

Political observations from Bandung, Indonesia

By a WSWWS reader

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The following personal observations were sent to the World Socialist Web Site from a reader in Bandung, Indonesia's third largest city, after Jakarta and Surabaya. With a population of more than two million, Bandung has a substantial working class and student population at the long-established Institute of Technology and other universities. The reports provide an insight into the conditions facing workers and the discussion taking place in the lead-up to national elections scheduled for June 7.

I have been unable to write until now. On Sunday, two churches and one sport centre were attacked, one Christian school had its kindergarten burned down, two restaurants were burned, and rocks were thrown at some houses by more than 500 Muslim teenagers. Up until now there are no casualties, only material losses. My friends and I have been investigating these events. The sources of the reports below are student activists, NGO (non-government organisation) activists, my own observations, and some supporting information from my contacts.

Workers in Bandung are facing hard social conditions. Their wages are insufficient to support the daily needs of their families, school fees, health expenses and other costs. In fact, an NGO activist who works with street children stated that some workers' children have become street singers (*pengamen* in the Indonesian language), beggars, child labourers or even street children, who generally live as scavengers. Their wives work as house servants with very minimal payment.

Another local NGO person said the small number of patients in clinics and hospitals recently is the result of the economic turmoil rather than people's health. These are some recent examples of the health problems of workers:

* A tea factory labourer suffered from typhus as a result of overwork and lack of nutrition. A woman worker also suffered from typhus caused by overwork for more than 12 hours a day.

* Eight workers from a garment factory in Cimahi, one of Bandung's districts, died within one month at their workplace. A few times when they were sick, the factory management did not give them permission to rest at home. When each suddenly collapsed, they were placed in the Musholla (Islamic praying room, usually a small room) to rest without any medication. Each died the following day.

* A labourer who worked in printing industry suffered a lung disorder caused by his workplace atmosphere, which was full of ammonia gas.

* A garment worker and his wife had to place their baby with relatives in Garut, about three hours from Bandung, because they work for 12 hours a day.

There are no solutions from the local government and the owners regarding these cases. Even with an exploitative working day of 12 hours or more, workers receive minimal wages and, of course, do not have time for socialising, organising, or even for their families.

Not all workers here work in big factories. They also work in small industries, some of which are well known, such as Bandung's shoe and garment industries. Cibaduyut district in Bandung is famous for its shoe industries--there is even a shoe monument near it, which I suspect is another monumental tool of the regime.

Suharto's regime repressed the labour movement. Workers in big factories could not establish their own union. The regime also collaborated with the capitalists so that workers could easily be fired and established local workers supervision groups--in Bandung it was called the "Keraben" group. The trauma of the Marsinah case (a woman worker in Sumatra who was tortured and brutally killed) and other violent cases is still haunting workers. In this period, which is full of joblessness, the fear of being fired is very strong among workers. They tend to try to keep their job instead of struggling for their class. These conditions have made workers not confident to struggle. Bandung's workers also suffer from these conditions. NGO activists indicated that workers tend to avoid any political topics: "When we're trying to talk or bring any political discussion, they seem to ignore us".

It is difficult to establish any unions or movements among workers in small industries like shoes and garments, who are not well educated. They are divided into small numbers and separated from one another. They are more in competition with each other. As a workers' NGO activist reported: although some labour groups are willing to build their own union, the NGOs and the labour groups have only succeeded in building labour communities. This kind of community only covers about 2 percent of all Bandung.

The fears and disorganisation, their undereducated background and their occupation as *buruh* (labourer, which in the Indonesian language has a pejorative sense) have created a social gap. This gap also influences their families, especially their children: "My father is a labourer, and God willing (Insya Allah) I can become a labourer like my father in the future". The NGO activist also stated: "When they're gathered together, they're talkative, but when we approach and start to talk with them, they become silent. They look up to us as the intellectuals and they feel that they're underclass". The self-confidence problem is the result of this social gap.

Under these conditions, the NGOs, legal advocacy and consultative groups are developing new approaches. One group is positioning itself as a mediator in some cases, which means that they are not using

formal legal methods but are negotiating with the owners. This way has proved successful in fulfilling the workers' demands although some compromises have been made. The NGOs hope that workers will have more confidence and that needed infrastructures--communities, organisations, unions, alliances, etc--will be established.

As I mentioned, workers are having difficulties with their family needs. Other approaches in developing the struggle of workers are in relation to their family needs, for example: organising students to become tutors for the children of workers; holding some religious events as a tool to gather workers and gradually perform political education; running some skill courses for wives or husbands for their future economic needs; building a labour centre as the basis of labour communities; and helping with workers' health problems.

The coming election, which could be used as means for the political education of workers, is only an agitation and propaganda arena. Megawati's posters (called *Posko Gotong Royong*) are occupying a large number of local sites, along with those of Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid) and Amien Rais. Their stickers, banners, leaflets and other advertising are everywhere: in public places, public transport, marginal sites, street intersections, etc. A large number of people attended their rallies.

Their ideological propaganda is not functioning to drive a working class struggle. It is only to support their leadership position and "common" ideologies, which are counter-revolutionary. The talking point of people is only about these leadership figures. I think that the coming election, with the new political laws as the framework, is only another charade of the regime, with the campaigns of these "opposition" figures used to make people believe the election is legitimate.

There was a tactical reason for the PRD (People's Democratic Party) registering as a contestant for the coming election. A friend from the PRD in Bandung stated: "Our intention is only to keep our mass not to be recruited by the other bourgeois parties". Regarding this, most workers have no ideology to drive their struggle. As I mentioned above, the social condition of workers has become an obstacle to political education.

As a temporary conclusion, I would say that the proletar (adopted from a word that means: "ones that only have children as their possession") is really "proletar" in this kind of social condition. Welfare and organised movements are still far from workers and their social conditions are getting worse and worse.

There are divisions among the students. The reaction to the new political laws indicates the divisions. Some of the student organisations support the coming elections. Most of those are the organisations, which have been coopted by ICMI (Muslim Intellectuals Organisation), KISDI (a fundamentalist element and an ICMI ally), or Adi Sasono's network. In Bandung, they are ITB (Bandung Institute of Technology), UNISBA (Bandung Islam University), KAMMI (United Action of Muslim Students), and most of HMI's (Islam Students Group) network. Or they are organisations, which are infiltrated by the personnel of political parties such as FORSAL (Salemba Forum) in Jakarta. FORSAL's leader is with the Partai Keadilan.

Last December, a number of university rectors gathered at the ITB campus. The result of this meeting was the establishment of UNFREL (University Network for Free Election). Some universities like UGM Yogyakarta and ITB are providing 2 to 4 semester credits for the students who join the UNFREL or any coming election observation

programs. About two weeks ago, KM-ITB (ITB students' main organisation) held a national students meeting (about 22 universities from Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and West Papua attended the meeting), to discuss the coming election. But it failed to get most of the other campus delegations to support the coming election. Although ITB is not formally following the UNFREL, its agenda and attitudes tend to support the coming election.

The pro-election student organisations are also using the election issue to raise funds by claiming it is a means for political education. In fact, it is only for their own agitation and propaganda, and for recruitment, by establishing election observation bodies as a camouflage to benefit them. "Election is the best of the worse options," they often state.

Generally, we can see three sides to the student organisations: the political revolution side, which supports the coming election, the social revolution side, which rejects the coming election, and those who claim to be "moralist"--mostly a floating mass. The divisions are between the political revolution and social revolution sides. In the middle of disorientation, the students are offered a more "realistic" political agenda--the political parties and the coming elections. Meanwhile other students are unable to bring up clear and genuine ideas for social change.

This situation has caused some student activists to resign from student movements with a campus basis. They have gone out and to try to establish smaller independent groups such as study groups or labour advocacy groups, etc. Others join the NGOs or the political parties without bringing the party's agenda into campus. Some of the student activists try to build new alliances among the campus--we can see that there are plenty of new student elements. Some students try to keep the movement growing by evading the election issue--they bring up local issues or other issues such as a social safety net, Aceh, East Timor, etc.

Lately, the Ambon solidarity issue has misled the students. The movements are urging the security and defense minister, General Wiranto, to step down. Some say that if Wiranto steps down, then the fundamentalists and the military will unite.

The coming election is gaining more and more legitimacy among the people. The pro-election side of the students and those who already coopted are playing a big role here. Some rumors indicate that Adi Sasono has recruited a large number of student activists with money and "academic insurance"--they will receive "help" in academic affairs from Adi's links with campus professors.

The students are really divided right now. It is hard to expect massive movements from students to lead the struggle for the working class. As you always say, the working class themselves are the only ones capable of leading the struggle for genuine democracy by the socialist way.

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