uncertainty for business and angers the employers. Open disagreements on minimum wages between local governments and business interests erupt almost annually in the regions. This has led the APINDO chairman to suggest that the central government revoke the authority of local governments to settle the minimum wage (Jakarta Post, 29 November 2006).
Conclusion: Emergence of a “Movement Society”?

While collective actions unsettle the institutions of formal politics, their proliferation in the period since the end of the New Order suggests more than just the undermining of formal politics. They indicate that collective actions have become an increasingly acceptable mode of engagement with the state. In responding to such actions, authorities in general have begun to set a certain pattern of interaction, integrating collective actions, in various degrees, into the political structure through which claims are processed. In other words, it is not implausible to suggest that what is happening now is a shift, ironically, toward the institutionalisation of protests; this may represent an embryo of a “movement society” in Indonesia. Tarrow (1998) and Meyer and Tarrow (1998) coin the term to refer to a phenomenon in mostly advanced industrial democracies in which social movements as a form of representing claims have become normalised political practice. A movement society is said to take place when three conditions are fulfilled (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998: 4). First, “social protest has moved from being a sporadic to become a perpetual element in modern life;” second, “protest behaviour is employed with greater frequency, by more diverse constituencies, and is used to represent a wider range of claims;” and, third, “professionalisation and institutionalisation may be changing the major vehicle of contentious claims into an instrument within the realm of conventional politics.”

The persistent and regular nature of protests suggests that such collective actions have become an acceptable part of politics in Indonesia. Different groups of people, most prominently workers, routinely take to the streets to air their grievances and to assert claims. State authorities have generally allowed collective action with few restrictions and, in fact, there has been a kind of understanding, if not co-operation, between police and protest organisers to ensure a peaceful expression of contention. Both authorities and protesters can refer to an increasingly common script with familiar patterns and try to avoid potentially dangerous deviations. For instance, at the height of the protest waves in Central Java’s Semarang in 2000, the local parliament received two or three groups of protesting workers every week, forcing the secretariat to arrange separate office hours for MPs to receive worker delegates (Suara Merdeka, 28 February and 9 March 2000). Incidents of violence still happen, but the main point is that amidst the failure to develop labour parties and functional tripartism, labour groups have grown to accept street protest as their strategy because they believe that the state can be pressured in this way.

In the past decade different generations of union leaders and labour activists, especially at the grassroots level, have emerged, which indicates a functioning programme of leadership training. Core activists in various labour NGOs have become professional organisers who provide support and training. It is still too early, however, to be absolutely sure about the direction of Indonesian labour politics in the future, but institutionalised collective action is not implausible.

Given the empirical evidence available, it seems unlikely that Indonesian labour movements would develop into political parties or interest groups. These are two known forms of institutionalised labour representation in the history of advanced democracies, characterised by the centralisation and bureaucratisation of labour organisations and the moderation of demands and tactics. As highlighted by many scholars, Indonesian trade unions do not attach any great urgency to unification and
centralisation and are unlikely to “tidy up” their organisations in the near future. Attempts at establishing political parties and persuading workers to vote as a group have failed spectacularly in the last three general elections and several local elections.

Collective action is likely to remain as the predominant mechanism of engaging the state for many years to come. Trade unions will use their membership in existing tripartite institutions, especially in the regions, as a front or facade for social-movement-style bargaining, rather than bargaining on their own. Labour movements will continue to consist of loose and decentralised networks of activists and unions without strong central leadership, even if the unions are part of a unitary organisation or affiliated with bigger organisations based in Jakarta. Activists and union leaders may grow in the capacity to put together temporary coalitions of local and trans-local groups for contentious politics after relatively brief preparation. Their mobilisation will be organised mostly around particular campaigns and claims. Once contentious, unpredictable and disruptive, their mobilisation will be less so without being less effective as both labour groups and the state learn to negotiate the boundaries of acceptable conduct and claims.

Since the end of the New Order, Indonesia has seen an interesting trend in political action by labour. Once a risky activity, street protests have been decriminalised and become a common sight in many parts of the country, especially in urban areas. Various labour groups, particularly trade unions, take up this strategy to challenge the state and business interests that are perceived as threats to their quest for welfare and political influence.

Not only have street protests become pervasive, they mark the development of a strategy in engaging the post-authoritarian state. Out of the failure to develop significant labour parties and functioning tripartite forums, Indonesian workers turn to the streets to air their grievances and voice their demands. Conflicts and shifting alliances in the new, tenuously democratic institutions allow some space for workers to gain leverage in policy-making circles. As these protests produce some results, perceived and real, street-level politics gains popularity and has, to some extent, grown into an acceptable mode of engagement with the state. This strategy is likely to stay as long as other more conventional avenues of dealing with the state and employers remain blocked.

Notes

1 Data provided by the North Sumatra Chapter of the PBSK in Medan.
2 According to Della Porta and Diani (2006: 20), social movements are a distinct social process which consists of “conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents,” “dense informal networks” and a “distinct collective identity.”
3 Of course, some old repressive habits did not simply go away after the enactment of the legislation. The law has even been used to detain protesters, such as the students who staged a demonstration outside President Megawati’s official residence in 2002. See Tempointeraktif (27 January 2003).
4 The source used by the author was Medan Police records.
5 A more extreme strategy of disrupting the traffic is to march against the flow of traffic as was done by workers of PT Shamrock in Medan on 5 October 2004 outside the Medan police headquarters, as reported in the chronology written by the KPS (2004) and in Sumatera (6 October 2004).
6 In Ungaran, Central Java, a strike outside PT Ungaran Sari Garment that had lasted for three days angered public van drivers and almost saw an open clash between them and the strike workers (see Wawasan, 3 January 2000).
SPSI sets the union due at 1% of the minimum wage while SPN at 0.5%. For SBSI, member income accounted for just 2.3% of its total income between May 2000 and February 2003 (Caraway, 2006).

For example, in July 2009, the newly elected governor of Central Java built a gateway (gapura) that marks the entrance into the compound of the provincial administration in Balinese style with an estimated cost of Rp1.2 billion (Suara Merdeka, 22 July 2009).

The verb mengawal (to escort or to guard) is often used by trade union officials when describing the process of demanding fair wages, especially when they do not sit in the tripartite wage council.

This decree had earlier been replaced by the more business-friendly Ministerial Decree No. 78/2001. However, after persistent and widespread protests, including those in Bandung on 13 June 2001 which turned violent, the pro-business decree was shelved and the pro-labour one reinstated (Kompas, 22 June 2001).

In January 2006, the government began to amend several pro-labour articles in the Manpower Law of 2003, and this again was met with fierce resistance by labour groups.

Such was the experience of Kasminah, an activist of KBC in Tangerang. She was summoned by the local police to brief them on her organisation’s plan to march on May Day in 2008 (interview, 28 June 2008).

A success team is an ad hoc committee responsible for mobilising support for a particular candidate in an election. It usually combines professional advisers, such as academics and party strategists, with figure heads poached from influential business, youth, ethnic or religious organisations.

This point was emphasized by Djimanto, the general secretary of the APINDO in Jakarta, in an interview, 4 August 2006.

References


