

As military threatens repression

Strikes break out in Indonesia

Martin McLaughlin
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Tens of thousands of Indonesian workers have joined in strikes and protests against the military-backed regime and the policies of crippling economic austerity imposed at the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and the US government.

In Surabaya, the country's second largest city, 10,000 shoe factory workers tore down tree branches and built roadblocks on the second day of protests demanding pay increases. The workers marched on the regional parliament building. Soldiers lined the city's downtown streets but made no attempt to interfere with the protest.

Surabaya has been paralyzed by a strike by dock workers at its port, Tanjung Perak. The 6,000 workers walked out on June 17 demanding that their basic wage be increased from 7,000 rupiah to 15,000 rupiah an hour (about US\$1 an hour at current exchange rates).

The east Java port is one of the Indonesia's busiest, handling over \$12 billion in exports and imports last year. By the weekend, 49 ships were sitting idle at dockside waiting to be unloaded and another 170 stood in the harbor.

Major strikes have broken out in the factory belt surrounding Jakarta, the capital city. In Karawang, 2,500 workers from P.T. Texmaco Perkasa Eugenering walked out demanding a wage raise, and improvements in overtime pay, annual holidays and food allowances.

Most of the 1,500 workers at the P.T. Kukdong factory were also on strike. Their demands included a reduction in the taxes taken from their wage packets, more holiday money, and money for food and transportation.

Another strike hit the P.T. Sandang Mutiara Era Mulia factory, where most of the 1,200 workers walked out Monday, June 22. They demanded a 30 percent wage increase, payment for overtime work and better food provisions.

Workers also staged a strike at the government's main currency printing plant, protesting excessive overtime and demanding higher pay and benefits. The value of the Indonesian currency, the rupiah, has fallen from 2,400 to the US dollar to as low as 17,000 to the dollar in recent weeks, and the government has fueled the inflation by keeping the printing presses running.

The greatest fear of the military-backed regime of President B. J. Habibie, who took office May 21 following the resignation of longtime dictator Suharto, is that the working class will move from purely economic demands to a broader political struggle. The military is particularly concerned to prevent any linkup between the workers' strike struggles and the protest movement led by students who continue to demand the resignation of Habibie and the repudiation of the price increases and other austerity measures imposed under the IMF plan.

This sensitivity was shown on Sunday in Jakarta, when army troops set up checkpoints around the Selemba campus of the University of Indonesia in an effort to prevent striking factory workers from joining forces with students protesting against the government. The soldiers cleared the campus and checked ID cards of anyone seeking to enter it, in the process compelling several hundred workers arriving for the demonstration to disperse.

Military roadblocks and checkpoints have been set up throughout the city in a large-scale effort to disrupt opposition protests and reassure foreign capitalists that their investments are secure.

Indonesian workers have already suffered a devastating decline in living standards as a result of the economic crisis that has steadily accelerated over the past nine months. But the worst is still to come, according to a report from the World Bank made public

June 22. The agency said that 20 million Indonesians would lose their jobs this year, on top of the 12 million who have already been laid off since last October. The number of jobless in Jakarta rose by 21 percent during the month of May, the report said.

While 28 million Indonesians presently face conditions of semi-starvation, with a daily struggle to find enough to eat, 50 million people will plunge below the official poverty line in the course of the coming year, according to the World Bank. The lending agency said that the authorities would confront 'tens of millions of desperate people' who would expect some provision for their survival.

As the social crisis in Indonesia mounts toward a new flash point, a top-level representative of the US government arrived in Jakarta for talks with Habibie and his top aides. Treasury Under-Secretary Lawrence Summers met with Habibie Monday and declared that the restoration of economic stability was 'absolutely top priority here in Indonesia.'

His statement was clearly intended to convey the message that democratic rights and an end to the repressive military regime were not the top priority. Asked about political reform, Summers limited himself to an indirect criticism of the anti-Chinese pogroms fomented by the Suharto regime during its last days, calling for the Habibie government to base itself on 'universal values of inclusion.'

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced before the arrival of Summers that all staff withdrawn from the US embassy in Jakarta during the rioting that accompanied Suharto's downfall had returned, a clear indication that Washington intends to resume its role as the power behind the throne.

The cynicism of the American role in Indonesia was underscored by Washington's response to Habibie's decision to name as one of his key advisers a retired general forced to retire by Suharto after he directed a massacre of demonstrators in East Timor in 1991.

James Rubin, the State Department spokesman, played down the significance of the appointment, saying that retired general Sintong Panjaitan would only act as an adviser, 'as opposed to a formal role in the Cabinet or something like that. A particular person's role as a personal political adviser to President Habibie should not affect bilateral relations.'

A US court in Boston awarded a \$14 million

judgment against Panjaitan to the mother of a 20-year-old New Zealand man who was murdered by troops during the massacre. But Rubin dismissed calls for the US government to seek enforcement of this decision. 'We wouldn't be able to do business' if such court actions were allowed to interfere with foreign policy, he said.

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