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April 18, 2008

SCW To Participate in the Catch the Olympic Flame for Labor Rights

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Rosario , Cavite - The Solidarity of Cavite Workers (SCW), an alliance of workers organizations and unions in the province of Cavite , Philippines will be holding an unofficial “Olympic Torch Relay” at 4:00 PM on April 19, 2008.

The torch relay will start at the town plaza and will end at the Cavite Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) in Rosario , Cavite where a short program will be held to highlight workers rights violations and violence committed against the striking workers in two Korean apparel companies of Chong Won Fashion, Inc. and Phils Jeon Garment, Inc.

This activity is a parallel activity to the alternative torch relay being launched by the Play Fair 2008 Campaign called “Catch the Flame”. It is an electronic relay race to bring public attention to the need for Olympics movement to stamp out abuses of labor standards in workplaces making Olympic goods.

According to Merly Grafe, chairperson of the SCW, the Catch The Flame campaign is requesting any supporter to become a torch bearer via sms-bluetooth-internet.

“ Anyone interested to participate in the Catch the Flame for Labor Rights and be a torch bearer on line can log on to www.catchtheflame.org. But since not everyone in the Philippines have access to the internet, we have decided to have our own version of the torch relay to create more public awareness and to disseminate information about the labor rights violations all over the world committed by sports brands that sponsors the Olympic games”, Grafe explained.

The Fairplay Olympic flames will passed through different countries from March 24 to August 2008 and participation can be made by signing on at www.catchtheflame.org These flames would be posing a



Torch Relay in front of Cavite Economic Zone

clear message to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and hopefully pressure them heed the call to respect workers rights.

The unofficial Torch Relay will be passing the Philippines on April 19-22, 2008. During these days, supporters of labor rights are encouraged to sign in their name at the website or send a text message with name, country, and a personal message to this number 00 31 6 39171613.

While the passing of the Olympic Torch in different countries had been marred by protest especially about the human rights violations of China, this year's Olympic games's host, it will be important to highlight and expose the on-going union repression and violence and killings among labor leaders in the Philippines and in Cavite as well.

"We were not spared from these violence and killings and we have lost three lives already to this brutal killings. First it was Bishop Alberto Ramento, the chairperson of the Workers Assistance Center, Inc. and second and third were SCW officers and former union officers of Yazaki-EMI Jesus "Buth" Servida and Gerardo Cristobal both murdered by assassins bullets along Baranggay Anabu, Imus, Cavite in separate incidents of December 11, 2006 and March 10, 2008, respectively", Grafe laments.

Furthermore, she said that while the Olympic spirit embodies fair play, we want to demand from the Olympic games supporters to ask the Olympic brands if they are fair also to their workers in terms of their wages, job security, and workers rights. 

[2008 – 02/05]

February 5, 2008

WAC, recipient of Justice & Peace Award

05 February 2008, Rosario, Cavite — Impressed by the organization’s continuous advocacy for the rights and welfare of the labor sector, the Workers Assistance Center (WAC) was chosen by the Tji Hak-Soon Justice and Peace Foundation in South Korea as the recipient of its 2008 Justice and Peace Award.

“We were very impressed by your organization that has been continuously fighting for the rights and welfare of [day] laborers, no matter what hardships your organization has undergone,” said Msgr. Kim Byung-Sang, chair of the foundation, in his letter to WAC on January 28, 2008.

WAC is the 11th Justice and Peace awardee of the foundation since it was founded in 1997. The award consist of US\$ 10,000 and a medal which shall be formally presented to WAC in a ceremony to be held in

Seoul, South Korea on March 10, 2008. WAC’s Executive Director Rev. Fr. Jose Dizon will accept the award on behalf of the WAC’s Board of Directors and staff.

The award is a fitting tribute to the more than twelve years of WAC’s unwavering advocacy for the rights and welfare of the Filipino working class, said WAC’s Chairperson Bishop Ephraim S. Fajutagana of the Philippine Independent Church.

He further expressed that “the principles practiced by WAC for the benefit of hundreds of thousands of workers who are exploited, manipulated, harrassed and exposed to various forms of human rights violations is worth of the prestigious award given by the foundation.”



The WAC is not only honored by the award. It is also deeply inspired by this kind of recognition coming from a Korean foundation whose own compatriots investing at the Cavite economic zones are the most handled cases by the WAC in terms of labor rights violations.

With this award, our late beloved Chairperson Bishop Alberto Ramento, who was murdered in 2006, had already been provided a share of his justice even not from the rule of law but by way of recognition for what he had fought and died for as one of the staunchest advocate of the workers rights.

The Justice and Peace Award is presented annually by the Tji Hak-Soon Justice and Peace Foundation to individuals and organizations who fight for justice, peace, and human rights even in the face of an oppressive system and at the great risk of their lives.

The Tji Hak-Soon Justice and Peace Award is the only international human rights award in South Korea that is entirely funded by the public to commemorate the life, works and beliefs of the late Most Reverend Bishop Daniel Tji Hak-Soon who stood and fought for social justice and democracy during the military dictatorships in South Korea.

It is sponsored by the Tji Hak-Soon Justice and Peace Foundation and supported by the Korea Broadcasting System (KBS), Pyonghwa Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), the Hankyore newspaper, the Catholic Times, and the Pyonghwa newspaper.

Aside from WAC, the other ten past awardees of the Justice and Peace Award since 1997 were as follows: Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) (1997); Raphael Clinic – a medical outreach project for migrant workers in Korea, 1998; Ms. Rosaline Acosta, Bangladesh human rights worker, 1999; Ms. Ibu Sulami, Indonesian human rights worker, 2000; National Commission for Justice and Peace of Pakistan, 2001; Peoples Action of Revise Unjust Status of Forces Agreement between South Korea and USA, 2002; Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples in Hong Kong, 2003; Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association in Burma, 2004; Ms. Kathi Zellweger, director of International Cooperation for Caritas Hong Kong, 2005; and Dr. Salai Tun Than, exile from Burma, 2006.

The Workers Assistance Center was established in 1995 in Rosario, Cavite to empower, assist, and defend the workers against all forms of human and labor rights violations for the realization of their socio-economic well-being. The WAC in its advocacy focused on three core rights of the workers – the rights to free association, strike and other collective actions, and collective bargaining. The Center has offices in Cavite and Batangas Provinces.

In a related development, WAC was among the three organizations honored by the Canadian Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) for the year 2007 as “Heroes of the Anti-Sweatshop Movement” in recognition of “the heroes of ... the grassroots labour, women’s and human rights organizations that defend the rights of the young women and men who labour behind the brand-name labels”.

The Honor was a recognition of WAC’s resolute advocacy of the workers right to form unions and fight for their basic rights and welfare notably for higher wages, better working conditions and respect for labor and democratic rights.

MSN took particular note of WAC's assistance to the striking workers of Chong Won Fashions, Inc. amidst unrelenting harassment and violent attacks on the striking workers by the police and security forces of the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) and the company. Chong Won is a Korean-owned garment factory located at the Cavite Export Processing Zone in Rosario, Cavite that produced garments for a US Giant retailer Wal-Mart.

The campaign for the striking workers of Chong Won Fashions was the first time ever that WalMart admitted to a violation on the workers' right to organize in one of the factories in its supply chain. The campaign was a collaboration between the MSN, the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), the WAC, and the Nagkakaisang Manggagawa ng Chong Won (United Workers of Chong Won), the workers' union.

The Maquila Solidarity Network is a labor and women's rights organization that supports and works in solidarity with organizations to uphold the right of the workers for better wages and working conditions on the belief that manufacturers and retailers must held accountable for the working conditions under which their goods are produced. 

[2007 – 04/30]

April 30, 2007

Ground breaks, seeds of hope planted for proposed labor center

While an enormous work, including finances, has yet to be done and mobilize to materialize the construction of proposed labor center located in Barangay Salitran I, Dasmaringas, Cavite, this already symbols another seed of hope for worker's to have another place where they could come to for help and assistance. The center will be called "Bahay Kalinga para sa mga Manggagawa".



To advance the worker's rights and welfare, even former foes and critics could work together for a common cause.

This would be the second labor center servicing and providing assistance to workers, in particular from the economic zones. The first ever labor center had long been operating since early 90s in Rosario—the Bahay Manggagawa (Workers' Home). Since the first labor center operates, it had already served a number of workers and labor unions within and outside the province.

Given the pressing needs and the worsening condition of workers, a need to develop another labor center to expand the service had been sought and come out. This dream was given hope when the former governor, whom the workers had previously severely criticized and fought with on his labor policies, had offered to do his share to improve the lives of workers in Cavite.

On April 28, Cavite former governor lawyer Juanito "Johnny" Remulla and Fr. Jose Dizon, executive director of the Worker's Assistance Center (WAC), have signed a 25-year lease agreement for the WAC to occupy his 230 square meter lot where the center will be built during a ground breaking ceremony.

The parcel of land is valuable for Remulla since it was the first lot that Remulla earned as lawyer's fee in his early days of practicing law. Remulla acquired the lot in his first winning case in 1959, three years after he graduated law. For nearly 50 years owning the said land, Remulla instead chose to "donate" the land for the cause of workers' sector. The lease only cost very small amount of annual fee per year.

During the groundbreaking, the signed lease contract was placed inside a bottle and buried together with the hardwood Narra tree to symbolize the seed of hope.

The proposed labor center aims to provide labor training and seminar on basic workers' rights and welfare, legal education on Philippine Labor Code and legal services, programs on occupational health and safety, and organizing program. The center will be beneficial primarily to the workers in at least three big municipalities of Dasmariñas, Imus and Carmona, all in Cavite, wherein there have been a number economic zones in their area.

WAC had earlier constructed Bahay Manggagawa to which has been serving the workers of cavite economic zone (CEZ), the largest economic zone in the country which employs around 60,000 industrial workers. Striving to stay in close proximity to the workers, WAC felt the need to set to put another center within the next two years in the newly leased lot in Dasmariñas.

After having leased the lot for the proposed center, the WAC will then have to source out financial support required to construct and manage the labor center. This, however, is what WAC has yet to materialize and has asked the local and international community to do their share as well by giving donations, in particular for financial support for the labor center's construction.

WAC earned its reputation of consistent and unwavering bias for the workers and as a resolute advocate for workers' rights and welfare. Since it was first established in 1995 as a parish-based program formerly, it has persisted in its mission to equip the workers with knowledge on labor laws and workers' rights through education seminars, assist them in organizing and in their struggles, and, provide them free legal assistance, among others.

Also present during the groundbreaking were Remulla's son, Congressman Gilbert Remulla of 2nd district of Cavite, leaders and members of the Solidarity of Cavite Workers (SCW), an alliance of labor organisation and leaders of the Samahan ng Manggagawa sa EMI-Independent, a labour union of a Japanese owned factory in Imus and the biggest company in Cavite.

Others joining the ceremony were Gubernatorial candidate Archie Gadang and Mayoralty candidate Victor Carungcong and his colleagues, worker's friend lawyer Lucien Sayuno and lawyer Noel Neri of the Pro-Labor Assistance Center (PLACE), La Salle social action group, EMI-Yazaki management representatives, church representatives and the local barangay (village) officials in the area. 



[2006 – 06/17]

June 17, 2006

Factory's health risk cause workers' death, severe illness

Occupational safety and health is essential at workplace. This company's obligation, which is supposed to be a priority, is often taken for granted if not ignored.

The death of 38-year-old Carmen Mendoza, a sewer at a garment factory Dae Young Apparel, on June 15, exposes reality of an inevitable health risk the factory workers are facing. When she was hired five years ago, she had no serious illness and deemed fit to work. Later she would die of heart ailment and swollen feet.



Shirley Maderazo

Mendoza's death mirrors a desperate need of workers to earn money. Earning a minimum of P254 (USD 4.6) a day, at the time of her death she had to work overtime to support her three children and an extended family.

Mendoza, like most factory workers, is often overworked for working overtime—beyond what their body requires.

Mendoza's death caused deep concern to her fellow workers. While it was not medically clear whether her ailment was hereditary or acquired, her fellow workers strongly believed she had acquired the illness at work. A person who was hired fit to work would have not died from illness if the working place was suitable and their health monitored.

Her fellow worker, Violeta Mariano, also working at the factory's production area for the last ten years shared similar experience of contracting disease at work. Mariano had been diagnosed to have difficulties in breathing due to fiber allergies. In 2003 her health worsen as she was hospitalized twice in a week. She had been hospitalized often in past two years. Had it not been of her self-help regular medication she would have not recovered.

Mariano revealed a lack of concern by their company to their worker's health. Although their company had annual medical check-up, it was unable to diagnosed Mendoza properly. Mendoza's death could

have been prevented had she been diagnosed early and treated well with company's support. The workers there were also not provided with facemasks, which could serve as their protective gear from inhaling tiny fibers of clothing they handle at work.

Not only Mendoza and Mariano had stories of inevitable health risk inside factories. When Shirley Maderazo, an employee of an electronics company—San Technology Inc., also operating at the Cavite Export Processing Zone (CEPZ), reported for work on June 2, she cough blood and had her nose bleed. With blood coming from her nose and mouth, their company physician would only tell her it was caused by exposure to severe heat.

Had she not sought for second opinion on June 3 after she went back to her native place in Batangas, she would have not be aware that her tuberculosis in 2001 had revived. Her annual medical check-up on May 9 and the medical examination by their company-paid physician at the Dominic Hospital on June 2 did not diagnose her illness. Later she would be told by their management they would refer her to avail of a six-month free medication, but not paid for by them, but through a government health program.

Maderazo had been employed for nine years. Her work involved exposure to chemical and electronics fumes as their company manufacture computer hardware. They are supplying computer hardware to companies like; Fujitsu, Hitachi, Toshiba, IBM and Samsung.



A tablet-size metal coated battery. It is a mixture of neodymium, iron and boron chemicals. The battery is said to cause blindness and sight defects, according to workers, once ripped-open.

Like Mendoza and Mariano, Maderazo was also deemed fit to work and did not have history of serious illness when hired in June 1997. After years of working at the factory, Maderazo had contracted the disease yet her company—by way of their paid physician—was unable to diagnose it. Worst is that she was not afforded with a

company-sponsored medication.

Although her physician recommended for six-months for her to take a rest, she only availed for one month. Not only she was uninformed of her right she could avail sick leave based on recommendations by her physician, she was worried she could not support her daily needs if she's on leave for six months without pay. Like, Mendoza, it is not a surprise for workers to unfortunately sacrificed their health so long as they could bare it—on a dire need to earn money for a living and support their families.

The story of Mendoza, Mariano and Maderazo are yet another stories of workers inside the CEPZ. This health concerns and occupational safety, however, are not adequately acted upon by most of the factories. Until the workers realise that it must hold their company accountable of ensuring their welfare, no significant improvement on working condition of factory workers would take place. Most often, if not ignored this grievance fell on deaf ears.