

*A wage hike may be something foreign domestic workers need. But their call goes beyond that.*



# Is the HK\$80 wage hike ENOUGH?

**The HK\$80 wage increase for Foreign Domestic Helpers is a welcome move by the Hong Kong administration. However, it is still a drop in the bucket if one compares it with the HK\$400 wage cut last 2003.**

In fact, the overall increase has amounted only to HK\$130 if we count the HK\$50 wage hike implemented last year. The FDHs have only been able to recover 30% of their lost wages since 2003 and only 22% of the wage cut since 1999.

At the rate the HK government is granting wage hikes, the increments will catch up with the loss only after four years!

The piecemeal wage increase for FDHs in the past two years indicates two things. First, it is becoming harder and harder for the HK administration to deny the correctness and urgency for a wage increase. Unless Hong Kong is really determined to become infamous for wage slavery, or as the migrants sarcastically spin the famous HK tourism advertisement "Asia's worst city" for migrants, it has to accede to the clamor, albeit grudgingly.

If the HKSAR government wishes to maintain its claim of economic rebound after the Asian Financial Crisis, it has no

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choice but to agree to wage hikes. If you recall, the reason for the annual proposals for wage cuts since 1998 by sectors of the government and employers had been the

undeniable economic crisis. Now that the condition has supposedly improved, the current administration cannot invoke the same line of "sharing the burden of the crisis" to impose further wage cuts or just allow the wage levels to freeze. It is obliged to increase wages or else, earn the ire of the migrant and local workers.

If it had its way, and without the persistent movement of workers for liveable wages, the HK government will either continue to depress wages or simply maintain the unjust present levels. Being a promoter of "free trade", it favors depressed workers' wages in return for making corporations satisfied.

Also following the dictum of neoliberal policies, it resorts to regressive taxation to generate more revenues. A classic example is the employer's levy imposed in 2003. Taxing employers, who are not Stanley Hos and Li Ka Shings, but are mainly middle income earners, but giving these employers the option of taking it from their helper's wages was a brilliant scheme of the government.

If the HK\$400 monthly employers' levy was imposed without a HK\$400 FDH wage cut, then the local employers would have resisted. This skillful policy maneuver of the HK government ensured acquiescence from the employers.

by  
Becky Hue



# SUNITI

## *Standing Up against Abuse*

Suniti arrived in Hong Kong from Indonesia on June 13, 2005. Upon arrival, a staff member from her employment agency picked her up, and brought her to the agency's boarding house, where she stayed for one night. The next evening, Suniti began working for her employers - a couple and their 9-year-old son. Everyday, she would clean the house, launder and iron clothes, buy groceries at the market, cook, and care for the son. She also washed the car on a weekly basis.

For the duration of her employment contract, Suniti's female employer constantly yelled at, and physically assaulted her when she thought that Suniti was not performing her duties well. "Every time I did a mistake, she always slapped my face and sometimes pulled my hair," said Suniti. "Like, for example, she asked me to get something, but I didn't understand her, she slapped my face. She asked me to buy something, but didn't buy what she exactly wanted, she slapped my face again."

Suniti's employers' son also pushed and kicked her, and spat on her face. On one occasion, he purposefully closed a door on her hand. His father, who witnessed this, simply gave her some ointment for her wound, and warned her to be careful around his son, as he was very naughty. The boy was never disciplined for any of these actions.

On the morning of July 9, 2005, Suniti's female employer asked her to buy corn at the market. When she came back home, she cleaned and husked the corn, and placed it in the fridge. When her female employer saw that the corn had already been husked, and was smaller in size than what she had wanted, she

got very angry and threw the corn at Suniti, striking her forehead causing it to bleed.

That afternoon, Suniti's employer also grew very angry with her and slapped her upon discovering that she had hung a towel that was meant to stay on the floor, on the towel rack. On the 12th, when Suniti did not understand her female employer's request spoken in Cantonese, her employer twisted her ear and told her that she was stupid. Later that day, she also pulled Suniti's hair for not hearing her call for her.

The next day, when she was helping her employers' son get ready for school, he asked her to bring his shoes to him. When she brought him a pair that he didn't like, he used his slipper to slap her face. Later in the afternoon, Suniti went to the market. Another Indonesian domestic worker saw her crying and asked her what was wrong. When Suniti told her about her experiences with the family she was working for, the other domestic worker gave her some money and told her to leave her employers and seek help at Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge.

When she arrived at Bethune House, the volunteers helped

Suniti seek medical treatment, report her case with the police, and lodge a case against her former employer with the labour department. After several delays, the police told Suniti to wait until the results of her case with the Labour Department before pursuing a case against her employer with the police.

After her employer failed to show up at their conciliation meeting in August, Suniti pursued her case with the Labour Tribunal. Although her claims for her wage in arrears, wage in lieu of notice, ungranted rest days, travelling allowance, and air fare to place of origin totalled to \$9,510.10, she was only granted \$5,710. Suniti decided to pursue a case with the police department.

At the trial hearing in November, Suniti's former employer pleaded guilty, and was fined \$2,500. Suniti then filed for Common Law Damages with the Legal Aid department for her loss of income over the three months that it took to settle her cases. At the same time, Suniti also lodged a case with the Small Claims Tribunal. The Legal Aid department advised Suniti to wait for the results of the case with the Small Claims Tribunal

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*When  
fighting for  
one's dignity  
and right  
paves off.  
Suniti is one  
of those  
women who  
stood up  
against  
exploitation  
and won.*



## Nedra

My name is Nedra Scott. I am from the state of Texas in the United States of America. I chose to become a Global Justice Volunteer (GJV) because I believe that we serve a God of justice and the program will help me to follow God, and help people seek justice. I believe that working to help migrant workers seek justice from their employers is a calling from God. I feel that it is an important opportunity for me. I also feel that I as well as other Christians should challenge the false Gods of our time, such as Commodity, race, class, and gender. The Migrant workers are being targeted because of these false gods. I feel that giving them company and advice will help them in a comforting way even if the words of a GJV will mean nothing in court, God knows my heart.



## Erin

I am Erin Castillo. I am also from Texas. I became interested in GJV because the God I believe in deeply loves those who are not considered privileged in society and desires to turn their injustice into justice. This makes me want to love others as God does and fight with them for justice. It is a privilege to join in with the collective efforts and long-term work already being done for the justice of migrant workers in Hong Kong. Although I will only be volunteering for two months, I hope it will have a lasting impact. I desire to have an impact on the women I meet as I support them and build friendships with them. As I return to America, I want to raise awareness of the situation, seek to address the root causes, and amplify the cries of these women. We think volunteering is a great way to experience reality and contribute to the world. 📷

**This year, we welcome two Global Justice Volunteers through the United Methodist Church from the United States. They will be in Hong Kong for two months this summer and will be with the Mission and Bethune House helping out migrant workers.**

# Welcome our Global Justice Volunteers!



## Myths in the Philippine History

**OUR FAITH,  
OUR  
STRUGGLE**

*Father  
Dwight dela  
Torre  
IFI Chaplain  
MFMW*

A lot of myths and legends are peddled in our schools as facts of history. In our June 11 celebration – for those who have died for the country — we said at the very beginning that we will try to correct some of these. That is easier said than done as some of these myths have been so ingrained in our consciousness that a passing mention will hardly do the job.

Yes, on June 12, 1898 there was a declaration of Philippine Independence *from Spain* but at the same time placed the Philippines “...*under the protection of the Mighty and Humane North American Nation...*” - from a colony of Spain to a protectorate of USA. Yes the gesture was spurned.

Two months later, Spain surrendered the Philippines to the Americans and not to the Filipinos who had laid a siege around the walled city of Intramuros, and who were already in control of the Philippines except the forts of Cebu and Zamboanga, and Muslim Mindanao, on August

13, 1898, after a choreographed battle in Manila between the navies of the two countries.

The mock battle and Spain’s surrender was brokered by the Belgian Ambassador of Manila to “...preserve the honor of Spain...” To add insult to injury, the Spaniards sold the Philippines to America for USD20M under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, some six months after the Kawit event. Thus the Filipino once again became a colony of another foreign master.

Another enduring myth was that the Spaniards came to the Philippines to spread Christianity. That would have been an extremely expensive religious expedition – which makes such a purpose

unbelievable. Fernao Magallanes, the Portuguese mercenary in the pay of the King of Spain, was searching for the western route to the Spice Island. That was during the Age of Discovery. That was during the Rise of Mercantilism. That makes his voyage a commercial/economic adventure. To claim lands for the Spanish sovereign was another purpose: that is colonialism. To spread Christianity, that was incidental. They did have chaplains on board.

There is a great need to disabuse ourselves and free our consciousness from myths and legends such as these for the Filipino people to understand our past and the present; and for us to chart our future for our own benefit. 📷

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But how could the HK government, now forced to grant wage hikes, continue to collect the levy without the employers complaining of additional taxation and further question this government's already unstable foothold in people's acceptance?

The solution: cleverly choose a path of least resistance.

Grant pay raises for FDHs in the hope to lower the boiling resentment of migrant workers against the HK\$590 wage cuts since 1999. Do not bring back the wages to HK\$3670 so as not to further prove the migrant workers claim that the levy was borne by the workers themselves. Make the increases piecemeal to slowly condition the employers to accept wage increase but ignore its connection with the regressive tax the HK government collects.

This is the second explanation why the wages are being increased in slow increments.

The HK government is afraid to be caught flat footed with the lie that the HK\$400 wage cut in 2003 had nothing to do with the employers' levy conspicuously of the same amount. It wishes to evade the possible resistance of employers if the latter find out

that they have actually been taxed until the present.

Clever, but not clever enough. The levy is currently contested in court by migrant petitioners. Some employers are already feeling the crunch as they have to accede to wage hikes while still paying the levy.

While the campaign of FDHs is paying off with two years successive partial victories in their wage increase campaign, the full restoration of their wages are still far from being accomplished. But more so, it is now the levy which is the main stumbling block in the

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before pursuing Common Law Damages. After two court appearances, Suniti won her case; however, after waiting for a week, and failing to receive her claims from her former employer, she reapplied for Common Law Damages.

In February, Suniti's former employer tried to appeal the decision of the Small Claims Tribunal, but at their second hearing, Suniti won the case again. The court ordered her former employer to pay her claims within two weeks. The Legal Aid department also awarded her claim for her loss of income.

In May, Suniti received her full and final settlement from the Small Claims tribunal, which amounted to \$18,171. After 10 months of meetings and hearings, Suniti was finally able to go back to Indonesia with the satisfaction that the various institutional bodies in Hong Kong had recognized the oppressive situation between herself and her employer.

We, at Bethune House and The Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers wish her the best of luck with her future endeavors.



MIGRANT FOCUS

Migrant Focus is a monthly publication of The Mission for Migrant Workers in Hong Kong (MFMW)

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