

The Migrant Condition

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Dear Friends,

Akbayan Party congratulates Rep. Walden Bello who was recently named as chairman of the Committee on Overseas Workers Affairs. Our representative in Congress needs the support and cooperation of our comrades and friends in the international sphere specifically the migrant groups and lobbyists who are contributors in reforming our migrants' agenda.

Thank you very much.

In solidarity,

Akbayan's International Committee

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The Migrant Condition

by Walden Bello

(When I was recently named chairman of the Committee on Overseas Workers' Affairs of the House of Representatives of the Philippines, I was approached by members of the press for my views on migrant labor. I remembered a speech I delivered last year at the Global Forum for Migration and Development in Athens, Greece. The thrust of the speech was that migrants' rights have to be addressed on two fronts: ending the neoliberal policies that are responsible for creating poverty in their home countries, thus forcing them to emigrate, and demanding that they are given full rights in their host countries.)

The migrant worker experience is one that is increasingly typical. Let's start with myself. I am now back in the Philippines, but I spent nearly 20 years as a political exile in the United States during the Marcos dictatorship. During that time I survived by working as a journalist, teaching, doing research, and taking on odd jobs in different American cities.

Multiple Sites, Multiple Identities

This experience of multiple sites of work during one's active years is not too different from that of the Palestinian engineer who returns to the West Bank or Gaza after working in Kuwait, Egypt, and the United States. Nor from that of the Mexican peasant who goes to the United States to work in a variety of jobs, returns to tend to his or her farm in Morelos for extended periods, then heads back to Chicago. Nor from that of the Keralan who alternates between tending a small shop back home built with savings from her overseas work and long stints serving as domestic help in the Gulf countries.

With multiple sites of work have come multiple identities. Over the years, in addition to our original identity, we begin to regard our country of work as our home, indeed even with some affection, even when that country is not hospitable to us. And beyond identities forged by nationality and residence, there is the identity of class—that becoming aware of a condition we share with so many others of different nationalities, that sense of being part of an international working class.

Negative and Positive Realities

But let us not romanticize the lot of the globalized worker. Instability and lack of security is the condition of many. Capitalism in the neoliberal era destroys jobs at home and creates them elsewhere, forcing many into dangerous transborder journeys to find those jobs. Unregulated as it is today, capitalism is marked by periods of expansion and contraction. When contraction arrives, the lot of the migrant becomes a perilous one, as opportunistic politicians scapegoat him or her for the loss of jobs of workers from the dominant culture. This is the situation in the developed countries today, where discrimination, police repression, and deportation have become pervasive. In Europe, this is accompanied by cultural stigmatization, with migrants of Muslim origin being defined as the "Other."

But let us not be too negative either about our host societies. These are often democratic societies where there are rights and liberties that are institutionalized. Many migrants, of course, are deprived of a number of these rights and liberties, but in many respects, these polities provide a model of what is possible in our societies of origin, where rights and liberties are fragile if not non-existent and political corruption is pervasive. Women from many developing societies find in their host societies a level of respect and a state of formal equality with men that is sorely absent where they came from. Filipina women, for instance, are afforded in Europe and the United States the means to assert their reproductive rights via contraception which benighted forces make it difficult for them to obtain back home. They also have the right to divorce abusive partners, a course of action they are legally deprived of in the Philippines with its medieval code governing marriage.

Crisis of the Home Economy

But when all is said and done, most migrant workers would probably prefer to stay and work in their countries of origin if they could find the jobs that would provide them with a decent living. This is why it is important for migrant advocates to understand the conditions which have made emigration from developing countries so pervasive over the last three decades.

Conditions of poverty and economic distress push people out of their societies, but these conditions are not natural. They are created. And in scores of developing countries since the late eighties the prime engine expanding poverty and economic distress has been structural adjustment programs pushed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and trade liberalization promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Promoted under the guise of bringing about efficiency, these programs have destroyed agriculture and industry in country after country. In Mexico, severe cutbacks in state support for agriculture, efforts to roll back agrarian reform, and NAFTA-imposed trade liberalization have made agriculture a losing proposition, forcing Mexico's peasantry, as the saying goes, to transfer en masse to the United States. In the Philippines, structural adjustment has destroyed the country's industrial base and with it, hundreds of thousands of industrial and manufacturing jobs, while WTO-imposed trade liberalization has made farming unattractive for peasants whose products cannot compete with the subsidized commodities being dumped by the US, Europe, and other countries. For many of these displaced farmers and their children, relocating to the urban metropolis is followed by emigration.

The Remittance Economy

So massive has been the unraveling of our industrial and agricultural base wrought by neoliberal policies that it is oftentimes only remittances from migrant workers that keep our home economies afloat-something that can be said without exaggeration of the Philippines. Remittances are critical and our migrant workers are to be complimented for their heroic role, but the remittance economy is no substitute for a vibrant domestic economy. Unfortunately, in the Philippines, our policymakers have made remittances a substitute for domestic production.

Two-Front War

Thus, to seriously address the problems they confront, migrants and migrant advocates cannot but be involved in a two-front war. On the one hand, we must struggle in our countries of origin to end the conditions of structural adjustment, trade liberalization, and other neoliberal policies that have eroded our industrial and agricultural base and destroyed millions of jobs. We must tell the US government and the European Union that we do not need

aid; what we need is for them to stop imposing bilateral trade agreements and economic partnership agreements on us. What our countries demand is a halt to the structural adjustment programs still in effect in scores of countries in Africa and an end to further liberalization of trade under the WTO and bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. Of course, development has many other requirements, but stopping structural adjustment and indiscriminate trade liberalization is a sine qua non, a condition without which other indigenous development initiatives cannot prosper.

When it comes to the other front, in our host countries, the agenda is clear. We must aggressively assert what is the unvarnished truth: that migrants overwhelmingly make a positive contribution to the economy and culture of their host countries. We must frontally oppose state repression of migrants and confront the right wing populist groups that scapegoat them. We must demand an end to the deportation of undocumented migrants, the rapid legalization and granting of full citizenship rights to those with papers and their children, and the facilitation of the achievement of legal status of those without papers.

Success in solving the dilemmas of migrants will necessitate progress in both these fronts. There is no guarantee of success in our advocacy, but unless we confront the challenges in both fronts, we are sure to fall short of our goals.
