

FILIPINO LABOR OUTMIGRATION: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

As the country plunges deeper into crisis, the Marcos administration has been hard pressed for ways out of this terrible crisis. Of late, it has been pinning its hope on three major sources of much-needed capital, namely: increased earnings from traditional export products like sugar, copra, lumber, garments, and electronics; more loans from multinational banking institutions like the World Bank-International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank and a hundred or so private banks; and increased remittances from Filipino overseas contract workers. Of the three, the latter has been an unexpected but a most welcome source of foreign exchange. The government was not quite ready for the sudden boom in manpower export, so much so that up to this point, it has been relying heavily on initiatives of the private sector to recruit and deploy Filipino brawn and brain overseas. At any rate, labor export has come to be, to quote a primer of the Friends of Filipino Migrant Workers, Inc. (KAIBIGAN), "extraordinarily important at a time when contributions to national economic development must be made in cash or in kind".¹

The government sees manpower export as a stop-gap measure against the twin problems of unemployment and balance of payments deficits. No less than President Ferdinand E. Marcos stressed the importance of exporting people overseas when he declared its rationale:

For us, overseas employment addresses two major problems: unemployment and the balance of payments position. If these problems are met or at least partially solved by contract migration, we also expect an increase in national savings and investment levels. In the long run we also expect that overseas employment will contribute to the acquisition of skills essential to the development of the country's industrial base.²

In sum, the government is vigorously exerting all efforts to sell the Filipino workers purportedly to generate badly needed foreign exchange, alleviate the unemployment situation and acquire new skills and technology.

It is no wonder then that the present regime is leaving no stone unturned in selling Filipino brawn and brain like bananas in the world market. Likewise, the government is

making sure that hard-earned dollars first pass through its hands before handing over its peso equivalent to the overseas employees' waiting families.

For 1983 alone, some US\$955 million were remitted by both land and sea-based overseas contract workers.³ This represents a 19.3% increase compared to the 1982 figure of \$800 million. Given the 1983 balance of payments deficit at \$2.5 billion and the \$25.6 billion for the loan (as of December 1983), this compulsory remittances indeed go a long way in shoring the sagging economy.

A closer look at manpower export, not only in terms of dollars and cents but the other attendant issues as well, is useful at this juncture.

PROFILE OF THE FILIPINO OVERSEAS CONTRACT WORKERS

An overseas contract worker is simply defined as someone who leaves the country to work. Unlike the immigrant, he does not intend to settle permanently in his place of work. Neither does he wish that his family join him. Thus he is not forever lost as a member of his country's labor force.

The number of Filipino men and women annually leaving the country to fulfill work contracts abroad is staggering. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration's (POEA) Labor Assistance Center based at the Manila International Airport estimates that around 900 workers leave the country everyday, except Wednesdays and Saturdays, where the average is 1,200.⁴ Roughly, that is 358,800 workers a year. The actual total of workers presently out of the country is difficult to ascertain as estimates vary. Several factors account for this. For one, the government is not in a position to keep track of workers who went out illegally by posing as tourists. Another is its inefficient system of monitoring the inflow of workers who have finished their contracts. Nevertheless, the official estimate of the Ministry of Labor says that there are over a million Filipinos working temporarily in some 124 countries.

Numerous researches tend to confirm the popular notion that we are indeed selling the cream of our labor force. Those who find work abroad are those in the prime of their health and productivity. Surveys show that some 48.5% are

in the 22 to 31 age bracket. On the average, they are also better educated than their co-members in the local labor force. Only a very small number were unable to go beyond elementary school (4.7 %), while 27.5 % completed high school, and close to 36.5% finished college with some even finishing masteral and doctoral courses.⁵

Available statistics of registered and local migrants tend to show that the males dominate the field of overseas employment. Three out of every four workers are males. However, if we include the illegal entrants to Western Europe, then it would be more or less on an equal proportion. On civil status, the married outnumber the unmarried, with 64.2% married as against the 35.8% not married.

In the highly competitive business of overseas work, a great premium is placed on skills and expertise. It is not surprising therefore to find that the great majority (83%) of those who are working abroad were previously employed. Many had worked for two to twelve years prior to their deployment, with almost one out of every three workers belonging to the professional/technical category like engineering and medicine.

The bulk of current workers can be found in the production process job classification. Production workers, particularly those who work with metals such as fitters and welders and construction laborers including transport equipment operators, constitute the biggest occupational group (64%).

Although overseas migration is a nationwide phenomenon, the distribution as far as region of origin is concerned shows a bias for those originating from Luzon. For example, in the period from July 1975 to June 1977, 79% of all placed workers came from Luzon, particularly from the provinces close to Manila, like Pampanga, Rizal, Cavite, Pangasinan, Zambales, Batangas, Laguna, Bulacan, and Bataan. Mindanao accounted for only 3.3% of contract workers placed overseas for that period.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Export of Filipino manpower is not something new. It has been going on since the American imperial government at the turn of the century. The composition of Filipino workers migration flows has been specific as to skills required in their countries of destination. Likewise, the periodicity of migration waves has been tied to the manpower needs of the host countries as well as the political climate prevailing between the sending and receiving countries.

The outflow of Filipino brawn and brain within the last eight decades can be classified into three distinct periods: the First Wave in 1900-1946; the Second Wave from 1946 - 1972; and the Third Wave from 1973 to the present.

The destination of the first wave was the United States, then the emerging imperialist power. Filipino workers began going to Hawaii in 1906, mainly through labor contracts with the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA). Filipinos were in demand to replace Chinese and Japanese laborers whose entries were encumbered by US legislation. Over 100,000 Filipino laborers were contracted by the HSPA between 1906 and 1934, accounting for around 18% of the local population in 1929.⁶

The economic hardships afflicting the rural areas, particularly the Visayas and Northern Luzon provinces contributed greatly to the agricultural labor outflow. It must be remembered that this was the period immediately preceding two wars of liberation. The Philippines was still reeling from the toll in lives and property brought by the Filipino struggle for independence from Spain and the United States. Compounding the problem was the subsequent opening of free trade between the Philippines and the United States which encouraged in the Philippines the cultivation of cash crops for export that undermined traditional peasant economies.

Initially, migrant workers from Cebu and Negros accounted for the bulk of recruits to the Hawaiian plantations between 1916 and 1920. Between 1925 and 1928, Hawaiian recruitment efforts shifted to the Northern Luzon provinces with the Ilocanos accounting for 58%.

Employment opportunities eventually dried up in Hawaii as earlier migrants stayed on. The succeeding batches went instead to the US mainland, increasing the Filipino population there tenfold. There were about 50,000 Filipinos in the mainland between 1920 and 1930. Concentrated along the Pacific Coast, these Filipino migrants trekked along the harvest trail, going into the least pleasant and least remunerated jobs like picking apples, grapes and lettuces.⁷

The Second Wave of Filipino labor migration may be better described as a trickle. The years from 1946 - 1965 marked the closure of the United States to immigration. The United States set an annual quota of 100 immigrants, giving first preference to those who joined the US armed forces. Migrants during this period were relatives of earlier migrants who stayed and became citizens. Moreover, they came to the US not for temporary employment but to settle permanently. As before, applicants were screened on the basis of possessed skills that would contribute further to the development of imperialist America.

Around 2.8 million Filipino immigrants to the United States were registered during this period.⁸ Of these, only 28,000 or about 1% of total Filipino immigrants were professional, notably in the medical/health profession.

The construction boom in the Middle East brought about by a sudden increase in the world price of oil in 1973 saw the shifting of destinations of overseas workers from the US to the oil-rich countries, notably the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This ushered in the newest trend in overseas migration.

Capital and oil-rich countries in the Middle East account for some 699,335 workers of 81% of total land-based employment for the period 1975 - 1982.⁹ Saudi Arabia alone was responsible for at least 70% of total workers placed in the region. At the moment, it is estimated that there are about 250,000 contract workers in the Middle East, 75% of whom are in Saudi Arabia. Majority of them are production process workers, transport equipment operators, and laborers.

Side by side with this influx of mostly skilled male workers to the Gulf region is the exodus of women migrants to the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa.¹⁰ Collectively, Western Europe is the place of work of some 117,000 Fili-

pinos, mostly in the service sector as domestic helpers, chambermaids and nurse aides. In very far away Africa, some 15,000 Filipinos are employed, a good number of whom are in the teaching profession of countries like Nigeria. Hongkong also accounts for 24,000 Filipinos, of whom 95% are women domestic helpers. Finally, in Japan, 15,000 Filipinos are employed as entertainers and domestic helpers.

GENERAL CONDITIONS BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER MIGRATION

The fact that manpower export is never problem-free is unquestionable. Experiences of many agencies, both local and international, government or private, will attest to this. Some would say that this is natural in any given social relation. A few even believe that this should not bother us at all since the workers come into this "mess" of their own free will. They were not forced after all and that they are fully aware of the consequences. Of course this is a convenient way out. However, this view does not help in understanding the problems. Neither does it present viable long-term alternatives or solutions.

Manpower export can be roughly categorized into three stages: application, work proper and post-migration. In each stage, the worker is vulnerable to conditions of exploitations. In applying for instance, KAIBIGAN researches show that on the average, an overseas jobseeker spends something like P10,265. Of this amount, between P6,000 to P10,000 is actually spent for placement fees which include the passport charged at the maximum of P1,500. Clearly, this is exorbitant. Based on existing POEA regulations, placement fee should only be P2,500 maximum. And for a passport, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs charges only P450. It is no wonder then that we hear of applicants selling or pawning their most precious possessions, like land, work animals and jewelry, just to raise the much needed amount to pay a recruiter. And this is not without risk. Cases of illegal recruitment by both licensed and unlicensed recruiters abound. For example, in 1979, the Philippine Task Force on Illegal Recruitment was able to file 1,479 cases estimated to be only 10% of actual incidents.¹¹ For 1983, Labor Deputy Minister Willie Villarama said in a recent television interview that of the 4,000 cases reported to his office (he is also part of the Task Force on Illegal Recruitment), 50% were perpetuated by licensed agencies.¹² This is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. An article by Regina B. Dacanay published in one Ministry of Labor and Employment journal listed a litany of workers' complaints "even before assumption of duty".¹³ Number one on the list is substitution of contracts to make the salaries of Filipino workers lower than previously agreed upon. Then there is the "withdrawal of the provisions for free travel or adequate accommodation of workers' dependents; delay or underpayment of overtime pay; change of work of workers contrary to nature of the work permits; levy of unnecessary fees such as tax, housing allowance, or a certain percentage fee for the home agency; and, substitution of names for others".

Some workers are fortunate enough to be spared the harrowing experiences connected with the application stage. However "once the workers are transported to the host

society, a typical project operates at high efficiency, with intensification of working hours, militarization of working discipline and rapid rotation of the labor force, typically every 18 months."¹⁴ Part of the rigid set-up to maximize the migrants' productivity and for other various reasons advantageous to the host countries' governments and employers is the policy to physically separate the overseas workers from the host societies in camps or enclaves. Most of these camps from which workers are generally not allowed to leave have "no entry" signs.¹⁵ Similarly situated are the domestic helpers who are living in with their employers. They are allowed only one day off in a week, if at all.

Tales of woe are long and heart-breaking. However, it does not end there. The overseas contract workers have to face a very uncertain if not bleak post-migration future. Why? Are they not able to save? What happens to the money they are remitting back home?

Sometimes the material goods associated with working abroad are illusory. People are blinded by the new stereo component, or the remodelling of the house of a neighbor, a relative or a friend who slugged it out for two years in the flaming desert of Saudi Arabia or the freezing mist of the Atlantic Ocean. However, that is not all there is to it. A survey of construction workers conducted in Dumez, a big French multinational construction company, reveals some startling facts. It was found out that among the topmost reasons for seeking employment abroad is to be able to buy a house and lot. This "has not reached fruition, as only a minute 4% were able to achieve this goal".¹⁶ On the question of savings, it was found out that "out of 998 allottees who responded, 62.8% reported no savings from the 70% remittance forwarded to them; while 37.2% admitted some savings from their allotment".¹⁷ The average amount saved per month is P247.30. When asked for the reasons behind their inability to save, the respondents said that "school expenses, high house rentals, and increased cost of living were the three primary reasons"; and that most them (82%) "are financially dependent solely on their husbands/son".¹⁸ One thing to consider also is the fact that overseas workers cannot stay abroad continuously much as they want to. They are bound by the contract for a maximum period of two years. This is not enough time really to amass wealth considering the fact that they have debts to pay, mouths to feed, children to clothe and send to schools, and dwellings to rent.

A United Nations study likewise gave a not too encouraging post-migration scenario for the large number of migrant workers including Filipinos. According to this study, "the future of the large numbers of foreign workers who remain in the receiving countries remains uncertain. They are unlikely to be repatriated *en masse* in the immediate future. However, there are likely to be smaller increases in their incomes, stricter control over their spare-time activities, and an over-all deterioration of their current precious economic and social situation."¹⁹

In brief, the general condition of the Filipino overseas contract workers is, in reality, one of hardship and exploitation. The question to ask is why.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The simple framework of "push and pull" factors as a way of explaining and analyzing the issues and problems attendant to manpower export or international migration is unfortunately inadequate. In fact, it does not say anything at all except to boost the myth that international migration is a viable solution to the problems of unemployment, low wages, balance of payments deficits, and technological underdevelopment. Seemingly logical, the "push and pull" reasoning appears convincing in its position that higher incomes and attractive fringe benefits pull or attract workers from less developed countries to work in the more developed ones; while on the other hand, unemployment, low wages and severe economic hardships push or compel the sending countries' workers to look for better paying jobs elsewhere. This type of structural-functional framework presents such an idealistic situation that it simply cannot explain the fact that workers are indeed exploited when they work overseas.

A more profound and instructive analysis would be to view migration, whether local or international, as a result of "two laws of the capitalist mode of production: one, the submission of the worker to the organization of the means of production dictated by capital (and hence, to its spatial concentration in areas regarded as most profitable) and two, the uneven development between sectors and regions, and between countries, in accordance with inter-capitalist competition and political relationships".²⁰

This means that because the worker does not own the means of production except his labor power which he is "free" to sell in exchange for subsistence wages, in reality, he has no choice in terms of where he will work. It is inevitable that with this structure, he will work wherever work can be found, lest he and his family starve to death. The higher the wages then being offered by a particular capitalist, the stronger is the compulsion for him to sell his labor to that capitalist. However since capitalist growths are not the same for all, certain capitalists (irrespective of geographical boundaries) offer higher wages than others. Similarly, the development of labor is not also even, so much so that certain workers accept the same work for less (relative this time to the prevailing rate in the receiving countries). At any rate, the position of the capitalist, naturally, will be dictated by what will give him maximal profits, this being the *raison d'être* of capitalists and capitalism. This process of capitalist accumulation includes hiring labor from across the borders so long as this would be cheaper than hiring local labor whose price may be higher or whose skills may be insufficient, or both.

The essential features of the capitalist mode of production, the capitalist class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat) are the same regardless of national and cultural peculiarities. Although we mentioned earlier that the development in each country is uneven and certain characteristics are indeed particular to that country, the basic relations in production, the various forces in production and the motivation to amass profit on the part of the owners and controllers of the means of production is the same for each country thriving on the capitalist mode of production. In this sense, the geographical location of the deployment of labor and

even capital, is incidental.

Let us be more specific and elaborate the points raised above. Capital's requirement of additional and flexible sources of labor is not something new, but rather a general condition of the mode of production. The specific form is the only new factor. Marx showed that a "surplus population of workers" is not only a necessary product of capital accumulation and a "condition for the existence of the capitalist mode of production".²¹ Only by bringing ever more workers into the production process can the capitalist accumulate capital, which is the prerequisite for extending production and applying new techniques. These new techniques often make redundant the very men and women whose labor allowed their (i.e., new techniques) introduction in the first place. The workers are set "free" to provide an "industrial reserve army" which is available to be thrown into other sectors, as the interests of capital require.

It would be best to illustrate historically the above-mentioned thesis by quoting at length Stephen Castles' formulations in his latest work *Here For Good*:²²

During the centuries preceding the industrial revolution – the mercantile period – relations between Western Europe ("the center in process of formation") and the countries then being colonised ("the new periphery") were vital for the genesis of capitalism. World trade was mainly between Western Europe on the one hand, and the New World, Asia and Africa on the other. The commercial metropolises of Western Europe (first the cities of Northern Italy, later the Hanse towns of Germany, then Spain and Portugal, and from the seventeenth century the ports of Holland and Britain) redistributed gold, spices and agricultural and craft products obtained overseas. The center got hold of such products through a variety of methods, including exchange, plunder and the organization of production in the colonies. The consequence was the transformation of the relations of production and the imposition of new forms of subjugation of labor both at the periphery and the center.

The slave economies of the New World were based on enforced migration of labor from one area of the periphery (Africa) to another (America). At the same time, the development of agrarian capitalism at the center (especially in Britain) was causing displacement, through the enclosures of masses of formerly independent small farmers. As the landlords turned arable land into sheep pastures and pulled down the cottages of their tenants, these had no choice but to migrate to the town. Hordes of beggars, disciplined and intimidated by draconian poor laws, provided labor power for the work-houses and manufactures, foreshadowing the industrial revolution...

In this period, primitive accumulation continued at both center and periphery, giving rise to a variety of forms of labor migration, both internal and international... British capital began employing workers from one of its colonies for some of the hardest and worst paid jobs. Many of the "navigators" who dug the canals as well as factory laborers came from Ireland. Irish labor was plentiful because of the depredation of Ireland by British landlords and the flooding of the Irish market with cheap manufactured products, which had ruined many peasants and artisans and caused

wide-spread poverty. . .

In the countries of the periphery, colonial expansion was beginning to incorporate some sections of peasant agriculture and artisan production into the capitalist mode of production. The pulling of these pre-capitalist forms into the world market, and the expropriation of their surplus products was causing increasing poverty, landlessness and debt. Displaced and underemployed farmers and artisans were thus "freed" from their traditional relations of reproduction, and were forced to seek a means of survival elsewhere. Initially, they migrated as wage labor for colonial plantations, mines, docks and so on, or became domestic servants of the colonists . . .

In the present modern-day capitalism, a new international division of labor is shaping up. But first, let us briefly characterize this era.

Lenin characterized the present era of imperialism as moribund capitalism. Essentially, Lenin pinpointed five of its basic features: 1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; 2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance; 3) the domination of finance capital; 4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist combines which share the world among themselves; and 5) the territorial division of the biggest capitalist powers is completed.²³

In effect, according to Stalin,

The increase in the export of capital to the colonies and dependent countries, the extension of "spheres of influence" and colonial possessions until they cover the whole globe; the transformation of capitalism into a *world system* of financial enslavement and colonial oppression of the vast majority of the population of the earth by a handful of "advanced" countries — all this has, (on the one hand), converted the separate national economies and national territories into *links* in a single chain called world economy . . . (Emphasis supplied)²⁴

In the era of imperialism, not only capital, technology and governments are in the hands of monopoly-capitalists but also the disposition of the vast armies of the working class. In fact, "labor migration, along with commodity exchanges and capital flows, plays an important part in the development of the capitalist mode of production throughout history, although its forms have varied considerably".²⁵ In the long period of capitalist expansion, it became not only necessary but also essential for the full development of the capitalist mode of production to transcend the boundaries of national labor markets. As Stephen Castles aptly puts it:

The need for migrant labor in this period (i.e. monopoly-capitalism) was not merely a result of quantitative expansion but also of its forms: increasing use of such methods of mass production as increasing division of labor, conveyor-line production, shift-work and piece-work. This form of growth meant not only an increase in the number of workers needed, but also deskilling of large sections of the labor force. The new jobs were often dirty, monotonous, unhealthy and unpleasant. In a situa-

tion of expanding employment opportunities, some sections of the indigenous (local) workforce were able to refuse such jobs and move into skilled, supervisory and white-collar positions. Expansion could only be sustained by the large-scale import of workers compelled by their social, economic and legal position to take unpleasant jobs.²⁶

Again, it might be instructive for us to deal briefly on how capitalism became a system of hierarchically organized competitive networks in which regimes and countries "specialize" in one or more activities. James Petras in a short article titled "Imperialism, World Economy and the Newly Industrialized Countries"²⁷ synthesized it in this manner, and we quote lengthily:

Historically, those countries which achieved the highest development of productive forces and the most powerful military-political state apparatus have shaped the international division of labor to their needs, organizing "specializations" within subordinate regions and countries and incorporating the emerging ensemble in the service of their economic and strategic needs. The classical pattern involved the production and export of finished industrial goods from the metropolitan centers and the import of agro-mineral products from the colonized or semi-colonized countries. Two points require emphasis here: first, while colonies were typically reduced to mineral or agrarian monoculture economies in the service of the metropolis, the economic supremacy of the latter rested on the diversification of its economic base and the global sweep of its multiple economic activities, including manufacture, finance, shipping, agriculture and mining as well as on its ability to control profit from dynamic sectors of the colonial economy. In short, in a world in which capital accumulation was frequently equated with specialization, in fact hegemonic power lay with optimum diversification. Second, even in the colonies, diverse patterns of specialization began to develop. For example, personnel within India were recruited and served as regional police within southern and eastern Asia; a similar pattern was evidenced in the French use of Senegalese forces in the occupation of Africa. Hundreds of thousands of Korean laborers were impressed to work overseas in Japanese coal mines, as were Mozambican workers in South African mines . . . More important, certain areas and regions, even in the colonial period, served as banking, administrative and commercial centers, accumulating capital and creating the basis for dynamic growth in the post-colonial period. Lebanon, Singapore, Hongkong, became banking and commercial centers, retaining some of the surplus appropriated by imperial countries.

The movement of labor from one country to another, especially from a poor, imperialist-dominated Third World country to the capitalist mainland (like the US, Japan and Western Europe) or to any other country which may be, for various economic and political reasons considered tactically or strategically aligned, supportive or beneficial to the world domination of imperialism (countries like the oil-rich States of the Middle East and trading centers like Hongkong and Singapore) can therefore be rightly appraised in the overall schema of imperialist domination, exploitation and oppression of the peoples of the world.

Imperialism encourages, maintains and supports the movement of labor from one country to another to forestall its downfall. It deliberately postpones the development of Third World countries into full-blown capitalist economies by delaying the transfer of both capital and technology and by siphoning off skilled labor to where it may derive the most benefits. In effect, advanced forms of production as well as control of world trade have tended to be concentrated at the imperialist countries, while colonies and semi-colonies have been "pushed into a subordinate role of suppliers of labor power and certain types of commodities, and as markets" for imperialists' industrial products.²⁸ Such uneven, unequal relations are so designed by imperialism to serve its industrial needs and to maximize the benefits it can derive in the ensuing international movement of labor and in the more general new international division of labor. Proof of this is the fact that . . .

From 1945 until the mid-70s, and most particularly during rapid expansion in the last 15 years of that period, the import of labor power was a marked feature of all advanced capitalist countries. Employers were looking for flexible labor units. Temporary foreign workers matched this requirement; they provided labor as where required, without inflationary effects on wages or social expenditure. They were expected to remain only a few years, and to be easy to get rid of if no longer needed.²⁹

Or to quote Lenin:

One of the special features of imperialism . . . is the decline in emigration from the imperialist countries and the increase in immigration into these countries from the more backward countries where lower wages are paid.³⁰

Imperialism worsens the internal problems of Third World countries by integrating them into the world capitalist system without making them politically and economically stable. "Integration," according to Castles, "is based not only on markets for commodities and capital, but also for labor and for production sites."³¹ However, as we have previously asserted, "imperialist form of integration of the world economy is very far from being a smooth, continuous and planned process. It is marked by constant struggles of various kinds: between capital and labor, between various sectors of capital on the national and international level, and between imperialist states struggling for bigger shares in the picking."³²

STRUCTURES IN THE PHILIPPINES CONTRIBUTING TO LABOR OUTMIGRATION

Let us apply the preceding framework to the Philippine case.

National development strategies as designed by World Bank-International Monetary Fund (WB-IMF) "experts" call for an export-oriented industrialization (EOI) backed up by unequal trade structures, open-door policy to foreign investment and an organic dependence on foreign loans. Concretely, this means the dismantling of the import-substitution industrialization initiated by the local industrial elite in the mid-50s and the establishment of industries and industrial free trade zones (like the Bataan Export Processing Zone) geared towards selling light manufactured products such as garments and electronic parts in the world market. Part of this scheme calls for the opening of the doors of the country to foreign investors who

are expected to take the lead in the EOI program. Cheap and docile labor, abundant raw materials and great incentive packages that include numerous tax deductions and 100% repatriation of profits serve as attractive come-ons for these transnational corporations to open their shops here and not elsewhere. A built-in flaw of the EOI scheme, however, is a "hemorrhage of foreign exchange for the expensive infrastructure needs" and the equally high costs of importation of necessary raw materials, intermediate goods and capital-goods inputs.³³ In such a situation, the economy's balance of payments deficits continue to worsen. From 1982 - 1983, the BOP deficit increased to 47% or 456% way above the desired target of the government. Real exports growth was only 1.7% in 1983, resulting in a \$1.135 billion trade deficit.

All these redound to the "decomposition of backward productive structures - especially in agriculture, structural unemployment in certain sectors of the population (as EOI has strong preference for women labor) and oppressively low wages."³⁴

What we have therefore is a stunted, backward and underdeveloped economy where the forces of production are basically agrarian and non-industrial. Heavy and basic industries are glaringly absent. Agriculture is the principal means of production responsible for producing the food staples and substantial amount of raw materials for local light manufacturing and handicrafts and the bulk of surplus products for export.

As such, the economy that failed to fully industrialize cannot absorb the increasing surplus labor brought about by the ever-increasing farm workers competing for decreasing farm jobs. Equally problematic is the fact that the labor force is earning less and less as inflation, depression of export crops and plain mismanagement of the economy take its toll.

The net effect is that we have a ready pool of people, employed, underemployed and unemployed, who are willing and ready to sell their labor just to get past the bare subsistence level. Where to sell is of secondary importance.

The specific interest of capital as exemplified by the developed countries and their corporations in this instance is to maximize profit by making use of this cheap labor, not otherwise available within its territories. Of course, it is also the interest of the government, taken as the concentrated expression of the ruling class, to export this potential social volcano.

CAPITALIST EXPLOITATION OF MIGRANT LABOR

Relations in production under a capitalist mode of production are characterized by the existence of two distinct social classes of which one appropriates the produce of the other's labor, and thus, puts the former in a position to dominate and exploit. This is exactly the very same relation which a migrant enters into when he opts to sell his labor to a foreign capitalist outside his country. And like traditional relations between labor and capital in this set-up, exploitation is present in the relationship between our overseas workers and the receiving countries' employers. This is notwithstanding the fact that if we compare the wages which the overseas worker receives to the prevailing rate in his country of origin, he gets at least five times more compared to his local counterpart.

To a great extent, migrant workers are doubly exploited. This stems from the very nature of overseas contract workers.

Inherent in the status of the Filipino contract worker are limits to the satisfaction of his essential needs and aspirations. For one, he clings on to a job that is least preferred by the nationals of the host country. A proof of this is the fact that "most countries require employers to demonstrate that they have tried unsuccessfully to recruit local labor at wages and conditions no less favorable than for similar jobs in the area. This often means that the job is so unpleasant (or so poorly paid) that local people would prefer unemployment".³⁵ A case in point is "Hardship Hotels", a *CIS Report* which said that "in London alone in 1979 there were 5,000 vacancies in the hotel industry in spite of rising unemployment. Most of these vacancies were filled by migrant labor."³⁶

To give an idea of how boring and unpleasant the work of one employed in the service sector is, particularly that of a domestic helper, the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers, a service institution for Filipino domestic workers in Hongkong, gave this documented report of a typical daily work schedule as prepared by the employer:³⁷

- 6:45 am: take breakfast alone.
- 7:00 am: prepare breakfast for the family and boil water.
- 7:20 am: dress oldest child for school.
- 7:30 am: feed him his breakfast.
- 7:55 am: take him to the school bus.
- 8:15 am: dress youngest child and feed him breakfast.
- 8:30 am: clean the bathroom, tidy all the bedrooms, sweep and mop all floors, wipe furniture, clean the ceiling lights with feather brush, etc.
- 10:00 am: get food ready for lunch, e.g., clean vegetables, defrost meat.
- 10:30 am: wash dirty clothes and hang them on line to dry.
- 12:15 pm: pick up boy from school and give him a change of clothes.
- 12.45 pm: cook lunch.
- 1:30 pm: serve lunch and have lunch yourself.
- 2:30 pm: wash dishes, iron clothes, take clean clothes to different rooms.
- 5:00 pm: go to supermarket, polish shoes, give children baths.
- 5.30 pm: make snacks for children and have a snack yourself.
- 6:30 pm: prepare for dinner.
- 8:30 pm: cook dinner.
- 9:30 pm: serve dinner.
- 10:00 pm: wash and put away dishes, clean the kitchen thoroughly, mop kitchen floor, prepare oldest child's snack box.

Aside from the fact that most of these jobs are unpleasant per se, there are other built-in disadvantages for the migrant workers. The discrimination in the pay is a glaring example. Compared with the nationals of the labor-importing countries and Caucasian migrants, Filipinos and other Third World nationals receive the lowest wages. Dacanay³⁸ has this to say on the issue of wage discrimination:

... one of the major sources of complaints is the discrepancy in wage benefit schedules afforded to expatriates who perform the same level of work. Wages at the worksite

differ by nationality groups. In the Middle East, for instance, at least three general payrolls are maintained. These are the American or European payroll, the local payroll used to pay the country's own nationals, and that of the Third Country Nationals (TCN) which include those of the Philippines and other Asian countries.

Still, in a study done on the case of Kuwait by an observer who prefers to be anonymous, it was found out that "both the private and government sectors pay differential wages based on nationality rather than on skill and competence".³⁹

Table
Private Sector
Average Monthly Wages in Kuwaiti Dinars (K.D.)

Year	Administrative and Technical Staff		Laborers	
	Kuwaiti	Non-Kuwaiti	Kuwaiti	Non-Kuwaiti
1967	153	112	72	38
1974	265	120	200	50

Source: Annual Statistical Abstracts - Kuwait 1977, p. xxix.

Discrimination in wages is not the sole monopoly of Kuwait and other countries in the Middle East. In Hongkong the pay of the Chinese *amah* is significantly higher than that of the Filipino domestic helper, yet, it is the latter who does all the dirty work. Even in most European countries, the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that migrant workers employed in hotels, restaurants and similar establishments are being discriminated against in terms of wages that are way below the pay rates for the nationals, being kept on minimum wage for a long time and underpayment in relation to qualifications.⁴⁰

A similar observation was made by a United Nations study which noted that "wages paid to immigrant workers have tended to progressively match those in their countries of origin" and that "the proliferation of manpower recruitment agencies in the labor-exporting countries has tended to depress further the level of pay offered to prospective migrants".⁴¹

Overseas contract workers are also exploited by means of the considerable savings generated by capital when they "allow" themselves to work in the worst safety and health conditions. Typical of this are the experiences of Filipino seamen aboard the so-called "floating coffins". These ocean-going vessels are registered under the Flag-of-Convenience (FOC) to undercut strict international maritime bodies. The conditions in these ships are not only hazardous but so inhuman that many strikes have been staged by Filipino seamen in the ports of Rotterdam, Hamburg and elsewhere. In 1980 for example, the *M/V Saudi Independence*, a ship owned by a Saudi Arabian Company but managed by a Greek agency, sailed for 10 months with very minimal food provisions so much so that the 38-man crew (which included 25 Filipinos) had to fish in the sea to augment the daily ration of one dried fish and one cup of rice per person. To top it all, no winter clothes were given to protect them from the harsh weather.⁴²

Considerable savings are also optimally realized in consi-

deration of the fact that migrant workers are in the best of health conditions, highly trained, "forced" bachelors and are staying only temporarily. The huge cost for facilities like housing, schools, welfare benefits and so forth are thus saved. Many workers rightly feel that they are like prisoners and the whole country is like a prison camp without bars. The same United Nations study cited earlier supports this position. It said of the Middle East social cost-cutting measures:

As a means of keeping down the social costs of immigration, most of the receiving countries now restrict family immigration, and make naturalization nearly impossible, thereby preventing the likelihood of either assimilation or integration. One reason that naturalization is blocked is that citizenship confers substantial benefits upon the holder, such as benefits derived from redistribution of oil revenues, guaranteed employment, the right to 51% partnership in all enterprises involving foreign capital, etc.⁴³

Aside from being able to save on new infrastructure for housing, most employers tend to economize on the accommodations and living conditions in general afforded the contract workers. Many complaints along this line had already been aired. Many *Pinoys* working in Khaddafy's Libya complain of the exorbitant prices of basic food items like rice, vegetables and fruits. Still, at times, they cannot find chicken, fish and beef in the market. To make matters worse, they are sheltered in temporary barracks without proper facilities like kitchen utensils and furniture. Those in Europe, particularly the nurses and domestics working in Great Britain complain of similar living conditions. In a report⁴⁴ given to KAIBIGAN and the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) by the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers, a service institution for migrants based in London, it was found out that living conditions of Filipinas working in British hospitals and hotels are far from ideal. It is typical to see eight persons packed like sardines in a small room with no space at all for clothes and furniture. Some Filipinas working in Hongkong are not too lucky either. Documented cases of maids sleeping on top of the refrigerator, in the bath tub or with a big boy or a small child abound.

After extracting the most from this part of the labor force, the contract is terminated and the migrants have no claim to benefits like retirement, medical, housing and so on. Neither are they able to save during their stint abroad. As mentioned earlier, those who are able to save constitute only a small percentage. Castles and Kosack (1980) remarked that there are hardly any retired migrants as many of them remain only a few years in their place of work as stipulated in the contract. However, in their limited stay, they have "higher than average rates of economic activity, and make contributions to health, unemployment and pension insurance far in excess of their demand on such schemes"⁴⁵

Lastly, their "legal-political status as foreigners and their political-ideological isolation lead to the basic point: their limited capacity for organization and struggle and very great vulnerability to repression"⁴⁶ Thus, most of their basic rights are denied to them even though it is explicitly contained in the Master Employment Contract that they signed as required by the Ministry of Labor and Employment. Overseas workers' mass actions, especially in countries under authoritarian con-

trol are replete with incidences of repression and suppression of workers' basic rights like the right to form unions and the right to strike. Any sign of militancy among non-Arabian workers is quickly and at times violently crushed, even if the complaints aired are legitimate grievances. The truth is that many workers have been deported for demanding better working and living conditions and for taking part in strikes, slowdowns or work stoppages to press such demands. Deportation is so swift that it usually takes place within 24 hours, leaving no room for appeal or the chance to brief and say goodbye to friends and roommates.

Repression of political rights is not a monopoly only of autocratic and feudal governments like those in the Middle East. Even in the so-called democratic states of Europe, quite a number of clear violations of human rights of the expatriate workers have been reported. Most vulnerable to harassment and intimidations are the so-called illegal entrants. These are workers who came with tourist visas but were actually out to get jobs. Because of their illegal status, they are harassed and exploited in every conceivable way. They are the most poorly paid, literally living like rats who cannot roam freely during their free time for fear of being caught by the authorities.

GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Numerous and complicated problems beset the Filipino overseas workers. Many well-meaning and many self-serving individuals and groups have prescribed their diagnosis and remedy to the malady affecting the migrant workers and the manpower export program in general. Sad to say, majority of the proposed solutions are mere palliatives if not outright placebo measures intended to plug a hole here and there. The core of the matter has been neglected.

One reason for this is the rationale behind manpower export itself. Most governments, including the Philippines, have found in manpower export the short-term solution for its employment and balance of payments problems such that little planning, if at all, concerning the total well-being and protection of the exported workers is undertaken. For one thing, to quote a world survey of international migration policies and programmes by a department of the United Nations, "the governments of many labor-exporting countries have seen labor migration as a safety valve and have failed to give employment-creation the priority it deserved in their economic development strategies".⁴⁷

The Philippine government has, time and again, paid lip service to protecting the rights and promoting the welfare of the Filipino migrant workers. Readily, top bureaucrats of the Ministry of Labor and Employment would point to the Master Employment Contract, the Welfare Fund and the Workers Assistance and Adjudication Office (WAAO) of the POEA as proofs that they have not neglected the well-being and protection of the overseas contract workers. However, many workers claim otherwise. For one, the contract signed in the Philippines is not the binding and legal one but the contract signed in the place of work. Two, the Welfare Fund and the WAAO are of no use when the problem is right there in the place of work, like when the workers are being discriminated against or when human rights are wantonly violated. As they say in Pilipino, "*aanhin pa ang damo kung patay na ang ka-*

bayo". The third, and this partly explains the second point, is the fact that because the country has, in almost all instances, no bilateral agreement with the receiving countries, Filipino workers are not adequately protected. Even when it is clear that the foreign employers are at fault in issues involving labor disputes, not a whimper of protest can be heard from the Philippine government. Indeed, a very extreme fear of "killing the goose that lays the golden eggs".

If the workers' well-being is not the principal concern of the government, what is it then?

From its own moves, one can surmise that the government is hell-bent on maximizing the desired economic benefits accruing from labor export. How is this being accomplished?

Firstly, by centralizing agencies concerned with the manpower export. More than a year ago, the Bureau of Employment Services, Overseas Employment Development Board and the National Seamen's Board were merged into the POEA for a more streamlined manpower export program and for a more effective administration and control. To the consternation of the private recruitment and contracting companies, the POEA has implemented government-to-government hirings. In effect, all foreign government ministries, agencies and their instrumentalities such as government-controlled and government-owned corporations hiring Filipino workers have to course their recruitment through the POEA.

Secondly, through the expansion of overseas market for manpower export. This is in line with the Ministry of Labor and Employment's program and policy to expand internal recruitment and training that would create pre-selected, pre-documented pools to ensure quick delivery and shipment of more workers in corporate packages (rather than as individuals for hire). A comprehensive but expensive manpower marketing strategy and dispatch of marketing missions abroad for this purpose has been continuously implemented. Also, the One-stop Processing Center, worth more than a million pesos, was set up precisely to expedite the mobilization of overseas contract workers.

Thirdly, through the oppressive foreign exchange program. Here, overseas contract workers are mandatorily required to remit 80% of their basic pay to the Philippines through authorized banking channels. Non-compliance carries service penalties like being blacklisted from the manpower pool and non-renewal of passport. Clearly, this is a Gestapo-like tactic by the government to squeeze the workers of their hard-earned dollars to augment shrinking foreign exchange earnings.

OPTIONS FOR THE MIGRANTS

What then are the options available to the migrant workers?

Given the not too promising post-migration future, the overseas workers have three options to choose from. One is to totally dissociate themselves and their families from existing Philippine realities. This would mean settling permanently in their place of work. The second alternative is for them to renew their contracts, i.e., to continue working overseas as long as their labor is still demanded. The third option is to return home and carve their future together with the rest of the people.

The first choice is not very feasible as there are strong barriers in staying permanently in their places of work. Immigration policies in most of these countries are so strict and discriminating against Third World nationals. And we have seen why. Furthermore, the arrangement is fixed in such a way that the workers are compelled to return home after the job is finished. The contracts and the work permits see to this.

The second alternative is an addiction and full of uncertainties, and working contracts are not always readily available, overseas work being prone also to the fluctuations and crisis of the world capitalist market.

The last one necessitates a realization that they cannot hope for genuine changes in their economic, social and political conditions unless and until there are meaningful changes here at home. In the first place, the problems are essentially home-bred. Meaning to say, the structures prevailing in the country is such that many workers are forced to sell their labor elsewhere without adequate protection from the government, who, in the first place, aggressively campaigned to market them in order to augment the burgeoning economic and political crisis it created.

While labor is internationalized in the framework of the capitalist mode of production, the emancipation of migrant or expatriate labor rests still within the confines of the geographical boundaries of their country of origin. The fundamental stress of the struggle of the Filipino working class is here. However, this does not mean that there is nothing the overseas Filipino workers can do while abroad.

The path towards solving the many problems besieging the Filipino overseas contract workers is long and arduous. The very first and basic step is to organize. If there is one most valuable lesson in the history of the working class movements, it is the realization that the true strength of labor or the working class lies in unity and in active participation in the struggle for its economic, political and social liberation.

The migrant workers must organize. It is an imperative need. Experience and history have shown that workers do get what are due to them when they demand for them, collectively and resolutely. In stressing the need for a union, the ILO said that "the existence of strong trade union movements (in the hotel and catering trade) in the various countries, sympathetic to and actively working in the interests of both national and foreign workers, would seem to be a *major means of combatting such abuses* where they exist" (emphasis supplied).⁴⁸

The basis of unity of the working class is never ethnicity. Such breeds only narrow national chauvinism. The stronger and more effective basis of unity has always been the upholding and promotion of its class interests. This is crystallized even more each day the workers engage in production, each day they have to endure the appalling working and living conditions. In the process of being brutalized and consequently radicalized, the workers' collective will and spirit seek and do find avenues for ventilating their legitimate grievances and for advancing their basic and genuine class interests. This is in spite of the fact that so much is against them.

One effective form of workers' organization is the union.

However, it must not just be any kind of union. To be called a true workers' union, it must uphold first and foremost the class interests of the workers. This includes participation in the economic struggle as well as in the political struggle for emancipation. These two spheres are like twins. To engage in one and neglect the other is to fall in a trap that would surely derail the eventual liberation of the working class from the exploitative clutches of monopoly capitalism. Engaging in purely economic issues is economism, an inadequacy typical of the bread and butter unions. On the other hand, purely political struggles are reckless adventurisms that take no cognizance of the immediate livelihood needs of the working class.

The point is that workers must stand up and speak for themselves. It is only in their unity, in their organization and in their struggle that they can be free from the oppression and exploitation that shackle them. At this point in time, it would be foolish to rely on government's empty promises. In the immediate future, the workers' unity, collective actions and solid organizations would ensure the adequate protection and promotion of their just well-being. Moreover, in the long run, a truly genuine trade unionism must see to the very root cause of massive labor outmigration. Specifically, this redounds to the unjust economic structures prevailing in the country. In this sense, the creation of a genuine industrial backbone and a strong agricultural base together with all the requisites of these ends, should be the long-term interest of the Filipino migrant workers. To think otherwise is not to hit at the heart of the issue.

NOTES:

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6. KAIBIGAN, *Compendium of Materials on Filipino Overseas Migration*, (Manila: KAIBIGAN), 1982, p. 2.

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25. Castles, p. 15.

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28. Castles, p. 16.

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32. *Ibid.*

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34. *Ibid.*

35. BALAI, p. 4.

36. *Ibid.*

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