

Child Dockworkers Break a Union in Mindanao

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DAPITAN, PHILIPPINES (1/15/98) — How do you break a dockworkers union in the Philippines?

With children.

At least, that's how it was done last year in Dapitan, a port city on the southern island of Mindanao.

Six years ago, the Philippine Integrated Industrial Labor Union (PIILU) won an election to represent the 80 longshoremen working for the Dipolog and Dapitan Stevedoring and Warehousing Services Company, a company owned by Joaquin Macias. The union, affiliated to the conservative Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, signed a collective bargaining agreement for five years. The contract pegged longshore wages to the minimum wage in Mindanao for dock workers - about 96 pesos a day (at the writing of this article, the peso was in free fall, going from 33 to over 46 pesos per dollar in one month.)

In late 1995, a year before the agreement was due to expire, the capataz, or dock foreman, worked behind the scenes to organize a company union. It challenged the right of the PIILU to represent the employees. But that wasn't the biggest threat to the established union.

Children started showing up on the docks. At first there were just a handful, working fulltime on the Dapitan wharf. But the number quickly grew. Flor Amistoso, an organizer for PIILU, by now has interviewed 71 children working there.

The Philippine government estimates that it takes over 370 pesos a day to support a family of six, so the wages of adults on the waterfront were never sufficient by themselves to support a family. Once in a while, dockworkers in Dapitan themselves would bring their kids to work with them. But children only did light jobs.

When the company union got started, the new wave of child workers began doing the work of adults.

Their main job is unloading sacks of concrete, each weighing over 100 pounds. When a freighter carrying cement docks at the wharf, children troop up the gangway, and down into the ship's hold. Each child hoists a sack onto his shoulders, and carries it up out of the boat and onto the pier. There two adults take it and stack it onto a pallet or truck. The children work until the hold is empty.

They are all boys, from 10 to 17 years old. For this heavy labor, they receive 80 centavos a sack. In a week, each earns between 70 and 200 pesos.

The capataz says he hires children because adults won't do the work. But Flor Amistoso points out

that “slowly but surely, they are replacing adults by hiring children. If we allow children to do the work,” she warns, “the whole union is weakened.”

Amistoso was given a grant by the International Labor Organization’s International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor to organize the children and their families. She befriended the kids, taking them fishing and on picnics, buying them a volleyball net for games between unloading boats. She held classes under a tree near the docks to begin teaching them to read. She visited each of the parents, who live in squatter communities without running water or electricity near the port, in houses built of cast-off materials.

The work exacts a heavy physical toll. The boys complain of muscle pains, headache, fever, scabies, and respiratory ailments. Three of them have tuberculosis, and one has started to cough up blood. Last year a child was killed when he fell inside a ship.

But despite the pain and danger, the kids want to work. The parents want them to as well. Their families have begun to depend on the income.

“Their fathers ask me, ‘Can you give us three square meals a day?’” Amistoso recounts. “I just tell them I’m not here to give them money or food, but to tell them what their rights are.”

One of those rights is to go to school. But only one child wants to - none want to give up their income from working. Their families don’t have money for even the small tuition charged by public schools, much less for uniforms, food or transportation.

The Philippine labor code prohibits the labor of all children under 16. Those between 16 and 18 can only work directly under their parents’ supervision. The child labor in Dapitan port is clearly illegal.

Yet the local office of the Philippine government’s Department of Labor and Employment has not taken action to stop it. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to make the country’s economy attractive to investors, enforcement of labor protection legislation, including the prohibition of child labor, has decreased. The government declares that an inexpensive labor force gives it an important competitive advantage in the world economy.

Other government organizations have been equally unresponsive to Amistoso’s pleas on behalf of the children. The Department of Health has ignored their need for X-rays to determine lung damage due to the dust, and the Department of Education won’t come up with either informal classes for the kids, or subsidies to defray the expense of their attending school.

“I think the only way we can stop the children working is if the port workers themselves take some action, like going on strike,” Amistoso concludes. “They’re afraid that if they act, they will be fired and replaced, and the government won’t defend them. But if we don’t act, we’ll never be able to protect the jobs of the adults. And what kind of life will we be giving to our own children?”

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