

Protesters Say Reform or Junk the Trade Talks

Inter Press Service

December 12, 2005

Ngoc Nguyen

HONG KONG - There may be as many police as protesters outside the venue of the sixth ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as it opens on Tuesday.

While the police say they have deployed 9,000 men and women to prevent a repeat of the massive protests that accompanied the Cancun and Seattle ministerial meets, an estimated 10,000 protesters are arriving in this southern port city of China to show governments just how big the global movement against WTO is.

Three big demonstrations have been planned during the week-long meeting, which activist groups have pledged will be peaceful even as they pursue other strategies to block all possible breakthroughs in the stalled trade meeting.

On Tuesday, farmers and fisherfolk from many parts of the world, including 1,500 South Koreans, are expected to dominate the protests. On Sunday, thousands of migrant workers and their allies rallied in Hong Kong's Victoria Park, just blocks from the convention centre where the WTO meetings are being held.

Fisherfolk from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia plan to sail several boats into Victoria Harbour on the opening day to voice their demands to WTO delegates inside the Convention Centre, which is surrounded on three sides by water.

The South Korean farmers are here to push the WTO to preserve tariffs to protect their country's rice market and their livelihoods. For fisherfolk from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia, WTO policies are leading to overfishing and threatening their way of life and food supply.

New trade rules are worsening joblessness in many developing countries. The lucky few manage to find jobs abroad, but at a tremendous social cost.

"We don't want to be migrant workers," says 25-year-old Neralisa as she rehearsed a political song she planned to sing at the Sunday rally, where the majority of protesters were the island's huge army of foreign domestic workers. "We want better work in our country with a good salary. If we could, then we wouldn't be domestic helpers."

Neralisa earns the equivalent of 430 U.S. dollars monthly working as a maid, money she saves to send home to her family in Indonesia to help with their medical bills.

She became a migrant worker at age 16. A recruiting agency shipped her to Singapore where she worked as a maid for four years. Then she decided to go to Hong Kong. On her second trip, she owed the recruiting agency seven months' wages.

There are some 100,000 Indonesian domestic workers here. Eni Lestari, spokeswoman for the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong, says that like the Philippines, Indonesia is banking on exporting its citizens' labour. "Sending those people is creating a lot of income for them through remittances."

Indonesia joined the WTO in 1995. Since then, the country has racked up more than 132 billion dollars in debt and pays 2.6 billion dollars every year just to service it. Activists say International Monetary Fund and WTO policies have resulted in more landless peasants, increasing joblessness and low wages.

"My family used to be farmers," Lestari says. "But because of high interest on pesticide and seeds, they cannot afford it anymore and when it comes to harvest. We cannot compete with foreign rice from the U.S. or Thailand. So my mom decided to sell it and we became landless."

Lestari, who has been a domestic worker for 6 years, says migrants have little workplace protection. They face problems like underpayment, lack of time off, confiscations of documents and high fees by recruiting agencies, and even mental and physical abuse.

Rosita had only worked as a maid in Hong Kong for a month before running away from her employer due to underpayment and physical abuse. The 21-year-old from Indonesia filed a labour complaint and is currently staying in a shelter run by domestic workers' advocates.

More than 5,000 organisations, movements and groups have joined in a People's Caravan for Justice and Sovereignty, which will end its two-month journey in Hong Kong this week. They are demanding trade justice, and an end to unjust free trade.

The Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) collected close to 280,000 e-mail petitions in just three weeks from people around the world who are asking the WTO to stand firm on commitments to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were established at the United Nations in 2000, especially to tackle extreme poverty.

Campaigners are demanding that trade ministers at the WTO stop pushing countries to open up their economies; allow poor nations the space to determine their own trade policies; protect their public services; and end "dumping" (selling below cost) by rich countries.

On the eve of the WTO Ministerial meet, Nelson Mandela came out strongly on the side of the world's poor. In an e-mail to GCAP's supporters, he wrote: "In Hong Kong there is a chance to make decisions that will lift billions of people out of poverty."

Women's groups, trade unions, youth organisations, international NGOs, grassroots movements and numerous other civil society groups gathered in Hong Kong will want to see a substantial shift in national and international policies that will eliminate poverty.

Otherwise the ministerial meet is likely to be eclipsed by the "Junk the WTO" protests on the streets of Hong Kong.