

History and the nature of migrant work in France

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The nature and specificity of Philippine migration in France cannot be detached from its history. While France was already a destination in the past for Filipinos who were doing higher studies at the Sorbonne or working in institutions like UNESCO, OECD, the big wave of migrant workers first came in the early 70s, at the time of the Iran-Iraq war, where Filipino workers in the Middle East managed to escape the war by coming to France. Some of them accompanied their employers, who were mostly diplomats, while others hopped into the first plane available that would take them out of the country at war.

This already partly explains the nature of their work: as house employees; in comparison to their predecessors. And it is their status of being legally attached to the country of their diplomat employers (for those who did not come on their own) and the resulting difficulties in terms of working rights, which continues to be one of the main challenges Filipino migrants in France still face today. Along with confronting a quite different culture and difficulty in speaking French.

The turn to Europe became inevitable with the worsening problems in the Middle East, and today the entry of migrants to France persists. The number is now estimated at 50 000 but only 12% of these are officially registered.

Strict migration laws has obliged the majority of these Filipinos who wished to stay, but only had limited tourist visas, to overstay as undocumented and clandestine workers. This still means today that, unlike the documented ones, they have no social protection and are excluded from enjoying social security benefits. The harsh consequences of this situation are strongly felt especially when one gets serious health problems. Money saved over long years of work has been easily depleted by hospital bills. As one Filipina put it, "in the long run, is it worth all the pain of leaving one's home and family, working more than 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, just to give up what one has earned for so many years for a few days of hospitalization ? "

MEMBERSHIP IN LABOUR UNIONS

One important turning point that began to change this situation of insecurity occurred in the early 80s. With the election to the presidency of the French Socialist Party candidate, François Mitterrand, the occasion was

seized by Filipino community organizers to benefit from a likely opening in the immigration policy of the new government. They solicited the support of the CFTD, the trade union confederation related to the Socialist Party, which was also the only union then that had a section for house employees. Filipinos who sought regularization joined the trade union and some 600 applications processed through the trade union (this happened during two phases of regularization) eventually got accepted. A big success !

This effort of relating with a French institution was not only for this prompt and urgent need to obtain "papers", but to get the Filipinos to integrate with other French workers and to give them the opportunity to develop a certain political experience. However, while the former objective was achieved, the latter unfortunately failed. This experience still needs to be properly documented and studied, and lessons will undeniably benefit both Filipino and French workers and the trade union structures as well.

Today, trade union involvement of Filipinos is minimal if not nil, and this can also be said for their involvement in political struggles in general. A sad break to an inspiring beginning, but which could still be built upon in order to face the current anti-immigrant policies of France's rightwing government. These policies have become even harsher in almost all European countries, with the right and extreme right gaining more electoral weight.

In France, the implementation of new and stricter laws have gone as far as arresting the children of the "sans papiers" (undocumented) while the kids are attending school, then expelling them back to their countries of origin, even if these children were born and have grown up in France. On the other hand, it is heartening to know that French teachers and families have gotten deeply involved in protecting these children in collaboration with the RESF (Education Network Without Borders).

The experience with the trade union movement does not pertain to France alone. It is now being lived by Filipinos in Belgium and looks quite promising as shown by the rising big numbers of affiliated members, and growing participation in trade union work and activities. Of course other political experiences of overseas Filipino workers, notably in Greece and Italy, are worth studying, also to see how these efforts can be multiplied.

Identities and roles

An important issue which also merits reflection is that of identity. The importance of the question is not on whether one has lost their Filipino identity (as many constantly say) but how this identity has evolved, and how this new and enriched identity can impact on both Filipino and French societies. What greater chance can there be than to combine one's Eastern and Western experiences for people's development "here and over there". There is surely not one formula or model on how this can be done, but this

calls for a lot of creativity, motivation and organization. Perhaps, this issue could be a challenge to take up, for Filipino migrants and their organizations : instead of simply living and working to earn enough money to send back home. Indeed, how can Filipino communities abroad contribute to systemic changes in their country of origin as well as in their host country? Couldn't this give a more dynamic sense to one's life as a migrant, transforming the usual picture of the victim to that of a social player ?

If this challenge is taken up by the individual and the organizations that have grown in number in France, then it would mean that we still have a lot of work to do on various spheres. We should make use of our organizations (some 30 in France) to facilitate this, re-orienting certain concerns in this light. Forget the yearly beauty pageants engaged into by parents for their children which just causes stress and spending. It nurtures jealousies and a negative spirit of competition. There is a lot of room for greater creativity! For instance, the recent efforts at forming and developing a migrant workers-artists' collective show that other interesting initiatives can be realized.

INFORMATION NEEDS AND SOLIDARITY

It is essential that we equip ourselves better with relevant information, both on what is happening in the Philippines and in France, (thus the need to learn well French), and use this information to guide our actions. By organizing exchange sessions with Filipinos passing by France, and representing organizations doing development work in the Philippines, we can try to reflect together on how to do effective work with our communities as well as with public authority in both countries. By joining the week-end tours to beautiful villages in France to feel better what French culture can offer. Or by doing something similar in the Philippines like visiting villages and communities which we never cared to know in the past, now to see the realities, and to establish more meaningful solidarity initiatives. We also need to move out of the ghetto of our families and friends, and participate in activities offered by relevant organizations to nourish ourselves and work with others fighting for similar causes.

REMITTANCES AND RELATIONS WITH PUBLIC AUTHORITY

"Remittances" is a very central issue in Philippine migration. It has not only helped particular families but has sustained as well the national economy. From France alone, some 80 million euros come out of migrants pockets every year, and they are sent directly to their families in the Philippines. This has increased the buying capacity of the families, boosting up the economy, eventually creating new jobs.

But one can also ask why, despite all the money that enters the country, there has not been much change in the lives of majority of Filipinos who are poor, which also means that migrants should not be eager to go home yet and still continue to work abroad . One explanation given by engaged groups lies

in the planning of the national budget, where priority has been given to paying the public debt (\$1.62 billion in 2004 or 10 % of the total government budget, according to an UNCTAD study), resulting in reduced expenditures for education and health.

On this basis, it would be very difficult for Filipinos to have trust in their government whose policy is to use their hard-earned euros for debt-servicing (in other words, allowing all this money to leave the country again). Worse still is that Philippine government delegates have been sent to various European countries to meet migrant associations and entice them "to think in a more productive way" by investing in government development projects instead of simply sending money to their families. This is adding insult to injury, and it is about time that Filipino citizens living abroad including France, to put their noses into the budget and have their voices heard.

In this relationship with public authority, it is also about time that real efforts are taken by Philippine authorities to compensate the contribution done by migrant workers to their country's economy. Not only by giving them awards for exemplary deeds, but by having a political will to help them in the difficulties they encounter in their trajectory - from the extortion done to them at home by recruiters and harassment at the airport, to the scornful treatment they receive from their own embassies when they are abroad. And why not also take up ways of providing them with the social protection denied them by their host country because of their irregular status? Let us not forget that one's sense of citizenship entails first of all the ability to answer one's own essential needs and to exercise basic rights.

KUDOS TO OUR WOMEN!

The feminization of Philippine international migration in the recent period is a reality which should be acknowledged in a mitigated way. Kudos to our women for taking the responsibility to save their families from hardship and for sacrificing their own happiness and lives for their loved ones. On the other hand, this large percentage of women leaving their homes and country has also destabilized families and fragmented the country's social fabric. But again, how do we turn a negative experience to a positive one? Migrant women in France have nurtured both the pains and more importantly, the challenges. They have organized their community to respond to various needs and continue to give sense to their stay in a foreign land. Just as they found the solutions for their families at home in the Philippines, so is there a great chance that they will be the same ones who will carry on the perspectives of transformation. It is thus important for them to realize that they have this capacity, and that they could make things advance by studying further together how energies and efforts can better be harnessed in the light of the various contexts and issues.