

Book Review

GLJ-RC44 Book Panel Melbourne 2023

Teri Caraway and Michele Ford (2020) *Labour Politics In Indonesia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781108478472. pp. 224. US\$110 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by
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[Editors' note: At each meeting of the Research Committee on Labour Movements (RC-44) of the International Sociological Association, the *Global Labour Journal* organises an Authors-meet-critics panel as part of the RC-44 programme. This review and the others in this section were first presented at the June/July 2023 ISA Congress in Melbourne, Australia. Note that for this book there is the unusual situation that the reviewer (Ben Scully) and one of the authors are both current editors of the *Global Labour Journal*. The book was submitted and accepted to the ISA Book Panel before Teri Caraway joined the journal's editorial board. Ben Scully was not scheduled to be the reviewer, but he had to step in to fill a gap in the program at the ISA conference.]

Labour and Politics in Indonesia, by Teri Caraway and Michele Ford, traces the history of trade unions' political engagements in Indonesia in the period since that country's democratisation in the 1990s. They draw on their own long engagements in the country over the entire period, including decades of interviews, participant observation, political analysis, and also a series of surveys of workers that coincided with elections over the past ten years. The case they present is a fascinating one in the context of global labour studies, as they see Indonesian labour as establishing and growing its political influence over a period which is seen as a one in which unions around the world have generally been on the defensive and have been, in most contexts, seeing their political influence wane. They do this both by showing the real gains that Indonesian unions have made from a very low base of political isolation up to the present period in which they are a well-established and influential political constituency. This review will give a brief overview of their arguments before raising some questions, by way of comparison with the case I know best, the South African labour movement.

Caraway and Ford put forward an important conceptual argument in order to justify their characterisation of Indonesian unions' political engagement as a relative success. They reject elite-focused explanations of Indonesian politics which see any victories for unions as simply "concessions" provided by oligarchs or as outcomes of inter-elite struggles. Instead, they take unions' ability to shape policy as evidence of real political strength. Although I am not familiar with the Indonesian literature they were critiquing in making this point, the discussion reminded me of Thandika Mkandawire's (2015) comprehensive critique of the idea of neopatrimonialism as an all-encompassing explanation for political developments in Africa. Like the critique of neopatrimonialism, Caraway and Ford's critique of elite or oligarchic theory gives primacy to the political agency of the working class. Although it is not framed in this way, I found this discussion

interesting in relation to the extensive debates on the power resources of unions. Rather than simply identifying sources of power, they instead theorise about what constitutes power, namely whether and how successful outcomes can be taken as signs of union power.

The rich story of how Indonesian unions have engaged in politics takes up most of the book, so I won't be able to do it justice here, but briefly, Caraway and Ford identify three phases of engagement over the period from the 1990s to the present. In the immediate post-Suharto period, freedom of association was legally established and there was a proliferation of new unions, but these unions lacked any historical political alignment and they also, for the most part, lacked access to institutionalised collective bargaining. So with no political allies and no institutional bargaining venue to advance their members' interests, this first phase of union political engagement was defined primarily by what Caraway and Ford call "street politics" or protest politics, which drew on longer traditions of Indonesian social protest.

The second phase, beginning in the mid-2000s, was precipitated by an important set of institutional changes. Most important was the introduction of direct elections for local politicians who had previously been elected through a proportional system. These local politicians were particularly important for unions owing to an important feature of Indonesian industrial relations, whereby minimum wages are set on a regional basis. In the same period that direct elections for local government were introduced, the power to set minimum wages was devolved from national to local officials as part of a governmental decentralisation.

This second phase was not an abandonment of street politics, but a repurposing of them. Street protests suddenly had clear targets. Unions wanted to be able to directly pressure local officials over minimum wage determinations, and more generally they wanted to use street politics to demonstrate the size and significance of unions as a constituency.

The third phase, beginning around 2009, involved more direct engagement with elections. This included formally supporting candidates in presidential elections and even running union candidates in national legislative elections. Importantly, unions explicitly chose to eschew formal alliances with any one political party, and, aside from a few unsuccessful initiatives, avoided forming a specific labour party. Instead, candidates were run on the tickets of a range of parties, a strategy that was made possible by the non-programmatic nature of Indonesian political parties. Again, unions continued to actively engage in protest politics. So the entire period can be read as one in which street politics continued to be important, but were combined in increasingly sophisticated ways with electoral engagement.

These engagements won a number of concrete victories. Unions influenced the passage of a set of pro-labour industrial relations laws and successfully blocked legal reforms that unions saw as harmful to workers. In the early years of democracy, unions were more successful at this national policy engagement than they were with the important issue of minimum wage increases. However, with both the devolution of wage determination to the local level as well as increasingly sophisticated strategic engagements, unions were, over the past decade, able to win significant real increases to the regional minima.

One of the closing chapters of the book draws on a multi-site survey of workers about their electoral views over two consecutive rounds of national elections, in 2009 and 2014. The data is used to test whether the combination of street politics and electoral engagement has been successful in shaping Indonesia's working class as a coherent voting bloc. Put in other terms, they are interested in whether workers' voting behaviours reflect an understanding of their interests as class interests. The answer, as it so often is for sociologists, is that it is complicated. Some unions in some places had success in translating campaigns into votes for worker candidates. However, Caraway and Ford find that this effect tended to be limited, especially by union affiliation. As they

pithily summarise, the slogan of one of the unions' electoral campaigns – “workers electing workers” – “would be more accurately described as FSPMI members electing FSPMI cadres”.

The brief overview of the authors' main arguments presented here has not done justice to the richness of the book, but hopefully it has given the sense that this is an important analysis of a fascinating case, and one which, at least outside of the region, is not widely known or discussed. I think readers who are not Indonesia experts will find rich material for comparison and consideration.

In order to demonstrate the comparative value, I would like to highlight some elements of this case which are striking in comparison to the South African case, and in doing so I will raise some questions. First, there is the chronological parallel, with both countries achieving democracy within four years of each other in the 1990s, both at a high point of the period of neoliberal globalisation. However, whereas Indonesian unions played little role in the pro-democracy struggles, and entered a period of explosive growth only after democratic space had been opened, South African unions were central protagonists of the anti-Apartheid movement. While the beginning of the democratic era in Indonesia saw a proliferation of new unions who had no history of political engagement, South African unions entered democracy with a single dominant union federation, COSATU, who had formed a political alliance with the ANC movement which became the ruling political party.

This history led to political strategies of the two movements that could be taken as polar opposites. Whereas Indonesian unions avoided political alliances and consciously engaged with a range of parties in order to avoid political co-optation, South African unions took a (now highly criticised) decision to remain within their political alliance and work within and through the ruling party, even as the party's policy stances took on an increasingly neoliberal character.

And yet, despite these divergent strategies, I found myself thinking that it might be possible to give a similarly “optimistic” account of South African unions' political achievements over the past three decades. South Africa has also passed a generally pro-worker slate of labour legislation. Unions have even won, in the past ten years, significant legal restrictions on labour brokering or labour hire as well as the introduction of a national minimum wage.

However, many view the South African unions as spectacularly unsuccessful. Union density in the private sector has declined significantly, while unemployment has remained at crisis levels. Despite legal limitations, precarious forms of work have expanded throughout the period. Many would argue that the unions in this situation represent the interests of a shrinking section of privileged formally employed workers, rather than the working class as a whole. In my own work, I have questioned this narrative. One important rejoinder to this view is unions' engagements on social policy, where they have advocated for and won expansions of pro-poor social grants despite the fact that these constitute a net transfer from union members to the unorganised poor.

However, even as an avowed partisan of South African unions, I would have to admit that this is a question that is open to debate. And in order for it to be answered in the South African case, it is necessary to look broadly at unions' actions and policy positions, rather than simply concentrating on their engagements over labour law and in bargaining institutions that directly benefit their members. Indeed, if we look only in these spaces, it is hard to dispute that South African labour represents the interests of a relative minority of the working class.

To return to Caraway and Ford's book, I think that there are important questions which I was left with, whose answers seem important to this kind of comprehensive assessment of Indonesian unions' politics. One of the clearest questions is the relation of the unions to informal and unorganised workers. The book does note that 70 per cent of the workforce is in the informal sector. As I have explained in my views on the South African case, I do not suggest that we should

assume that the interest of formal organised and informal unorganised workers are in contrast, but neither can we assume they overlap.

There is not much discussion in the book of whether and how unions engage with this majority, and more importantly, whether and how the informal majority are affected by policy decisions that unions do or do not engage with.

This could also be important for thinking about the questions of the emergence of a working class identity, which is one of the concerns of the book. The chapter that focuses specifically on this question concludes that while there are some hints, there is no clear and broad-based working class identity which has emerged from unions' political campaigns. But I wondered if, hypothetically, union members and informal workers shared a common preference for comprehensive social welfare, or for the expansion of public healthcare, whether this would be captured as an expression of an established working class identity. From my understanding of this chapter, it would not. But especially in an environment when formal workers are a minority, it seems important to have a broad conception of working class politics and identities.

While my comments have raised some questions, I would frame these not as flaws, but as evidence of the book's strength. It is a credit to Caraway's and Ford's rich historical account, drawing on their long engagements with Indonesian labour, that their analysis helped me think through cognate issues in the South African case on which I work. I have no doubt that labour scholars from a wide range of countries will find reading this book both enlightening about a national context they may not be familiar with, as well as stimulating of ideas in relation to countries which they know best.

References

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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