

Indonesian presidential candidates make empty promises to improve social conditions

Owen Howell
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Last week, the final debate was held between the three candidates running in Indonesia's 2024 presidential election, which will take place tomorrow. The debate, televised across the nation live from Jakarta, focused primarily on social issues including health and welfare.

Election frontrunner, Prabowo Subianto, promoted his so-called "National Transformation Strategy" promising to provide free meals for schoolchildren and pregnant mothers. He claimed the scheme would prevent malnutrition and help end extreme poverty in Indonesia.

Ganjar Pranowo, former governor of Central Java, pledged to distribute social aid more evenly across the Indonesian archipelago. As part of his campaign to promote himself as a "progressive," Ganjar said he was committed to improving Indonesians' work life by raising salaries and paying off farmers' debts.

The third candidate, Anies Baswedan, also agreed to provide social assistance with promises of more affordable education and to raise wages. Moreover, repeating earlier campaign statements, Anies said he would combat social inequality, both between rich and poor and between urban and rural areas.

None of these three capitalist politicians has the slightest intention of addressing the deteriorating social conditions facing workers and the poor. Under conditions of a worsening global economic crisis, whoever is elected will seek to boost business profits at the expense of working people.

Workers and the poor have already been hit hard by rising prices for basic commodities including housing and transport. The World Bank estimates that 9.5 percent of Indonesians, or 26.2 million people, currently live below the poverty line, while over 40 percent are deemed "economically insecure" and at a

"high risk" of falling back into poverty.

In a recent interview with Al Jazeera, Ratna, 34, a market vendor in Sumatra, explained: "The cost of living is rising in Indonesia and essentials are becoming more expensive. Rice and cooking oil are more expensive now while salaries are still low."

Indonesia ranks as the sixth highest in the world for wealth inequality, which has grown faster there over the past 20 years than in any other Southeast Asian country. The four richest Indonesians are worth more than the combined wealth of the poorest 100 million people, according to Oxfam.

Part of the presidential debate focussed on health care in conditions where the public health system has been severely undermined by the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic. Once again the three candidates made empty promises to improve health services.

Ganjar claimed he would restore the requirement to spend 5 percent of the national budget on public health. Introduced in 2009, the measure was abolished last August as a new law was passed ending mandatory health spending. This followed the slashing of public health funds carried out by the administration of President Joko Widodo during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to bail out corporations and the banks.

Ganjar declared that new health centres were needed around the country to ensure every village has one health facility and one health worker. He claimed he would aim to guarantee available doctors and essential medicines in rural locations.

Indonesia has a chronic shortage of doctors. According to the World Health Organisation, Indonesia has a ratio of just 0.6 doctor for every 1,000 people, in a country of 270 million people. The low standard of healthcare has led to an outflow of better-off patients

who spend around \$10 billion annually for medical treatment overseas, including in Singapore and Malaysia.

Another topic that arose in the debate was the Widodo administration's job creation bill, known as the Omnibus Law. The pro-business law has provoked mass protests, both before and after its enactment in 2021, by workers and young people, who correctly feared it would be used to enrich big business and slash job protections. It allows employers the ability to deny workers permanent work status and other benefits, as well as reduce wages, severance pay, and paid leave.

Ganjar declared that he would review the Omnibus Law if elected. Anies cited statistics that some 45 million people lack jobs with decent salaries but had nothing to say about the legislation. Prabowo studiously avoiding saying anything on the Omnibus Law, or any labour issues.

None of the candidates was challenged on their past record on these social issues. All three are connected either directly or indirectly to the Widodo administration that rammed through the Omnibus Law and presided over the gutting of workers' conditions, welfare and public health.

Prabowo served as defence minister in Widodo's cabinet, while Anies was education and culture minister from 2014 to 2016 and served as Widodo's official spokesperson for his 2014 election campaign. Ganjar is the official candidate of Widodo's party, the PDI-P, and was a member of parliament from 2004 to 2013.

The worsening social crisis has led to widespread alienation from the political establishment and all of its parties. Under these conditions, a new political formation—the Labour Party (Partai Buruh or PB)—has been established, claiming to oppose the Omnibus Law and to represent the interests of workers. Various political analysts suggest that PB could win enough votes to enter parliament.

The party was founded in 2021 by 11 major trade unions and is headed by Said Iqbal, also president of the Indonesian Trade Union Confederation (KSPI). Nuruddin Hidayat, a leading PB member, told the *South China Morning Post* last month, "The fact is all the political parties in the DPR [House of Representatives] assented to the Omnibus Law, which only shows that none of them are on the workers' side."

However, the trade union apparatus has played a crucial role in the suppression of struggles by the working class to defend its social and democratic rights. The formation of the PB is aimed at diverting the opposition of the working class into safe parliamentary channels and propping up bourgeois rule.

The Indonesian unions, particularly the KSPI, are intimately involved with the political establishment in Jakarta and its sordid intrigues. In the last presidential election in 2019, the KSPI openly endorsed Prabowo—a notorious Suharto-era general responsible for the brutal suppression of opposition to the dictatorship.

None of the establishment parties represent the interests of workers and the poor. The task before the Indonesian working class to break from all capitalist parties and politicians and build an independent movement to defend their democratic rights and social conditions, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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