

# INDONESIA LABOUR ALERT

## CRACKDOWN ON FREE TRADE UNION

Indonesia, long cited as a major human rights violator by Amnesty International and other groups, has launched a vicious crackdown on the country's only free trade union. The 250,000-member SBSI (Indonesian Prosperity Trade Union) has been banned by its government, a repressive dictatorship that rules the world's fourth-largest country with an iron fist. The union desperately needs international labour solidarity to continue its work on behalf of the workers of low-wage Indonesia.

### Indonesia's bloody regime

The current government of Indonesia came to power in a military coup in 1965. General Suharto has held power ever since. He was re-elected this year in an election in which no other candidates were allowed to run and criticism of the president was against the law.

Indonesia invaded West Papua in 1963 and has killed thousands of indigenous Papuans. In 1975, it invaded the former Portuguese colony of East Timor. Under Indonesian occupation, one third of the Timorese people have died. In both territories, and in the province of Aceh, the Indonesian armed forces are engaged in brutal counter-insurgency wars.

Suharto converted Indonesia into an "investor's paradise" for Western multinational corporations.

Wages are kept low in order to attract multinationals: workers are paid an average of \$1 a day, the lowest rate among Asia's industrializing economies. Children as young as 13 work 10 hours a day in the factories of Indonesia.

Corporations rushed into Indonesia at the same time they began laying off employees in their home countries. The Suharto regime hopes to use them to turn Indonesia into a leading "Pacific Rim growth economy," following the lead of countries like South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. It is helped by Western donors, who gave Indonesia \$5.1 billion last year.

Indonesia's growth rate is certainly high, but the wealth is only for the few. Riches are concentrated in a handful of families, led by Suharto's own children. Per capita GNP is just \$440, compared to \$1,940 in neighbouring Malaysia and \$16,690 in Canada. Infant mortality is 61 per 1,000 births, compared to 23 in Malaysia and 7 in Canada.

The government-sponsored trade union is affiliated with the ruling party, GOLKAR. It is a yellow union that invariably backs employers against their workers. Other unions

that have been set up in opposition have been routinely crushed by the military.

### An alternative for workers

Two years ago, workers disgusted by the ineffectiveness of their "official" union formed the SBSI. This set off a wave of strikes, many of them demanding nothing more than payment of the official minimum wage of \$2 a day. Other demands included transport and daily food allowances, holiday bonuses, and better working conditions. Women workers have gone on strike to stop bodily indignities such as having to remove their underwear to prove they are menstruating when they apply for menstruation leave.

Last May a woman textile worker named Marsinah died under interrogation by government security officers. (In

Indonesia, interrogation is a virtual synonym for torture. A special United Nations investigator last year condemned Indonesia for a consistent pattern of torture.) Human rights groups believe she was murdered by a government that feared her leading role in labour activism among the factories of East Java. However, the government chose to coerce "confessions" from co-workers.

By this February, the SBSI had 250,000 members in 87 branches across the country. The union called a one-hour general strike for February 11, prompting a vicious clampdown by the government. SBSI chairman Muchtar Pakpahan was arrested along with other leaders. He has been charged with "spreading hatred" against the government, a criminal charge that carries a jail term of up to four and a half years. Despite the government response, at least three quarters of a million workers downed their tools to back the demand for payment of the minimum wage.

The SBSI has applied for membership in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which includes the Canadian Labour Congress.





*Strikers in Medan, Sumatra, April 1994*

## The empire strikes back

In April, the SBSI launched a series of strikes in Medan, an industrial city in North Sumatra. Tens of thousands walked off the job, an action that prompted hundreds of arrests and intervention by armed soldiers.

Following the Medan strikes, the interior ministry announced that the SBSI was henceforth "banned from carrying out any kind of activity."

The SBSI urgently needs international solidarity. Please consider passing a resolution in your local demanding that free trade unions be able to organize and the Indonesian government take steps to improve labour conditions. Also ask the Canadian government to review its cosy trade relationship with Indonesia.

## Canadian investment bankrolls repression

Hundreds of Canadian corporations have invested a total of more than \$3 billion in Indonesia, many of them with financial support from the government of Canada through its Export Development Corporation (EDC). Indonesia is also the second-largest recipient of bilateral Canadian aid dollars, and a leading target for the Chrétien government's Pacific Rim trade initiative.

Leading the charge are giants like Inco Ltd., which has spent over \$1.5 billion on a mining and smelting operation on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, at the same time as it

has made big layoffs at its operations in Sudbury, Ont. PT Inco Indonesia has destroyed huge tracts of rain forest since it opened the open-pit mine in 1968, three years after the Suharto regime took power. The EDC lent \$57.25 million to Inco for this overseas adventure, with additional financing coming from the governments of Australia, Japan, Norway, the U.K. and the U.S. Inco plans to triple production to 100 million pounds of nickel matte by 1995.

Another leading Canadian multinational with big dealings in Indonesia is Bata Shoes. The 2,000 workers at Bata's two factories in Java are the lowest-paid in the 70-country Bata empire. In 1979, Bata called in the military to break up strikes at one of the factories.

The East Timor Alert Network, a national human rights organization founded in 1987 by the Canadian Council of Churches, has called for a boycott of Bata Shoes as the first step towards Canadian divestment from Indonesia.

The Suharto regime has proved intransigent, saying that dissent will not be tolerated. (Vice-president Try Sutrisno, for example, has declared that "trouble-makers must be shot, and we will shoot them.") Economic sanctions, like those imposed against South Africa, are needed to force Indonesia to stop abusing the rights of its own people and those of its occupied territories like East Timor.

Supporters fear SBSI leader Muchtar Pakaphan, taken into custody on Aug. 16, is being tortured today. The current union chair, Ms Sunanti, has again appealed for international solidarity. "It is the intention of the government to destroy the SBSI," she said.

## Addresses for action

Please write in support of the SBSI's right to organize freely:

General Yogie S. Memed  
Minister of the Interior  
Jalan Medan Merdeka Utara, No. 7  
Central Jakarta  
Indonesia

Please also send letters to the government of Canada, asking for trade to Indonesia to be linked to human rights:

~~André Ouellet~~ Lloyd Axworthy  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
House of Commons  
Ottawa Ont.  
K1A 0A6

Send copies of all letters to (and for more information):

Labour in Indonesia Solidarity Project  
c/o East Timor Alert Network (ETAN)  
PO Box 562, Station P  
Toronto  
M5S 2T1  
(416) 531-5850 (phone/fax)