

Philippines: Labor groups rally against Charter change, call for wage hike instead

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MANILA, Philippines — Labor groups are joining the opposition against Charter change (Cha-cha), with one group urging lawmakers to prioritize passing a law for a P150 wage hike for private sector workers.

The Federation of Free Workers (FFW) vice president Jun Mendoza Ramirez in a statement on Sunday emphasized the need to concentrate on the immediate needs of Filipino workers instead of getting entangled in prolonged discussions about Charter change.

“This bill has already lost its steam and got sidetracked by the Charter change debates,” added Ramirez, who is also union president of the Vishay Philippines Employees Union-FFW based in Food Terminal Inc. (FTI), a government corporation in Taguig.

He noted that thousands of skilled workers, including teachers, engineers, nurses, and other health-care workers, are leaving the country due to low wages.

Fees, benefits

FFW also called on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to introduce non-wage benefits to alleviate workers’ financial burdens and to issue a moratorium on the hike in mandatory contributions to Philippine Health Insurance Corp.

The group has also recommended stopping the collection of entrance fees and stickers in export processing zones, noting that companies there enjoy hundreds of billions in government subsidies like tax exemptions and subsidized electricity.

Ramirez cited the annual P300 “sticker fee” in FTI and other zones, besides the P40 “parking fee” every four hours and P60 “vehicle entry fee,” which he said were being shouldered by the employees.

According to him, FFW already raised these issues in a dialogue last year with the Department of Labor and Employment and is hoping for Labor Secretary Bienvenido Laguesma’s intervention, together with the support of the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (Peza), in addressing these concerns.

Labor rights

Meanwhile, the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights said in a statement: “We fear that Cha-cha will remove not only limits to foreign ownership of land and other essential sectors of the economy. We also fear that it will remove the provisions of the 1987 Constitution that guarantee

labor rights.”

A people’s initiative campaign is being undertaken in different parts of the country to gather signatures supporting constitutional amendments.

The nongovernment organization warned that fully opening businesses to foreigners would endanger labor rights enshrined in the Constitution, including the right to security of tenure, humane work conditions, and living wages, as well as the right to join or form unions and the right to strike.

“Previous Cha-cha campaigns floated the possibility of removing these provisions,” the group said.

“Further opening up the country to foreign investors, and removing labor rights provisions in the 1987 Constitution, will mean deeper suffering and greater exploitation for Filipino workers. Marcos Jr.’s Cha-cha will make the country’s Constitution even worse,” it added.

It noted that the country has already been opening up its economy to foreign investors, “but [this] has not achieved any development.”

“What the country needs in order to create decent jobs for Filipinos and uphold labor rights is to create industries in the country,” the group said.

“Countries who have attained development, and provided decent jobs to their people, are those that created industries. We should follow their lessons, not the dictates of big foreign employers,” it added.

‘Foreign domination’

On Saturday the Peasant Lawyers Conference, holding its third annual gathering at the University of the Philippines Diliman, also expressed its opposition to Charter change.

“We must keep the light of democracy burning. We must oppose the economic Cha-Cha which will allow foreign domination and wholesale ownership of education, media and advertising and even public utilities. We must thwart the sinister attempts for a ‘never-ending Marcos presidency,’” said lawyer Jobert Pahilga, executive director of the Sentro para sa Tunay na Repormang Agraryo, which organized the conference together with Tanggol Magsasaka.

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