

News Digest

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

Rallying for rights and democracy

Migrants in the movement against dictatorship and repression

They have every reason to be involved.

Migrant workers of various nationalities across Asia are taking up the issues besetting their respective home countries.

The Filipinos, Thais, Indonesians and Nepalese are among the many who are bravely speaking out, getting involved and even taking to the streets their protestation against the cases of corruption, human rights violations and dictatorship of their own governments.

Proximity does not affect or weaken their determination as these issues impact on them. The security and welfare of families and loved ones back home are among their many worries: the economic strangulation wrought by tax impositions and neoliberal policies, endangerment of their lives in the hands of brutal and mercenary police and military personnel, and the direct assault on their democratic rights by their own governments and of host countries.

The banning of any Nepalese except as tourists was imposed by the Hong Kong Immigration months after Nepal King Gyanendra placed the whole country under martial rule. The Nepalese migrant workers are caught between two big stones as they struggle against the autocratic dictatorship in Nepal while resisting this discriminatory policy by the HK government.

This, however, did not stop the Nepalese migrant workers and residents to stage mass actions and dialogues involving the campaign to implement total democracy in Nepal replacing both the king and the monarchical system. The actions in HK were widely supported by migrants of other nationalities as well local workers, grassroots groups, and human rights advocates.

The call of the overseas Filipino workers runs the same as that of the Nepalis. The spate of killings, corruption cases and the economic destabilization caused by pro-globalization policies have both people in

and outside the Philippines rage against their president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The declaration of a State of National Emergency that violated the civil and political rights of the Filipino was a de facto Martial Law. Though it was lifted, its effects still linger as oppositionists continue to face arrest.

Under GMA, it has now become clear to migrants that their rights and wellbeing have no future. While the economic policies of the Arroyo government further impoverish them, voices of dissent by those opposing such policies are curtailed by bullets or repressive laws.

Meanwhile in Thailand, the call for the ouster of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is gaining ground. The Thai people have felt betrayed of Thaksin's involvement in corruption issues that have plagued Thai politics through the years. Thaksin also has responsibility on the death of Muslim protesters in South Thailand in 2004 against

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the war on terror that the US is waging mainly against Moslems and Moslems countries.

Indonesians, on their part, are enraged by the blanket implementation of liberalization policies by president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.



Migrant workers have every reason to be concerned with the intensifying political crisis in their home countries due to worsening condition of the lives of their people.

The political and economic crisis gripping these sending countries affect greatly the migrants as they are the first byproducts of

the crisis itself. They are forced to leave their families either from economic depression or from political persecution of their own oppressive states.

It is for this reason that migrant workers, no matter where they are, are involved. They have every right to rally – to rally against state oppression, injustice, military violence, dictatorship, liberalization and terrorism.

Under a repressive state that is bent on maintaining its power, a struggle to change the system will only be answered by fascism.

The urgent call is for migrant workers to be involved in the fight to remove dictators, defend the democratic right to protest and push for a more pro-people government.#

Philippine Labor Center in Taipei Unperturbed by Number of Complaints of Migrants

Instead of being alarmed by the big number of complaints by Filipino migrant workers in Northern Taiwan, Philippine Labor Center officials led by Reynaldo Gopez even seemed to gloat about their so-called achievements in handling these. They, however, never gave clear answers on how they helped resolve the problems encountered by their nationals and even in some instances blamed the workers for their own woes.

All of these came out on January 31, 2006 when the Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) had a meeting with Filipino migrant organizations and NGO's. MECO's objective was to get the support and cooperation of said organizations. The PLC stated that they received 14,000 complaints from the workers in 2005. This involved 20,000 migrants or 1/3 of the total number of Filipino migrant workers in the Northern Taiwan area. This area includes Taipei, Taoyuan, Hsinchu, Keelung and Ilan.

These numbers did not even include those lodging complaints with NGO's and local labor bureaus. If these were added, the number of migrants complaining would be more staggering. It would not suffice for the PLC to just tackle the problems one by one but instead should raise policy issues to the CLA, which might help resolve these.

To illustrate this point, Mr. Gopez said that the most common complaint involved brokers who demand excessive broker's fees. The PLC head had clearly departed from the previous policy of his predecessor Mrs. Guirao and that of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and Taiwan's Council of Labor Affairs (CLA).

Mrs. Guirao had stated that under CLA and POEA rules, only fees indicated in the Fees and Salary Declaration form are legal. Memorandum Circular 19 dated November

12, 2001 governs this (and Governing Board Resolution No. 5) whereby workers and their Philippine agent are required to sign a Fees and Salary Declaration form authenticated by the POEA.

Instead the present PLC head insisted that overcharging of brokers' fees should be challenged in the POEA and when the migrant worker had already departed for home. In addition to this, he blamed the



Migrants in Taiwan bold dialogue with MECO on their issues

“Handog sa Migrante”

Mission's 25 years of unwavering service

The Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers (HK) Society is celebrating



its 25th anniversary this year. Established in 1981, the Mission, as it is fondly called by migrants, has always believed in the principle of “paying attention to the well-being of migrants”.

The Mission prides itself for 25 years of service towards empowering migrant workers in HK. As the pioneering migrant-serving institution in Asia, it has been a part of many lives of HK migrant workers.

To give tribute to migrants, the Mission staged “Balentayms sa Central- Handog sa Migrante” on 12 February in Chater Garden in Central. This event was just one of the series of events for this anniversary. Other events are the Silver Anniversary Cocktails, the Conference on Service providers, cultural extravaganzas and raffle draw.

Thousands of migrants from different organizations, alliances and churches turned out to watch the celebration. The Board, staff, volunteers and friends of the Mission were also present to witness this historical event.#

migrant workers for signing alleged loans incurred in the Philippines. For him and other MECO officials, the poor OFW should pay for this whether or not they really did incur any loan.

Adding insult to injury Mr. Gopez added, "The PLC is not a regulatory agency," and therefore lacked the authority to directly cancel the licenses of brokers and agencies that engaged in bringing Philippine workers to Taiwan. When asked by Fr. Romy Veloz of the Taipei Migrant Workers Concern Desk (MWCD) how many licenses of such entities had been cancelled, the PLC head could not cite exact figures on this.

Other complaints cited by Mr. Gopez include over collection of government fees. Other than this were non-payment of wages or benefits; non-compliance with labor standards, such as sub-standard working conditions or poor accommodations; illegal termination; contract provision violations; employment transfer; and forced repatriation. During the dialogue, the APMM raised the issue of the new complaint center set up by the CLA in the departure and arrival halls of the international airport in Taoyuan (labeled as Taipei). The Chinese National Federation of Industries is running this center, which is an aggrupation of employers groups. As such it could be biased in favor of employers and would help legitimize the illegal repatriation of migrant workers.

A case in point is that of Mary Ann Kag-Ayed. Her employer wanted to send her back home because she needed to be operated on. This impinged on her right to have sick medical leave with pay for thirty days. When she raised this to the complaint center at the airport, she was told that she should go home because she would not be able to work after her operation.

All that MECO could say was that it was still too early to say if the complaint center is really that way. They even said that this was a welcome development even if an employers group runs such center.

Overall MECO should stick to its original policy of honoring POEA's board resolution in handling overcharging of brokers and placement fees. It should also bat for a standard employment contract, which is guaranteed by the Labor Standards Law. No addendums and side agreements should be allowed or these should be considered non-binding and unlawful. Only this way could MECO lower down the staggering number of complaints it is receiving every year.#

AMCB campaigns anew for wage hike, abolition of the levy, and against abuses to migrants



In the wake of the annual wage review being conducted by the Hong Kong government, foreign domestic workers under the Asian Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB) reiterated their call for wage increase and the abolition of the levy for employers.

As the Year of the Dog was ushered in this year, the AMCB asserted that justice, which the dog symbolizes, should be finally granted to the workers whose wages have been cut by HK\$590 for the past seven years.

"As the Hong Kong economy continues its recovery, the government is fast running out of excuses to force FDW wages to remain depressed. Unemployment is down, GNP is up, CPI is up as well as the wage of local workers. To refuse to give wage increase to FDWs will expose the real agenda of the government of maintaining FDWs as cheap laborers," the migrants stated.

The workers also called on the Hong Kong government to set an equitable and transparent formula in determining the Minimum Allowable Wage (MAW), otherwise the decision would always be regarded as arbitrary and capricious.

This year, the wage hike campaign was initially revived by the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK), a member of the AMCB, during the first Leaders Kapihan held at the St. John's Cathedral Li Hall on the 15th of January.

UNIFIL enjoined its member organizations and allies to endorse the Submission for Wage Increase and Abolition of the Levy to the Hong Kong Executive Council. The government must realize that domestic workers are overworked and on call 24 hours a day. It is

only just that their wages be increased in the same way that 84% of companies in Hong Kong have increased their workers' wages according to a survey conducted by The Standard, the domestic workers argued.

Meanwhile, the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers, (Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia ,ATKI), called for an end to the exploitation of Indonesian workers.

According to Eni Lestari, ATKI chairperson and a coordinator for the AMCB, unscrupulous recruitment agencies and employers have taken advantage of the vulnerability of Indonesian migrants as shown in a survey conducted by the ATKI. The survey showed that 53% of Indonesian migrants are underpaid, and 93% are overcharged.

To aggravate this situation, she said, 45% are not given rest days properly by their employers while 57% reveals that they are not given legal statutory holidays properly. But this did not deter the rapid increase of Indonesian workers in the territory as a result of severe economic crisis in their country.

Members of the AMCB have planned various activities to carry out their campaign for increase their wage and abolish the levy. These include a protest march on March 5 which coincides with the International Women's Day, a dialogue with the government through the EDLB, massive education work among migrant groups on the just bases of the demands for the increase, and gathering support from local trade unions, community groups and local people.#



Struggle against WTO continues in HK



Months after the historic Peoples' Action Week (PAW) against the World Trade Organization's (WTO) 6th Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong last December 13 to 18, the struggle against the unjust policies of the WTO continues.

The experience of the Hong Kong's social movement, particularly the organizations under the Hong Kong Peoples Alliance on WTO (HKPA), the main organizer of the PAW, is a positive development in the struggle of the HK people against neoliberal globalization in this relatively prosperous "free market" territory.

For the first time, the "free market" dictum which made Hong Kong (or some of its people) "rich" is put into question by a significant section of the public. Suddenly, there seems to be a public interest in discussing if not debating on the "positive" and negative impacts of the "free-market" principle and neoliberalism.

Another continuing battle, this time in the legal arena, is the case of two Korean farmers who were charged with illegal assembly by the HKSAR government and blames for what happened during the December 17 skirmishes in Wanchai district.



It was during that night where more than a thousand protesters mostly from Korea were arrested. Most of them were released the following day except for 14 of them including 11 Koreans, one Japanese, one Taiwanese and one mainland Chinese.

An international campaign led by the HKPA was immediately launched calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all 14 WTO detainees. Local actions and mobilizations were held including protest rallies in front of the Kwun Tong District Court, the HK Police headquarters and the Central Government Office (CGO).

Solidarity actions were also held in different parts of the world with big international networks like the International League of Peoples Struggle (ILPS) and the Our World is Not for Sale (OWINFS) calling on their members to launch protest actions in their respective countries.

On January 5, 12 of the detainees including 11 South Koreans and one Japanese, launched a week-long hunger strike which ended on the day of the trial on January 11. The detainees were surprised when an outpour of support from the local people started to come on the 2nd day of the hunger strike.

As part of the global campaign, an International Solidarity Mission (ISM) was held last January 10, the day before the historic trial of the detainees was held. Prominent political and anti-globalization figures including Philippine parliament member and veteran labor unionist Crispin "Ka Bel" Beltran, representatives of Via Campesina and the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU) arrived in Hong Kong as part of the ISM.

On January 11, charges on the 12 detainees were dropped due to lack of evidence. However, in what many believe was just a

political muscle flexing move, the HK government continued to charge two South Korean peasants with unlawful assembly.

At present, Hong Kong's social movements including a significant portion of migrant workers led by the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body (AMCB) are taking up the tasks of sustaining the education and awareness-raising campaign that started during the PAW. At the same time, the struggle to free the remaining WTO detainees continues.#



Campaign to release Ka Bel, Batasan 5 continues

The campaign for the release of Anakpawis (Toiling Masses) Partylist Rep. Crispin "Ka Bel" Beltran is still on.

Despite the order of the judge for his release, the Philippine National Police has refused to do so.

The call for the release of Ka Bel, as he is fondly called, has generated the support of migrant Filipinos, human rights advocates, and trade unionists around the world.

Several parliamentarians in HK, Netherlands and Belgium openly called for the Philippine government to stop the prosecution of Ka Bel and his colleagues in progressive partylist groups.

Migrant workers consider Ka Bel as a staunch defender of the rights of overseas Filipinos. He led in pursuing OFW concerns inside the Philippine Congress.#

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Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM)
Kowloon Union Church

No. 2 Jordan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR
Tel. No: (852) 2723 7536; Fax No: (852) 2735 4559

E-mail: apmm@hknet.com Website: www.apmigrants.org

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Editorial Team:

Ramon Bultron, Gi Estrada, Buhay Bangcawayan,
Aaron Ceradoy, Vicky Casia-Cabantac