

Brief Report to VTHC Executive on the International Unions' Conference in the Philippines and work of the KMU

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In early May 2010 a delegation of eight Australian trade unionists from the CWU, CFMEU, AMWU and the RTBU from across Australia attended the 26th International Solidarity Affair (ISA), in the Philippines. The annually held international trade unionists conference was hosted by the KMU (May 1st Labour Movement Centre), the largest federation of militant unions in the Philippines. The conference was also attended by delegates from Germany, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Denmark and New Zealand. Delegates were inspired by the immense courage and dedication in the work of KMU union activists at all levels for the rights of Filipino workers for proper wages, working conditions, union rights and a just society, in the face of violent suppression. The 26th ISA conference took place in the immediate days leading to the national elections on 10th May. (Three of the Australian ISA delegates also joined the People's International Observers' Mission.)

International delegates spent more than a week in numerous discussions and travelling with KMU organisers, national and local leaders and organisers, learning first hand about conditions of the Filipino urban and rural workers and the work of unions amongst many sections of workers. One of the highlights of the ISA programme was a 3 day "exposure" at the coal face of KMU work and its union affiliates in workplaces and communities, learning first hand about working and living conditions, day to day struggles, difficulties and dangers faced by workers and union activists.

Background to the economic and social conditions in the Philippines.

Tens of millions of workers in the Philippines have been at the sharp end of the effects of the global economic crisis that hit the world in mid 2008. This economic crisis intensified the existing hardship and suffering exacted on the Filipino people by the neo-liberals globalisation policies of past 20 years, led mainly by the US. Globalisation, together with the more recent GFC, is holding back the development of the Philippines into a modern economy, with its own industries and agriculture to provide jobs, food, housing and the necessary infrastructure. Globalisation and the GFC have entrenched the semi-colonial and semi-feudal economy of the Philippines. Whilst the vast majority of the 94 million Filipino people live and work in the poorest conditions and devastating poverty, much of

the country's wealth is hogged by a tiny group of obscenely rich families who run the country. The enormous profits extracted from the Filipino workers' cheap labour by the multinational corporations (mainly US, Japan, South Korea) are sent off shore. At the same time the Philippine's economy has become increasingly dependent on remittances from more than 9 million intensely exploited Filipino migrant workers working overseas in near slavery conditions, to support their impoverished families in the Philippines,

The US exerts a great deal of power and influence over the political and economic policies of the Philippines government and the state. Philippines holds an important economic and militarily strategic position for the US in the Asia Pacific region. US exercises strong influence over the compliant Philippines government to ensure its interests are protected and promoted in the region. US has many troops stationed in the Philippines.

Workers' conditions in the Philippines

Whilst the GFC worsened the economic conditions in the Philippines for ordinary people, it is used by big business in particular as an excuse to escalate attacks on workers wages, jobs, working conditions and the crushing of unions. Neo-liberal policies of globalisation and the GFC have led to wholesale privatisation, deregulation, widespread retrenchments, casualisation, "flexibility", part-time work, putting permanent workers on short term contracts, the wholesale destruction of many conditions, victimisation of union members, and more. The Centre for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR) recorded tens of thousands of retrenched workers from 88 companies in the country in past year. The majority of the affected industries are export-oriented, including electronics and garments. Many of the lowest paid workers are now getting wages below even the minimum wage. Official unemployment is 11%, while 19.4% of registered employed workers in 2009 are underemployed and the number continues to rise. These figures do not reflect the true numbers of unemployed with many in "unpaid family work" counted as employed or impoverished street vendors eeking out a meagre existence living hand to mouth. An October 2009 survey by the Ibon Foundation found that 71% of Filipinos rate themselves as poor. Basic necessities of life are unaffordable to many people in the Philippines.

Many rights and conditions that had been won over many decades of collective struggle by unions in the Philippines are now being rolled back under the pretext of global economic crisis and threats of job losses. The special "export processing zones" are covered by an official government policy of "no-union, no-strike". Big business wants to operate in conditions under which they can dictate to workers to do what they want, when they want it and to make workers sell their labour solely on employers' terms. They want cheap and docile labour to exploit to the hilt.

The GFC and globalisation have made it easier for employers and the government to crush unions, slash union membership and savagely wipe out many collective agreements. The total labor force in the Philippines is approx. 38 million of whom only 10% is organised in unions and only 4% are covered by a collective agreement.

The military (government and private armies of big employers) constantly harass, threaten and violently attack union activists. Union members and activists are commonly blacklisted by employers, the government, army and police. Many human rights violations are committed by the state's military and private armies and hired goons. Union organisers and activists are the main target of the violence. The highest number of recorded human rights violations, in the form of harassment, threats, intimidation, bashings, shootings and assassinations, are against workers and union organisations. In 2009 the Centre of Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR) recorded 270 new human rights violations involving 55,178 victims.

Armies in the workplace

Against this background trade unions in the Philippines operate in extremely harsh and repressive conditions. Successive national governments ensure that they deliver to multinational corporations and local large employers favourable conditions for the super exploitation of workers. Whilst Philippine Labor Code officially recognises the rights of workers to form unions or workers' organisations, in practice this is not being upheld. In reality belonging to a union or forming a union is banned. The government and big corporations constantly try to crush active unions and prevent workers from forming new unions. Many factories and farms have been militarized, with the army and police stationed permanently on site to prevent and crush unions organising and defending the workers. Union activists trying to organise workers are regularly harassed, threatened, victimised, intimidated and bashed by soldiers (state and private armies) and hired thugs. Workers seeking improvements in pay and conditions are attacked and threatened, bullied, harassed and physically assaulted. We spoke to many local organisers, rank and file workers and KMU organisers who reported continuous threats, intimidation, bashings and murders committed by soldiers, police and goons on trade union activists and members. Many union activists have been jailed on trumped up charges or have disappeared.

ISA international delegates visited two regional areas to gain direct experience of workers' conditions and union work in organising workers – Central Luzon and Eastern Visayas. Below are just some of the accounts from the "exposures".

Southern Tagalog is home to a large number of industrial enclaves and export processing zones where “no-union, no-strike” policy is implemented. Many multinational corporations in the electronics, automotive, garments and food manufacturing industry operate in this region. There is very high incidence of trade union rights violations. Around 40,000 workers in this region alone lost their jobs in 2009 at the height of the global economic crisis

Nestle, Toyota, Garment Factories in special economic zones

ISA delegation met with Nestle workers sacked in 2002 over a dispute with the company that refused to bargain over workers’ retirement benefits. To this day Nestle is ignoring court orders to reinstate sacked workers. Delegates joined the sacked workers and supporters on their 8 year long picket line. Sacked Nestle workers are continually harassed, threatened and blacklisted by the army and the company.

Delegates also met and held extensive discussions with **Toyota** workers and their families, union organisers and activists. The workers have been struggling to form an independent union since 1992. Several times Toyota unsuccessfully tried to set up company sponsored union or yellow unions. In 2001 workers went on strike that resulted in many union activists being sacked. Toyota ignored the supreme court ruling to reinstate the sacked workers. The ILO supported the union, Japanese unions supported the sacked workers and the KMU. The International Metals Federation support for sacked workers was also ignored by the company. Intimidation, threats, bashings and assassinations of union activists continue till this day. In 2009 the ILO high level mission investigated the Toyota sackings and recommended reinstatement but nothing has happened, and government is refusing to enforce the ILO recommendations. Now there’s constant military presence on the site, including CCTV cameras, threats, intimidation and assassinations. Workers inside are harassed and military intelligence is crawling inside the factory spying on workers and identifying union members and activists to bosses and the military.

The KMU has continued actively working with the Toyota workers not only with those still working inside the plant but also with sacked workers since 1992. It has implemented an ongoing house to house program to regularly visit sacked workers and their families. Regular meetings are held in 5 different areas; setting up and maintaining family support groups and education, and fund raising for the sacked workers and their families. Some sacked workers have been blacklisted by the company and government and live in dire poverty, some have sold their homes, some returned to countryside and some are hiding on account of arrest warrants for trumped up charges.

Cenral Luzon - the site of the **Hacienda Luisita** massacre in 2004 .

Delegates visited and met local union organisers from the Hacienda Luisita struggle where 14 unarmed farm workers were massacred by soldiers from the Armed Forces of the Philippines and local private armies. More than 1000 people marched to Manilla for 5 days in protest and to build awareness and support. Some workers were tortured and forced to sign false documents and declarations.

Hanjin in **Subic Bay** is another “no-union, no-strike” “export economic zone” in the Philippines. **Hanjin** is South Korean ship building conglomerate and Asia’s 3rd largest ship builder. The company prohibits any form of unionism, pays minimum wages and sacks workers at whim without needing to provide any reason – common practice in the Philippines. The company does not have to adhere to any health and safety standards and there are common injuries and deaths from being crushed, falling objects and electrocutions. More than 400 workers are women, mostly welders. The pay is insufficient to make ends meet. Since 2006, 47 workers have died from work accidents with 2000 recorded serious accidents. Workers taking 2 or 3 days leave are sacked. As an “economic zone” even Government Labour Department and local officials are denied entry to the plant. Recently, 300 union members, mostly leaders, were sacked.

In past 8 years 96 union leaders have been murdered in the Philippines, the most recent one on 2 June this year. Edward Panganiban, a 27 year old Union Secretary in Takata Philippines Inc. was another motor cycle drive-through assassination, a common method of assassination of trade union activists by the army.

Work of the KMU

The difficult and harshly repressive anti-worker and anti-union conditions in the Philippines have not intimidated the KMU organisers, union affiliates and supporters. On the contrary, the unjust and oppressive economic, political and social conditions of the Filipino people and the violent suppression of unionists and union members has only strengthened the KMU’s resolve to organise, educate and mobilise urban and rural workers and communities to struggle collectively. National and local union organisers and activists have dedicated their lives to organising workers in all sectors of the economy. KMU organisers patiently work day and night, tirelessly and creatively organising and educating workers in workplaces and in the communities. The KMU has a three prong approach in its work – educate, organise and mobilise. It conducts its own investigations and analyses of the general and specific conditions of workers and the wider society. Education of workers is central to all of KMU’s union organising work. Workers are not only educated in the necessity to be organised in unions, the collective strength of workers and their rights, but also on their overall rights to social and economic justice in the society. Problems of workers’ rights and conditions are linked to the

overall unjust and oppressive economic and political system in the Philippines. This has ensured a formidable and expanding base of a strong network of union activists. The KMU works closely with a wide range of different community organisations, many large marginalised sections of the people and professional groups, forming important alliances in struggle. During typhoon Ondoy KMU organisers helped hundreds of thousands of poor and homeless people savaged by the floods and storm, despite many being typhoon victims themselves.

Despite the government and employers' desperate efforts to discredit, vilify, demonise, isolate and physically destroy the KMU through jailings and assassinations, its work is deeply supported and respected on the ground by workers and communities in cities, rural areas and amongst other sectors of the people. KMU's three prong approach of organising, educating and mobilising workers and working deeply with communities has seen many positive results. It has instilled confidence in workers' own collective strength and union organisation, and a deeper political understanding of their conditions. Not all of these successes are openly evident as violent repression obviously compels some level of union work to be conducted virtually underground to protect union members, activists and the union organisation. The KMU and its union affiliates' strength lies in its powerful grass roots base amongst many sections of workers in manufacturing, processing, assemblies, garments industries, port workers, farm workers, teachers, academics, health workers, doctors, lawyers and many others, including continuing its work amongst the unemployed, sacked and retrenched workers.

The meagre subsistence wages of Filipino workers and union members means the KMU and affiliated unions' organisers at national, regional and local levels, essentially work on very little or no pay at all. They live "on the smell of an oily rag" and have very few resources to support their work. Their unfaltering commitment to the interests of the Filipino workers is inspirational and admirable.

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