

Struggle for Decent Jobs!

Sunday 16 November 2008, by [PINLAC Pete](#) (Date first published: 15 October 2008).

Contribution at the seventh Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF-7) held in Beijing, October 13-15, 2008. Workshop 7 of cluster 2 ("Social and Economic Rights and Environmental Justice").

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), Decent Work involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. Technically it is the enjoyment by the workers of, and adherence by capitalist to the CORE LABOR STANDARDS namely:

- Freedom of Association
- Right to Collective Bargaining
- Prohibition of forced labor
- Elimination of Child Labor
- Prohibition of Discrimination

So that's what's decent work theoretically means. Now let's talk about the Philippines.

Definitely, I am not proud of this, but I will tell you just the same. I come from the Philippines, said to be Asia's center of people selling their own internal organs to earn money. I come from the Philippines where a growing number of its urban population scour garbage dumps for food or buy left-over food thrown away as garbage by fast food restaurants, a country where about 400,000 women and 75,000 children are forced into prostitution. Our government is one that has, among its important foreign affairs and labor policies is to encourage its population to seek jobs abroad and keep Philippine economy afloat.

Am I painting a very grim picture of how desperate the Philippine labor force has become? No. I am just showing you how indecent the lives of the poor people, supposedly members of the labor force, have become or how urgent our demand for decent jobs is.

Philippine government's official statistics say that the current Philippine labor force is 36.4 M of which 33.5 M are officially employed. If we would believe official statistics, it would appear that unemployment in the Philippines is at a manageable level. Then you would wonder why I mentioned those things in my opening.

The present government redefined "unemployed" beginning in April 2005 to exclude own-account, domestic household and unpaid family workers. By doing so, it magically reduced subsequent unemployment figures by 1.8 million. The current joblessness statistic of 2.9 million was derived

using this manipulative computation. This pegs the unemployment rate in the country at 8.2%. But if we use the old definition, the country's real unemployment rate is in double-digits and the highest in Asia.

Underemployment, on the other hand, is at 6.6 million individuals, according to government. Other sources say it runs to 8.4m or a rate of 25.4% as of August 2006.

Unemployment and underemployment are such serious problems. These are the conditions that spell the semi-proletarianization of our labor force. Every day, more and more people lose their regular jobs. And today, 60% of our labor force belong to the semi-proletariat, either as non-regular wage earners, as casuals or contractuels, which comprise 35%-40% of the total wage earners, or in the so-called informal sector as "own account", domestic or unpaid family workers.

These people are forced to accept wages that are way below the minimum wage even if the present minimum wage of 382 pesos (\$8.535) is also way below the daily cost of living of P894 (\$20) that the government computed for a family of six. These are people who, at every hour of the day worry where and how to get the needs of their families for the next day or week or month. These people work in the most hazardous situations or for very long hours as they are not protected by CBA's. These are also the people who live in sub-human conditions, who can hardly feed their families, much less with appropriate food or send their children to college or even to high school. They don't have decent jobs.

I am not using the word decent from a religious or moralistic point of view. From our view as workers, decent jobs are regular jobs in humane conditions that pay living wage and allow workers' families to live with dignity.

Informalization and casualization of labor is, of course, not confined to underdeveloped countries like the Philippines. These are international phenomena. These also happen in more developed economies. The stiff competition for jobs between nationals and migrant workers is a clear manifestation of the gravity of the problem even in advance capitalist countries. Besides, migrant work is largely contractual and not regular.

Surplus labor or an over abundance of labor force is the common denominator both in underdeveloped and developed countries. The situations that created surplus labor are different. But in both, we can hear the clamor of workers for decisive changes, urgently.

An over-abundance of labor in developed countries is clearly due to technology advancement. Production that used to require hundreds of workers may need only ten workers now because of technology. Even office procedures have greatly reduced human power as a computer can now handle jobs that used to belong to five or more people.

But this is not the whole picture; otherwise, we will end up hating technology, destroying machines, the products of workers' persistence in improving means that will make work fast and efficient to better serve humanity's needs.

Advanced technology rendered many workers jobless because the aims of capitalist production are geared towards gaining profit and not really to address the people's needs. They used whatever additional profits they got from using modern technology and wringing workers' sweat out for more capital goods and not to improve the lives of the workers. Workers continue to earn little and they cannot buy goods produced. This is the crisis of over-production. And this drove the capitalists to turn into more speculative investments. They made more money but more of their investments were not creating value. A big portion of the world's capital is not invested in the real economy. Thus, many workers became part of the informal sector or casuals. Hence many are without decent jobs

like today in the US and elsewhere.

In backward countries like ours, surplus labor is a result of the lack of industrialization. Investments are outsourced by the advanced economies that generally do not develop local industries. And domestic capitalists would not like to invest in genuine industrialization that they have yet to develop. This would require them bigger capital outlay and with imported products saturating our markets, investing in production economy would not be lucrative, would not be giving their ROI fast.

So, what we have are outsourced businesses: repacking, assembly, business process outsourcing. These are few and cannot absorb the growing labor force. And because of this oversupply of labor and a government that is dependent on foreign power support for its stability, it became easy for contractual or casual hiring to become the norm.

Proponents of neo-liberal globalization have been going around peddling the idea that we cannot do anything about casualization but accept it.

I have always believed that we can gain better understanding of the socio-economic situation of the people in the light of the balance of forces between classes. That is to say the balance of power between the ruling elites and the working class. There is an immense power in the hands of the elite that the working class in the Philippines lives in grinding poverty and is deprived of decent work. The trade union movement on the other hand is at a disheartening state. The Philippine trade union movement is weak and fragmented. Of the 36.4 m Philippine labor force, only 2.4 m are members of unions and workers associations but only about 1.5 m are covered by Collective Bargaining Agreements. These are divided into 30,968 unions and workers association nationwide.

These statistics would spell out the reason for the capitalists' disregard of the core labor standards. The Filipino Labor is simply weak- not unionized and unempowered.

And even if the Trade Union movement is strong in its simple nature i.e simple trade unions. That can neither be a guarantee of decent work for the working class forever. Membership of a trade union does not determine whether or not you are a member of the working class. Workers are an economic unit, because they work for a wage or salary. They are compelled to sell their mental and physical energies and in the process are exploited, inasmuch that they produce a greater amount of wealth than they receive.

For example in the first world like the United Kingdom, Trade Unions have been operating in this country for two hundred years, at first as illegal organizations, later with the protection of the law. From one point of view their history appears to be a great success story. Membership, at one time counted in tens of thousands, has increased (at the end of 1978 to over 13M) and new groups of workers continually become organized.

Employers generally now have to negotiate with the unions. Governments more and more find it necessary to consult them about wage fixing as in the so-called Social Contract negotiated in February 1979 between the Labor Government and the TUC General Council.

The twenty-six largest unions, with a membership of over ten million, can by striking, bring to a standstill factories, power and transport, nationalized industries, government departments and public services.

But it is so disheartening to realize what has become our Trade Union movement in the Planet in general today. From originally organized as a social movement most unions if not all have been reduced to sectarian organizations concerned only for their own organization or sectors' welfare. This is doubly disheartening to realize in the Philippine Trade Union movement which started not

only as an ordinary social movement but as an anti imperialist social movement.

What is there to show for all this `success' of the Trade union movement in the first world like the United Kingdom? Workers' living standards have indeed risen but the unions could not prevent some of this gain being lost in the depression which began in 1974; could not prevent unemployment or its rise to a peak level of 1.6M in 1977; could not prevent considerable numbers of workers being paid wages lower than the amounts received by the unemployed under the social security scheme.

The problems facing the unions is that - necessary as they are to prevent employers depressing wages excessively - the unions are strictly limited in what they can achieve for their members within the capitalist system of society out of which unions arise and within which they operate.

Capitalist private companies and Government Owned & Controlled Corporations are both operated for the purpose of making a profit and they cannot long survive without it. Trade unions cannot push wages up to a level which prevents profits being made.

When companies are marketing their products profitably a union can hope to win concessions by threatening to halt production and interrupt the flow of profits. But against a firm nearing bankruptcy, or during a depression when firms generally are curtailing production, standing workers off or closing down whole factories, the strike is a blunted weapon.

Trade unions, fighting the same old battles over and over again, offer no way out of the dead-end of capitalism.

There is nothing the unions can do which will substantially alter the way capitalism works.

However, there is a solution; it is the replacement of capitalism by Socialism.

Only Socialism will free the working class from the problems which flow from capitalism-including war, exploitation, poverty, unemployment and bad housing.

Let the motivation of production be the need of the people and not profit. Let market be equivalent to the population and not only to those that are capable to buy.

The root cause is clear. And therefore, the solution. Change capitalism? Let the workers' experience in the more than centuries of struggle guide us. The initial step is strengthening our ranks. Unite for decent jobs!

The old ethic taught to man is that man's business on this earth was to look out for himself. That was the ethic of the jungle; the ethic of the wild beast. Take care of yourself, no matter what may become of your fellow man, which is what free trade and neo liberalism is all about.

Thousands of years ago the question was asked; "Am I my brother's keeper?" That question has never yet been answered in a way that is satisfactory to civilized society.

Yes, I am my brother's keeper. The labor movement is organized upon a principle that the strong shall help the weak. The strength of a strong man is a prideful thing, but the unfortunate thing in life is that strong men do not remain strong. And it is just as true of unions and labor organizations as is true of men and individuals. And whereas today the strong trade unions of the first world and some of the developing countries may be able to stand upon their own feet and like mighty oaks stand before the gale, defy the lightning, yet the day may come when those organizations will not be able to withstand the lightning and the gale. This is one lesson we have learned so bitterly in our past in the Philippines. Now we have the resolved to organize the unorganized.

Ten thousand times has the Philippine labor movement stumbled and bruised itself. We've been enjoined by the courts, assaulted by thugs, charged by the militia, traduced by the press, frowned upon in public opinion, and deceived by politicians. But notwithstanding all these, labor is today the most vital and potential power this planet has ever known, and its historic mission is as certain of ultimate realization as is the setting of the sun. Its spirit will never die. And we hope that the realization of this planning workshop will manifest that the spirit lives on.

Thank you Very Much