

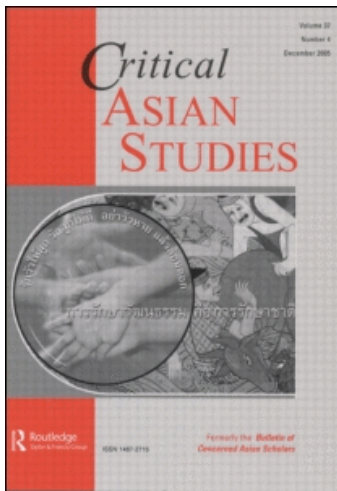
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## THE MAKING OF A TRANSNATIONAL GRASSROOTS MIGRANT MOVEMENT

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# THE MAKING OF A TRANSNATIONAL GRASSROOTS MIGRANT MOVEMENT

## A Case Study of Hong Kong's Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body

Hsiao-Chuan Hsia

**ABSTRACT:** As capitalist globalization has intensified in recent years, academic studies of international labor migration have gained significance. Studies have shown how globalization has increased the extent of labor migration and how it has greatly affected the lives of migrant workers. Few studies, however, have documented how migrant workers collectively resist capitalist globalization. By collaborating with migrants from different countries, migrant workers have created transnationalism from below, vehemently challenging capitalist globalization. This article focuses on the development of the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body (AMCB) in Hong Kong to illustrate how grassroots migrant organizations resist capitalist globalization. Most studies of Hong Kong as a "site of transnational activism" overlook the unique importance of grassroots migrant organizations and their distinctions from migrant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The AMCB is particularly interesting and important not only because it is the first coalition of migrants from different Asian countries but also because it is a coalition of grassroots migrant organizations from several nationalities. By focusing on the AMCB, this article analyzes how migrant workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have worked together across nation-state, racial, and gender boundaries. This article describes the AMCB's origins and achievements and asks what makes the AMCB possible and what lessons in grassroots transnationalism are to be gleaned from the AMCB's efforts and its relationship with NGOs.

International labor migration has regained significance in academic writings as capitalist globalization has intensified in recent years. Studies have shown how

### Glossary of Organizations

AMCB	Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body
APMM	Asian Pacific Mission for Migrants
APMMF	Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants Filipinos (see APMM)
ASL	Association of Sri Lankans in Hong Kong
ATKI	Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong
BH	Bethune House
CTU	See HKCTU
Feona	Far East Overseas Nepalese Association
FMWU	Filipino Migrant Workers Union
FOT	Friends of Thai
Gammi	Indonesian Migrant Muslim Alliance
HKCTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
HKPA	Hong Kong Peoples Alliance [on WTO]
IMA	International Migrant Alliance
IMC	International Migration Conference
KMP	Peasant Movement of the Philippines
MFMW	Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers
Panap	Pesticide Action Network – Asia Pacific
Pilar	United Indonesians against Overcharging
TRA	Thai Regional Alliance
TWA	Thai Women Association
Unifil-Migrante-HK	United Filipinos in Hong Kong

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globalization has increased the extent of labor migration and how it has greatly affected the lives of migrant workers. There is little documentation, however, of how migrant workers have made collective efforts to resist capitalist globalization.

Among the few scholars paying attention to activism relating to migrant workers, the focus has been primarily on the efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Ford examines the emergence and operation of both migrant labor NGOs and migrant labor associations and argues that NGO-sponsored foreign domestic worker organizations are an important new form of labor movement organizations both in host and home countries and stresses that migrant labor NGOs' organizing function is the most incontrovertible indicator that migrant labor NGOs are part of the labor movement.<sup>1</sup> Sim celebrates the significance of NGOs in advocating migrant issues and argues that NGO activism has made visible arenas of potentiality and has yielded insights into the contested political spaces in transnational migration.<sup>2</sup>

Acknowledging the contribution of NGOs in advocating for migrants' rights is indeed important, but we should not neglect criticisms of NGOs for being elitist and nonrepresentative and consciously or unconsciously serving as the support mechanism of imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Government-organized NGOs ("Gongos") and mafia-operated NGOs ("Mongos") are not uncommon, and thus we should not

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1. Ford 2004.
  2. Sim 2003.
  3. Petras 1999.

assume that all NGOs lead to genuine protection of migrants' rights and welfare.

While many migrant NGOs claim their goals are to "empower" migrants and protect migrants' rights, it is not uncommon for NGOs to "speak on behalf of" migrants and the so-called "empowerment" can thus be more rhetorical than practical. Many studies do not distinguish NGOs from *grassroots* migrant organizations and often conflate the efforts and achievements of grassroots organizations with those of NGOs.<sup>4</sup> Studies such as these risk overlooking how migrants have organized themselves and developed their own migrant movements at the grassroots level. Although NGOs can play a catalytic role in the development of grassroots migrant movements, as we will see below, not all NGOs share the values of grassroots movement building. It is thus crucial to analyze how migrant NGOs position themselves in handling migrant issues. Does the NGO act as the "agent" who speaks on behalf of migrants? Or does the NGO clearly define itself as the "supporter" of migrants and gear its efforts to developing grassroots migrant organizations?

Activism on migrant issues always has elements of "transnationalism." As Parreñas points out, despite differences in "contexts of reception," migrant Filipina domestic workers share experiences of dislocation, leading them to establish cross-national alliances on the basis of this shared experience.<sup>5</sup> Most studies of migrants' transnationalism focus on transnational movements of one nationality that organizes across national borders. That is, "transnational" in these studies means "cross-border organizing" rather than "trans-ethnic solidarity," activism by migrants of different nationalities.<sup>6</sup>

Studies suggest that as a result of competition among different nation-states and various labor brokers, migrants of different nationalities are often divided rather than united.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in order to protect the rights of migrant workers, some scholars call for transnational solidarity among migrants.<sup>8</sup> Few studies, however, address the critical question of how migrants of different nationalities overcome the divide and rule tactics of brokers and states and form transnational solidarity.

As Evans argues, analysis and theory have not caught up to practice when it comes to progressive action at the global level.<sup>9</sup> According to Evans, the global rules and networks currently being constructed around the interests of transnational corporations are "hegemonic" and therefore "globalization from below" is "counter-hegemonic," allowing ordinary citizens to build lives that would not be possible in a more traditional world of bounded nation-states.

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4. For example, see Constable 1997; Sim 2003; and Law 2002. This confusion between NGOs and grassroots organizations results in NGOs, especially mega NGOs, receiving the credit for work that grassroots migrants organizations themselves have done.

5. Parreñas 2001.

6. See Lyons 2009.

7. Cheng 2003; Lan 2003.

8. Cheng 2004; Tierney 2002.

9. Evans 2000.

“Globalization from below” has received much attention, especially since late 1999, when tens of thousands of protesters brought the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to a halt.<sup>10</sup> However, most studies focus on big events such as protests against WTO, G8 Summit, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and typically conclude that transnational activism as such is unplanned, spontaneous, nonorganizational, anarchistic, or postmodern, with the participating networks described as fluid and loose. The daily and regular organizational efforts of grassroots organizations trying to organize across nation-state boundaries have been neglected. Unlike resource-rich NGOs and advocacy groups, most grassroots organizations do not have the wherewithal to make themselves globally visible. Furthermore, grassroots organizations need to do a lot of groundwork, including conscientization,<sup>11</sup> empowerment and mobilization, because their members often lack confidence, access to information, and resources.

With regard to transnational social movements, Porta and Tarrow identify three important processes in the transnationalization of social movements, namely, diffusion, domestication, and externalization.<sup>12</sup> They also separate nation-bound domestic activism from global activism, though they recognize interactions between the two levels of activism. Similarly, Evans separates local from transnational struggles: “Building transnational networks gives local organizing new prospects of success, and local mobilization is an essential element of counter-hegemonic globalization.”<sup>13</sup>

Smith suggests, however, that the types of grassroots political practice that have emerged among transnational migrants and refugees do not fit well into the restrictive boundaries of local politics conventionally used in connecting the local to the global.<sup>14</sup> Grassroots migrants’ struggles must simultaneously encounter the states of their origins, the states of their workplace and settlement, and supranational institutions, the “politics of simultaneity” or a politics that brings together multiple actors from multiple places. Similarly, Law argues that it is not enough to localize the transnational advocacy of migrant NGOs in Hong Kong, contextualizing it as a contemporary form of local politics.<sup>15</sup> Rather, she explains, Hong Kong is one “site” of transnational activism within a broader “social space” where new alliances between migrant, feminist, and workers’ organizations take place.

Hong Kong as a “site of transnational activism” for migrant issues has been well researched,<sup>16</sup> but, as we have noted, earlier studies have overlooked the unique importance of *grassroots* migrant organizations or have conflated them with migrant NGOs. The Asian Migrants’ Coordinating Body (AMCB) is particularly interesting and important not only because it is the first coalition of mi-

10. Brecher et al. 2000.

11. Freire 1970.

12. Porta and Tarrow 2005.

13. Evans 2000, 240.

14. Smith 1994, 25.

15. Law 2002.

16. Constable 1997; Law 2002; Sim 2003; Ford 2004.



Anti-G8 protest in Makati, Philippines, 2004. Most studies of “globalization from below” typically conclude that transnational activism as such is unplanned, spontaneous, nonorganizational, anarchistic, or postmodern, with the participating networks described as fluid and loose. The daily and regular organizational efforts of grassroots organizations trying to organize across nation-state boundaries have been neglected. (Courtesy: Millennium Campaign)

grants from several Asian countries, but also because it is a coalition of grassroots migrant organizations of different nationalities.<sup>17</sup> AMCB’s grassroots transnationalism crosses not only geographical borders but those of nationalities as well.

Some studies have documented the importance of the AMCB,<sup>18</sup> but none has investigated the AMCB’s origins. Law argues that the AMCB’s formation was motivated by the Asian financial crisis and its aftermath.<sup>19</sup> Yet even before the 1997 Asian financial crisis, efforts were being made to form a coalition of migrants from different nationalities. The financial crisis itself did not automatically trigger the successful formation of the AMCB; the continuous efforts of migrants themselves were required.

The primary concern of this article is what I call the “methodology of activism.” By studying the AMCB in detail, I ask how migrant workers from several Asian countries were able to work together across nation-state, racial, and gender boundaries; what they achieved; what made this transnationalism of grassroots migrants possible; and what lessons are to be learned from the AMCB’s grassroots transnationalism. In addition to printed and on-line documents, this study draws from interviews with five leaders and five active members of the AMCB’s member organizations, two organizers of NGOs that helped the AMCB

17. Other coalitions or networks are composed of NGOs alone or of a mixture of NGOs and grassroots migrant organizations, such as the Coalition of Migrants Rights, initiated by the Asian Migrants Center.

18. Law 2002; Sim 2003.

19. Law (2002) briefly notes AMCB’s existence, but doesn’t analyze the organization in depth.



develop, and three leaders of local social movement organizations in Hong Kong.<sup>20</sup>

### Migrants Divided in Capitalist Globalization

Migrant domestic workers (MDWs)<sup>21</sup> comprise the majority of migrant workers in Hong Kong. In 2005, there were 223,200 MDWs in Hong Kong, a significant and visible number among Hong Kong's total population of 6.9 million.<sup>22</sup> Almost 98 percent of these MDWs are women.

MDWs in Hong Kong were once predominantly Filipino women. In 1997, Filipinas accounted for more than 80 percent of all MDWs in Hong Kong. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, Indonesian domestics began to arrive in increasingly large numbers. By the midpoint of the following decade, the proportion of Indonesian MDWs had risen to 43.4 percent (2005), while the number of Filipinas had decreased from 66.7 percent of the total in 2001 to 52.9 percent in 2005.<sup>23</sup> Besides the Philippines and Indonesia, other major countries that supply MDWs to Hong Kong are Thailand, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India.

Although migrant workers in Hong Kong all work under conditions regulated by the Hong Kong government, they do not automatically share a sense of "community" or solidarity across national lines. On the contrary, many migrants have stereotypes and prejudices against migrants from other nationalities, as the following observations make clear:

Filipino migrants consider Filipinos good and educated and migrants from other nationalities are not educated so they can be exploited. Especially the images of Indonesians are from poor families and countryside, not ready to work, just here for playing, because of their young age and low educational levels. (Chairperson, Unifil).

Thai migrants don't like Indonesians because they have been replaced for their lower wages. Thai used to be the second largest and now the third. They feel Indonesians are not educated and willing to take very low wage. They thought Filipino migrants are sexually abused because they are too open and forward. (Chairperson, Thai Regional Alliance [TRA]).

Indonesian migrants are afraid of Filipinos because Filipinos can speak English, and they know how to fight, so they deserve higher wages. (Chairperson, Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong [ATKI])

These negative impressions of migrants of other nationalities are constructed in the context of capitalist globalization where developing countries compete with one another to expand labor export markets. To become more

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20. The interviews were done between March 2007 and June 2008. All these interviews were done in Hong Kong. Additionally, between March 2007 and July 2008, I attended several protest actions organized by the AMCB, its member organizations and local organizations to observe how the AMCB's member organizations relate to each other and how the AMCB relate to the local organizations.

21. The Hong Kong government uses the term "Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDH)," but in this paper I use "Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs)," the term widely used in international human rights discourse.

22. Hong Kong Government, 2004a, 2005.

23. Hong Kong Government, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005.

competitive in the global labor markets, labor-sending states often need to demonstrate their comparative advantages, that is, how workers from their countries are “better” than others. For the Philippines, whose labor export policy has a long history and is more systematic, the competitive niche of its workers is their “skills,” including their English-speaking abilities. For governments that are latecomers in formalizing labor export policies, their marketing niche is workers who are cheaper and more docile. To ensure the steady export of labor, the governments of sending countries are often unwilling to protect the welfare and rights of migrants; some are even actively engaged in creating conditions that are detrimental to migrants. Taking Indonesian MDWs for example, during one pre-departure group briefing, an Indonesian labor department official is reported to have said that it is “normal” for Indonesian migrants to have lower wages than migrants from different nationalities.<sup>24</sup> Thus, comparative advantages for the state can be comparative *disadvantages* for migrants.<sup>25</sup> When Indonesian migrants have encountered problems, the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong has discouraged them from taking legal action against employers.<sup>26</sup>

Recruiting agencies in Indonesia also play a crucial role not only in making Indonesian migrants more “docile,” but also in perpetuating negative images of migrants of other nationalities.<sup>27</sup>

All Indonesians are told many times by agency: don’t befriend Filipinos.

Ordinary Indonesian migrants feel that it’s OK to have lower wages because Filipinos speak English, they know how to fight, so only they deserve higher wages. (Chairperson, ATKI)

Antagonism among migrants of different nationalities is thus a barrier that needs to be overcome when building solidarity. As we will show below, the AMCB has successfully overcome divisions and prejudices between different nationalities of workers.

### Development of the AMCB

The AMCB was established in 1996 as a coalition of grassroots migrant organizations of several nationalities in Hong Kong. Member organizations of the AMCB now include the Far East Overseas Nepalese Association (Feona), Association of Sri Lankans in Hong Kong (ASL), Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong (ATKI), Thai Regional Alliance (TRA), Friends of Thai (FOT), and United Filipinos in Hong Kong (Unifil-Migrante-HK), and Filipino Migrant Workers Union (FMWU).

Although formally established in 1996, the AMCB’s origins go back to the multinational network of organizations that formed around the first Asian Cultural Festival held in Hong Kong on 23 October 1994. This festival gave more than 1,500 migrant workers from India, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, and the Philippines a venue in which to meet and begin working together as they shared

24. Sim 2003a.

25. See Constable 2009.

26. Sim 2003a.

27. Ibid.





AMCB demonstration, Hong Kong, 2006. "The common basis of unity in the AMCB is the struggle against issues affecting migrants, which is why member organizations identify themselves as part of a migrant *movement*, rather than simply organizations established for the welfare of their fellow compatriots." (Credit: Nicole Constable)

traditional cultural dances and songs in a spirit of international solidarity.<sup>28</sup> Organizations present at the festival were the Thai Women Association (TWA), Feona (Nepal), and Unifil-HK (Philippines). Two months after the cultural festival, the organization representing migrant workers from Sri Lanka, ASL, joined the other groups in organizing the International Human Rights Day celebration on 10 December. (India and Indonesia had no formal groups representing their migrant workers in 1994.)

In 1996, a committee of representatives from Unifil, Feona, and the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers (MFMW) was formed to draft a declaration of unity, which was later presented and discussed by representatives of migrants of several nationalities. After a series of meetings, the declaration was approved and the AMCB was launched on 10 December 1996 during the Third Asian Migrants Festival in observance of International Human Rights Day.<sup>29</sup>

The AMCB's work includes advocacy and organizing, networking and cooperation, and educational activities. Every member organization functions independently and the AMCB's coordinating committee is composed of executive committee members from each member organization. They meet regularly and plan actions and activities. Celebrations of International Labor Day, Women's

28. APMM, 2003.

29. Migrant organizations involved in the initial formation of AMCB include ASL, Feona, FOT, Indonesian Group (an informal association), TWA, and Unifil.

Day, and International Human Rights Day are key times when the AMCB mobilizes its members as part of its educational activities and cultural exchanges.

The AMCB networks and consults with migrant groups that are not yet part of the AMCB. On 25 November 2007, the AMCB organized the First Asian Migrant Workers Summit in Hong Kong to strengthen solidarity work with other migrant organizations. The AMCB also works in partnership with regional and local institutions, advocating for the rights and welfare of migrants, and has established working relationships with major trade unions and women's and community-based organizations. To enhance the understanding of its members and their respective countries, educational activities are held to share experiences and struggles, to provide leadership training and opportunities for discussing crucial issues.

### The AMCB's Achievements

The AMCB's signal achievement has been the creation of a grassroots migrant movement in Hong Kong. Before the AMCB was established, many migrant organizations were active, but each group typically represented just one nationality of workers. With the establishment of the AMCB, migrant worker issues were no longer confined to individual nationalities or racial or gender groups because the AMCB brings together migrants across national lines and includes men as well as women. A pertinent example is the case of Nepali male construction workers who felt discriminated against because they had not been given the safety equipment that their local counterparts had been given. The AMCB joined rallies in behalf of the Nepalese workers and the ensuing dialogue with the Hong Kong government resulted in promises to change the occupational safety conditions for the construction workers.

The common basis of unity in the AMCB is the struggle against issues affecting migrants, which is why member organizations identify themselves as part of a migrant *movement*, rather than simply organizations established for the welfare of their fellow compatriots. Moreover, their unity is based on a common understanding of the root causes of forced migration, as Unifil's chairperson explains:

The basic understanding within the AMCB is that all migrant workers from different nationalities are victims of poverty back home. From this basic understanding, we link to the locals, national movements, and global movement. From this understanding of root causes, migrants easily understand why we address issues to Hong Kong government and governments of our home countries. (Chairperson, Unifil)

This unity is translated into growing numbers of migrants who participate in street protest and marches, ranging from five thousand up to the peak of twelve thousand in demonstrations against cuts in wages.<sup>30</sup> The AMCB's ability to mobilize significant mass mobilizations has led the Hong Kong government to recognize it as a legitimate representative of migrant workers and has resulted in

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30. APMM 2003.

changes in the government's migrant-related policies, as the following examples show.

— Since its establishment, the AMCB has organized campaigns against government proposals to cut wages.<sup>31</sup> In August 1998, a provisional councilor had proposed a 20 percent cut in the Minimum Allowable Wage (MAW) for MDWs; at the same time, the Employers Association of Foreign Domestic Helpers called for an even deeper cut of 35 percent. The AMCB responded by organizing a march with an estimated two thousand migrant worker participants during the celebration of International Human Rights Day.<sup>32</sup> In January 1999, the Hong Kong government agreed to reduce the wage cut to a token 5 percent.

— In 1999, the Hong Kong government proposed a ban on driving duties for MDWs and abolished maternity protection and “live-out” arrangements for the workers. Meetings were held among the AMCB members and between MDWs and employers and a petition opposing the ban on driving drew thousands of signatures. In 2000, the government shelved the three proposals.

— In July 2001, the Labor Department proposed a HK\$400 levy on employers who hired MDWs. The money was supposed to be used for retraining programs for locals who wished to work as domestic helpers. The AMCB immediately opposed this initiative and the Labor Department withdrew its levy proposal. Later in November, the Hong Kong government proposed “measures to raise revenues,” including a 15 to 20 percent wage cut for MDWs. The AMCB held a press conference to register its opposition to the proposed measure and, on 2 December 2001, it organized a protest march from Victoria Park to the Central Government Office. More than three thousand migrants participated. Five days later, the Education Manpower Bureau was forced to call for a dialogue with the AMCB about the issue.

— Following a 5,000-strong mobilization on 13 January 2002 against government-proposed wage cuts, the government agreed to freeze rather than cut the MAW. A month later, on 23 February, a series of protests and signature campaigns culminated in a march of 12,000 migrant workers.

The MAW remains a concern, however. As Constable has explained in detail, the MAW rose steadily from 2005 through 2007, but the high it reached in June 2007 (HK\$3,480) was still below the minimum wage in March 2003, HK\$3,670.<sup>33</sup> The MAW is reviewed every year and the AMCB organizes protests around wage issues whenever needed.

A related issue of concern to the AMCB is the HK\$400 levy the government imposed on employers of foreign domestic workers in 2003. The authorities explained that the money would be used to support retraining program for local (as distinct from foreign) workers. Just months before this action, the government had imposed a HK\$400 wage cut on foreign domestic workers arguing that employers needed relief. The AMCB has consistently called for abolition of

31. Ibid.

32. AMCB was the first migrant organization to launch campaigns against wage cuts. Later on, other migrant organizations staged their own protests against such policy.

33. See Constable 2007.

the levy and an increase in wages for MDWs, explaining that the levy benefits the government, does not help the employers (who pay HK\$400 less in wages but HK\$400 more for the levy), and comes at the expense of the MDWs.<sup>34</sup>

Though there is no simple causal relationship between the AMCB's struggles and changes in the government's migrant-related policies, and acknowledging that the AMCB is not the only group to advocate and protest against these issues, still even the leading local labor organizations consider the AMCB's ability to promote mass mobilization to be crucial. The chief executive of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) noted that the HKCTU's secretary general, who is also a legislator, had himself brought the migrant issue before parliament. But, she acknowledged, "the mass mobilization of migrants puts more pressure on the government."

The productive relationships the AMCB has forged with trade unions and women's and community-based local organizations in Hong Kong have helped make its campaigns successful. To strengthen its ties with local organizations, the AMCB supports solidarity actions that relate to issues and problems these other local organizations face. For example, the AMCB's campaign against the government's proposed abolition of maternity protection — which stipulates that pregnancy is not cause for termination of employment — enlisted support from local women's groups because all the groups saw the proposed abolition as an infringement of the rights of migrants not only as workers but as women as well.<sup>35</sup>

As migrants of different nationalities are pitted against each other, locals also express prejudice and discrimination against migrants. As a result of working in the AMCB, migrants have realized that they need to overcome barriers in order to unite with local organizations. As ATKI's chairperson observes, "The only solution is to be active in local activities.... To show we are here to support."

Leaders of other workers unions in Hong Kong expressed in interviews how much they valued the support of migrant workers in their campaigns. The joint struggles against the WTO's Sixth Ministerial Meeting in Hong Kong in 2005, for example, demonstrate the strength of the links between migrant workers and these other labor groups. The AMCB, along with six other member organizations, joined the Hong Kong Peoples Alliance on WTO (HKPA), the organizers of the anti-WTO "People's Action Week" actions, and it mobilized hundreds of migrants to join the anti-WTO demonstrations as marshals. Speaking after the WTO events, HKCTU's chief executive, who was also a member of HKPA's decision-making body, described how impressed other social movement organizations in Hong Kong were with the AMCB's work in the campaign:

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34. Other migrant organizations support the levy. See [http://www.apmigrants.org/papers/CMR\\_Joint\\_Position\\_Paper\\_on\\_Wage&Levy.htm](http://www.apmigrants.org/papers/CMR_Joint_Position_Paper_on_Wage&Levy.htm). Unifil once issued a statement against this position: see <http://www.apmigrants.org/papers/07.htm>. (Both accessed 4 July 2008).

35. Under the maternity protection provision, pregnancy is not a basis for the termination of a contract. Migrant workers who have been terminated for this reason have the right to file a case and, if successful, can get extra benefits outside the contractual obligations of the employer. Proponents of the abolition pushed for a more "flexible" arrangement between the employer and the migrants in such cases.

The local organizations were very impressed by AMCB's capacities of organizing and mobilizing. AMCB also helped "open the eyes" of the locals by their deep understanding of the impacts of WTO on ordinary people's lives, which Hong Kong people did not know much about. Our union leaders say that we should be more like the migrants. We should learn from the way they organize and express themselves. Their rallies are very dynamic and creative.

Being able to mobilize more than five thousand migrants at the centralized march on the opening day of the anti-WTO demonstration illustrates the strength of the migrant movement the AMCB leads<sup>36</sup> and also shows how well it links with a wider global movement. The wider connections are the result of deliberate efforts to establish and enrich AMCB's international alliances. Attending conferences is one method that has been successful in this regard. Participating in the World Conference against Racism and Discrimination (in Durban, South Africa, 30 August to 5 September 2001), for example, gave the AMCB an opportunity to establish many international contacts. The AMCB was represented in this event through the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) and Unifil. AMCB representatives also attended the International Migrant Conference (IMC) held in November 2001 in Manila. This conference passed a resolution establishing the International Migrant Alliance (IMA). Most of the AMCB representatives were part of the International Initiative Committee responsible for the formation of the IMA. A third conference AMCB representatives attended was a tripartite conference in 2001 on "Trade Union, Migrants Organization and Women's Organizations" organized by the Asia Pacific Women Law and Development and Migrante-International.<sup>37</sup>

In mid June 2008, the IMA, the first global alliance of grassroots migrant organizations, held its founding assembly in Hong Kong. The significance of the IMA's foundation is captured in these words from a film shown at the assembly: "For a long time, others spoke on our behalf. Now we speak for ourselves." Eni Lestari, the chairperson of ATKI and an AMCB representative in the assembly, was elected the first chairperson of the IMA in recognition of the AMCB's achievements.<sup>38</sup> The HKCTU's chief executive later told me that seeing the AMCB in action during the People's Action Week convinced her that AMCB members have a "deep critical insight about the problems" that were their common concern. "Most local organizations," she explained, "did not know what the WTO was all about, so we had to do a lot of education work during the anti-WTO campaign. In that process, many local organizations realized that the AMCB understood the WTO very well. For example, they knew how the WTO af-

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36. The numbers of participants in this anti-WTO protest and previously mentioned campaigns are all based on head counts by AMCB member organizations and its partners. Protesters mobilized by other migrant organizations are not included.

37. APMM 2003.

38. I attended the IMA founding assembly and was present for Lestari's election. The AMCB's achievements were mentioned several times throughout the meeting as an inspiration to grassroots migrant movement.





Korean anti-WTO demonstrator, "People's Action Week," Hong Kong, 2005. "The AMCB's knowledge of the WTO was the result of countless educational activities. For more than a year, the AMCB worked with the APMM and other institutions to illustrate the negative impact that the WTO had on migrant workers." (Courtesy: Webshots/jng20)

affected the livelihood of people in Indonesia and the Philippines and caused them to have to look for jobs overseas."

The AMCB's knowledge of the WTO was the result of countless educational activities. For more than a year, the AMCB worked with the APMM and other institutions to illustrate the negative impact that the WTO had on migrant workers. In September 2004, for instance, it sponsored an educational forum on the WTO and migration in conjunction with the People's Caravan for Food Sovereignty of the Pesticide Action Network – Asia Pacific (Panap).<sup>39</sup> Through its organizing and educational work in the weeks leading up to People's Action Week—an effort called the "Migrants' 10-Week Countdown"<sup>40</sup>—the AMCB countered the argument that grassroots migrants don't have the time and resources to understand "big" issues such as the WTO. At

the same time it demonstrated that mobilization demanded continuous mass education work; mobilizations were not just "spontaneous," as some studies of anti-globalization have assumed.

The AMCB's transformation from a cultural sharing network (in 1994), to an alliance for migrant sectoral movement, and then to an actor in the anticapitalist globalization movement has inspired migrant organizations in other countries: in South Korea, for instance, efforts have been made to establish a similar formation as the AMCB; in Japan an annual cultural festival of migrants from different nationalities has been organized. In turn, this recognition by migrant organizations in other countries further encourages the AMCB.

### Transformation of Migrant Workers within the AMCB

Working in the AMCB is a transformational process, according to the many members of the AMCB with whom I spoke. The united strength of migrants from different nationalities has shown workers that they can make change happen. The chairperson of ATKI expressed her feelings of empowerment poetically: "I see victims become heroes for themselves!" She described to me her personal change after being involved in the migrant movement:

39. The forum was co-organized by APMM, AMCB, and Panap.

40. APMM 2005.



Before, I could not imagine a movement. But now I know we are part of the migrant movement.... When I was working underpaid, I thought that I could only be like that, even I didn't like it. I only could try to learn how to be a "good," meaning obedient, DH [domestic helper]. But deep in [my] heart, I felt I deserve fair treatment. I ran away and triggered everything that has happened..... From this experience, I have learnt that change should come from the migrant workers themselves.... The major impact of the AMCB on me is politicizing, realizing that the only way to protect ourselves is to fight.

For Filipino migrants who are already experienced in organizing, working in the AMCB can also be empowering:

I used to be a student activist. But organizing migrants is much more complex. Especially, when I became leader of migrant organizations, I need to think more about what I say, especially when talking to the press. I have learnt a lot and felt that I have become a more comprehensive organizer. I need to study how to work with different persons, especially people from different nationalities. (Chairperson, Unifil, 14 March 2007)

By being involved in the AMCB, stereotypes and prejudices against migrants of other nationalities have been transformed, as TRA's chairperson and others explain:

Before, many Thai migrants felt negative about Indonesian migrants. But because of the AMCB, now Thai migrants know why and know the situations of Indonesian workers. Thai migrants now even went to help Indonesians. (Chairperson, TRA, 14 March 2007)

I only found out at Bethune House [a domestic worker shelter] that the reason why Filipinos are more advanced and brave is because they have a strong movement, which is led by migrant workers themselves. Now many ordinary Indonesian migrants still think what I used to think about Filipinos. But we try to organize them, give them confidence, for them to realize that the issues are not between Filipinos and Indonesians. The issue is that we are commodities. They think that we Indonesians are obedient. But why are we obedient? It's because we are afraid of losing jobs. (Chairperson, ATKI, 13 March 2007)

Because of the decrease of Filipinos and the increase of Indonesians, ordinary Filipino migrant workers think it's a problem of Indonesian migrants accepting lower wages.... But now since the AMCB, Filipinos are even inspired by Indonesians because they are young and energetic. Indonesians are always active in rallies, marches, and are very creative! Now the Filipino migrants even say, "We should be more like Indonesians!" (Chairperson, Unifil, March 14, 2007)

Interview materials suggest that members of the AMCB value the importance of transnationalism:

We are determined to learn from each other [across nationalities] and develop a culture of giving in the AMCB. (Chairperson, Unifil, 12 March 2007)

With the AMCB, we can get more chances and more powerful to protect rights of migrants. If small group, we can't do much. If working together, we can get it more easily. (Leaders, ASL, 11 March 2007)

We are part of the migrant workers movement.... We can't do movement individually or nationally, though we also recognize national dynamics.... All ATKI members feel strong solidarity with the AMCB. We become more encouraged when seeing other nationalities support. (Chairperson, ATKI, 12 March 2007)

Members of Unifil are very proud of the AMCB, because now migrant workers are more organized. They are happy to see other nationalities are also organizing themselves. Some non-Unifil Filipino organizations also want to join the AMCB. (Chairperson, Unifil, 14 March 2007)

This sense of transnationalism is felt not only among leaders but also among grassroots members of AMCB affiliated organizations, as one ATKI member explained to me: "I like working with the AMCB, because we can learn so much from each other. Like we Indonesians learnt a lot from the Filipinos how to fight for our rights. We also learnt a lot how to educate our own people and how to organize them."

### Context of Reception in Hong Kong

Two factors have contributed to the AMCB's success: Hong Kong's openness and the influence of Filipino migrant organizations. As Constable explains,<sup>41</sup> key to understanding the Hong Kong government's permissive stance toward migrant protests is the uniqueness of the post-1997, postcolonial Hong Kong SAR, with its claims to maintaining its status as a global city and its historical development as a "space of neoliberal exception."<sup>42</sup> This is not only a post-1997 phenomenon, however. Even during the colonial years, the British colonial government favored more liberal governance in order to project a picture of Hong Kong as a "modern city" with social and political stability, especially after the riot in 1967.<sup>43</sup>

This historical projection of Hong Kong as a "modern" colony and "global" city explains why the government gives migrants more room for organizing work. First of all, unlike in Taiwan, for example, where a maximum length of stay is imposed on migrants, migrant workers can stay in Hong Kong on a series of two-year visas and work contracts. Even though MDWs are not eligible to apply for permanent residency, the practically limitless time they may work in Hong Kong makes it easier to maintain and consolidate organizing work, where leaders of migrants can be gradually developed and become organizers without much fear of deportation.

Second, Hong Kong's labor-related laws do not separate foreign workers from the locals, allowing migrants to form and join unions and associations.<sup>44</sup>

41. See Constable 2009.

42. Ong 2006.

43. Law 2007.



Hong Kong harbor, 2004. "[The] historical projection of Hong Kong as a 'modern' colony and 'global' city explains why the government gives migrants more room for organizing work." (Credit: Robert H. Holzworth, University of Washington, 2004)

Third, to ensure that local workers would not complain when MDWs began to arrive, the Hong Kong government made the hiring of MDWs appear to be a "privilege," meaning that employers had to be rich enough to provide airfare, private accommodation, minimum wage, and a full day off each week, all conditions spelled out in a standard contract. This regular 24-hour day off is crucial for organizing work, because MDWs can then congregate on Sundays and avail themselves of opportunities to become conscientized and organized. Fourth, both the British colonial government and the post-1997 Chinese government are relatively tolerant of protests. The director of MFMW notes that before the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, the police did not intervene as long as the protest was not against the HK government. Even after 1987 when the two-week rule was imposed, the migrant protests against the Hong Kong government did not trigger much reaction from the police, as long their actions were peaceful.<sup>45</sup>

Aside from the projection of Hong Kong as a modern and global city, the actual need for migrant workers in Hong Kong's economy, especially the need for

44. Though the laws do not discriminate against migrants, migrants are discriminated against in practice and as a result of immigration policies. For example, it is an unwritten policy rather than the law that prevents MDWs from applying for residency. Though migrants are entitled to join unions, union leaders who volunteer to work at the unions need to prove to the immigration officers that their employers allow them to do so, because the policy does not permit MDWs to work outside the employer's house.

45. There are still many restrictions on protests. While some local activists like to challenge these regulations, migrant organizations make sure to apply for permits, abide by restrictions, and maintain friendly relationships with the police, so that migrant workers will not be terminated or deported.

MDWs to serve the interests of expatriates, makes the Hong Kong government more lenient to migrants' demands.

No matter how liberal the context of reception, however, conditions for migrants would not have changed without pressure from a strong social movement. Social action by local Hong Kong people contributed little in the past to migrant activism, especially before the mid 1990s. When Filipino workers first came to Hong Kong in 1981, they were able to establish the MFMW with support from some Church institutions and individuals. But local organizations gave them very little other help.

The chief executive of the HKCTU recalls that in the beginning, the local trade unions opposed migrants, and in 1987 they voted against allowing migrant organizations to join the forum of unions.<sup>46</sup> The HKCTU eventually accepted migrant workers unions in 1995, in part because the union leaders saw that migrants had already organized themselves and so the HKCTU had no right to deny them membership.

Studies have shown that the opening up of the political structure in the 1980s and the growing involvement of local leaders in electoral politics have contributed to a decline in social movements in Hong Kong. As a consequence, connections have weakened between pressure groups and community movements.<sup>47</sup> The development of a significant migrant movement in Hong Kong — particularly the pioneering Filipino migrant movement — has to be seen therefore as the result, in part, of persistent work by migrant organizations themselves, coupled with the Hong Kong government's more liberal environment.

### **The Influence of the Filipino Migrant Movement**

Leaders of MDWs of various nationalities pointed out to me that they were inspired and helped by Filipino organizations. Filipino leaders and organizers highlighted the importance of international solidarity, as the chairperson of Unifil explains:

We know Filipino organizations are far advanced than other nationalities, but we do not take it as advantage. We don't see other nationalities as competition. We formed the AMCB to show to our community that we should not fight against each other, but we should help each other.

Filipino organizers with whom I spoke saw clearly that divide and conquer is a tactic of the rulers:

Not only Filipinos are exploited. Other states also export people, so we need to share experiences of organizing migrant workers in Hong Kong, where there are migrants from many different nationalities. To protect migrants' rights and welfare, we need to deal with both sending and receiving countries. That is, we need to deal with Hong Kong government and other states. It is much better to come together with different nationalities, so we can be more powerful. (Managing director, APMM, 15 May 2007)

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46. The CTU had not yet been established; an education center was set up as a platform of different unions.

47. Ho 2000, 191.

Filipino organizers consciously make efforts to show Filipino migrant workers the importance of international solidarity:

We don't want Filipinos to be divided from other nationalities as the governments intended. Instead of competition, we need to show Filipino migrants that we need solidarity with other nationalities. We explain to the Filipino migrants, at the same time reach out to other nationalities. (Managing director, APMM, 15 May 2007)

Not without difficulty, Filipino organizers take many approaches in helping Filipino migrants realize the importance of collaborating with migrants of other nationalities:

When we explained to ordinary Filipino migrants, some accepted our views, but some were suspicious. So we tried to educate them about solidarity through informal and formal discussion. For example, when we were invited to attend other's activity, we explained to them why it's necessary to attend this activity and what should be our attitudes. Now, some Filipino migrants even realized that other nationalities are even more exploited than Filipinos and they have more empathy with them and even try to help them. They appreciate it when Filipinos have issues, other nationalities help us, so they want to help others as well. (Managing director, APMM, 15 May 2007)

Filipino organizers have found creative ways of realizing international solidarity, starting with cultural sharing, and gradually developing a transnational network for migrant issues:

We started with cultural exchanges...because many migrants were interested in showing their own cultures and learning from others. When Filipino organizations had their cultural presentations, they incorporated issues in their presentations. Other nationalities found this type of presentation interesting, so they also learned how to do it. Then we began to have discussions about issues, before and after cultural events, aside from preparing for the cultural event. During the discussions, we tried to raise some issues to other nationalities and see how they react to those



Dolores Balladares, chairperson of Unifil-HK delivers the opening speech at Unifil's twentieth anniversary celebration in Hong Kong, 2005. (Courtesy: Unifil-HK)



issues. They got interested and later on, ask more questions about issues. When discussing these issues, such as wage cuts, we asked them how we could stop it. Then they decide that it is better to organize ourselves and fight together. (Managing director, APMM, 15 May 2007)

These creative ways of reaching out to migrants of other nationalities lowered linguistic and cultural barriers, as one active member of ATKI explained:

Filipinos expressed their problems through the theater presentation, so we can easily understand even though our languages are different. From their performance we also found that our situations are similar. And we also learnt how to express our issues through cultural presentation.

### ***Supporting Mechanism to Nourish Migrant Organizations of Other Nationalities***

In addition to developing the AMCB, Filipino organizations have contributed to the strengthening of other nationalities' grassroots migrant organizations. The story of Eni, the chairperson of ATKI, best illustrates how Filipino organizations have helped not only her but also the ATKI organization:

I was underpaid.... I endured the work for about six and a half months, so I could pay back the agency fees. Then I felt I could not take it any more. I was finally referred and accommodated in Bethune House. In this shelter, we learn a lot of things and they taught us how to handle my own case.... The way they handle cases in Bethune House was very empowering. Bethune House helped me by education and exposure to ways of handling different cases. Mission [MFMW] provided education and helped me see the importance of organizing migrant workers. APMM also helped with various trainings. Bethune House is the second home for many Indonesians. It's also for empowerment. I was sheltered at Bethune House for four to five months. From the shelter, I learnt from the Philippine movement. I attended their forum and activities, and I was so impressed by Filipino migrant organizations. They are also migrant workers, but it did not prevent them from fighting and organizing themselves. I see how the victims become heroes for themselves! So we Indonesians also felt the need to form an organization for fellow Indonesians.

Four Filipino organizations collaborated in the development of ATKI: MFMW, the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refugee, APMM, and Unifil. The aim of the first three, which are all NGOs, is to help migrants form their own organizations. After the organizations are established, the three NGOs respect the independence of the new organizations and offer help only when requested. Unifil, one outcome of the work of the "triangle supporting network" (the three NGOs), later became part of the supporting mechanism for migrants from other nationalities.

Launched in 1981, MFMW was the first NGO established in Hong Kong to benefit migrant workers. The ecumenical organization started mainly to assist Filipina domestic workers; later it began assisting other nationalities. Among the MFMW's achievements was the setting up of a shelter, the Bethune House, which today is a full-fledged charitable institution that provides accommoda-



tion, counseling, and legal and mediation services to distressed foreign women workers. Since 1981 MFMW has handled over 23,000 cases. Of the workers helped, 8 to 10 percent later became active in various grassroots migrant organizations.

In addition to providing individual counseling, the Mission also helps migrants understand the causes of the problems they face and how to solve them collectively. Rather than simply offering conventional problem-solving counseling services, MFMW helps migrants make their own decisions. In this way the workers learn to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. While waiting for their cases to be resolved, migrants are encouraged to volunteer at other migrant organizations and participate in campaigns for migrants' rights.

Most clients leave MFMW after their cases have been settled. But at Bethune House, much more can be done to empower migrant workers because they typically live at the shelter for a long period of time. ATKI's chairperson points out the benefits of this extended contact: "When ATKI was formally established on October 1, 2000, there were twenty-four members, and half of them were former clients from Bethune House." APMM provides training for the migrants in the shelter, with topics including leadership, organizing, writings (for newsletters, statements, etc.), advocacy, and alliance work. When ATKI's founders lived at the shelter, APMM provided weekly training for three to four months. As ATKI was newly established, APMM continued to provide regular training until ATKI members were more experienced. ATKI now operates independently and consults APMM only when they need advice or assistance.

When migrants of other nationalities seek help from MFMW and Bethune House, the Filipino organizers often invite them to attend activities organized by Unifil and other Filipino organizations. There, they help those with problems identify causes and decide what they think can be done to solve these problems. MFMW's executive director explains how crucial this problem-posing method is:<sup>48</sup>

We do not know much of their situations, especially in their countries, so encourage them to find out the problems for themselves and later on find out what they can do to solve these problems. It is empowering for them to find out the causes of the problems. Later on, they are more empowered by making the decision to do something to stop the problems. (Executive director, MFMW)

The Unifil alliance of grassroots Filipino migrant organizations has a membership of more than five thousand domestic workers; more than 95 percent are women. Unifil was formed in May 1985 by organizations that had campaigned in Hong Kong against the Marcos government's policy of "Forced Remittance," which compelled overseas contract workers to remit 50 to 70 percent of their total earnings to the Philippines.<sup>49</sup> At present, Unifil is composed of twenty-five organizations, including religious, cultural, and socio-civic organizations. Inspired by Unifil, ATKI also links with other Indonesian migrant orga-

48. Freire 1970.



United Methodist Church worker Nedra Scott teaches an English class to migrant domestic workers at Bethune House, Hong Kong, 2006. “[A]t Bethune House, much more can be done to empower migrant workers because they typically live at the shelter for a long period of time.” (Courtesy: Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church)

nizations and has established two alliances: Pilar (United Indonesians against Overcharging) and Gammi (Indonesian Migrant Muslim Alliance), which have mobilized Indonesian migrants in Hong Kong and pressured the Indonesian government to meet their demands. Filipino organizers advise and physically accompany members of ATKI and other groups in situations of difficulty — support that is especially important for migrants who have no experience of organizing and campaigning. ATKI’s chairperson recalled how a Filipino organizer helped them to solve their problems when ATKI was newly established:

When we started to organize, I realized how many Indonesian migrants were afraid. For them, being leaders meant death! When we just began in 2000 and 2001, it’s not safe to even go to Victoria Park, because agents and Indonesia Consulate staff monitored, checked on migrants. So we decided to move to Star Ferry at Kowloon side, but it did not work. Because

49. In 1982, President Ferdinand Marcos issued Executive Order No. 857 (EO-857), popularly known as “Forced Remittance,” that decrees that all overseas contract workers (OCW) had to remit 50 to 70 percent of their total earnings (depending on which category the workers belongs to: seafarers, professionals, construction workers, or domestic helpers). The bill also prohibits the use of non-banking channels and restricts OCW to remit only through government-authorized channels. OCWs who cannot produce proof of remittance in the required amounts face punitive acts such as losing their rights to renew their contracts, renew their passports, cancelation of working contracts, or being eliminated from the list of eligible workers for overseas employment. Since migrant workers spend a part of their salary in the host country, remitting such a large percentage of their salary is not easy. Such punitive provisions forced Filipino migrant workers to borrow money from financing agencies and remit the money through banks for them to have remittance receipts as proof.

how could we organize Indonesian migrants when we could not even enter the park where most Indonesian migrants congregate?! In 2001, after consulting with Filipino organizers, we launched a survey about conditions of Indonesian migrants. It's an entry point for organizing. The first protest action was at the consulate; to expose issues and break fear, we even had to wear black masks so migrants would not be identified by agents of the government. This protest was on a weekday and so only about one hundred were able to attend. But the action was still significant and it made the news. So we gained confidence. We continued to stay at Victoria Park. Edwina from Bethune House accompanied us every week for a month, because we did not know how to deal with harassment and intimidation. She helped us and we learnt how to deal with it. Later on, we could handle things by ourselves, so she did not have to accompany us anymore. (Chairperson, ATKI, 13 March 2007)

### *Criticism of NGOism and Stress on Grassroots Organizing*

As its declaration of unity makes clear, the AMCB believes that a strong mass movement is the only solution to the plight of migrants:

We share the belief that only through step-by-step organizing and educating our ranks, engaging ourselves in worthwhile mass actions, shall we address our homesickness and ensure the protection of our rights, welfare, and dignity.

The step-by-step organizing the Filipino organizations favor became the key to the AMCB's success in mass mobilization. This style of organizing "begins with initial social investigation to building contacts, organizing groups, a committee of organizing groups, and the formation of a formal mass organization that will genuinely uphold the interest of migrant Filipinos and the Filipino people."<sup>50</sup> This time-consuming and painstaking process of organizing reflects the principles and beliefs of Filipino organizations that the prime mover for social change should be the exploited masses. This approach debunks the anarchist and postmodernist views of social movements as spontaneous or nonorganizational.

This emphasis on solid grassroots organizing is a result of many years of experience in the Philippines — especially learnings gleaned from negative experiences such as attempts to undermine the development of grassroots organizing. A historical review and critique of NGOs in the Philippines by the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (KMP) highlights the lessons drawn from the Philippine people's movement with regard to the danger of "NGOism."<sup>51</sup> The study criticized what it called NGOism for fostering greater loyalty to funding agencies than to the people's movement; socioeconomic work that fails to take class struggle and structural change into account; bureaucratism; corruption of the NGO service orientation; professionalism; adoption of corporate practices and

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50. APMMF 2000, 4.

51. KMP 1994.

standards; and “turfism.” By reflecting on the development and problems of NGOism, Filipino progressive organizations affirm their belief that the exploited masses — and not NGOs — should be the prime movers of genuine social transformation. NGOs *are* important to the people’s movement, but they should define themselves as a supporting force for the mass organizations, rather than impose themselves as “representing” the masses.

To help the masses gain the knowledge and skills necessary for organizing work, in 2000 Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants Filipinos (APMMF, later became APMM) produced an educational manual for organizing migrants. Summing up the experiences of Filipino organizers and migrant leaders in Asia and the Middle East,<sup>52</sup> the manual served not only as a general reference guide for organizing migrant Filipinos but also provided guidance to non-Filipino migrant organizations in the AMCB.

In its work APMM tries to transfer organizing knowledge and skills to migrants with no prior organizing experience. Its training sessions, for instance, help inexperienced migrants become organizers and develop creative ways of organizing. ATKI’s more than one hundred active members join other Indonesian migrants in the parks on weekends. There, ATKI organizers offer “mobile counseling” services since many Indonesians do not enjoy a regular day off. ATKI’s chairperson explains:

We used mobile counseling. We have trained twenty to twenty-five counselors and we divide our tasks to make sure that we call our members regularly to know their needs and counsel them what to do if they have problems.... Since we have more active members now, we also want to train them to be experienced organizers. We decided to divide ourselves to four groups and each group goes to different areas of the parks on weekends, to integrate with Indonesian workers and discuss issues with them.

Another ATKI member adds:

I am now in charge of the area called “under the bridge,” one of the gathering places in Victoria Park of Indonesian migrants. I and my other partners responsible for this area go there every Sunday, asking how they are doing, discussing their problems and issues, and we mobilize them when there are campaigns.

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Guided by the principles illustrated above, the MFMW, Bethune House, the APMM, and other NGOs instrumental in developing cross-national migrant organizations support the efforts or desires of migrants to organize themselves, rather than impose themselves as the saviors or spokespersons on behalf of the migrants. Despite these noble aims, however, one can argue that NGOs still substantially control the daily operational machine, since they have more resources, such as full-time professional staff, representational skills, funding and educational resources, office space, and transnational connections. To bridge the gaps between NGOs and grassroots organizations, the “triangle” association

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52. Filipino migrants started to be organized in early 1980s. See Bultron 2006.

of MFMW–BH–APMM has taken the following steps. First, grassroots migrant organizations have been given access to NGO resources, such as office space and equipment. Second, the three NGOs provide systematic training so the grassroots migrant organizations can develop presentation skills, writing (for fund raising, public statements, etc.), and other organizational management skills. Third, the NGOs give financial and other support to organizers from other countries to come and work in Hong Kong in order to help local migrant organizations. This not only helps develop grassroots migrant organizations but also strengthens links with movements in the home countries. Fourth, to ensure that the grassroots migrants' concerns are highlighted, the NGOs make sure that representatives from grassroots migrant organizations are part of the decision-making body of the NGOs. The chairpersons of Unifil and Migrante-International (an alliance of Filipino migrant organizations) are both on APMM's board of directors, and one representative of Unifil serves on MFMW's board of directors.

### *Linked to Movements in Home Countries*

Although the Hong Kong government is often the target of protest actions, the AMCB helps migrants understand that problems in their home countries are a root cause of forced migration and therefore they invest energy to develop and strengthen people's struggles in their home countries.

The strength of Filipino migrant organizations can only be fully understood if situated in the broader context of the Filipino mass movement. The four Filipino organizations that helped establish the AMCB are all part of the progressive mass movement in the Philippines. Unifil is linked to many Filipino grassroots migrant organizations that form Migrante-International, which was formed in 1996 as a member organization of Bayan, a multi-sectoral national alliance of mass organizations.<sup>53</sup> Migrante-International represents the migrant sector within Bayan, convinced as it is that the solution to the migration of Filipinos abroad lies in resolving the basic problems of the Filipino people and that cross-sectoral work is therefore necessary.<sup>54</sup>

Filipino migrants often come to Hong Kong with some organizing experience — experience that contributes to the formation of the migrant movement overseas. For example, the chairperson of Unifil was a student activist in the Philippines. After working as a domestic worker for nine months she began to participate actively in Filipino migrant organizations; her experiences in the Philippines help her organizing in Hong Kong, since she already understands the fundamental problems in the Philippines and how to organize other Filipinos to deal with them.

Filipino organizations encourage and inspire migrants of other nationalities to seek the root causes of their forced migration and to link themselves to the organizations and movement back home. Links to the home country not only

53. For details, see: [http://www.bayan.ph/about\\_bayan\\_the\\_alliance.htm](http://www.bayan.ph/about_bayan_the_alliance.htm) (accessed 5 December 2008).

54. Bultron 2006.



help migrant organizations broaden their perspectives on their struggles, but also helps organizations in their home countries better understand migrant issues. The chairperson of Thai Regional Alliance (TRA) declared with pride: "Our organization is the first overseas labor organization in Thailand!"

The link between migrant organizations and activism or the movement in home countries is developed through exchanges such as when Thai union members and labor NGOs come to Hong Kong for trainings or as speakers with Thai migrant organizations. TRA also uses newsletters and radio programs (available via the internet) for migrants and people in Thailand to better understand migrant-related and other issues in their home countries. ATKI collaborates with organizations in Indonesia in sponsoring organizing and training initiatives in Hong Kong and training ATKI officers who return home for visits. From my interviews, I learned that ATKI officers who return to Indonesia make an effort to raise awareness about migrants' concerns in Hong Kong and other countries. This experience is especially unique for Indonesian migrants, most of whom are young and have no prior organizing experience. Thus, ATKI officers are not only involved in the Hong Kong migrant movement, but also in the movement back home. As their perspectives are broadened, they can see the importance of building a stronger movement in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and in other countries. (ATKI officers have helped organize Indonesian migrants in Macau, for example.) Some ATKI members have returned to Indonesia as activists, joining such campaigns as that against oil price hikes. When protestors against oil price hikes were arrested by the police in Jakarta, ATKI-HK also mobilized protest actions in front of the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong, demanding the release of activists back home.

In an article on transnational activism, Law argues that the AMCB's transnational activism constitutes a new domestic worker subject, one that loses the specificity of national debates.<sup>55</sup> The AMCB, she believes, has shifted the debate for Filipino activists: the Filipino feminist-nationalist movement can no longer construct the female migrant worker subject as dependent upon neocolonial government policies. Global social movements can help bolster the national agendas of Filipino organizations, Law contends, but the stability of the AMCB might be jeopardized because of the importance of national politics in labor migration." Based on my analysis, I believe that Law's analysis and prediction may not be accurate. First, the AMCB has not lost the specificity of national debates: migrant organizations and their members continue to link wider migrant issues to national concerns. Second, the bolstering of Filipinos' national agendas has not jeopardized the stability of the AMCB. On the contrary, the AMCB has expanded as Filipino organizations have encouraged other nationalities to link to their home country struggles.

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55. Law 2002.



### *Organizing Style of Filipino Organizers*

The low-key organizing style of Filipino organizers in the AMCB is a crucial factor in the AMCB's work with other nationalities. As MFMW's director observes, "the key to organize other nationalities is to learn from them about their cultures and histories." Thus, when engaged in joint activities, Filipino organizers deliberately downplay their roles in order to encourage more active participation from other nationalities.

Filipinos are often treated as "experts," but we always try to explain thoroughly so other nationalities can fully understand the issues and we can have more involved discussion.... In rallies and marches, Thai and Indonesian organizations are usually in the front. Their cultures are more impressive and they are very creative. Filipinos are often at the back. (Chairperson, Unifil, 14 March 2007)

Other migrants voice an appreciation for this low-key approach:

Filipinos don't take advantage even though they are much advanced. Indonesians appreciate Filipinos very much. At marches, Filipino walk in the back, so Indonesians and other nationalities can walk in the front. Simple things like that make Indonesians appreciate Filipinos. (Chairperson, ATKI, 13 March 2007)

The election of an Indonesian — the chairperson of ATKI — as the first chairperson of the IMA is an example of how Filipino organizers decline to push themselves forward into power positions. Filipinos were the prime movers in IMA's foundation, and thus it would have been appropriate for the chairperson of Migrante-International or Unifil to fill this leadership role. However, in order to encourage other nationalities, Filipino organizers deferred to ATKI.

### **Lessons from the AMCB's Grassroots Transnationalism**

Leaders and organizers of the AMCB recognize the challenges they face: language barriers, limited time and resources, varying levels of politicization and organizing experience among members, and the need for expanding and consolidating organizing work, among others. Nevertheless, the AMCB continues to provide an inspirational example of "transnationalism from below."

The transformation of migrant workers within the AMCB can be looked at in the context of Alain Touraine's concept of the shift from personal subject to historical subject.<sup>56</sup> Writing in 1988, Touraine introduced the concept of "societal movement" in which "historicity" and "subject" are two key elements. Elsewhere, I argue that in addition to "personal subject" and "historical subject" there is a "communal subject" (developed through a sense of collectivity) who must be created in the subjectivation process. That is, "subjects" do not exist automatically. A long process of development and transformation is required, one that involves continuous and painstaking efforts. Thus, we conclude, migrants can become historical subjects, the movers of histories, but their subjectivity does not arise spontaneously.<sup>57</sup>

56. Touraine 1988.

The problem-posing methods that MFMW and Bethune House use help migrants develop a sense of personal subjectivity as they come to understand that their conditions are not due to fate or luck, but are instead the result of forced migration and that they can do something to improve their own lives. By linking with other migrants, first with compatriots and then with members of other nationalities, migrants develop a sense of communal subjectivity that enables them to see the collective strength of migrants. I argue that linking the migrant movement to movements in their home countries and then to the global movement against capitalist globalization, migrants within the AMCB have developed historical subjectivity and they are making their marks on history by remaking the social relations and the cultural model that define their identity.

The development of the AMCB offers many lessons about transnationalism:

First, it shows that migrants at the grassroots level are able to defeat the divide-and-conquer rule of domination by working collectively with other nationalities.

Second, contrary to what anarchist and postmodernist theorists and activists maintain, this grassroots transnationalism does not happen spontaneously or automatically. It involves the continuous and painstaking efforts of step-by-step organizing.

Third, while NGOs can assist the development of grassroots migrant organizations they must be willing to shift from a representative role to a supportive role. This shift in roles involves bridging the gap between grassroots organizations and more resourceful NGOs; providing opportunities for systematic training; sponsoring organizers from the home countries to work in Hong Kong with migrant organizations; and ensuring that the representatives of grassroots migrant organizations are part of the decision-making body of NGOs.

Fourth, organizing work with migrants of respective nationalities is useful in the development of solid grassroots transnationalism because it helps to overcome linguistic and cultural differences and the lack of sufficient knowledge of contexts in other countries. Moreover, as the managing director of APMM points out, "without solid lessons from organizing migrants of our own nationalities [Filipinos], we cannot share with migrants of different nationalities the methods of organizing that have been proven useful in practice."

Fifth, linking to struggles in their home countries strengthens migrant organizations because this effort helps them identify and address the root causes of forced migration. At the same time, this is a risky course of action and organizers must be careful not to put leaders and active members of grassroots migrant organizations at risk of deportation by carelessly encouraging action against host governments.

Finally, finding a common ground for collaboration enables grassroots migrant organizations to forge a basis of unity, a sharing of cultures, experiences, and common concerns across national barriers. The necessary basis of unity for

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57. Hsia 2006.

migrants of different nationalities is, as we have shown, issues of mutual interest in the host countries.

In her keynote speech at IMA's founding assembly, Dr. Irene Fernandez, a prominent advocate of migrant rights, declared that in the context of modern-day imperialist globalization migrants must carry out dual struggles: one in their home countries and the other in their countries of reception. The AMCB has shown in practice that these dual struggles are essential to protect migrants and to develop genuine transnational grassroots migrant movement against capitalist globalization.

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