

The Grave Attack on Migrants' Rights Taught Us One Thing:
Get Organized! Build Alliances!

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First of all I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me to share and to learn on how we can better promote and protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers. I was assigned to share with you about our experiences in organizing work on an international level, though much of my sharing will be experiences from the Asia-Pacific region from which I am more confident in dealing with today.

When the Asia-Pacific Mission for Migrants or the APMM was established in 1984, it did not come from nowhere but rather, was a product of the development of the work of the Mission for Migrant Workers in Hong Kong, a local mission established in 1981 to attend to the plight of migrant workers in Hong Kong.

I am sharing you this point in our history to stress the principle and the belief that any initiative for international cooperation and action does not start from the top but rather is a product of a continuous spiral growth of endeavors from the grassroots level. Likewise with the migrant movement, any national or international alliances can be assured of continuing growth and strengthening only if its base is strong. And when I mean "base", I refer to strong organizations of migrants that is the only assurance against attacks on their rights and promoting their welfare. Imagine constructing a house with weak foundations. Won't it inevitably collapse? But by having strong groundwork, we can build even the tallest and biggest mega-structures.

Take for example the following:

Case Study 1 – The Asian Migrants Coordinating Body in Hong Kong (AMCB – HK)

Even before the inception of the AMCB, there was already a strong alliance among Filipino migrant organizations - the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (now, UNIFIL-Migrante –HK). There also exist organizations among the Nepalese, Thais, Indonesians, Sri Lankans and Indians.

The AMCB started in 1994 in the form of cultural exchanges among migrants of different nationalities to deepen their knowledge and understanding of each other. It also became an avenue to know the specific issues of each of these groups. In 1998, when they experienced the first wage cut threat, the AMCB started to launch activities tackling migrant issues. The campaign and the mass actions they launched further galvanized their resolve to strengthen their ranks by seriously transforming AMCB from a mere cultural exchange into an alliance of organizations of migrants of various nationalities. Since then, the AMCB became the main campaign centre of migrants in defending against attacks on workers' rights and the negligence on their welfare by either the Hong Kong government or their respective governments.

The AMCB remained strong because the organizations that belong to it are continuously expanding and consolidating their membership.

This alliance also became an avenue for members to assist and help each other even in expanding and consolidating the other's organizations. Take the case of ATKI (Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers). Member organizations of Migrante plus the Coordinator of APMM in Macau directly assisted in the formation of ATKI in Macau. This experience is being replicated in other countries which then help the migrants strengthen their ranks and build the true spirit of international solidarity.

Case Study 2 – The Migrants Trade Union in South Korea (MTU – South Korea)

The formation of the MTU in South Korea is a collaborative effort of the migrant workers organizations and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Many members of the MTU are undocumented migrant sweatshops workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Indo-China, Philippines, etc.

The local union has been playing a vital role as far as fighting for the rights of undocumented migrants. It was very well obvious that it would be difficult for undocumented migrants to openly campaign against any policy that is detrimental to them, for threat of the reprisal and crackdown of immigration authorities. But it did not mean that these undocumented workers cannot join protest actions, for example, against immigration policies.

In a display of bold and creative tactics, the local union members are the one in the front line of the marches and clearly protecting the undocumented members of the MTU as they raise their demands. It is important for these undocumented workers to be present and experience the mass action to embolden them in fighting for their rights. The same thing happens when negotiating with the management of the factory for unfair labor practice.

Of course, there are issues that are beyond the “mandate” of MTU as a union. Policies and issues emanating from the respective governments of sending countries must rightfully be addressed by the organizations of the respective nationals. This is the reason why, for example, Filipino migrants have its own alliance – KASAMMAKO. It is the campaign centre among Filipino migrants. KASAMMAKO complements and supports the MTU and vice versa. It is essential for each nationality to have their own organizations to address their respective issues as a national because of the particularity of the issue.

This is also in line with our belief that the phenomenon of forced migration can be resolved principally within the existing conditions of the home country which breeds massive forced migration. Added to this, the strength of any international alliance is dependent on the strength of the national organizations of migrant workers themselves.

That is why on the part of the Filipino migrant workers, aside from being a member of the migrant union, they have their own organizations and their own alliance.

Case Study 3 – The Migrante International

Migrante International is the Global Alliance of progressive Filipino migrants' organizations in more than 20 major country-destinations of Filipino migrants. As of its last Congress in 2005, the member organizations of Migrante grew to about 95 organizations. Its Executive Committee is based in the Philippines though it has a Global Council which include members overseas to decide in between its Congresses.

The APMM in the early 90s initiated the formation of Migrante-International after sponsoring a series of yearly international consultations and conference to gather the pre-existing and budding organizations of migrant workers.

There are two major conditions, though that hastened the formation of this alliance. One is the result of an assessment that at least there are already organizations of migrant workers in major countries of destination. The other is the 1995 Flor Contemplacion campaign that put the issues and agenda of migrant workers in the national and international level. The objective condition and the readiness of the migrant workers to come together and put up their own alliance brought about the birth of Migrante International in 1996.

Now, Migrante International, aside from being an alliance and a campaign centre further developed its tasks by establishing Migrante Chapters in the Philippines among the families of migrants, returned migrants, would-be migrants and advocates. Now, it has its own mass base in the Philippines and not only outside of the country.

The Cooperation between Institutions and Migrants Organizations

If you will notice, church-based institutions such as APMM, MFMW and Bethune House in Hong Kong played their part in assisting migrant workers in forming their organizations and alliances.

These institutions gave the necessary education and training, assisted the migrants on how to draft the pertinent documents needed and helped them find the needed logistical and financial support.

Though migrant workers are surely the decisive ones in this effort, many institutions paved the way and hastened the realization of these objectives by creating a favorable atmosphere for organizing.

Some lessons to share

First and foremost, international alliance building is a process dictated out of the felt necessity of migrant workers themselves. And usually, the migrant workers also will pass through a process wherein their own practical experience taught them to connect and combine themselves - first as a single organization and later after some practical cooperative relations with other organizations, see the importance of establishing an alliance.

If they voluntarily organize themselves, the organizations will be sustained and will become strong. Sometimes, because of our strong eagerness to empower them, we went ahead of their readiness to get organized. Usually, these organizations will not last long. If the external motivator is no longer in their midst, the organizations go astray and will eventually die a natural death.

Though the desire of migrants to organize themselves is there, continuing education is needed to make them more conscious and aware of their rights, the complexities of running an organization and alliances, the importance of solidarity relations, the study of current issues to make them abreast of the changing conditions, etc. Systematic education will sustain not only their desire but will raise their level of consciousness which is essential in sustaining the motivation to further strengthen their organizations.

There are well-defined roles and places for institutions and migrants in the whole process of building organizations and alliances. The latter plays the decisive role and former plays the creator of favorable conditions, advocacy and support.

Time-tested organizational principles in alliance work must always be followed. We strive to achieve conscious unity arrived at by consensus, respecting the integrity and equality of each member organization by respecting the independence and initiative of each one, by not forcing the minority opposing views to submit to the majority view but also the minority respecting the majority view.

Our conference today, is I believe a timely and an important one. Poor countries are becoming poorer. Super-rich countries can sustain their status now only by their ultimate goal of controlling the source of raw materials and cheap labor and also the control of potential markets for their products. They do it through unceasing plunder, militarism and war.

Forced massive migration will always be a by-product of this unequal arrangement. Exploitation and oppression of marginalized peoples is surely a permanent feature of this phenomenon of imperialist globalization.

Resistance and defense is necessary. The only way of assuring the protection of their rights and the promotion of their welfare is first of all, for the migrants to get organized.

Our sharing today, I strongly hope, can be a vital input towards the realization of these objectives.

Get Organized! Build Alliances! Hasten the realization of a strong international migrants' movement!

Thank you and good day.