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“Workers fighting back against APEC’s intensified attacks on people’s economic and political rights”.

Thank you everybody first of all I would like to tell you that I am a member of the national minority in the Philippines and now I am standing on Aboriginal grounds that I pay respect. Secondly I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and everyone who have one way or another helped in the struggle to give Mr Crispin Belteran free from detention after sixteen long months of being detained. The Supreme Court on July 10 this year came out with a decision absolving Mr Belteran and five other

APEC’s role in perpetuating imperialist plunder and exploitation

For the past 18 years since its inception, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has served its narrow purpose of protecting and advancing the interests of imperialist powers particularly that of the U.S. government. Taking cue from its mantra ‘free trade’ and ‘trade liberalization’, the superpowers behind APEC used and manipulated this regional grouping to impose economic, political and social policies among its member countries which only aimed to squeeze super-profits out of Third World countries and their poor and exploited population. APEC has been an active advocate of the policies of liberalization, privatization and deregulation.

Apart from bleeding out human resources, capitalist globalization further plundered the rich natural resources of various countries in South East Asia, Latin America and other areas. The Philippine Mining Act of 1995 was passed right after the Bogor Summit in 1994. This has virtually opened up the whole country as an investment and mining haven for big multinational mining firms such as US, Australian, Canadian and European corporations.

This has contributed to several manmade disasters in the country. The worst calamities happened in the past 10 years. Landslides and flash floods kill thousands of people every year. At the same time, billions worth of natural produce and income are wasted.

As I speak before you today, our country is still experiencing a drought and possible water shortage. This natural condition will have an extreme effect on our country’s agriculture sector and to millions of poor peasants and their families, who comprise majority of the Philippines’ more than 80 million population.

Over the years, APEC targeted a more integrated regional formation. Heads of government and financial ministers are constantly meeting to keep track of each governments’ adherence to and performance on structural reform agendas and other policies adopted by member countries. Just

recently, APEC Finance Ministers met in Coolumb, Queensland, and in that particular meeting, the importance of investment in the Asia Pacific region was underscored.

Coming from a country like the Philippines, I know that APEC only brought further suffering for the people, specifically to the working people both in the private and the public sectors.

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's impossible dream

An avid advocate of capitalist globalization, RP President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is dreaming the impossible dream. In her latest State of the Nation Address (SONA) in July this year, she announced that the Philippines will finally become an industrialized country in 2027.

How can this be true when our country at present is on the verge of another financial crisis? A local survey even showed that more than three-fourths of Filipinos rated themselves as poor. The lingering local unemployment and fiscal woes can attest to this. The Philippine economy has become even more fragile in the last two decades, and its productive sectors have been deteriorating rapidly. With the way Arroyo abides by the dictates of neoliberal globalization, a genuine and lasting development in Philippines is far from reality. Only a fool like Arroyo can believe the delusion of Philippine NIC-hood after 20 years.

All statements related to economic advancement coming out of Arroyo's mouth are pure lies. There is no economic development, nor peace and stability in the Philippines. We only have two constant things in our country – first is joblessness, second is poverty.

APEC, the World Trade Organisation, as well as other imperialist dictated pacts and policies have resulted in a massacre of jobs. In the Philippines, eight establishments are closing down every day and an estimated 156 workers retrenched. Establishments that resorted to closures or retrenchments increased by more than 50% between 1995 and 2005. Under Arroyo's leadership from 2001 to 2006, the official unemployment rate in the Philippines reached its highest at 11.3 percent. While underemployment stands at an alarming rate of 18.7 percent. This dismal condition drives millions of our fellow countrymen to seek employment as overseas contract workers. More than 10 million Filipinos are now deployed in 192 countries worldwide, as domestic helpers, caregivers, nurses and blue-collar workers.

The quality of jobs in terms of security of tenure is also deteriorating. According to conservative government data, there are 652,000 non-regular workers who are directly-hired, while there are 316,000 agency-hired workers in 2003. When combined, this equals about 30.2% of all the rank and file workers of establishments employing 20 or more employees. Labor flexibilization, which has been the thrust of neoliberal globalization, has been replacing regular employment with contractual or project-based employees, casuals, probationals, seasonal workers, apprentices and trainees. There are workers, in addition, who are considered indirect employees for being in subcontracting arrangements. The passage of the Japan-Philippine Economic Agreement will bring further devastation to the jobs and livelihood of the Philippine working class.

The quality of jobs created also points to the lack of a coherent program for the country's industrialization, as jobs created are low quality and low-paid, such as unpaid family work (524,000) and household help (147,000) in April 2007. While the productive sectors continue to decline with the manufacturing, sector shedding 105,000 jobs.

Growing gap between rich and poor

The Philippine gross domestic product (GDP) registered a 6.9% growth for the first quarter of the year and was trumpeted to be hitting a 17-year record. To boot, this growth is boasted to be accompanied by peso appreciation, a booming stock market, as well as improvements in exports and investments.

But the government's bullish economic figures remain immaterial to the working masses, as only the foreign multinational and local big businesses benefit by amassing colossal profit. What is glossed over by government propagandists is the fact that about 69 million Filipinos or 80% of the population struggle to survive on P96 or less a day (US\$2). About 46 million Filipinos go hungry everyday. The poorest 30 percent of families have no savings to speak of; instead they accrue debts of PhP 6 billion for food and non-food needs.

The local ruling elite who own big businesses - such as Lucio Tan, Jaime Zobel and Danding Cojuangco - lead in pocketing much of the national incomes and expenditures. With 36 others, they are listed as belonging to the world's super billionaires and super millionaires. Last year, their combined assets amount to US\$16 billion. The net incomes of the top 1000 corporations, moreover, have increased by 327% during the periods 2001-2005 and profits increased 20% annually.

In contrast, workers' wages continue to nosedive compared to the increasing costs of living. For the past 7 years, Arroyo neglected the Filipino workers' demand for a national wage increase of Php125 per day (US\$2.50). To shield the interest of local and foreign capitalists, Arroyo shelved the approval and implementation of House Bill 345 primarily authored by Cong. Crispin Beltran, former Chairperson of KMU.

The Phil government, in keeping with its firm believe that development lays in the influx of foreign investments, passed several laws that favor investors by keeping wages at the bottom.

It passed R.A. 6727 in 1989 which provides for the regionalization of wage fixing decisions. It has likewise passed the BAMBI law, (R.A. 9178), on November 13, 2002, after just five months of deliberation in the lower house. This exempts companies with a capitalization of P3M or less from paying the minimum wage. The Arroyo government has further insulted the workers demand for a P125 per day wage hike by replying with a P12 per day wage hike through the Regional Wage and Productivity boards. This amount is just enough for a pack of noodle and an egg.

Persevering fight for jobs and justice

The recent release on July 10 of Cong. Crispin Beltran from detention of false rebellion charges is a big victory for the workers and people's movement in the Philippines.

The militant workers movement in particular led the Free Ka Bel Movement and persevered for Beltran's release. Even with the continuing human rights abuses and political killings jointly instigated by the government and military, workers continue to organize among

themselves to further build and strengthen militant unions in economic zones, enclaves and workplaces.

Following the path of the U.S. Patriot Act and “War on Terror” espoused by the Bush government, the Arroyo government enacted the Human Security Act (HSA) or the Anti-Terrorism Law, also in July this year. Under this anti-human law, activists, unionists, progressives and even ordinary people can be proscribed as ‘terrorists’, based on government standards. This law gives blanket authority to the government to further suppress legitimate political dissent, by arresting people without warrant and jailing them indefinitely. Massive people’s resistance met the implementation of the HSA.

Trade union organizing has become more stringent, especially in economic zones and enclaves where foreign investors concentrate. In 2002, Arroyo even labeled militant unions as “those who terrorize factories.” Since January 2001, when Mrs Arroyo became president through ‘people power’, 77 workers have been assassinated, while more than 850 activists and progressives in total were victims of extra judicial killings. Hundreds more are still missing presumed murdered, while thousands are being harassed and subjected to various forms of abuses.

In other words, President Arroyo combines military death squads, anti-worker laws, and neo-liberal free trade policies to grasp onto power and to maintain the support of the Bush Administration and big multinational corporations.

But this human rights situation has brought some 49 U.S. lawmakers to express alarm and to call on the Arroyo government to prosecute the perpetrators of extra-judicial killings. In a letter on Aug 2, 2007, the U.S. legislators asked for “strong and immediate” leadership to investigate and prosecute individuals and groups responsible for the surge of killings and abductions that continues to scar the country.

Despite determined efforts to impose a ‘no union – no strike’ policy in the export processing zones in the Philippines, KMU has now organised many genuine unions in these zones, and organised successful strikes.

Despite the terrible murder of our union and other democratic leaders, we have responded by pursuing harder our claim for P125 per day for all workers nation-wide, we have continued to campaign hard for the ouster of this fascist like Arroyo regime.

We have had solidarity from all over the world in these times, but we all need more solidarity if we are to overcome this extraordinarily repressive neo-liberal regime, which is really a US imperialist regime.

We have done our best to protest along with Australian workers at the Howard government’s version of this policy – especially the attempt to crush the Maritime Union in 1998 and the WorkChoices law of 2006. We know that this is a vital struggle for workers rights here, and for the soul of your country.

Our experiences in the Philippines and many parts of the world teach us that neo-liberal perpetrators will push with their narrow interests against the people's will no matter what.

But at the same, mass actions and people’s collective protests, especially with the working class at the core, will deter such ill intentions against the people as shown by many concrete actions.

In Australia for example, there has been minimal public disclosure of the government's current trade negotiating position. Community campaigning has forced a higher degree of "consultation" with community groups. Community campaigning limited some of the worst proposals in the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement. And the 'Your Rights At Work' campaign is the single biggest factor in the possible defeat of the Howard government in your coming national elections.

Let us thus all join hands and continue to arouse, organise and mobilize against the APEC, WTO and other imperialist impositions.

"APEC will assert free trade, coal and nuclear energy, military and police repression. We will assert fair trade, real action on global warming, genuine development to alleviate poverty and respect for labour rights and human rights for all the peoples of our vast Asia Pacific region!"

Victory is the result of people's struggle!

Long Live A P P E C !

Asia Pacific People for Environment and Community!

Long Live International Working Class Solidarity!