

“CHALLENGES IN COALITION BUILDING OF FILIPINO WORKERS AMIDST REPRESSION AND VIOLATION OF WORKERS’ RIGHTS”

Let me start by giving an overview of the country Philippines and the current Trade Union situation.

Philippines is situated in the South East Asia with a population of 112,729,484 (as per 2024 Census of Population of the Philippine Statistics Authority). As of June 2026 there are estimated 53.25 Million Labor Force (LF). There are also estimated 3.14 Million unemployed individuals as of July 2026. Labor Export remained as a policy of the government, and for this purpose the government created the Department of Migrant Workers. In year 2025 there are approximately 10.7 Million Overseas Filipino Workers are working abroad according to the Commission on Filipino Overseas (CFO).

The present condition of workers is deteriorating, economically and politically on workers’ wages. There are hundreds of different salary rates all throughout the country, as it differs from every region. There are 17 distinct wage regions. The minimum wage rates of agricultural workers are significantly less than that of non-agricultural workers. Majority of the workers in the Philippines are only receiving the daily minimum wage or even below. The highest minimum wage rate is in the Metro Manila, in the amount of Php 695.00 or USD 9.12, while the lowest is in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, in the amount of Php 411.00 or USD 5.12. The government mandated daily minimum wage is far from the supposed daily Family Living Wage of Php 1,250.00.

Just this July 2026, the Regional Tripartite Wages and Productivity Board in the National Capital Region issued Wage Order No. 27, raising the daily minimum wage in Metro Manila to Php780.00. However, a Regional Trial Court in Pasig City issued a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) and Writ of Preliminary Injunction, depriving the workers of the supposed increase in their minimum wage. The TRO was issued despite of its lack of jurisdiction to hear and decide wage orders issued by the

Regional Tripartite Wage and Productivity Board, and failure of the petitioner-companies to post the required bond. The Department of Labor and Employment on the other hand, failed to protect the workers as it lacks political will to implement the wage increase.

The issue on contractualization remains a major concern in the labor sector. The right of the workers to security of tenure is eroded by the widespread contractualization. Under this scheme, employees are hired for less than six months per contract, and paid low wages without benefits, despite performing essential functions in the trade and business of the employer. The government is the number one violator of right of the workers to security of tenure. One-third or nearly 900,000 of the employees in the public sector (government employees) are under the Job Order and Contract of Service arrangement. Contractualization directly threatens workers' right to organize and form labor unions.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a substantial increase in the number of workers in the service sector because of “*gig economy*” and the proliferation of “*digital platform work*”. According to 2021 World Employment and Social Outlook Report, Philippines is one of the top suppliers of online labor in the world.

Workers under the *gig* and *platform work* arrangement lacks security of tenure and right to work. Though they are relatively earning more than the minimum salary, their right to have the benefits under the law had been compromised. They cannot also collectively bargain for higher benefits received by the regular workers for the reason that there is no employee-employer relationship, and they cannot bargain unto themselves.

According to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), as of December 2025 there is 157,058 registered labor organizations in the private sector nationwide having a total membership of 6.76 Million workers. The Manufacturing sector has the most registered labor unions numbering about 9,761 with 854,428 members. On the other hand, there are only 2,156 registered unions in the public sector.

However, the number of registered labor organizations does not guarantee that workers are duly protected of their rights or importantly their right to collective bargaining. Out of more than a hundred of registered labor organizations, there are only 1,324 active Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA) covering 334,750 workers in the private sector, and 329 Collective Negotiation Agreements (CNA) in the public sector. The number is very alarming, as this translates that more than 90% of the workers still are deprived of their right to collectively bargain.

The world of work has become more insecure, flexible and seasonal. The workers face more challenges in exercising their trade union rights. Employers and companies had employed new tactics to undermine collective rights including using lawsuits to repress workers' freedom of association and speech, use of loopholes in the employment laws to lawfully let go of workers, particularly those who are actively advancing the rights of the workers.

For the past nine (9) straight years until year 2025, the Philippines was listed as one of the 10 worst countries for workers. It was removed in the 2026 ITUC Global Rights Index. However, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) clarifies that this is not by reason of a real improvement in the domestic conditions, but rather because the situation in other nations had drastically deteriorated.

There is a remarkable decline in the exercise of freedom of association, and massive attacks against unionists despite of the fact that the International Labor Organization (ILO) had sent a High Level Tripartite Mission in the Philippines in 2023, and the present administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. had boasted that they had already instituted reforms.

The attacks against unionists come in different forms – red-tagging, illegal arrests, filing of fabricated charges (e.g. financing terrorism, etc.), enforced disappearances, killings, union busting and forced disaffiliation, harassment, threats, intimidation, and imposition of assumption of jurisdiction on striking or about to go on strike unions.

Red-tagging is the practice of labelling organizers, union leaders and members as “communists-terrorists”, placing their lives at risk. Most of the trade union organizers and leaders were subjected to red-tagging before they were extra-judicially killed or disappeared. The red-tagging are primarily perpetrated by the agents of the state, particularly the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), with the objective of suppressing and violating the rights of the Filipino workers.

Under the Marcos Jr. administration, there were already ten (10) recorded political killings of trade union organizers, and another four (4) were abducted and disappeared.

A human rights organization, Karapatan, had also recorded several violations of Civil and Political Rights for the period July 2022 to November 2025, as follows: 134 Extra-Judicial Killings; 12 Enforced Disappearances; 822 Arbitrary Arrests; 577 Forced Fake Surrenders; 70,028 Indiscriminate Firing; 57,156 Indiscriminate Bombings in the countryside; 48,247 Forced Evacuations, and 10,824,838 Threats, Harassments, and Intimidations.

Given the trade union situation, the workers continue to organize and mobilize. It is also important for the workers’ unions and associations to have strong linkages with the other sectors, and the civil society in the protection, advancement and defense of workers’ rights.

Despite of the situation, progressive and militant worker’s union did not just confine to legal actions, but also used meta-legal actions by staging numerous protest actions to denounce repression and pressure the judiciary to act with haste on the trumped-up cases filed against the trade union leaders and organizers. In June 2022 to May 2025, there were twelve (12) union leaders and organizers were freed from detention as the cases filed against them were dismissed.

The Philippine situation is not different from the situation faced by the global trade union movement. The problems may come in different

faces, but they are the same in the essence. The capitalists continue to amass super profit, while the workers are fighting for a decent living.

There is a gargantuan challenge not only to the workers, but also to the labor rights defenders, and lawyers as well, to build a strong coalition to collectively advance workers' rights and welfare.

A strong coalition can only be achieved if the workers are organized. It is necessary to establish widespread workers' unions in order for them to exercise their right to collectively bargain for higher benefits, and for the protection and advancement of their rights. The role of the lawyers and the para-legals are vital even in the early stage of establishing a workers' union, as it imbued with legalities – from union registration, certification election, CBA preparation and negotiation, etc.

Labor rights defenders are not only crucial to defend workers' collective rights at the workplace, but they are key to strengthen trade unions and workers' organizing which in turn strengthen participatory democracy as well as contribute to achieving economic justice. As the nature of the attacks against the workers' rights are increasing and changing, it is important for the civil society and trade unions to come up with responses which are timely and resourceful based on solidarity and accountability to encounter the risks and danger faced by labour rights defenders across different regions.

Therefore, there is a need to mobilise organizations working in different areas for labor rights to utilize available resources in coordinated ways to mobilise, not only solidarity but advocacy and legal support on various fronts.

Let me share our experience in the Pro-Labor Legal Assistance Center. We regularly conduct lectures, training/seminars all over the country, in collaboration with workers' unions, federations, and non-government organizations concerning labor rights, legalities on union formation, collective bargaining, pressing issues that confronts labor, as well as para-legal trainings among union members, leaders and organizers. Our role as labor rights lawyers is not simply confined to

giving them legal assistance, but we worked hand-in-hand with them, considering that the role of labor rights lawyer and the workers are closely intertwined in union building by arming them with the necessary knowledge of the law. We participated directly in their campaigns with regard to issues on wages, security of tenure, and fight against repression.

In an attempt to gather together and consolidate labor rights defenders, the first national conference of the Labor Rights Defenders Network was held in June 2025 with the theme: “Affirming Labor: A National Conference for the Defense and Advancement of Labor Rights in the Philippines. Its main objective was to convene, consolidate, and mobilize progressive labor rights lawyers, para-legals and advocates to formally create a network of labor rights defenders, and to discuss and synthesize effective legal tactics, remedies, and campaign against trade union repression.

Through the creation of the Labor Rights Defenders Network, progressive labor rights lawyers, para-legals, and advocates are called to defend, and exact justice as provided by law, and the principles of justice and equity. However, in the face of repression, impunity, and the legal system’s inadequacy, lawyers, para-legals, and advocates are called to serve the victims’ interest beyond the regular halls of justice.

In order to strengthen workers’ power, it is also necessary to build alliances with different unions and federations, both in the private and government sector, particularly on issues of common concern.

We cannot deny the need to establish and strengthen international solidarity among the workers, unions, associations, labor rights, and peoples’ lawyers in different corners of the world in order to learn from each other’s experiences, and create a support mechanism in their struggles for better working conditions, just, and living wages, and to the protection, advance, and defense of workers’ rights.

Before ending my piece, let me say that it is only when we fully understand and embrace the working class, that we can effectively serve the workers of the world.