

Filipino Migrant Workers Amidst Globalization

BY PURA VELASCO

Le néolibéralisme a donné la priorité au commerce international et aux droits/profits des corporations transnationales ce qui a fait de l'exportation du travail (ou des travailleurs de métiers) un élément-clé de la stratégie économique des Philippines ainsi que de plusieurs autres gouvernements du Sud. Cet article examine l'impact de la mondialisation de l'économie sur la vie des travailleuses émigrantes des Philippines.

The impact of economic globalization on the lives of poor Filipinos is so devastating, and the need for jobs so pressing, that despite the horrifying stories of injustices suffered by Filipino migrant victims, Filipino workers cannot be dissuaded from leaving the country in search of overseas employment. In my particular case, the threat of living in perpetual poverty, unemployment, and misery drove me to leave my own family in 1981 to work in Saudi Arabia. Today, many years later, these are still the same threats that push a lot of us to brave the violence against migrant workers abroad just to have the chance to find these better albeit elusive opportunities.

Since the beginning of American neocolonial control of the Philippines in 1901, our natural and human resources have been reserved for American businesses and their partners to use and expropriate. Every time our laws are changed to accommodate foreign business interests, the Philippine government and its transnational partners come up with promises of jobs and progress for the Filipino people. But our experience tells us that these were not the real goals of government and corpora-

tions. We have opened and continue to open our doors wide to foreign firms so that at present, our forests, minerals, and other natural resources are almost depleted. Rural and urban poor communities with no sanitation, health, education, and social services are experiencing the devastating impact of "fast-tracked" development projects by foreign corporations. Time and again, communities of the poor are demolished by private armies and by the military, and such brutal use of force and intimidation does not exclude arson and murder. Agricultural and forest lands have been converted to open pit mining, agri-business and industrial peace zones or export processing zones. These areas are called industrial "peace" zones because unions and strikes are not allowed. Workers are routinely required to get recommendation letters from public officials, and parish priests or pastors certifying that they are not members of unions or activist organizations and will not participate in union and strike activities.

Under Gloria Arroyo's present government, foreign companies are welcome to expand their business—whether it be in agriculture, mining, real estate, logging, fishing, communication, energy, financial management or in the pharmaceutical industries. It is no surprise that President Arroyo is a staunch promoter and administrator of globalization since she has even authored the Philippine government economic policy—which carries the full WTO/GATS agenda.

Vancouver-based Placer Dome Mining Company is a good example of the many foreign companies that

create havoc in the lives of poor working class Filipinos and which have connections with corrupt government officials who very often have business interests. In the 60s it started its partnership with the former dictator Marcos' mining company, Marcopper, the biggest gold and copper mining company in the Philippines. Three years ago, Placer Dome massively displaced thousands of rural folks in Marinduque when its mine tailings polluted and destroyed the sources of food and livelihood of the community. These displaced communities are now considered internal refugees in urban cities and have joined the growing number of unemployed migrant workers. President Arroyo repeatedly ignored the pleas of the Marinduque people for her to intervene in their case against Placer Dome by bringing their case to the attention of Prime Minister Chretien. Later, when the Placer Dome executives absconded from the Philippines right after they were

**Despite the
horrifying stories of
injustices suffered
by Filipino migrant
victims, Filipino
workers cannot be
dissuaded from
leaving the country
in search of overseas
employment.**

found guilty of polluting and, in effect, killing the Boac River and the Calacan Bay at a congressional investigation, she still maintained her hands-off policy. She even chose to ignore the advice of her Minister of Agriculture and Environment, who, together with the Chairperson of the congressional investigation, recom-

Labour export has shifted from being a temporary solution to becoming a permanent policy with increasing government aggressiveness in marketing the Filipino as a global worker.

mended that she bring up this issue during her official visit to Ottawa. However, the strong protests by Filipino migrant workers and their supporters from Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa forced President Arroyo's hand, and for her Ottawa meeting with Chretien, she invited both her Minister of Agriculture and Environment as well as the chair of the congressional investigation of the Placer Dome environmental disaster to present this case.

What is happening to the people of Marinduque is not an isolated case. It is also happening to many other communities in the Philippines especially now that President Arroyo has joined the bandwagon of the anti-terrorist campaign by the Bush government. The truth is, the American troops now in Mindanao are not really there to weed out the Al-Qaeda/Abusayaf bandits-for-ransom group. They are in these vast and fertile lands to protect the transnational businesses—Dole is

just one of them—and to allow these companies to continue their land-grabbing activities by driving away indigenous communities and small farmers from their lands. President Arroyo knows that she needs the U.S. military to control Mindanao since many hinterland communities are now organized and continue to defend their ancestral lands, forests and farms from rapacious transnational companies and their local partners in crime.

The Philippines is rich in natural resources, and the economy is essentially agrarian and lacks basic industries. It does not have a national industry. It is a country where multinational companies from the U.S., Japan, Canada, and Europe are active in keeping the country as an infantile economy: an amazingly cheap source of raw materials and a willing dumping ground for surplus products. As a result of this set-up we have a semi-feudal and semi-colonial political economy unable to provide meaningful employment and social services to our people. Our currency is tied to the U.S. dollar and continues to devalue so that we can no longer afford to pay the price of basic goods and services. We used to be number four in food production worldwide, but now we import rice, meat, milk, soap and a lot of our basic necessities. On the other hand, our production is focused on exportable products such as, bananas, cashew, pineapple, and asparagus.

The International Monetary Fund/World Bank imposition of structural adjustment programs in the Philippines has also intensified the misery of our people with deathly poverty and massive unemployment. Our government institutions such as schools, hospitals, and public utilities are very inefficient and beyond the reach of the majority of our people. Most of our institutions are privatized, and those that are publicly funded are run by corrupt bureaucrats and politicians, and so everywhere you turn, the patronage system is rampant. It compounds the

problem of access to training and employment. Filipinos, who are mostly poor, would offer gifts to their patrons just to maintain their connections. Workers would resort to personally paying to do volunteer work and to get reference letters from some bureaucrats and public officials. So, given these difficult economic and employment situations, our workers are conditioned and oriented to become so-called "docile, cheap and exportable labour"—and this is the kind of labour that is attractive to labour-receiving countries like Canada.

The Philippines, according to an International Labour Organization (ILO) study, has remained the number one source of migrant workers all over the world, followed by Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh, and Thailand. We are now seven million Filipino migrant workers involved in the nation building of 168 countries other than the Philippines. Our host countries benefit greatly from us. We are recruited at the prime of our lives. Seven million of us are like a nation by itself and our number is increasing as overseas employment has become an indispensable component of the Philippine government's Comprehensive Employment Plan. The Arroyo government has no new solution to the high rate of unemployment and underemployment in the Philippines under the neo-liberal policies of deregulation, liberalization and privatization. Labour export has shifted from being a temporary solution to becoming a permanent policy with increasing government aggressiveness in marketing the Filipino as a global worker and in marketing the Philippines as a human resource center. For several years now, the Comprehensive Employment Plan has meant more Filipinos employed overseas than it has meant an increase in local employment. For example, in the year 2001 alone, some 842,000 workers were deployed abroad, while local employment went down by 290,000 (which is the recorded number of laid-off workers).

Labour export remains as an attractive business enterprise despite the persistent feedback from Filipino migrant workers that it is a source of national shame because of massive abuses to Filipinos by foreign employers. It remains lucrative because it generates foreign exchange—about seven billion dollars annually; generates revenue for government and “creates” employment by exporting people. Labour export means survival for every Philippine administration, great income for bureaucrats and politicians and easy money for the private profiteers. It is no wonder that our government has failed to protect Philippine domestic workers around the world. Most notoriously, for instance, the government did criminally little to prevent Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino domestic worker being hanged for the wrongful conviction of killing her friend Delia Maga, also a domestic worker, and the little son of Ms Maga’s employer.

The Philippine government and the labour-receiving countries have found productive milking cows in the migrant workers—amassing large revenue from workers’ employment and immigration processing fees like visas, passport, head tax, professional license, etc. A study by the Philippine government revealed that the documentation process for overseas deployment involves 76 signatures. This means that a worker has to pay the total cost of 15,400 pesos for signatures and stamps on their documents. This is only for the authentication segment of the application part of the process. We are not yet talking about the major fees. The second time I departed the Philippines for work abroad, I decided not to go through the formal channel set up by the Philippine government because I could not afford it.

It also costs a lot to settle abroad. Some years ago, in Canada it cost me about 4,000 dollars to process my papers under the Foreign Domestic/Live-In Caregiver Program until I got my landing papers. But do we get

our money’s worth? Many of us are not sure about this. On the contrary, governments keep on creating policies that are oppressive to poor migrant workers, such as, Immigration Canada’s head tax and bond system in sponsoring family members and the proposal not to grant automatic Canadian citizenship to children born in Canada by parents who are not landed immigrants or citizens of Canada. Of course, we should not forget the racist and discriminatory Foreign Domestic Program (FDM) which is now called the Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP). Governments often set up agencies or offices that are allegedly, following policy, responsible for managing labour. However, they merely turn out to be efficient revenue centers.

Canada as an advanced capitalist country has used immigration policies to recruit skilled cheap labour in time of economic need. It also closes its door in time of economic crisis.

In the 1960s and 1970s many of those recruited by Immigration Canada were Filipino health professionals, teachers and garment workers. An estimated 70 per cent of this immigration wave were women. Most of them were sent to settle in areas like Newfoundland, Labrador and Winnipeg. But in the 80s and 90s, thousands of Filipino women entered as domestic workers under the Foreign Domestic Movement Program now known as the Live-In Caregiver Program.

So far less than five countries have signed the International Convention for the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families. Canada refuses to sign on the pretext that it has the Live In Caregiver Program (LCP) which according to Immigration Canada, is a program that protects foreign domestics from abuse and exploitation. In reality, the LCP’s mandatory requirement for domestic workers to live with their employers for close to three years without landing rights puts the workers in vulnerable and exploitative conditions. This federal program traps our

women in exploitative and oppressive situation. With low wages and long working hours, the workers are ghettoized in the lowest economic and political rung of Canadian society. Domestic workers are brought in to the country under a federal program, but the workers work under the provincial government jurisdiction. So nobody pays attention to the Employment Standards except the workers.

Also, domestic workers who are in a live-in condition find it difficult to demand their rights because they are afraid to lose their jobs, thus putting in danger their immigration status. They could also be barred from the place where they live and work. They routinely experience sexual harassment, violation of employment contracts, and other forms of abuse, but often they just suffer in silence. The Canadian government and our employers see us as mere slaves or vacuum cleaners that can be discarded. But there is also that unseen violence of not caring whether or not we suffer from a permanent deskilling because we have become mere chattel, even though we are already Canadian citizens.

After many years of struggling economically, many are trapped in domestic work, or other jobs that resemble domestic work, in factories, homecare, and service industries. We

**Labour export
means survival
for every Philippine
administration,
great income for
bureaucrats and
politicians and
easy money
for the private
profiteers.**

think it is high time that the Canadian government perceive the shamefulness of its shifting the burden of providing universal childcare and elderly care from its society to the backs of Third World domestic workers. We also think that the LCP is a tragic waste of rich human resources and has to be scrapped! Immigration

Such low wages necessitate long working hours and extra jobs—so that ironically, this system deprives our own families of that nurturing and care that it demands from Filipino domestic workers.

officials, like the former Immigration Minister Eleanor Caplan keep on saying that Canada should bring in the best and the brightest immigrants and yet they will not allow Filipino nurses to practice their profession even if they have passed the nurses licensure exams in British Columbia (despite the nursing crisis there). They want to keep skilled and talented immigrant women in a trap, where their labour remains cheap and flexible. In short, they want to maintain the discriminatory regulations within the LCP.

In Metro Toronto and in some major cities of Canada, the segregation of the Filipino women workers into low paying jobs is clear. They are concentrated in the homecare, laundry, janitorial, telemarketing, data entry services, and factory work. The few nurses and medical technologists who have upgraded themselves are part-time or contract workers working for private agencies. Yes, they are mobile, working in three or

four jobs, with a larger income than most Filipinos, but they have no access to upward advancement in their respective professions. And although the Canadian government acknowledges that we are one of the most highly educated of all immigrant groups, we also remain one of the lowest paid. Such low wages necessitate long working hours and extra jobs—so that ironically, this system deprives our own families of that nurturing and care that it demands from Filipino domestic workers.

The impact of this oppressive system continues to worsen, despite all hope and good intentions. I remember in 1990 when I arrived in Toronto with 209 other domestic workers from my town, we were very hopeful that things would be better for us here. It was difficult to engage my compatriots in a conversation on the possible impact of the global economic restructuring that Canadians had started to talk about at that time. When I mentioned that we might experience the impact of structural adjustment programs for the second time, and in Canada, my friends told me that Canada was an independent, strong country and its government would never bow down to the pressure of the free market. They also advised me to be a good domestic worker and to focus my energy in acquiring citizenship papers as it would free me from doing domestic work, and would help me get fair and decent treatment in Canada. Well, it has been over ten years since our arrival. I still receive the regular invitations to social events from friends. But recently, the invitations are more urgent and not the usual social and recreational events, but meetings organized by parents, churches, and the youth.

A lot of discussions are focused on the incalculable social cost of migration and the impact of flexible work situations on our families and the community in general. These discussions gradually make us aware of broad and encompassing problems. For one, we become aware that the

LCP, a program for domestic workers, is just an “entry point” for us—to go into that enormous stream of work that is the dirty, cheap, and undesired jobs. Slowly we understand that it was the bait we snapped at, and now we have to remain in these jobs that are essentially domestic servitude. We discover that this systematized compartmentalization into “jobs for people of colour” wherein we suffer the disappearance and devaluation of our skills and experience, is the almost unseen weapon of discrimination that can annihilate our spirit. We know that this is all about institutionalized racism and other forms of discrimination.

We begin to see other broad and encompassing problems. We are worried that our youth are now being recruited as a second generation of marginalized labourers. Many of our youth in Canada are not able to handle the pressure from family reunification and settlement concerns. The difficulties in family reunification are compounded by the length of separation, which is a result of many factors: a restrictive immigration policy; the exorbitant head tax of 975 dollars, the 500 dollar landing fee, and numerous employment fees as well as the income requirement to sponsor. Such is the low quality of life among these troubled families, that it is often marked by social and health problems like the high incidence of tuberculosis, teen pregnancy, increasing number of high school drop-outs, suicides, addiction, and domestic violence.

We are also getting alarmed with the increasing number of undocumented workers and mail-order brides in our community who are in very precarious situations exploited by their employers, brokers and partners.

Our community is frustrated with the fact that we have remained at the fringes of Canadian society. We are frustrated with the constant reminder from the federal and provincial governments that they no longer have enough money for social programs

and services. There has even been a report on immigrants, made when the Immigration Act was being reviewed, that basically said that although domestic workers were providers of valuable service, they were also big consumers of social programs and services. We know that most of us handle two, three or more jobs—and most of them are part-time jobs—just in order to stay afloat. In fact, in this way, we have an income to be able to pay our taxes, and here we are, blamed for using social programs that we paid for. To us that is evading the real issue, that jobs and social services are being stolen from us in the name of profit for a few.

However, this is the case whether we are in Canada or in the Philippines. We have been supporting this global economic system whose main beneficiaries are the elite. We, who are deprived but are courageous, are going to follow and settle where the resources are. We are aware that the privileged few will always create barriers that would prevent us from having decent lives. We will not surrender to these barriers. We have traveled this far, and have given up so much that we can only continue to grapple with and confront them.

On March 17, 1995, Flor Contemplacion, a Filipino domestic worker was hanged for the wrongful conviction of killing her friend, Delia Maga, also a domestic worker, and the little boy in Maga's care.

The travesty of Flor Contemplacion's wrongful conviction and hanging generated massive protests organized by Filipino migrants and their supporters all over the world against the Philippine and the Singaporean governments. The Singaporean government's arrogant refusal to stay the execution despite evidence of Ms. Contemplacion's innocence, and the restrained action by the Philippine government in her defence showed us that our interest and welfare did not rest in the hands of our government nor the host countries' governments, but in our own

hands. We took this opportunity to expose the plight of poor migrant workers to the international consciousness of people. It also gave us the opportunity to strengthen the overseas organizing drive started by Migrante International, an alliance of Filipino migrant workers organizations. A few months after the death of Flor Contemplacion on March 17, 1995, Migrante International coordinated the successful campaign to stay the execution by musketry of Sarah Balabagan, who was then a 16-year-old Filipino domestic worker convicted of stabbing her rapist, a United Arab Emirate employer.

In Canada, we continue to mount campaigns to fight for the rights and welfare of Filipino migrants. We mounted a national campaign to stay the deportation of Leticia Cables, the nanny from Edmonton, Alberta who was considered to have violated the LCP regulation when her employer—a lawyer—shared Leticia's service with another family since she could not afford to pay her full salary. We fought hard when Melca Salvador, the nanny from Montreal, Quebec was being deported with her Canadian-born son when she did not complete her LCP in the required three years because she got pregnant. Leticia Cables was able to come back to Edmonton and Melca Salvador won her fight to stay in Canada with her son. Our network of Filipino migrants has staged many demonstrations, protests, and deputations directed at Immigration Canada for the restrictive and discriminatory regulations embedded in the LCP and the Immigration Act. Our national network across Canada has established peoples' organizations in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa. We also belong to Migrante International, which is an alliance of Filipino migrant workers organizations. When Migrante International had its international conference in November 2001, in the Philippines, it was attended by migrant organizers from all over the world. A follow-up conference was

held in Japan, which created a network of Asia-Pacific migrant organizers supporting each other's work in organizing migrant workers from the different countries of the Asia-Pacific region.

As Filipino women workers, we are proud of the long history and vibrancy of our efforts to educate, organize and mobilize ourselves to address the roots of our problems in Canada and in the Philippines. We contribute at the local, national, and international levels of the women's movement. We recognize the need to deepen our understanding and organizing among specific groups of Filipino women in Canada: the migrant workers and the young Filipino-Canadian women.

The Filipino workers are like bamboo trees. We are very flexible. We don't break easily. We develop informal networks that help us to survive difficulties when we move from job to job, border to border. I have personally experienced these informal networks which helped me circumvent discriminatory rules at the borders or twist these ridiculous rules that the system imposes on us. But more important than little personal "rebellions" like this, we have learned over the years that formal and solid organizing is more effective in protecting ourselves and our rights. Finally, it is critical that we not only focus on the immediate problems that migrant workers presently face, but address the root causes of migration—poverty and unemployment.

Pura Velasco came to Canada as a domestic worker in 1990. She is currently coordinator of an Alzheimer's Adult Day Program at the Woodgreen Community Centre in Toronto. She is an active member of the Philippine Solidarity Group and the Migrant International Organization. She was President of the Toronto Organization for Domestic Workers' Rights (INTERCEDE) from 1990 to 1993.