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Philippines: May Day Demands: Workers First in the Covid Response and Recovery!

Friday 1 May 2020, by [Partido Manggagawa](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2020).

The covid pandemic has exposed all the ills and contradictions of capitalism. The state has intervened massively in society to contain the infection and maintain the social fabric. Still the workers and the poor are disproportionately bearing the burden of the pandemic.

The lockdown has put millions temporarily jobless on a no work, no pay policy. The poor cannot earn a living as everyone is forced to stay at home. Assistance to the poor was not enough for everyone so political patronage and wanton discrimination reigned supreme. The health system is overwhelmed by the scale of the contagion since public health provision has suffered from budget cuts while private hospitals are out of reach of the masses.

Finally, the government has exploited the pandemic to further restrict civil liberties and suppress democratic rights. An iron fist policy has dominated over a public health response. Thus the number of people arrested for violating the lockdown has far exceeded the number of people tested for covid. The situation in the Philippines is no different from other countries where authoritarianism is gaining ground.

A global recession, if not a depression, is looming. As in all episodes of capitalist crisis, the working class will be hard hit as the capitalist class will pass on the sacrifices to the poor.

The plight of the working class is deteriorating as capitalism struggles to recover from the covid pandemic and the economic crisis. But the present conjuncture is also an opening to reimagine a radical restructuring of society where the needs of people not profit come first.

Workers hold no nostalgia for the old normal of neoliberal capitalism characterized by insecure work, cheap wages, permanent joblessness, privatized services and lack of protection. Instead the working class must spearhead the framing of the new normal as a system where workers are valued for their wealth-creating labor and the people enjoy by right the things necessary for a decent life—full employment, a living wage, universal health care, quality education, social protection and a clean environment, a voice in their workplaces and society as a whole, among others.

A proper response to the covid pandemic should put the needs of the workers and poor first. The following four demands are just the most immediate but are necessary to transition to a new normal of workers first.

1. Sufficient Aid for All

An income and employment guarantee for all. All jobless workers, formal and informal, should receive a wage subsidy at the prevailing minimum wage or P10,000, whichever is higher.

Aid delivery must be universal not targeted and discriminatory. This will solve the slow, confusing

and bureaucratic targeted system of delivering government assistance to formal and informal workers. Support must be raised from the present level of P5,000.

2. Aid beyond the period of the lockdown

Aid should not stop when the lockdown is lifted, especially since not everyone will be able to return to work immediately. Assistance should be extended to at least six months. This extended support must form part of the proposed stimulus package for the purpose of recovery from the crisis.

The stimulus must also provide a robust emergency employment program for workers who will become permanently unemployed due to the impact of covid and for returning migrant workers who will be displaced in their host countries. Likewise, the stimulus aid for businesses must be tied to compliance to labor rights and standards, and to grant of a voice for workers in their workplaces.

3. Safety for workers returning to work

Workers returning to their jobs are key to restarting the economy. But the government and capitalists are more concerned more with the return on investments and less on the safety of workers. Unfortunately, even workers are tempted to risk their health and safety rather than face hunger due to joblessness.

Health and safety in the workplace and in transit must be ensured before workers are asked back to work. Mass testing must be done through the reliable Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) not the erratic Rapid Diagnostic Test (RDT) preferred by the government and capitalists. Personal protective equipment or PPE must be given free to workers. They must be remunerated with additional hazard pay. Full healthcare coverage for workers who will be hospitalized due to covid. Workers must have the right to refuse to work without penalty if health and safety is not guaranteed.

4. Humane not militarized response

Enforcement of the lockdown has been characterized by violence by state authorities, arrests of the poor and suppression of protests by the hungry. Duterte has repeatedly threatened to impose martial law even if the situation falls outside of the purview of the law.

The issue is framed as lack of individual discipline when in fact insufficient aid and repressive rules force the masses to desperately break the law. The order for people to stay at home will be problematic since people are going hungry for lack of assistance and they are treated as beneficiaries of philanthropy instead of claim holders of the right to aid in a time of crisis.

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