

News Digest

April 2008



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

Migrants in Asia-Pacific celebrate May Day with locals *Wage, labour and human rights highlighted*

VARIOUS ISSUES AND concerns were raised by migrant workers in the Asia Pacific region during international Labor Day celebrations. What united them all was the clamor to make their lives better and more stable.

Migrant workers in Hong Kong under the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) mobilized 1500 mostly domestic workers and joined local workers to call for a Legislated Minimum Wage for all workers as well as for a substantive and commensurate wage increase for foreign domestic workers.

Other issues that they raised included calls to scrap policies that make migrant workers vulnerable to abuse and violence including the New Conditions of Stay; stop to overcharging of recruitment agencies; and stop discrimination against migrant workers.

The AMCB then joined local workers in a march from Victoria Park to the Central Government Office to hand out their demands. AMCB comprises membership from different migrant organizations from five nationalities, namely Filipinos, Thais, Indonesians, Nepalese and Sri Lankans.

In Melbourne, Australia, overseas Filipinos who are mostly immigrants joined a series of activities for the Labor Day festivities. This included the showing of and discussion on the evening of Tuesday, 29th April of the documentary film called “The missing Iraqi billions”.

This was followed by a radio interview on May 1 of the chairperson of Migrant Melbourne, and the co-chairperson of Philippines Australia Solidarity Association, for a one-hour radio program especial May Day broadcast. The whole program was devoted to Philippine issues highlighting the ongoing political repression, human rights violations, workers situation including the continuous blocking of the P125.00 wage increase demand, the current economic and food crises, the situation of Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), the massive graft and corruption, and bits on Philippine geography and Philippine history.

After the radio program, there was a wreath laying ceremony commemorating the workers’ struggles in the past years. In the

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Migrant workers joined actions of local trade unions in HK, Australia and South Korea to show the solidarity of the working people on May Day. They took the opportunity to drumbeat the demands of all workers, highlight their issues as foreign labourers and also their issues as nationals of their home countries.

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ceremony, the gains and wins of workers struggles as well as the pains and loses were mentioned.

On the evening of the same day, May 1 there was the traditional May Day multicultural event where speeches and performances from different ethnic groups were featured. Men of Migrante-Melbourne danced the “Maglalatik” a Filipino folkdance of tribal wars. A Lebanese traditional band played several songs and a Greek folksinger rendered various progressive songs. Anne Taylor, the President of Victorian Trades Hall council talked about the ongoing fight to repeal the work choices implemented by the past Howard government and pressured the new labor government to meet its promises before the election. David Spratt of the Victorian Peace Network talked about the current environmental crises and the fast rate of global warming.

The highlight of the May Day activities was the Mayday rally on Sunday, the 4th of May. In Melbourne, May 1 is not a holiday like in other Australian states and other countries. To enable workers to join the May Day march, the march is always held on the first Sunday of May. Different groups participated in the festivities which included displays and various



Foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong intensified their call for an increase in their minimum wage as well as the legislation of a minimum wage for all workers in HK.

stalls from different groups, a march, speeches, a May Day tea and a concert and community singing.

In South Korea, though May 1 is also not a holiday, members and officers of the Migrant Trades Union (MTU) participated in the labor day celebrations organized by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions

(KCTU). Torna Limbu, the president of MTU spoke at the rally urging all workers to unite in their common struggles and aspirations and to stop the continuing crackdown on undocumented migrant workers. Most members of MTU are such kind of workers.

Unfortunately, South Korean Immigration and police authorities used the occasion to trace Mr. Limbu and MTU's vice president, Abdus Sabur. The next day the two of them were arrested and are now still detained. There is no let up in the continuing suppression of the MTU as the former leadership were arrested November 27 last year. There is now an ongoing campaign within and outside Korea to oppose this and calls for the release of Torna and Abdus.

In Japan, Filipino migrant organizations took the occasion to hold a labor and know your rights seminar. These organizations included those of Filipinos married to Japanese nationals and also of undocumented workers. There are 80-90,000 Filipino women married to Japanese and around 30,000 undocumented workers.

Indeed Labor Day was not only an occasion to celebrate but to reaffirm commitments in advocating workers and migrants rights. It was a day for workers to also unite with peoples aspiring to be free from foreign occupation, to determine their own destinies and for the democratic rights of the people. It was also an occasion to be one in solidarity with the workers and peoples of host countries struggling for more equitable and progressive societies to live in. #

Indonesians in HK lambast consulate for blaming rallies for poor services

“THE INDONESIAN CONSULATE should not dare blame us for its ineptitude and insufficient services to migrant workers.”

This was declared by Eni Lestari, coordinator of the United Indonesians against overcharging (PILAR), in response to the statement of Sukmo Yuwono, Secretary I and Consul of the Consulate General in Hong Kong, who said that that the Indonesian Consulate would stop its three-hour Sunday services due to security reasons, for as long as PILAR protests in front of the consulate.

“It is obvious that the insufficient services and protection for migrant workers on part of the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in HK results from its failure as a government institution. It now tries to cover its failure laying its own fault on the legitimate right of Indonesian migrant workers to protest,” she said.

According to Lestari, the statement was another attempt to divert the issue of the

incapability and failure of the Indonesian government to provide services and protection for their citizens. Worse, she said, it was an attempt to play migrant workers against each other.

Lestari relayed that in the history of protest actions of Indonesian migrant workers, there has never been an incidence of violence from the ranks of migrants.

“Until now, we have shown that our protests are peaceful, restricted to the location assigned to us and are done under the protection of the police,” she added.

PILAR and GAMMI recently intensified their campaign for the Indonesian Consulate to improve its services including the provision of a full-day services on Sunday – the usual day off for Indonesian migrants.

Lestari reported that the Consulate promised to provide better services starting April this year. However, she lamented, these have not been realized. #

HK groups hold solidarity action on death of Burmese migrants

HK-BASED LABOR NGOs and migrant workers held a demonstration at the Consulate General of Thailand on April 22 to call for actions on the death of 54 Burmese workers who died of suffocation inside a small container while being transported to Thailand in April 9.

About 20 persons participated in the action at the Thai consulate that included representatives from the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV), Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK), ITUC/GUF/HKCTU Hong Kong Liaison Office (IHLO), Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers (ATKI-HK), Asian Students Association (ASA) and the Hong Kong Coalition for a Free Burma.

The said demonstration was held in solidarity with labour and human rights organizations in front of the Thai Parliament in Bangkok on the same day.

The protesters handed in a petition of the ANROAV to Consul Tachaphorn Suntrajarn who is also responsible for human rights issues. The said statement was signed by more than 90 groups around the world including major labour and human rights groups in HK.

Among the demands included in the petition were:

1. The deportation of all surviving victims must immediately be halted until an inquiry into the incident is complete, to ensure perpetrators of this incident are brought to justice;
2. Surviving victims of this incident and dependents of the deceased should be provided with immediate access to independent lawyers and adequate compensation for deaths and injuries;
3. The Thai Government should immediately initiate an open and transparent inquiry into this incident in which the involvement of private companies as well as related State agencies in trafficking, smuggling and illegal transportation activities should in particular be explored;

4. The government's registration system for migrant workers must immediately be overhauled to make it more effective and transparent. In association with civil society and employers, the government must create a system that accepts the economic necessity and benefit of migrant workers for Thailand. The government must therefore cease to shortsightedly consider only national security aspects of migration and seek to limit opportunities for both its own officials, private individuals and the Burmese military junta's to engage in trafficking, smuggling and illegal transportation operations.



Migrants and labour advocates called for justice to Burmese migrants who died while being trafficked to Thailand.

Protesters said that they'll monitor the Thai government's response to the demands.#

MECO admits special hiring program for Taiwan, a failure

THE MANILA ECONOMIC and Cultural Office (MECO), the de facto Philippine Embassy in Taiwan, had unwittingly admitted that its Special Hiring Program for Taiwan (SHTP) is a failure. This can be attributed to it being non-mandatory and dependent only on the employer's decision to avail of such method.

Only 5,205 were deployed through the SHTP in a 12-year period from 1996 - 2007. This is only 1.09% of the total number (477,184) of Filipino workers deployed to the island in said period. Last year, only 600 passed through the SHTP which is 2.12% of the total number of migrant workers (28,426) sent to Taiwan in 2007.

The SHTP is described as an alternative hiring system agreed upon by the governments of Taiwan and the Philippines to enable employers in Taiwan to hire Filipino workers without the assistance or participation of manpower agencies.

However, the Philippine government pointed out that Filipinos deployed to Taiwan would be responsible for documentation cost, processing, OWWA membership, passport, visa, medical examination, and NBI clearance fees, as well as the airline ticket.

MECO has admitted that Filipinos who would want to work in Taiwan would need to shell out from NT\$36,232 – NT\$137,681 in placement fees alone. This does not include the mandatory brokers' service fee which is equivalent to NT\$60,000 in the 1st three year period. Combined, this is already from 15 - 32% of the minimum wage of NT\$17,280.

In 2004, Acting Labor Secretary Manuel Imson warned Filipinos from applying for jobs under the SHTP if they did not have the required skills and genuine credentials in support of their application. He added that those who don't have these would not fall under such method of hiring.

This is a lame excuse as everybody knows that Taiwan has stringent requirements for its overseas workers including mandatory training for its caretakers and school transcript of records should be authenticated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

The failure of the SHTP can also be attributed to the Philippine government who generally discourages direct hiring and in fact has tried to ban it through POEA MC-04.

If both the RP and Taiwan governments are sincere in stamping out exploitation by brokers, they must also make SHTP available for all migrant workers.

Justice sought for dead Filipina in HK

THE TRAGIC DEATH of Vicenta 'Vicky' Flores, a 31-year old Filipina from Lobo, Batangas, has triggered an unprecedented mass protest from fellow migrant workers in Hong Kong and local employers in Discovery Bay where she worked for the same employer for twelve years.

Earlier reports stated that Vicky Flores disappeared from her work place on or around April 7, 2008 and her body was discovered floating at Tung Chung Bay, a 30-minute ride away, in April 11. Allegedly, the police started interviewing people almost 10 days after her disappearance.

The Justice for Vicky Flores Support Group composed of migrants' organizations, service providers and local residents, was formed to demand thorough and transparent investigation on the true cause of the domestic worker's death following reports that police treated the case as a mere Miscellaneous Inquiry.

Prayer rallies organized by the Discovery Bay community showed an outpouring of support and unity regardless of status, race and religion, according to the support group. Gathering of signatures was also launched both in Discovery Bay and in Central.

Task force member UNIFIL-Migrante called on the Hong Kong Police and the Philippine government not to brush off Vicky's death as a tragic case of drowning, or worse as suicide, considering the suspicious circumstances that preceded the tragedy. The group demanded full probe, assistance to family, and review of HK policies on domestic workers.

On April 27 the militant group also organized



HK residents and expatriates living at Discovery Bay initiated and gave full support to the campaign for justice to Vicky Flores. Several activities such as candle-lighting vigils were held in the said community.



For fellow Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, the Vicky Flores issue is one of justice: Justice for Flores as a victim of violence and justice for all migrant workers who are abused and made vulnerable to abuses by different HK policies.

a protest action in front of the Headquarters of the Hong Kong Police in Wanchai as well as the office of the Philippine Consulate General where they submitted results of the signature campaign.

The Mission for Migrant Workers, also a member of the support group, expressed alarm at the spate of Filipina maids' violent deaths that happened in a week's time. There is a need to review Hong Kong policies like the New Conditions of Stay or Two-Week Rule, the wage level and the mandatory live-

in arrangement which have put foreign domestic helpers in very vulnerable conditions, the group stated.

Meanwhile, the family of Vicky Flores has requested the repatriation of her body at the soonest possible time. The Justice for Vicky Flores Support Group has made arrangements with the Hong Kong public mortuary to expedite the release of the autopsy report. The group vowed to pursue justice despite the return of Vicky's remains to the Philippines.#

ANNOUNCEMENT

IMA Founding Assembly, 15 - 16 June 2008, Hong Kong

The IMA will gather more than 100 migrant workers, immigrants, refugees and displaced peoples from all over the world to discuss the issues confronting them as a sector and the challenges of the struggles and the migrant movement that they are presently building.



www.pinas.net/ima

To all those joining or interested to join the IMA Founding Assembly, the deadline for the submission of participation forms is on 30 April 2008. Please send the forms by email at ima.sect@gmail.com or fax to **(852) 27354559**.

Indigenous migrant workers celebrate Cordillera Day in Hong Kong, Taiwan & Macau

REAFFIRMATION OF THE defense of land, life, livelihood and resources brought migrant workers and advocates together on May 4 to celebrate Cordillera Day in HK and Taiwan. Macau was celebrated a week later.

Organized by the Cordillera Alliance, Cordillera Day in Hong Kong focused on the issue of mining plunder and state terrorism in each of the six provinces in the region, namely Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, and Mountain Province.

Abra, the host of this year's Cordillera Day in the Philippines, is under threat of massive mining exploration particularly in the Baay-Licuan area as well as dredging of the Abra River, according to Caring Bachiller, president of the Abra Tinguian Ilocano Society Hong Kong.

She enjoined all Cordillerans to stand firm to oppose the exploitation of their rich natural resources by foreign corporations as well as the heavy militarization protection provided by the Arroyo government

The event also featured the rich cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples who maximized the occasion to display their colorful ethnic attire and traditional songs and dances.

Guest speaker Norman Uy Carnay from the Mission for Migrant Workers lauded the Cordilleran tribes for being a source of inspiration to the rest of the Filipinos in their bravery and unity to defend their ancestral domain.



The Cordillera Day in Taiwan was a venue to present the Cordilleran's concerns as migrant workers and as part of the indigenous communities in the Philippines. Solidarity of the people of Taiwan was also present in the said event.

"This is the genuine Cordillera way of celebrating Cordillera day and I wish to congratulate the Cordillera Alliance and all its members for being true to your progressive tradition of celebration. You have followed the path of BIBAK in the 80s which was formed out of anger from the pronouncements of then Foreign Affairs secretary Romulo that the "Igorots are not Filipinos!" You have continued the tradition of the Cordillera Consultative Committee who gathered leaders of the HK Cordillera migrants committee to educate and promote the issues and situation of their people," he said.

"Let us remember how our ancestral lands have been stolen from us. Let us remember the various government-sponsored and foreign funded projects that destroy our environment and puts our lives and way of life in danger – Chico dam, Cellophil, San Roque dam, open pit mining. And let us remember the courage and victories of the various Cordilleran peoples," he stressed.

It was a historic Cordillera Day celebration in Taiwan because for the first time, Filipinos were joined by the Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan. Adopting the same theme "Resist Mining Plunder and State Terrorism," the event was organized by the Taiwan Committee for Philippine Concerns (TCPC) and Migrante Taiwan in coordination with the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) which has

hosted Taiwanese groups and Individuals for nearly a decade already including this year's event in Abra.

The TCPC is a solidarity group in Taiwan composed of students, indigenous peoples, immigrant women, workers, and scholars supporting the struggle for genuine freedom, justice, human rights and democracy in the Philippines.

According to the group, the people of Taiwan have close affinity with the Filipino people because both peoples have endured systematic human rights violations specially during martial law and destructive development projects.

Meanwhile, the Macau Cordillera Day was sponsored by the Macau Cordillera Association in coordination with the Mission for Migrant Workers in Hong Kong. The event also highlighted the issues that indigenous peoples and other Filipinos face at home and abroad. Over 100 migrant workers, including other organizations of Filipino workers in Macau, also attended the event.

The observance of Cordillera Day came about as the indigenous peoples' commitment to carry on the symbol of the Cordillera people's struggle for self-determination- Macliing Dulag who was gunned down by government troops on April 24, 1980.#



Cordillera Day has been one of the long-running annual celebration in Hong Kong.

Strike of Al Jassim workers gains victories

Kuwait gov't threatens migrants of arrest and deportation

SEVEN FILIPINO WORKERS who were arrested initially for allegedly instigating a strike were formally charged for breaching national security by Kuwaiti authorities. At the same time, Kuwait's Ministry of Interior (MOI) announced soon after that it would prosecute all foreign workers involved in strikes and deport its alleged instigators as these are illegal practices and undermines the security of the state. Charging expatriate workers with legitimate labor grievances and who are asserting their right for its redress, for undermining national security is a dangerous precedent.

The seven, together with 400 others coming from different nationalities, staged a strike in Al Jassim Trucking Company from April 16 – 20. They won a small victory by being granted 20KD for every four trips to Iraq and one locally in Kuwait. This was only one of their several demands.

Their main calls were an increase to their basic pay and per trip allowances as inflation and the exchange rate of their earnings has lowered the value of their basic pay which averages only from 100 – 110KD (US\$376 – 414) per month. Kuwaiti families and expatriates working in the public sector were even given an additional social fund by the Kuwaiti government to offset the negative effects of inflation. The increase of the former is even higher than the basic pay of the migrant workers in Al Jassim.

Even if this labor struggle appeared among others in an English language Kuwaiti papers the name of the involved company, this became irrelevant to the Kuwaiti and even Philippine authorities. In an email letter sent by the Philippine Embassy to the son of one of the seven Filipinos detained, he was told that his father was charged with the rest for stirring a commotion in a place with highly flammable facilities and was considered a national security concern by the authorities.

One of the biggest jobs of the workers of Al Jassim is to transport fuel and other supplies to United States armed forces in Iraq. It was natural that the place where the workers were holding their peaceful sit in before the police came had flammable materials. Ironically one of the demands of the workers was to be provided with safer

accommodations because of previous accidents in their dormitories caused by such materials.

The letter of the Embassy never mentioned anything about the strike and the legitimate grievances of its nationals even if the workers sought its assistance on April 19. Labor Attaché Leopoldo de Jesus even talked to Al Jassim's management on April 22 where he was promised that the company will look into the demands of the workers and that the company was willing to take back the workers as soon as they were released from detention pending investigation.

The MOI, on the other hand, made the threat on striking workers on May 3 when it said that a growing number of Arab and Asian migrant workers resorted to this illegal practice. It also earlier ordered the deportation of around 12 Bangladeshi cleaners who were charged with allegedly instigating a strike of hundreds of other workers for non-payment of their salaries.

In a study made by a local NGO called Social Work Society of Kuwait in late 2006, it revealed that there is rampant violation on the rights of migrant workers. 50.3% of the migrant workers' who were interviewed said that their salary was delayed from 1-4 months; only 53.7% were paid for their overtime work and that only 34.7% of the employers paid for the airfare of the workers to and from Kuwait. And one of the causes of labor disputes is the refusal of the employers to transfer their residency or give them working visas.

And some of the answers made by the employers in the same survey on why the

salaries were delayed stated that this is needed to force the workers to comply with work and to control the workers. Other reasons given were delay of the accountant in calculating salaries and delay of receiving payments from the project. The last two however are the main responsibilities of the employers and not of the migrant workers.

It is also important to note that in said survey the workers resorted to going on strikes, not doing the work assigned to them and going on work slowdowns. Others complained to reporting officers and filing complaints at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor.

The Ministry of Interior's remarks that it would penalize striking workers asserting their rights from their exploitative and oppressive conditions was done in haste. It is said conditions that instigate the migrant workers to go on strike. Such remarks may also be construed that said Ministry is condoning the sorry state of the migrant workers while not lifting a single finger against those who exploit and oppress them.

It would do well for the MOI to listen to a police officer who was quoted in a news article in saying the following:

"This is not the first incident of this nature. Last year 4,000 angry Egyptian workers took to the streets, burnt tires and ransacked their employer's office. Labor unrest is on the increase in our country, which we never saw in the past. It has become very difficult for us to use state security forces against these protesters, because it can result in more wide spread unrest. The companies should take care of their workers; otherwise they will not accept slave conditions and will come out to show their anger."#

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