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Edward Webster
University of the Witwatersrand, edward.webster@wits.ac.za

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Review of Michelle Ford's 'Workers and Intellectuals: NGO's, Trade Unions and the Indonesian Labour Movement'

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Book Review

Michelle Ford (2009) *Workers and Intellectuals: NGO's, Trade Unions and the Indonesian Labour Movement*. Asian Studies Association of Australia: Southeast Asia Publication Series. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press/University of Hawaii Press/KITLV. ISBN: 978-0824-8344-70

REVIEWED BY ***Edward Webster, University of the Witwatersrand***

The growing inadequacy of traditional trade unions in defending workers' rights and in resolving new issues emerging in workplaces has created both the space and the need for new actors to fill the gap. The emerging role of these new actors is clearest in the successful organisation of self-employed workers in India through the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the variety of networks linking workers globally, and the innovative role of HIV/AIDS peer educators in the workplace in South Africa (Bhatt 2006, Tarrow 2005, Dickinson 2009).

With the exception of Seidman (2007) little attention has been paid to the impact of NGOs in the struggle for worker rights in developing countries. Michelle Ford's meticulous account of the role of labour NGOs as the principle advocate for workers' rights under the authoritarian rule of Suharto's New Order between 1966 to 1998 shows how NGO activists were able to go beyond the constraints of traditional trade unionism. She concludes this important contribution to Global Labour Studies by arguing: 'The Indonesian case confirms that new understandings of the labour movement are necessary in order to properly document and theorize the contribution of labour NGOs and other non-traditional labour movement organisations to that movement' (Ford, 205).

The empirical heart of the book is the identification of seven broad categories of labour NGOs on the basis of their function and composition. Five of these groups – NGOs established by ex-unionists, ex-workers, Christians, students and feminists – engaged mainly in grassroots organising, although some did policy and research work. In addition, legal aid NGOs with a strong focus on labour were involved in legal aid and advocacy, some alongside intensive programmes of grassroots organising. Finally, there were a number of NGOs that focused exclusively on policy advocacy and research, either entirely on labour or on a variety of social issues.

Although labour NGOs resisted attempts by the New Order regime to impose their state corporatist controls over them, Ford argues that both the government and the labour NGOs shared a 'conservative understanding of trade unionism and worker activism that offers no place for institutional non-worker intellectuals in the labour movement' (Ford, 17). In the New Order discourse non-workers were 'outsiders' in the trade unions who sought to use labour for their own ends, while for the labour NGOs, the labour movement was necessarily constituted entirely of worker-led unions. Instead

of seeing themselves as part of the labour movement, they saw themselves – and acted – as outsiders who stood apart from the movement, seeking to open the workers' eyes to new ways of understanding and drawing public attention to their concerns. Unlike the revolutionary intellectuals in the student groups who saw themselves as the vanguard of a workers movement, the Indonesian labour NGOs, Ford argues, accepted the Social Democratic model of unionism and believed that it 'was the workers themselves who could change their own fate' (Ford, 116). She calls them 'ethical intellectuals', as their activism was primarily defined by its moral dimension.

In spite of the reforms brought about in the post-Suharto period, Ford argues that NGO labour activists continue to waver between their desire to help workers and their belief that they have no legitimate role in the labour movement. She attributes this ambivalence to the highly stratified nature of Indonesian society.

The book ends suggestively by arguing that there is a need to reconsider our theoretical models of organised labour in light of the new forms of collective labour activism in emerging economies. Unfortunately the book does not really give an indication of how such a theory could be recast. Although the author refers to the notion of 'organic intellectual' and 'movement intellectual', these concepts are not developed in the study. But the strength of the book lies in its identification of the dilemmas faced by middle class intellectuals in their relationship to the workers movement.

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Edward Webster is Professor of Sociology and Research Professor at the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand South Africa and was Ela Bhatt Visiting Professor of Development and Decent Work at the International Centre for Development and Decent Work, Kassel University, Germany.