

# News Digest

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Monthly Newsletter of the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM)

## HK forum exposes impacts of WTO on migrant workers

"THE WORLD TRADE Organization is inherently flawed. Its policies force people to work abroad." This was stressed by Antonio Tujan, Jr. of IBON Philippines during the Forum on WTO and Migration held in Hong Kong on September 5, 2004.

Tujan, who was one of the resource speakers, also said that WTO policies that result to bankruptcy of poor peasants and labour contractualization in countries like the Philippines lead to poverty and migration. A study of IBON Philippines, he revealed, said that Filipinos migrate not to earn additional income but to have an income due to job scarcity.

The forum served as the kick off activity of the People's Caravan 2004 for Food Sovereignty East and South East Asia leg, which was sponsored by the Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific (PAN-AP). The Hong Kong activities were done in coordination with the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB), and the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM).

More than 130 migrant workers, local NGOs, students and migrant advocates gained first hand information on how the WTO has changed world economy at the expense of people's rights and welfare.

Irene Fernandez of Tenaganita Malaysia, who discussed the issues of globalization and migration, said that migrant labor has been used in the globalization process since its first wave

which was during the colonialism period. She relayed the current global reality of "Two Worlds" with one controlling wealth and power, and the other side that is poor, in debt and divided.

During the later part of the forum, the Malaysian activist and former political prisoner also reported on the situation of undocumented workers in Malaysia and the human rights violations committed against them during the crackdown in 2003.

Connie Bragas-Regalado, a veteran migrant activist, emphasized the need for the migrant workers to form organizations to resist globalization, WTO and forced migration. Moreover, she encouraged the migrant workers to join the campaign against the WTO in Hong Kong next year. She also invited the participants to join in the

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efforts of migrant groups to form an International Migrants Alliance that is set to start next year.

The People's Caravan 2004 for Food Sovereignty, initiated by the PANAP, intends to highlight the destructive effects of the WTO agreements especially to agriculture and food. Mr. Gilbert Sape, PANAP program officer, explained to the participants the history, objectives and process of the People's Caravan 2004. He called for support to the People's Agenda on Food Sovereignty that is expected to come out from the said activity.

The said forum was organized as part of the month-long People's Caravan for Food Sovereignty that advocates on issues of the WTO, genetic engineering, pesticides, and agrochemical industries, according to him.

Additionally, said Ramon Bultron of APMM, it is also a part of the preparations for the campaign against the 6<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting of the WTO slated in Hong Kong on December 2005. Mr. Bultron reported an "overwhelming opposition" of the participants to the WTO. He said the many of the migrant groups expressed their desire to "re-echo" the forum to their members.

## APMM Participates in WCC- CCA Consultation on Undocumented Children

THE WORLD COUNCIL of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia held the South East Asian Consultation on the Role of Churches in Caring for and Protecting Undocumented Children last September 1 - 4, 2004 at YMCA Hostel in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Representatives of the National Council of Churches in Malaysia and the Philippines including NGO representatives from Indonesia, Philippines, Hong Kong and Malaysia participated in this event. The consultation was a response to the WCC-CCA consultation on affirming fullness of life and dignity of children held in Bangkok in November 2001.

APMM presented the general situation and struggle of undocumented migrants in Asia and informed the participants of the highlights of the regional conference on undocumented migrants organized by APMM together with TENAGANITA and MIGRANTE International last October 2003 in Port Dickson, Malaysia.



Other participants presented the situation of undocumented children in their respective countries especially along the borders of Sabah, Malaysia.

The consultation's communiqué together with the plan of action were presented and approved. In particular, a fact-finding mission in Sabah will be held towards the end of this year or early next year depending on the outcome of the recent Malaysian government declaration to crackdown on undocumented migrants.

## Petition vs Phil gov't taxes kicks off in Macau

IN VIEW OF the Philippine government's proposal to generate more revenue to replenish its bankrupt economy through its eight tax revenue measures that affect directly or indirectly OFWs, a petition was discussed and agreed by OFWs on 03 September 2004 in a migrants forum held at the Morrison Chapel Pastoral Initiative Centre.

The forum, initiated by APMM and Migrante Sectoral Party, was attended by leaders and members of the Capampangan Association of Macau, Quezonian Association of Macau, Macau Cordillerans Association, MSP - Macau, Morrison Chapel Pastoral Initiative Group, Solid Rock Mission and individual OFWs who came to seek assistance for their respective case.

The petition outlined the opposition of OFWs to the proposal by the Department of Finance's Secretary Amatong and its Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) and National Tax Research Center (NTRC) to re-impose the annual income tax for overseas Filipinos if the eight tax revenue measures of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo are not be approved into bill by the Philippine Congress.

The petition also raised the issue of the Manila International Airport Authority's proposal to re-implement the airport fee unto the shoulders of OFWs, the text tax and scrapping of the OWWA Omnibus Policies.

Earlier, a petition was sent to the Office of the President and representatives of the Philippine Congress and Senate

that was signed by the Association of Filipino Pharmacist of Macau, Association of Ilocanos in Macau, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, Batangas Association of Macau, Capampangan Association of Macau, Filipino Engineers and Architects Society of Macau, Quezonian Association of Macau, Macau Cordillerans Association, Migrante Sectoral Party-Macau, Morrison Chapel Pastoral Group, Neuvo Ecijano Association of Macau, Our Lady of Manaoag, Pagkaburonyog kan mga Bicolano sa Macau, Fr. Agustin D. Datu, *SOLT*, Pastor Amante Padua of the Light House Baptist Mission and the Sto Nino Association.

This petition received a reply from the Office of the President claiming that there would be no annual income tax to be imposed on OFWs.

## Implementation of Financial Management Proposal, most probable - CLA

IN AN OFFICIAL letter to APMM, the Council of Labor Affairs (CLA) admitted that its proposal to financially manage foreign workers is still in its preliminary stage. The CLA added that it will research more information (on the scheme) and probe public opinion before implementing its proposal.

At the same time, the CLA washed its hands off the side agreement imposed by Ritek on its Filipino workers that stipulated that the workers agree and authorize their employer to remit their forced savings to Metrobank once they have returned home. The CLA mentioned that this was merely "an agreement between the migrant workers and their employer."

In a related development, MECO stated officially to APMM that it was still awaiting the response of Ritek's broker why such a provision in the employment contract with the Filipino workers exists. The response should have been given the third week of September but up to now, MECO has not received any word from the broker.

Meanwhile, an inter-faith/NGO forum on the issue held last Sept. 16 in Taipei was a success. The participants

included six Christian denominations including the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan which is the biggest Christian Church in the island, the Muslim community, five NGO's and a foreign teachers' mass organization.

Catholic Church NGO's on the other hand started their petition signing against the proposal on September 26.

The Taipei Times made a follow up features article on the issue on the same date and thus corrected their editorial of August 9. It then stated that the CLA proposal had been canceled.

Chen I Min, the deputy director general of the CLA's Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training was quoted as saying in the article that they are not going to push through with the proposal if the workers are strongly against it.

But in a meeting between the CLA with different NGO's the next day, Lai Jin-Ling the deputy chief of the CLA in a reaction to one of the participants stated that the Labor council would not stop doing what they think is right to do.

## OFW groups in Taiwan call for inquiry on problems

MIGRANTE SECTORAL PARTY (MSP) - Taiwan Chapter, KaSaPi, GITA and Rainmakers are calling for a Congressional inquiry on issues of migrant workers in Taiwan as a result of revelations made during a dialogue between the migrants and MECO last August 15.

Among these concerns include MECO's admission that there is an existing agreement between POEA and Taiwan's CLA that require rehires to pay placement fees and other requirements for new hires before going back to Taiwan after three years of work. In effect this is an admission that the CLA has imposed its will on a Philippine government agency.

At the same time, MECO admitted that side agreements which abound in Taiwan are illegal under Philippine law.

Another issue to be raised in the inquiry is the new CLA proposal on financial management of foreign workers. Although this has not yet been implemented, at least one factory called Ritek is implementing one of its provisions.

## Migrante Partylist - HK holds 2<sup>nd</sup> Assembly

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY members of Migrante Sectoral Party - Hong Kong from 83 chapters attended its Second General Assembly last September 26 at the Li Hall of St. John's Cathedral.

The group approved reports prepared by the executive committee on the electoral campaign the party conducted in Hong Kong. MSP-HK played a crucial role in the success of the first Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) in Hong Kong and delivered the most number of votes abroad for a partylist group.

The delegates also approved the party's General Program of Actions 2004 - 2005 in Hong Kong that mainly consisted of intensifying the campaign for OFW concerns, widespread education drive among its members,

and strengthening of the rights and welfare assistance program of the party.

New officers were elected led by chairperson-elect Vicky Casia-Cabantac. Cabantac, former vice chairperson, replaced Conie Bragas-Regalado who was elected to chair the whole MSP organization worldwide and is now currently based in the Philippines.

Other officers elected were Mila Ramos as vice chairperson;

UNIFIL vice chairperson Rowena dela Cruz as secretary-general; Lorna Sagun as deputy secretary general, and; Bella Cariaga as Treasure.



## HK OFWs decry austerity measures by Philippine consulate

HUNDREDS OF MIGRANT workers led by the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL) together with the Migrante Sectoral Party Hong Kong (MSP-HK), denounced the decision of the Philippine Consulate General (PCG) to continue its survey on the possible closure of the consulate on Sundays and the collection of HK\$212.50 authentication fee for the processing of employment contracts, in a rally held on October 3.



Angry protesters accused Consul General Corazon Belmonte-Jover of toeing the line of the national government to adopt austerity and taxation at the expense of services to migrant workers. They questioned where her responsibilities lie as a public servant, "Shouldn't it be maximum service delivery, protection of our wages and promotion of our rights?"

On August 29 this year, the PCG released a survey disguised as getting the pulse of the community but formulated in a manner leading OFWs to answer 'Yes' to the closure of the consulate on Sundays. Practically, the Consul General wants to cut down on expenses on electricity, maintenance, security, and other utilities incurred by the consulate on Sunday, which is not a normal working day.

Immediately, 96 organizations that participated in the Hong Kong-wide consultation on the Migrants Legislative Agenda unanimously expressed strong opposition to the survey. Migrante International also revealed that the budget of the Philippine Consulate increased by 30 million as approved by Congress this year.

In a move to allay protests, the Department of Foreign Affairs announced that the Philippine consulate in Hong Kong will remain open on Sundays. Despite this statement, the Consul General stubbornly pushed for the continuation of the survey in a Leaders Forum held on September 26. She also held on to the PCG's continued collection of the dubious authentication fee for the processing of employment contracts.



"It is high time for Congen Jover to choose whether she's for genuine service and responsibility to the migrant workers or for policies that are clearly detrimental to her constituents," Dolores Balladares of UNIFIL said.

## Recall of Ambassador Guinomla - MIGRANTE (KSA)

FILIPINO MIGRANT WORKERS have reiterated their demand for the immediate recall and filing of administrative charges for negligence of duty against Ambassador Bahnarim Guinomla, head of the diplomatic post in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

It was in December 2003 that migrants groups initially asked for a recall order for Guinomla and other officials of the Philippine Embassy in Riyadh because of the shameless way the hunger strike of stranded overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) was terminated.

Sixteen stranded workers, who wanted immediate action on their conditions, went on hunger strike inside the Philippine Embassy compound in Riyadh. In response, the Embassy officials allowed the local police to interfere and ordered the arrest of the protesting stranded migrant workers on the night of December 21 and were sent to jail.

Instead of putting up an effective mechanism to defend the rights of the Filipino workers in Court and to prevent the exploitation and abuse by employers, these officials would rather fold their knees and bring the OFWs in distress to another set of indignity, arrest, detention and deportation, according to Andrew Mangampo-Ociones, Chairperson of the Saudi Arabia Chapter of the MIGRANTE Sectoral Party

The group claimed that due to the Philippine Embassy's neglect, many are forced to become stranded workers while others end up in jail. Many of them have never received any form of legal assistance. Women and an estimated 50 children reportedly languish in jails while 1,115 Filipinos have been imprisoned around the Kingdom.

In a letter to the Department of Foreign Affairs, concerned migrants groups reported that the number of reported cases involving Filipina migrant workers in the domestic industry has enormously increased. The complaints include long working hours, non-provision of regular meals, physical maltreatment, solitary confinement, malicious acts, rape, and many others.

Families of the victims of abuses and unresolved deaths have sought assistance from Migrante International, who immediately asked for speedy action from the national government.

## APMM NEWS Digest

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