

Stranded migrant workers protest in Saudi Arabia

Joseph Santolan
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About 20 Filipino contract workers staged a protest outside of the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on January 22. They were part of a group of 57 workers unable to depart from Saudi Arabia and return home to the Philippines. The workers stated that their employers had engaged in deceptive employment practices, and when the workers quit in protest, their companies refused to return their passports or grant them travel documents. POLO, the Philippine government agency responsible for the protection of Filipino workers, has done nothing on their behalf. Many of the protestors have been stranded in Saudi Arabia for a year.

These workers are now homeless and jobless. They have no income, either to provide for themselves or their dependent families at home in the Philippines. Their situation is typical of the plight of thousands of migrant workers from numerous countries who are trapped in Saudi Arabia. The story of these stranded workers is not being reported, other than in small articles buried in the Philippine, Ethiopian, Arabian, and Indonesian press.

According to the most recent data available, released at the end of 2008 by the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency, 2.26 million Filipino workers are currently employed in the Middle East. Of these, 112,700 are regarded as illegal immigrants. Filipino contract workers in the Middle East sent home remittances totalling \$US1.47 billion in 2010.

Driven from the country by the impoverished conditions of their families and a dearth of jobs paying even a subsistence wage, nearly 10 percent of the Philippine population has sought work abroad, including in the US and across Asia. Recruitment agencies arrange two-year contracts with overseas employers. These contracts permit workers to obtain a travel visa. For this service, a worker will pay the agency anywhere from 30,000 to 200,000 pesos (\$US700 to \$US4,500) depending on the desirability of the country in which the job is located. Workers routinely take out loans to pay these fees. Often the agencies themselves offer the loans, charging predatory interest rates.

Employers take the workers' passports and travel papers upon their arrival. If a worker quits, strikes, or flees from an abusive situation, he will be unable to return home. With loans hanging over their heads, and a family depending upon every penny of their meager earnings, the workers are trapped. Skilled workers are reduced to performing demeaning labor; female domestic workers endure abuse and ill-treatment.

The workers protesting outside of the POLO office in Riyadh are representative of this experience. Ignacio Malayam, in an interview with Arab News, stated that he had signed a contract to work as a janitor in a mall for 1,000 Saudi Riyals (SR) (\$US279) a month. Upon arrival his contract had been replaced with one designating him a street sweeper and paying him SR600 (\$US167) instead. On April 17 last year he quit his job, along with 22 other workers in similar circumstances. His former employer is charging SR3,000 (\$US835) for the return of his passport and permission to depart the country. Quitting his job meant leaving the company barracks. He is homeless.

Some workers stay in a crowded apartment of an employed Filipino friend. Maids who have fled from abusive employers often take shelter with illegal maid brokers, who profit off their desperate situation by hiring out their services and then pocketing a substantial portion of their pay.

Many workers seek to return home by getting deported. They form tent cities, and wait for the immigration police to pick them up and take them to a deportation center. Nearly a thousand workers live under the Sitteen Bridge, in the Kandara region of Jeddah, in a squalid encampment. They depend on a local mosque for drinking water; they have no sanitation facilities and no reliable source of food.

These are not just Filipino workers. Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Thai, Indonesian, and Sri Lankan workers all share the same plight.

Many have been living under the Sitteen Bridge for 18 months. They have no health care. Pregnant women give birth in the open. There are numerous children living in the Sitteen tent city.

Temperatures routinely drop to 17 degrees Celsius at night and thin plastic tarps provide no warmth. Heavy rains have caused Sitteen road to repeatedly flood. The workers are forced to stand through the night as their tents fill with water.

Occasionally an immigration bus arrives and a small portion of the workers are able to crowd aboard. They are taken to detention centers, where the conditions are little better than under the Sitteen Bridge.

Decrepit cell blocks greet the workers. They are herded into overcrowded dormitories and share filthy toilets. The facility is fenced and guarded. A report of the Jeddah mayor's office stated that the building where the workers were housed was so old that it was in

serious danger of collapse. In August, five Ethiopians detainees died of what a police commissioner's report termed "asphyxiation due to overcrowding". A Filipino worker, crammed with 37 others into a single cell, died of similar causes in 2009. In April 2010, a riot broke out in the detention center in Jeddah. Some 270 detainees tore up a section of the fence surrounding the facility, assaulted the guards, and escaped.

Having no passport, the workers who are detained often have no proof of their identity. They sit in the detention center for periods as long as six months while waiting for their country's consulate to confirm their identity.

According to official Philippine government statistics, 2,448 Filipino workers in the western region of Saudi Arabia alone were reported as "distressed," and deported by the Saudi Arabian government last year.

The national governments of the exploited, homeless, and imprisoned workers have behaved in a callous and cowardly manner.

The Philippine government is engaged in a propaganda campaign celebrating migrant workers as "modern national heroes". The Manila airport is decorated with large banners thanking migrant workers for their "heroism". The total remittances from Filipino workers around the globe reached nearly \$US20 billion in 2010. The government desperately relies on these remittances as a source of revenue.

The tent city of Sitteen Bridge sits three blocks from the Philippine Consulate in Jeddah, but the government has refused to assist them. On January 23, the Consulate General issued a statement declaring, "[t]he allegations of neglect made by some quarters are baseless and gratuitous". A consular official added that local regulations and processes need to be observed, concluding: "With respect to those staying at the Kandara Bridge, it is the local immigration police that determine the number of people to be processed for deportation and when to begin said process."

An official from POLO, the supposed defender of these migrant "heroes," thanked the Saudi Arabian government for allowing some of the workers to leave. He added that the Philippine government would follow the usual formalities for repatriating the workers, and would be contacting their employers to determine if there were any objections to the workers being deported.

When informed that the distressed and trapped workers had no food, consulate officials made a brief excursion to the tent city and distributed packs of dried ramen noodles.

An overseas Philippine workers' defense organization, Migrante, has called upon the Philippine government to redress the workers' grievances. Migrante has close ties with the Maoist National Democratic Front (NDF) and Communist Party of the Philippines. How has Migrante responded to the situation of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia?

Migrante has directed workers to appeal to their government for redress, giving workers the illusion the new administration of President Benigno Aquino III will, or can be pressured to, protect

them. The Aquino government, however, like its predecessors, will do nothing to jeopardize the revenue stream coming in from workers' remittances in Saudi Arabia. It will certainly not antagonize the Saudi Arabian government, nor will it put its neck out on behalf of the exploited working class.

Migrante promotes the same mythology and illusions as the government. The slogan of the United Arab Emirates branch of Migrante is "ako'y dakilang migranteng Pilipino"/"I am a great Philippine migrant worker." They prominently advertise on their website t-shirts with this slogan, which they sell for 25 dirham (\$US7).

In its official program, Migrante calls upon the Philippine government to recognize "the offering" that migrant workers make, "to the progress of society". The workers are not making an offering to the progress of society. They are preyed upon by the Philippine state, which aids and abets the bourgeoisie in the Philippines and internationally in the ruthless exploitation of the working class.

Migrante states that the only solution to "forced migration" is "to aggressively pursue local job generation through improving our local agriculture and industry by implementing genuine agrarian reform and nationalist industrialization". But for over 60 years, the Philippine bourgeoisie have proven themselves organically incapable of national industrialization and genuine land reform. They are the landlords who refuse to redistribute their holdings, and are intimately tied to the interests of imperialist capital.

In keeping with the petty bourgeois nationalism of the Maoists, Migrante has nothing to say about workers other than those from the Philippines. But migrant Philippine workers share the same conditions of exploitation and oppression as their fellow workers from around the world. They huddle together under the bridge at Kandara, and are herded into cells awaiting deportation. Reading Migrante's press release, one would not know that there were any human beings sheltering under the bridge other than Filipinos.

The program of Migrante is poison. It would subordinate the Philippine working class to its bourgeoisie, and separate them from their fellow workers around the globe.

The working class has no country. Appeals to national governments will not resolve the problems of migrant workers. The only defense that the stranded migrant workers in Saudi Arabia have is solidarity with their fellow workers and the working class of the Middle East around the globe on the basis of a program directed against the profit system—the root cause of their oppression.



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