

More Unions, Lesser Members: Worker Representation in the Philippines

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Introduction

Philippine unions continue to have a significant role as a voice for workers in national industrial relations, business and society, as well as in keeping track of the extent to which organized workers achieve their basic goals. Given the history, social function and legal guarantees of unions, the representation of workers' voice will still be a critical, core competency in Philippine industrial relations and human resource management in order to promote decent work.

The Philippines ratified the fundamental conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on industrial relations as early as 1953, particularly ILO Convention 27 on Freedom of Association (1948), and ILO Convention 98, on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining (1949). Commitment to the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (1948), which guarantees the rights of workers to organize unions, is also an important part of the country's fundamental framework of industrial relations. These commitments to international norms are reflected in whole or in part by the Philippine Constitution and by various labor laws and social legislation enacted

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through the years. The fundamental framework of global standards along with the Constitution guide policy and practice in the field of industrial relations, including collective bargaining and disputes settlement.

The Philippine Constitution provides the fundamental framework for industrial relations, when it declares:

The State shall afford full protection to labor...It shall guarantee the rights of all workers to self organization, collective bargaining and negotiations, and peaceful concerted activities including the right to strike in accordance with law. They shall be entitled to security of tenure, humane conditions of work, and a living wage. They shall participate in policy and decision-making processes affecting their rights and benefits as maybe provided by law.¹

In addition, the Philippine Bill of Rights guarantees "the right of the people, including those employed in the public and private sectors, to form unions, associations or societies for purposes not contrary to law..."² These guarantees are likewise extended to the public sector: "The right to self-organization shall not be denied to government employees."³

Current facts about Philippine unions

The Bureau of Labor Relations reports that in 2006, there were 16,853 Philippine trade unions representing 1,858,555 workers.⁴ The Bureau also reported that there were 11,643 worker associations, which combined with the number of unions is equal to a total of 28,496 labor organizations. There are 10 registered labor centers and 128 federations. There are 241,668 workers covered by 1,674 collective bargaining agreements in the private sector. Worker coverage by CBAs is 12.7 percent of claimed union membership (see Table 1). In March 2007, workers covered by collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) represent 0.7 percent of the employed workforce, 1.4 percent of the wage and salary workers, and 12.4 percent of claimed union members.