

Contribution

Some Reflections on MTU's Fledgling International Solidarity Work

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Introduction

Despite the dedication and determined struggle of migrant workers in South Korea over the past decade it has to be admitted that the movement is still comparatively underdeveloped- it has yet to develop a national center and lacks material and human resources, a strong institutional structure and committed mainstream support.

With MTU still in the process of stabilizing its base and network of solidarity, it is easy to feel we are simply not ready to move into the realm of full-fledged international solidarity. This may also be the case for migrants' movements in other countries, which are still in their beginning stages. Yet, if we look at the situation from another perspective, we might think otherwise. Migration is a transnational process in its nature and as such, the migrant workers' movement lends itself quite organically to international solidarity- migrants move across borders, by necessity build relationships with people in new countries and go back to their homelands, sometimes with the potential to build new struggles when they return.

The potential arising from this nature is something I only came to appreciate a few months ago, when I went to Nepal and met Samar Tapa and Bajra Rai, leaders of the migrant workers movement in South Korea in 2002-2003 who are now working in the Migrants Section of Gefont.

MTU's international solidarity work does not have a long history and is severely restricted by a lack of resources and my own lack of experience. Therefore, I will not try to cover the entirety of the international migrants' movement in this presentation nor make ambitious statements about directions and strategy. Instead, I will only take a few moments to discuss the limited international solidarity work MTU has done and use this as a basis to reflect on the potentials for deeper solidarity in the future.

Over the last year, beginning with the Yeosu Detention Center Fire struggle, MTU has built international relationships largely upon two lines: first, with human rights and/or migration-oriented NGOs and secondly, with unions and other grassroots organizations organizing migrant workers, for the most part in Asian countries. I would like to comment briefly on each of these in turn.

NGOs: Migrant Forum in Asia

MTU's sustained contact with human rights and migration-oriented NGOs has been largely through the regional coalition Migrants Forum in Asia. While MFA's membership includes unions and migrants' associations it is largely made up of service, research and advocacy oriented NGOs (its official partner in South Korea is the JCMK).

MFA's work makes heavy use of international treaties (the treaty on Migrants and their Families and other human rights mechanisms) and international organizations such as the UN Human Rights Council and the ILO in order to advocate for more human rights-oriented migration policies.

Its work also includes workshops and conferences aimed at raising awareness and building strategies among participant organizations on emerging issues related to migration. MFA is currently engaged in a series of regional and country-specific workshops and events as a lead up to participation in the Global Forum on Migration and Development, an inter-governmental dialogue on labor migration that allows participation from civil society that will be held in Manila at the end of October of this year.

Since an MFA representative participated in the International Conference on the Rights of Migrant workers organized by the ILO and KCTU with support from Building and Woodworkers International last August, MFA has shown considerable interest in and support for MTU and the migrant workers struggle in South Korea. When Director Suk Gwanho and I were at an MFA conference on migration and detention in Nepal last December MFA's leadership and participants were quick to work with us to organize a protest in front of the South Korean embassy calling for the release of our President, Vice President, and General Secretary, whom had been arrested in a targeted crackdown two weeks before.

MFA has also been active in raising awareness and building support among its member organizations for the current struggle to stop repression against the migrant workers movement in South Korea. Recognizing the legal precedent it will set, MFA has shown support for the struggle to win MTU's official union status and is currently discussing with MTU and KCTU ways to intervene in the UN Human Rights Council meeting in March and the ILC in June in order to put pressure on the South Korean government.

It is clear that MFA's resources, knowledge of international law and instruments and access to UN and government-level processes make it an important ally for MTU and the migrant workers movement as a whole. However because MFA's work is largely a top-down process of advocacy, there cannot but be limited unless a connected is made to strong base-building, that is, work to organize and empower migrant workers as actors in the struggle at a grassroots level.

It is, therefore, clearly necessary for MTU, a union formed by and for migrant workers themselves, to develop relationships with unions and other grassroots organizations that are organized by and are organizing migrant workers. It is also at this level that the international character of migration and the migrants' struggle comes into play in an organic fashion.

Grassroots Organizations

First, through building relationships with community organizations here in South Korea it is possible to make contact with organizations in sending countries and other receiving countries where these community organizations have ties. So far, the clearest example of this is MTU's relationship with

Kasammako, a coalition of Filipino communities in South Korea. Kasammako is affiliated with the KMU in the Philippines and the international alliance of Filipino migrant organizations Migrant International.

Through Kasammako, Filipino and other migrant organizations in Hong Kong have become aware of MTU and the current struggle. The Asian Migrants Coordinating Body, a multi-national grassroots migrants' organization in Hong Kong with strong Filipino participation, sent protest letters to the South Korean Ministry of Justice and organized a solidarity protest in front of the South Korean embassy condemning the deportation of MTUs leaders in timing with International Migrants Day on December 18. While this relationship is only at the beginning level connections with Kasammako in Korea make greater cooperation possible in the future.

Over the last year, MTU has also had the opportunity to come into contact and build relationships with unions in other countries that are actively working to organize migrant workers, including those in Spain, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan and Nepal. While our work with these unions has been largely at the level of the sharing of information and concerns, in particular through the KCTU-organized conference last August, these connections have raised awareness of MTU's significance to the migrant workers movements in other countries as a union form and led by undocumented migrant workers. Many of these unions have also lent their solidarity in our current struggle.

It is my hope, however, and the ultimate goal of international solidarity I think, to move beyond the narrow scope of calling for solidarity messages or even organizing solidarity protests in support of a struggle going on in one country, to collective strategizing and joint action that can mutually support struggles going on in multiple countries and address the human rights and labor rights abuses that migrants face throughout the world. This is, of course, a task left for the future; however, I see the potential in MTUs relationship with GeFont and the MTU members who have been deported and are now part of the labor movement in Nepal.

Perhaps some of you will remember Samar Tapa, the representative of migrant sit-in in 2003 to 2004 during the Myeongdong Cathedral struggle who was arrested in a targeted crackdown and eventually deported, as well as Bajra and Rajika, central activists in the migrant workers movement in 2002 and 2003. These comrades began working in GeFont once they returned to Nepal.

When I met comrades Samar and Bajra last December, it gave me a whole new sense of the possibilities of our collective work. These are people who have strong understanding of the conditions in South Korea and a remaining commitment to the migrant workers movement. They also continue to command the trust and respect of activists in Korea, and element important to collective work, especially that which spans long distances.

When meeting with Samar, Bajra and the GeFont leadership, we briefly discussed the possibility of a National Center level Memorandum Understanding on Migration to develop the one reached between the Nepalese and Korean governments at the end of last year. This type of agreement is indeed quite possible without the personal connections with people like Samar and Bajra, but shared past experience, makes real communication and deeper cooperation all the more possible. Indeed, with Kajiman and Raju now back in Nepal the ties are even stronger, and the potential even the greater. It is my hope to investigate a similar relationship with Comrade Masum and others in Bangladesh, although Bangladesh does not have the same strong labor movement or space for protest as exists in Nepal.

Whether on the level of an official agreement between KCTU and GeFont or sustained communication between MTU officers and the officers in GeFont's Migrants Section, many possibilities exist: programs to educate workers about labor rights and unions in South Korea before

they migrate as well those that would introduce migrant workers to Nepalese unions before they return could be put into practice. In addition, the course of in each country could become a topic of anti-government struggle, collective discussion and strategy. It will however, take genuine attention from KCTU and the MTU leadership in order to turn this potential into practical results.

Conclusion

I want to conclude finally with a few suggestions about tasks ahead, which seem to follow from what I have presented above. The list is by no means exhaustive.

1. It should be clear from the above that MTU's relationships are mostly limited to the Asian region. While it makes sense that Asian countries, due to their proximity and similarity in conditions, should be the primary focus, more effort needs to be made to learn about and build relationships with migrants' struggles in Western countries.
2. We need to build relationships with organizations in sending countries and learn more about the specific circumstances that lead to migration in each. This should become the basis for collective work to strengthen the struggles in these countries as well as South Korea.
3. Most importantly, we need to develop the relationships and collective work that has just begun, with MFA and international NGOs and especially with the unions and grassroots organizations with which we already have connections. We have only scraped the surface of what is possible, and it will take serious effort to move to the next level.

P.S.

* From Chamsaesang website:

http://www.newscham.net/news/view.php?board=news_E&nid=46662

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