

# Philippines: Blaze Manufacturing as Case Study of Suppression of Unionism at Mactan Ecozone

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The intransigence of the management of Blaze Manufacturing Corp., a locator in the Mactan Economic Zone in Metro Cebu, to workers efforts to unionize and the indifference if not collusion of government agencies is symptomatic of the wholesale resistance to exercise of the freedom of association in that ecozone. After more than three decades in existence, no single union with a collective bargaining agreement presently exists in the Mactan ecozone which is the second biggest in the country.

Despite the pronouncements of employers and government, including the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA), that fact alone exposes the systematic violation of ILO Conventions 87 and 98 in the Mactan ecozone. The case of the rank-and-file and agency workers of Blaze Manufacturing, a Japanese-owned company producing hi-blocks for export, reveals this pattern of the suppression of the right to organize.

Two weeks after a certificate of registration for the Blaze Manufacturing Corp. Employees Union (BMCEU) was issued by the DOLE last March 15, 11 workers were terminated by management. Over the next few weeks, management tried to convince workers to withdraw from the union while offering to promote others. None of these anti-union maneuvers were successful and by June 3 a certification election was finally conducted.

BMCEU handily won the certification elections, arguably the first time that a union won in the Mactan ecozone since all previous attempts were defeated by the various management union avoidance tactics. Unfortunately the victory was pyrrhic as the company declared closure on the eve of the historic certification elections.

In fact the workers had to vote in the regional office of the DOLE as they were prevented from entering the Mactan ecozone due to the factory closure. Management used the alibi of Blaze being sold to a new Japanese owner for the impromptu shutdown which was in violation of the 30-day notice rule for any permanent or temporary closure.

Meanwhile the workers of the agency supplying workforce to Blaze also organized themselves into a union. Again in arguably the first time in the Philippines, workers of the A. Bones Manpower and Recruitment Agency successfully formed the Agency Workers Union of Blaze (AWUB) and won the certification elections in polls conducted last July 5. The certification elections were likewise held at the DOLE regional office as the workers were out of work since Blaze was the only principal to which the agency places its employees.

By the time the agency workers had won the certification elections, many Blaze workers, out of economic difficulties, finally accepted management's offer of a separation package. Still a significant number pushed through with cases of illegal dismissal and union busting against Blaze.

And yet despite the pendency of the labor dispute, PEZA issued on July 8 a letter of authority allowing Blaze to operate. Thus on July 10, Blaze reopened and rehired all of the terminated non-union members while it is contracting a new manpower agency for the additional workforce.

Last July 18 workers wrote PEZA questioning the basis of the authority for Blaze to reopen despite the pendency of the labor dispute. The reopening of Blaze exposes the real agenda of the factory's closure as blatant union busting tactic.

Both BMCEU and AWUB had launched protest actions at the PEZA offices in Cebu to call for the cancellation of the letter of authority and a hearing on the workers demands regarding the labor dispute with Blaze. A solidarity action by ecozone workers from Calabarzon last July 22 was held in support of the Blaze rank-and-file and agency workers.

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