

The first Filipino Women Migrant Workers Summit 2006

Uniting Filipino women in Hong Kong for the advancement of rights and wellbeing of migrant workers and their families

A broader and stronger movement of Filipino women migrant workers fighting for comprehensive demands on the rights and wellbeing of migrant workers in Hong Kong and families of migrants in the Philippines – such was the result of the historic first Filipino Women Migrant Workers Summit 2006.

Last July 2, the usually quiet afternoon atmosphere at the prestigious Hong Kong University was changed by the excited chatters, stomping feet, and later on, spirited discussion and lively sharing of experiences by around 400 migrant workers who attended the biggest gathering of organized Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong.



The Filipino Women Migrant Workers Summit 2006

Supported by Mamacash in the Netherlands and the regional group Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), the Summit was organized by five of the biggest and most active alliances, federations and unions – the Abra Tinguian Ilocano Society (ATIS), Cordillera Alliance (CORALL-HK), Filipino Migrant Workers Union (FMWU), United Pangasinan Hong Kong (UPHK), and the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-MIGRANTE-HK).

With firm determination to register the voices of Filipino women migrant workers on burning concerns of migrants and their families, 98 migrant organizations came together to tackle the impacts of policies of the Hong Kong and Philippine governments to migrants and their families and, more importantly, come up with a plan of action on policy advocacy, campaign and education to address these concerns.



Summit participants actively shared experiences and ideas in the workshops

Migrant groups that attended include ethno-linguistic organizations, provincial organizations, interest groups in line with skills and previous professions (nurses, midwives, teachers) and unions. Also present to lend support were known migrant-serving institutions such as the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW), Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge (BHMWR), and the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM).

The highlights of the summit were the workshops where the demands were drafted and the plan of actions formulated.

All of the workshops were lively and fruitful. Many of the participants shared their actual experiences such as denial of services due to them when they were in need, experiences with recruiters and money-lending agencies, their hardships in making ends meet for their families in the face of the rising cost of commodities in the Philippines, and the abuses they have experienced from their employers.

The participants took turns in contributing to the list of demands to the Philippine and the HK governments. Increase in government budget for education and health, a genuine charter of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) that is service-oriented, abolition of the Two-Week Rule or New Conditions of Stay (NCS), scrapping of the levy for employers of foreign domestic workers in HK, transparent and

participatory mechanism on the annual review of wages of domestic workers, more stringent rules against illegal recruitment and overcharging of recruiters, and scrapping of dubious government fees were some of the most popular demands that were incorporated in the Migrant's List of Demands.

The demands and plans of action drafted by each workshop group were unanimously and overwhelmingly approved by all the delegates in the plenary that followed the workshops. Additionally, the resolution to take part on the protest action on the occasion of the State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Arroyo on July 23 was wholeheartedly carried by the participants. As well, the summit approved a resolution to support the Free Ka Bel Movement and conduct actions, including a letter-writing campaign, to lobby for his release.

Campaign for these issues was the central action plan of the summit. Education, information dissemination and networking to further broaden the participation of migrant groups shall be included in the campaign. As well, the list of the demands will be transformed as policy recommendations for the Hong Kong and Philippine governments and, in particular, will be drafted as a legislative agenda for the Philippine Congress.

Furthermore, submissions to various international bodies of the United Nations will be made on the bases of the demands.

Guests and speakers of the summit provided the participants with important framework and analyses that guided the migrant workers in their discussions.

The summit participants were welcomed by Mr. Lau Fong, president of the Hong Kong University Students Union (HKUSU) who assisted the organizers in arranging for the use of university facilities for the migrant workers. In his welcome address, he expressed the importance for students to learn about the situation and concerns of other sectors in the society. As part of the workforce in the future, he emphasized the need for students to also be united with worker's groups – including migrant workers – for the advancement of the rights of the working people.



The summit resolved to participate in the ongoing campaign to free Rep. Crispin Beltran – a staunch fighter for the rights of migrant workers who was arrested in February 2006



Summit speakers gave valuable inputs that helped the participants in deepening their understanding on issues of Filipino migrants

Ms. Connie Bragas-Regalado, chairperson of MIGRANTE International (the only global alliance of Filipino migrant workers organizations) and herself a former domestic worker in Hong Kong, gave an input on globalization and migration with particular focus on the Philippine context. She emphasized on the impacts of globalization policies in the Philippine economy and how such result to increased migration of Filipinos.

She also tackled the relationship between the unconditional support of the Philippine government to the US-led “war on terror” and Filipino migration that include labor-conscription and the export of Filipino workers to war zones that make them vulnerable to life-threatening situations.

Ms. Bragas-Regalado also presented the main policies of the Philippine government with regards to its labor export industry.

She showed the participants the deplorable state of government services and protection to migrant workers through anecdotes of cases that MIGRANTE International handled as well as their researches and their past meetings with various government agencies.

Afterwards, a special presentation on the Philippine human rights situation followed. Mr. Ng Koon Kwan of the HK Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) gave a testimony on his experiences as a participant of the International Labor Solidarity Mission to the Philippines last May. Many participants were moved to tears when he recalled the grave poverty he witnessed and great disparity and inequality in Philippine society. He relayed how he felt when he heard from the residents of the urban poor community they visited that they had to buy distilled water because no clean drinking water is available in their community while in a nearby posh village, residents were wallowing in clean, sparkling swimming pools.

After the well-received testimony, the solidarity message of Rep. Crispin Beltran of the Anakpawis (Toiling Masses) Partylist was read. Representative Beltran is a pillar of the worker's movement in the Philippines. He was arrested last February on a 20-year old rebellion charge and has been detained until now. Representative Beltran used to be the vice chairperson of the Committee for Overseas Workers of the Philippine House of Representatives. He is a staunch supporter of issues of migrant workers and was active in exposing the situation of migrant workers and government neglect to his colleagues in the Congress.

Meanwhile, Ms. Elizabeth Tang, chairperson of the HK People's Alliance on Globalization and Chief Executive Officer of the HKCTU, gave a presentation on HK policies on migrants. She focused on the policies of the HK government that are in line with globalization and the policies of the World Trade Organization (WTO). She encouraged the participants to continuously oppose the New Conditions of Stay (Two-Week Rule), advance the campaign for wage increase of migrant workers, and further the fight to scrap the levy on employers of foreign domestic workers.

Ms. Tang expressed the local workers' pleasure in the strength, courage, creativity and militancy shown by migrant workers in the WTO protests in Hong Kong last December as well as the Labor Day march last May. She expressed her hope that the unity and cooperation of local and migrant workers will continue and become even stronger.

After the panel, the participants went to their respective workshop groups. The five workshops that were held were: On National Issues and Their Impacts to Migrants and our Families; On Recruitment Agencies and State Exaction; On Government Services and Protection; On the Labour and Immigration Policies, and Services to Migrant Workers of the HK Government, and; On Money Lending, Police Matters and Police Procedures.

In high-spirit and carrying even higher the banner of the strength of the movement of women, of migrants and of workers, the participants ended the first Filipino Women Migrant Workers Summit with a resounding pledge to implement the campaign, advocacy, education and organizing plans that the Summit came out with.

The historic summit may have indeed ended but actions of a stronger and broader movement of Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong that comprehensively address concerns of Filipino migrant workers and families have just begun.

With this, the migrant workers will continue to make history.



Women migrant workers – united in the fight to advance the rights and well being of migrant workers and their families