

The Indonesian Migrant Workers’ Movement in Hong Kong: Issues, Empowerment and Leadership

Indonesian migrant workers (IMWs) encounter numerous forms of exploitation, perpetuated by their employment agencies supported by the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong. An order by the Consulate SE2258 issued on 7 December 2007 testifies to how far the Consulate will act to enhance the control of employment agencies over Indonesian migrant workers.

According to this order, IMWs would not be able to change or transfer employment using another agency during their employment while in their first two years in Hong Kong. They can only do so with special permission, granted by the Indonesian Consulate, on a case-by-case basis, in subsequent contractual periods. This order was

subsequently cancelled on 17 February 2008, after weeks of intense contestation by a 22-organisation alliance of Indonesian migrant groups in Hong Kong, PILAR (United Indonesians Against Overcharging). Had it not been overturned, it would have effectively immobilized Indonesian migrant workers by not permitting them to change agencies even when they are subjected to exploitative practices.

PILAR, catalyzed by ATKI’s (Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong) leadership, was

established on 1 April 2007, for the expressed purpose of combating excessive placement fees charged by employment agencies for Indonesian migrant workers. These fees which



INDONESIAN CONSULATE GENERAL BELEAGUERED. Indonesian migrant workers made sure that the Indonesian Government hears their resistance to the unjust and immoral policies of overcharging, inability to punish erring recruitment agencies and inutility to provide services due the IMWs.

amount to HK\$21,000 are payable by each Indonesian migrant worker to her employment agency through a seven month deduction of their wages of up to HK\$3,000 per month, despite the fact that such practices are illegal under Hong Kong’s employment laws. According to Hong Kong’s Employment Ordinance, fees payable for placement should not exceed 10 per cent of one month’s salary.

After their major victory over SE2258 in February, PILAR gathered support and momentum from Indonesian migrants’

communities and migrant workers of other nationalities. It decided to include in their struggle, other demands for the improvement of Consulate services and migrant worker rights. It initiated another campaign from April 2008 with the following demands:

1. Stop illegal salary deduction and debt bondage of Indonesian migrant workers
2. Allow direct hiring for all Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong
3. Improve Consulate services for IMWs in Hong Kong and Macau. Consulate services remain inadequate and inaccessible for the migrant population as it is opened for 5 hours each day and was until recently, closed on Sundays, which is the only rest day that migrant workers have in a week.
4. Provide a one-day processing period for the renewal of passports.
5. End discriminatory treatment of its migrant workers who seek help from the Consulate;
6. Punishment for agencies that continue to confiscate the passports and employment contracts of Indonesian migrant workers.

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Domestic Work as Work Campaign Advances

Having reached practically the third juncture of the Campaign to Recognize Domestic Work as Work, the United for Foreign Domestic Workers' Rights (UFDWR) Coalition met in Bangkok on the 4th of May 2008 to further concretise the actions and activities in pursuing the campaign in the different country-bases.

Noting the trail...

- from Colombo where a Consultation in August 2003 marked the unity of the participants to embark on such a campaign as it drafted the "Colombo Declaration" to "Recognise domestic work as work";

- to Malaysia in 2006 where CARAM-Asia held the Regional Summit and launched the comprehensive Kit to equip migrant domestic workers with guidelines on their rights as they brave the exile;

- the establishment of the coalition in May 2007 gave way to the launching of the regional campaign in Singapore where the overarching campaign goal is to "Recognise domestic work as

work" and the 'one- paid- day- off-weekly' campaign for foreign domestic workers as the prime mover of the regional campaign.

Assessment of the previous activities and evaluation of current developments in the region and around the world are therefore in place for discussion which Core Committee members of UFDWRs certainly did, thereby enabling them to identify the areas of concerns and formations that the campaign should be involved with. Likewise, campaign operations were clinched.

The Core Committee members of UFDWRs are: a) Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), c) Coordinate Action Research on mobility and AIDS in Asia (CARAM Asia), c) Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), d) Mekong Migration Network (MMN), and Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW).

For those of you who are reading this, watch out for the notices! We expect your active participation!

PVC-HK sponsors Palarong Pinoy 2008

Lourdes Bayagan



The Pinoy Volleyball Club Hong Kong held the opening ceremony for the Palarong Pinoy 2008, a volley ball tournament, in Moreton Terrace, Causeway Bay on May 11.


The program was a success despite the rain shower. It started with a parade led by the torch bearers followed by PVC chairperson Catherin Catbagan, her fellow officers and members.

Eleven Filipino teams and seven Indonesian teams joined: the Bluhorizon, Super Jaya, Corpsun, Archers, Golpindo A and B, Arvalga A and B, Diwata, D'Hitz, Parteners, Airwaves, Arblitz, D' Angels, D' Eagles, St.Teresa, offsprings and Aremawangi.

A program followed, highlighted by a search for Mr. Gwaping, won by The Eagles team. Two other competitions, namely Best in Banner and Best in Uniform, were held and which results will be revealed at the tournament's end.

Cynthia Ca Abdon Tellez, director of the Mission For Migrant Workers, was the guest speaker and also a member of the board of judges. She was glad that there is such a group that organizes sports activities that unite migrant workers of different nationalities. Indonesians and Filipinos are able to make their days-off fruitful and meaningful through sports.

Meyhew Cyril Alan, project engineer of Gamon Company, was also a member of the board of judges. He participated in tossing the ball which was joined by the team captains.


The tournament's theme is "Intelligence plus good character, that's a goal for a true education." 

Indonesian Migrants, from p. 1

On 17 February 2008 when Indonesian Consulate General, Ferry Adamhar, announced the cancellation of SE 2258, he promised to punish the employment agencies in Hong Kong that confiscate the passports of Indonesian migrants and agencies that charge more than 10% of a month's salary as fees for the service of renewing employment contracts and visas. But in the research conducted by PILAR from March 2008, there is substantial evidence of erring agencies that are not punished.

Hence, PILAR's organizations protest that the Indonesian government has not only failed to protect its citizens from the monopolistic profiteering of employment agencies, but it has also failed to give adequate services to

Indonesian migrant workers and making available the full range of consular services on Sunday, the only available day for them to leave their employers' homes in a week.

Marking the first anniversary of the founding of PILAR, the new campaign began from 13 April 2008. It focuses on the issues above that ran throughout every subsequent weekend, with rallies and protest actions outside the Indonesian Consulate. Each event was led by various leaders of the alliance and saw participant turnout rates of 70 to 150 members. The campaign culminated on 25 May 2008, with a major public event in Victoria Park followed by a march on the Consulate. The event gathered more than 1,000 members. 



SU

Knowing your rights pays off. Though not always financially.

For nearly three years, Su worked for a woman who never treated her with respect. Although Su's contract was signed by one woman, it was really the woman's aunt and the teenage daughter that Su served. Her relationship with the mother and daughter was often strained. Su was underpaid nearly every month, because it was the mother who paid her salary, not the niece who originally signed the contract. The mother often found reasons to yell at Su, even when she had done nothing wrong, and the daughter often followed her mother's example. But whenever the mother was traveling on business, the daughter and the niece were very kind to Su.

Relations between Su and her employer were worsening, and Su began contemplating running away from her employer's house. One Sunday afternoon, Su was spending her rest day in Victoria Park, where many Indonesian domestic workers go on their rest days, when she met a volunteer from the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers, or ATKI.

The volunteer counseled Su to try to remain in her employer's house as long as possible to gather more evidence of underpayment, but Su said she could not handle her situation anymore. The treatment from the mother was becoming unbearable. Now knowing that underpayment was a violation of their contract, Su decided to constructively terminate her contract.

One afternoon, as Su was escorting the mother to leave out of town on

“For Su, knowing her rights helped her to educate others, even her former employer, as well how to defend herself when her rights are violated. For Su, it wasn't just about the money, but an education of rights and responsibilities, and compassion for others.”

business, they began to argue about her underpaid salary. The employer told if she was unhappy, she could just leave. Even though Su's situation was difficult, she was thinking about others beyond herself, and didn't want to hinder the daughter's studying.


But that evening the employer called and was shocked to hear that Su was still there. She was told to leave immediately, so Su went directly to the Bethune House for shelter, taking only a few of her belongings with her. A few days later, the mother called and told Su to come collect the rest of her belongings and her air ticket back to Indonesia. “I knew that I was supposed to get more than just my air ticket, so I refused.” When Su told her employer

she wanted her full claims before leaving, the mother became very angry, threatening to blacklist Su from ever being employed in Hong Kong again if she didn't leave for Indonesia immediately.

So knowing it was her right in Hong Kong to claim back all the underpaid wages, Su filed a claim in the Labour Department for three years of underpayment. Unfortunately, because it was the niece who signed the contract, the claim had to be filed against her, instead of the mother.

Although the mother wouldn't pay back what she had illegally denied Su, the niece was willing to negotiate. At first, Su wanted to stick to her full claims, but then the niece became very upset, crying, saying that she really wanted to pay all the claims because it was what Su deserved, but she just did not have enough money, and she couldn't convince her aunt to do what was right.

“At first, I wouldn't change my mind, but when she started crying, I was able to go down some. I wasn't so angry anymore, because I knew she was trying to help.” So even though the day ended with Su only receiving half of her claims, she was happy.

“We both learned something. I have learned about my rights, and the niece learned about the responsibilities that come with signing a contract for a domestic worker. It's not just a signature, it's a lot of responsibility, and I think the niece learned that.” For Su, knowing her rights helped her to educate others, even her former employer, as well how to defend herself when her rights are violated. 



Where there is no vision, the people perish...

(Proverbs 29:18a)

Although traditionally the book of Proverbs is ascribed to King Solomon who reigned ca. 961-922, many Biblical scholars agree that the book must have achieved its current form in the last part of the 6th century BC. It reflects both the wisdom of earlier monarchies and the instructional needs of the later Jewish community. The sayings it still speaks to us today.

Proverbs 29:18a still speaks to us today. Let us just peek at the current crisis faced by the Filipino people – although the current administration refuses to call it a crisis as it is always intent on presenting a cosmetic effect on the people.

The Philippines needs 33 metric tones (MT) of rice daily. The estimated rice consumption for 2008 is 2.1 MT. Government assures the

Filipino people this can be met by importing rice. It is an ironic fact, that since the mid-1990s, the Philippines has become dependent on importing rice to feed its people when it used to be a major rice exporting country.

Many blame population boom, high oil prices, unpredictable weather patterns that wreak havoc on the planting and harvesting seasons, shrinking agricultural lands, and massive corruption in the agencies involved with food production, as the culprits of the ever worsening rice crisis. But I think an important factor is missed in all these: the effect of WTO policies such as trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation adopted by the government since the late 1980s, which flooded Philippine market with cheaper imported agricultural

products and destroyed local agricultural initiatives and production.

By depending on rice importation, the Philippine government made itself extremely vulnerable to international pressures. The rice crisis is not just a question of economics. It is a political question. Food security impinges on national sovereignty.

Excluding irregular weather patterns, the problem is the cumulative effect of the policies chosen by various administrations, the men and women who had the power to do good but did not, who listened to no other voices but their own and their masters', who dismissed the plight of the small and the powerless. This is sin against God.

And the people suffer. 



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