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Made in Indonesia: Indonesian Workers Since Suharto

by Dan LA BOTZ, Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2001, 395 pp., ISBN 0-89608-642-9.

Dan La Botz has written an important and timely book on efforts to build labour organizations in Indonesia. Based on an extensive range of interviews conducted in 1999 and 2000, along with additional research, he provides readers with an in-depth understanding of workers' struggles and current political developments in that country.

La Botz begins by looking at three generations of student activists who joined the workers in struggling to build a genuine labour movement, and who were involved in forcing the hated dictator Suharto to resign in 1998. This approach does three things: it personifies the struggles by giving a sense of some of the actors; it allows the reader to understand that the organizing necessary to depose a dictator did not happen overnight, and it gives a sense of the issues and difficulties that activists have faced in trying to build genuine labour organizations.

The first major section of the book provides an overview of the political-economic system within a larger global context. It examines Indonesia's economic development during Suharto's rule (1965-1997), with a particular focus on the "Asian" economic crisis of 1997 and political developments since that time. It also recounts the terrible effects of Dutch colonialism on the people, their efforts to organize and achieve national independence, and developments in the period between independence in 1949 and the coup of 1965 that led to Suharto and the military seizing power.

The second section focuses on efforts to develop popular responses to the crisis of Suharto's "New Order." The author begins by looking at the role of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in the struggle—and some of the contradictions within—and then looks at

three different efforts to build an independent labour movement: the conservative "reformasi" wing of the state-sponsored unions that succeeded through encouragement of the U.S. State Department and the AFL-CIO; the independent, but relatively moderate efforts of Muchtar Pakpahan and the SBSI labour centre; and then the independent but radical efforts of Dita Sari and the FNPBI labour centre. This section highlights the extreme diversity of the Indonesian labour movement today and the strengths and weaknesses of these various projects.

The third section, "Alternatives to Global Capitalism," concentrates on the People's Democratic Party, with whom the FNPBI is affiliated, and its efforts to change the established social order. La Botz ends with a chapter on Indonesia and international labour solidarity, and an epilogue on "socialism from below."

The reader is thus presented with a wealth of information on the "development" (or really, misdevelopment) of Indonesia and efforts by dedicated activists to change conditions for Indonesian workers. La Botz and South End Press deserve our thanks for producing this material and distributing it so quickly. However, despite appreciating La Botz' descriptive material, three aspects of his analysis trouble me.

First, despite the title, this is a book about labour *activists*, not workers. We learn a lot about Indonesian production (as part of a global production network), and more about Indonesian activists who are trying to build labour unions and labour centres, but there is actually quite little about Indonesian workers. While this is understandable in a project where one visits a country for a short time and then tries to share the wealth of information obtained, we end up knowing

what activists and organizers are thinking—many, if not most, of whom are college-educated—but we do not really know how “ordinary” workers are seeing things.

Second and more critical, La Botz takes a Marxist approach to understanding societies and, at least in the final analysis, prioritizes economics. This reduction of political economy to simple economics leads to analytical problems. Indonesia becomes little more than an economic production zone, important because of its cheap labour. Granted, it *is* that in many ways, but other countries can provide cheap labour as well, often cheaper than that of Indonesia. And if the labour organizations that La Botz champions are successful, the gap between the cost of Indonesian labour and, for example, Bangladeshi and/or Vietnamese labour will only widen to the Indonesians’ detriment. However, Indonesia also has a huge geo-strategic importance: it sits astride the major oil shipping routes from the Middle East to East Asia and, most importantly to Japan, is itself an oil producer. The necessity for it to be controlled so as to prevent any “unfriendly” from threatening the oil “life line” seems overwhelming, and far more important than the cheap labour it provides to multinational corporations. This underestimation of geo-political factors means that La Botz is actually quite limited in his criticisms of the activities of the U.S. Government and U.S. organizations in Indonesia. For example he appears to be remarkably sanguine about the activities of the AFL-CIO’s American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) in the efforts to build independent unions. Even if it is clear that ACILS has worked to have some activists released from prison and made other positive contributions, and to my knowledge there is not any evidence to suggest that its activities in Indonesia are similar to previous AFL-CIO foreign operations in

the Philippines or Central or South America, there is a need to examine this type of involvement from the larger perspective of Indonesia’s geo-strategic importance for the U.S. empire in East Asia.

My third concern about the book is the political analysis. La Botz is clear that the oppression and exploitation of Indonesian workers will continue as long as the current social order remains in place, a point with which I agree. In the last section of the book, he basically projects some activists’ understanding of a need for a revolution. However, La Botz trips off on a Marxist approach to revolution, without really questioning why Marxist-led revolutions have not done so terribly well—a point he recognizes but, projecting a Trotskyist sensitivity, does not let this deter him—and even contends that the situation in Indonesia is similar to that of Russia in 1905! Surprisingly, he ignores the experiences and analyses of the KMU Labor Center of the Philippines, one of the most dynamic and developed labour movements in the world, whose experiences in many ways parallel and would seem immediately relevant to Indonesian activists and workers. I guess the KMU does not fit his political analysis, but to suggest that 1905 Russia and its political organizations are more relevant currently than a contemporary militant labour movement in a nearby country that has faced similar problems (Western colonialization, detrimental development, dictatorship) while sharing similar histories, economies and cultures seems a bit over the top.

This suggests my frustration with La Botz’ book. Excited to see it and wanting to be enthusiastic about it, I found myself increasingly less satisfied. The strengths of the book are his descriptions and interviews with key activists, which make it required reading for anyone interested in the effects of colonialism on an oppressed country and in the

development of workers' organizations in Indonesia. But it is only an introduction, and I hope that others will provide the focus that La Botz suggested he

would provide before he decided to turn to Russia in 1905.

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Working for McDonald's in Europe: The Unequal Struggle?

par Tony ROYLE, London : Routledge, 2000, 248 p., ISBN 0-415-20787-8.

Eu égard aux structures de régulation nationale ou supranationale des régions où elles exercent leurs activités, les multinationales adaptent-elles ou imposent-elles leurs politiques de gestion en matière de relations du travail ? Les droits des travailleurs sont-ils ou non protégés par ces mesures de régulation ? Voilà les questions majeures qui guident cet ouvrage de Tony Royle dont la réflexion s'inspire des politiques de gestion en matière d'emploi qu'applique en Europe la multinationale McDonald's. À partir de ces interrogations, l'auteur en arrive au constat suivant : le type de conflit émanant des divers systèmes nationaux de régulation entre le mouvement syndical et l'entreprise constitue le résultat inéluctable d'une lutte entre deux groupes d'acteurs d'inégales forces, compte tenu de la faveur dont bénéficie actuellement l'idéologie néolibérale dans le contexte de mondialisation économique. En ce sens, une société aussi puissante que McDonald's parvient bien souvent à escamoter ces droits des travailleurs et à garder intact ses principes de gestion étroitement liés au libéralisme économique (comme son anti-syndicalisme), et ce, même sur le continent européen souvent perçu comme le dernier bastion occidental de la protection collective des droits démocratiques des travailleurs.

D'une durée totale d'environ six ans, le travail de recherche de Royle débute par un examen des pratiques en matière d'emploi de McDonald's en Allemagne et au Royaume-Uni pour ensuite s'étendre à onze autres pays européens. Le travail empirique de cette étude s'inspire de diverses techniques de cueillettes de données telles que le dépouillement de

statistiques officielles, des périodes d'observation participante et des entrevues réalisées avec la haute direction de la firme, les gérants de restaurants, les représentants syndicaux et les travailleurs.

Outre les parties d'introduction et de conclusion, l'ouvrage de Royle se divise en sept chapitres principaux desquels émanent cinq thématiques : les grandes lignes de l'historique de McDonald's, son expansion au-delà des frontières ainsi que sa structure et son organisation sur le marché européen (chap. 2) ; une description de son système de franchisés, de son organisation du travail et de sa culture d'entreprise (chap. 3 et 4) ; un examen des problèmes liés à la syndicalisation et à l'application de conventions collectives dans ses restaurants européens (chap. 5) ; une description des divers modèles législatifs nationaux européens concernant les droits de représentation et de participation des travailleurs sur leurs lieux de travail ainsi qu'une analyse des impacts de ces mécanismes légaux sur les conditions de travail des employés chez McDonald's (chap. 6 et 7) ; une analyse d'une portion de la législation supranationale de l'Union européenne touchant les multinationales, soit celle portant sur les comités d'entreprise européens (chap. 8).

De ces thématiques se dégagent trois idées centrales. D'abord, l'analyse portant sur le système de franchisés, l'organisation du travail et la culture d'entreprise de McDonald's apprend au lecteur que les franchises constituent des entités indépendantes de la maison-mère légalement mais dépendantes économiquement. Cette double réalité confère à la firme des possibilités accrues de