

Indonesian workers continue to protest pro-big business “omnibus law”

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Protests against Indonesia’s new pro-big business “omnibus law” have continued into their second week across the country. Workers and youth correctly fear that the bill will be used to slash job protections, further enrich big business, and harm the environment. The new law includes more than 1,200 amendments to 79 existing laws. Nearly 6,000 people have been arrested so far.

Workers held rallies in Jakarta and other cities such as Bandung and Medan on Monday, demanding the repeal of the law that was rushed through parliament on October 5. Last week, approximately one million workers from industries including automotive, pharmaceutical, and textiles participated each day in the planned strike from Tuesday to Thursday in more than 60 locations, according to organisers.

Workers expressed deep frustration with the law. Francain Edy, from Makassar on Sulawesi Island, told the *Straits Times* last week that he already earned less than the monthly minimum wage of \$300 for the city and has had his pay slashed as a result of the pandemic. “Our welfare is only going to worsen [because of the new law],” he stated.

A 51-year-old factory worker named Entin expressed concern for her children: “What will happen to my children in the future? They don’t have proper qualifications. It’s already tough getting a job, why does the government have to bother labourers like us?” The last sentiment was echoed by numerous other workers.

Ema Liliefna, an official with the Confederation of All Indonesian Trade Unions (KSBSI), told Reuters on Monday, “We want the omnibus law to be revoked, and the government to issue a presidential decree to replace it.” She stated that approximately 1,000 workers had taken part in the demonstration in Jakarta.

The state’s response has been to employ violence against the strikers and demonstrators. On October 6, police first used water cannon and tear gas to attack peaceful protesters and blockaded Jakarta to prevent a larger rally from taking place. Police used similar methods throughout the week.

As in the United States during protests against police violence, members of the press have also been directly targeted during the past week’s demonstrations. Suara.com journalist Peter Rotti and his colleague, videographer Adit Rianto S., were attacked by police after filming officers attacking a student protester in Jakarta on Thursday.

Rotti’s camera was taken away and the journalist was beaten by six police officers. He stated afterwards, “I explained that I was a journalist, but they still grabbed and dragged me. I was dragged and beaten until my hands and temples were bruised.”

This was not an isolated incident. According to Indonesia’s Alliance of Independent Journalists on Friday, at least seven reporters, likely far more, have been attacked while covering the rallies, including a reporter for CNN Indonesia, named Tohirin, who photographed police putting protesters in choke-holds. Ponco Sulaksono, a journalist for Merahputih.com, went missing late Thursday.

Among its many pro-business clauses, the new legislation extends contract employment indefinitely, leaving workers in precarious positions; removes a requirement for the government to consider inflation when setting the minimum wage; eliminates mandatory leave, including for childbirth, marriage, and bereavement; and sharply reduces employers’ mandatory severance pay from 32 times a worker’s monthly salary to 19 times. It will also slash the corporate tax rate from 22 to 20 percent by 2022.

The new law and the violent police response are part of a global assault by the bourgeoisie on the international working class. The ruling class in each country is attempting to force workers, farmers, and youth to bear the brunt of sharply growing economic crises while also dispensing with the façade of liberal democracy.

At the same time, the protests by Indonesian workers against the pro-business omnibus law are part of an international fight back against these attacks. Workers and young people are waging a common struggle for their rights to safe, high quality jobs and education whether in the United States, Greece, Hong Kong, Thailand, and other parts of the world.

In this struggle, however, the labour unions serve big business and work to divert workers into political dead ends. Said Iqbal of the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI) stated last week that he would work through the courts—a move to contain and suppress the protests. In fact, this is precisely what the government wants, with President Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi, denouncing protesters and telling them to challenge the law in the judiciary instead.

Demonstrating the broad anger towards the president, who left Jakarta for a trip to Central Kalimantan on October 8, the Twitter hashtag #JokowiKabur (Jokowi Runs Away) trended on the platform.

KSBSI President Elly Rosita Silaban stated last week, “The actions taken by workers are the result of the government not understanding the situation of workers during the pandemic. In addition, the new law degrades workers’ rights, eliminating most of what they receive today... We oppose it and hope the president can withdraw this law. We have prepared a lawsuit for a judicial review to the constitutional court regarding articles that contradict the law.”

The recent protests, however, were not caused simply by the new law or the pandemic. The economic crisis this year compounded long-standing attacks on the Indonesian working class that are the result of capitalism itself. Therefore, the unions’ claims that workers can defend their interests in the courts—an arm of the capitalist state carrying out the attacks in the first place—is entirely fraudulent.

The government claims the law will create one million jobs a year. Even if this were true, millions of others would still be left without employment while

any jobs actually created would be highly exploitative. Just as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 6.9 million workers have been left unemployed with the government announcing last month an additional 3.72 million workers had been sacked in the world’s fourth most populous country. The official unemployment rate is expected to reach 9.5 percent this year, nearly double the rate last year.



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