



Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)

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Standing Members

Bangladesh

Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK);
Refugee and Migratory Movements
Research Unit (RMMRU);
Welfare Association of Repatriated
Bangladeshi Employees (WARBE)

India

Center for Education and
Communication (CEC); Migrant
Forum India (MFI)

Nepal

All Nepal's Women Association
(ANWA);
Women Rehabilitation Center
(WOREC), POURAKHI, Youth
Action Nepal (YOAC)

Sri Lanka

Action Network for Migrant
Workers (ACTFORM);
Migrant Services Centre (MSC);
Women and Media Collective
(WMC)

Cambodia

Legal Support for Children and
Women (LSCW), Cambodian
Women for Peace and
Development (CWPD)

Burma

Federation of Trade Unions –
Burma (FTUB)

Indonesia

Center for Indonesian Migrant
Workers (CIMW); Jarnas
Pekabumi; KOPBUMI;
Migrant Care;
Solidaritas Perempuan; Serikat
Buruh Migran Indonesia (SBMI)

Malaysia

Tenaganita

Philippines

Batis Center for Women;
Center for Migrants Advocacy
(CMA-Phils); Kapisanan ng mga
Kamag-anakan ng Migranteng
Mangagawang Pilipino
(KAKAMMPI);
Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc.
(KCFI); Unlad Kabayan Migrants
Services Foundation, Inc.

Singapore

St. Francis Workers Centre
(SFWC) Humanitarian
Organization for Migration
Economics (HOME), Transient
Workers Count Too (TWC2)

Hong Kong

Asian Migrant Centre (AMC);
Coalition for Migrants Rights
(CMR);
Indonesian Migrant Workers Union
(IMWU)

Japan

Solidarity for Migrants – Japan
(SMJ)

Korea

Joint Committee for Migrant
Workers in Korea (JCMK)

Mongolia

Center for Human Rights and
Development (CHRD)

Taiwan

Hope Workers Center (HWC)

MFA Cautions Against Ignoring Migrant Workers Amidst the Global Crisis 6 February 2009

Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) is profoundly concerned about the intensifying global economic meltdown and its impact on migrant workers.

Around the world, countries have prospered as migrant workers build the infrastructure and fuel the engines of their economies. Yet during economic downturns, migrants have been accused of depressing wages and stealing local jobs. As millions of working people are let go amidst the mounting the economic crisis, politicians have begun to exploit the recession to instill fear in job loss and promote classes of workers. Statements such as “locals first” have become divisive strategies that set migrant workers against national workers. Couched in racism, “local first” policies are frequently used to justify attacks on migrants and are cheap attempts to absolve government of responsibility. Unemployment, subcontracting and other policies that diminish rights and increase worker “flexibility” are driven by a concern for profit margins over people. Employers and governments, the staunchest supporters of the neo-liberal paradigm, must be held to account.

It is critical that the unfolding crisis does not ripple into scapegoating and violence against migrants. Over the past several months, MFA has observed mounting layoffs of migrant workers. The International Labour Office (ILO) predicts that the economic crisis will lead to more than 20 million job losses, with migrant workers being among the most affected and also rendered the most vulnerable (Business World, 2009).

The 1997 Asian financial crisis demonstrated that migration is not a sustainable economic development agenda. By early 1998, the anti-migrant sentiment was already peaking. Governments throughout Asia were expelling migrant workers. Thailand announced a plan to expel a million migrants while Malaysia indicated that hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, with work permits and not, would be deported (AMC, 1999). However, governments soon were besieged by complaints from businesses that did not have enough workers as locals refused to take those jobs left by migrants.

Across Asia, the shocks reverberations are again being felt. The Malaysian government has already announced a ban on the recruitment of migrant workers for manufacturing and services sectors. Under the pretext of a “Hire Local First” policy, the government will again force the early termination of productive migrant workers without their legally entitled compensation. Malaysia already employs migrant workers in the number of 2.1 million – about a fifth of the total workforce (Al-jazeera, 2009). Singapore expects that there will be about 300,000 job losses by 2010, likely the first to be let go will be migrant workers (Permatasari, 2009).

Many migrant workers are hired via outsourcing agents to whom migrants have paid exorbitant amounts to secure a job, in some cases, tens of thousands of dollars. When employers release workers, migrants still must work to pay off their debt bond. Already migrants, particularly women and unorganized workers, are known to be working in the most demanding and dangerous sectors, but they have no choice but to take even lower pay and suffer in more hazardous work conditions. Lack of portable social security exacerbates the vulnerability of migrant workers.

Trade unions, together with migrant workers, have strengthened the labour movement, organizing for decent work, decent and equal pay, job security and safe workplaces. Every worker is affected by the global recession and workers must remain united.

Several Asian countries rely heavily on remittances to stabilize the economy and provide for the basic needs of families. In fact, in recent years, international organizations have enthusiastically promoted migration as a means to promote development. Remittances represent the largest transfer of dollars to families in developing countries worldwide – over \$300 billion US dollars globally (twice that of all official foreign aid annually) (World Bank, 2008; Reuters, 2008). Remittance dollars are used to support the immediate needs of families, sponsoring educational opportunities and paying for health care. Diminished household incomes will put more families at risk and migration may be seen as the only option, whether authorized or not.

There are suggestions that flows of undocumented workers will increase even as doors are locked (OECD, 2009). The reasons for migration such as unemployment and attempts to support families will not disappear in the global recession. Desperation may deepen and migrants may endure perilous conditions to continue sending support home.

Migrants and their families will clearly be among the hardest hit by the recession. So too will the countries that rely on migrant remittances to ease unemployment, service debt payments, stabilize foreign exchange and support economic growth. Governments need to be aware of migrant concerns and must examine, in consultation with trade unions, how migrants can be supported through this challenging time. Stimulus packages are simply bandages that attempt to obscure the growing cracks in the current economic development paradigm. The ILO's strategy for decent work, found in the 2008 ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization "provides a solid foundation in addressing the current crisis," says Juan Somavia, Director-General of the ILO. "Decent work opportunities at home," Somavia continues, "would pave the way for migration by choice, not by necessity."

MFA calls for governments to uphold the right of migrants to organize, a fundamental right granted by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Labour and migrant worker movements have become allies but more has to be done to build solidarity across borders with ties at home and in destination countries.

MFA appeals for governments to implement and develop comprehensive and sustainable programs on migrant reintegration.

MFA calls for governments to ensure that laid-off migrant workers are safely returned home and are not forced to repatriate.

MFA urges countries of origin to create decent jobs in order for people not to be forced to migrate; migration should be an option not as a means to survive. Governments must stop relying on remittances for economic development.

MFA iterates that government must implement the ILO strategy for decent work, found in the 2008 ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization.

Those workers that choose to migrate for work must be protected and governments (of both sending and destination countries) must develop means to protect the labour rights of migrant workers including access to health services, portable social security, by including migrants under national labour legislation and through standard contracts. Portable social security is essential to tide over migrant workers during this current crisis but also to protect migrants from the accelerating cycles of economic downturns.

MFA urges governments in sending countries, as they begin to create economic stimulus packages, to create decent work opportunities and also to spend on skills and training programs to cushion workers, both local and migrant, from future shock waves.

MFA is a regional network of non-government organizations (NGOs), associations and trade unions of migrant workers, and individual advocates in Asia that are committed to protect and promote the rights and welfare of migrant workers. It is guided by a vision of an alternative world system based on respect for human rights and dignity, social justice, and gender equity, particularly for migrant workers.

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