



CROSS BORDER DIALOGUE

A View from the Global South

By Jojo Geronimo

INTRODUCTION

In April 2007, 35 people from the U.S., Canada and Mexico met in Toronto to share personal stories and critical analyses of corporate globalization. This cross-border dialogue was co-sponsored by the Labour Education Centre of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, Just Associates (a network of activists, popular educators and scholars in 13 countries) and Grassroots Global Justice, an alliance of 60 U.S.-based grassroots groups. During the three-day conference we explored alternative strategies to educating and organizing against global corporate power, whether we work in unions, communities, or academic institutions. By the end we were stronger in our convictions, even as we realized the situations we faced had both similarities and differences. What was most telling for me is how we actually experienced the tensions that exist among ourselves: tensions not brought about by us, but by the very forces that we are fighting against.

I realized how important it is to recognize how differently we have experienced corporate globalization and, thus, how different might be our understanding of it. And how, unless we consolidate our common ground and build a strong consensus around key issues, the forces of global capital will split our ranks, pitting us against one another.

This is my personal reflection on my understanding of corporate globalization, and the issues raised by our recent cross-border dialogue.

MY UNDERSTANDING OF GLOBALIZATION IS LARGELY SHAPED by my experience in the Philippines, one of the first countries that was “globalized” way before that word became current. I guess I can say I met my first “globalizers” there some 15 years before I met them here in Canada. And that I can say, to a large extent, I am here because, at

LABOUR JENNY AHN



JENNY AHN is a Toronto-based national representative with the Canadian Auto Workers who works in the union's education department. (She is also on *Our Times'* advisory board.) She attended the cross-border dialogue as a labour representative. Three issues that stand out for her are the survival of working-class people, the growing gap between rich and poor, and racism.

Here in Canada we say language matters when talking to workers and that we understand it's important to have translation, or to have people who speak different languages. But, we don't create enough opportunities for young people whose first language isn't English. We often continue to do things the same way, which is to have people who don't represent the diversity of workers (i.e. language, race, ability, faith, etc.) in Canada speak for unions. We know language is important, yet few opportunities are given to the people who have the language skills or who are representatives of specific marginalized communities. Often if we do involve people who are able to speak other languages besides English, they are usually not leading but rather helping — or they are "just" part of the group. We need to see a better representation of the communities that workers are a part of in all aspects of the labour movement, including the leadership.

An important aspect of the cross-border dialogue for me was having the space to have conversations with people from two other countries: sharing experiences and ideas and building solidarity. It was important to reconnect with activists from Canada to find out what everyone has been working on and to discuss what needs to be done for the survival of the working class, and to end racism. Conversations can be repetitive, which, while helpful at times in providing reminders, can be frustrating rather than motivating. We often have a lot of conversations that don't amount to very much. We needed to come out of the cross-border dialogue with an action plan and broader strategies across the countries.

Some days you feel discouraged but, as this conference showed, there is a lot of work happening throughout the three countries — and it's great work. It's inspiring to hear about what other people are doing so you don't feel isolated or alone in the community. The question is: How do we solidify all

this work across borders?

It was very encouraging that participants at the cross-border dialogue integrated a race-class-gender analysis throughout the conversations. We know that this does not always take place and often we have to make a conscious effort to do so. The reality is that some of our allies think that, just because they're progressive and our allies, they are entitled to take the space to represent workers of colour. We need to work together with our allies to make change and to end racism for all workers, but this means that space has to be given to workers of colour to lead on this issue. We talk about positions of power and how workers of colour need to represent workers of colour, but still we have to fight tooth and nail for a little piece of the pie. If our allies really get it, why do they think they should lead us and that we're not capable of doing it for ourselves. It needs to be understood that they can't do it for us. They can help us, but the lead person for a movement of justice for workers of colour needs to be a person of colour. We need our allies to not just make space for us to do the grunt work, but also to move over to give space for workers of colour to take up positions of leadership. We are making progress but there is still more work and more changes that need to occur for true equality and inclusiveness to take place in our unions and the broader community.

PHOTOGRAPH: ANGELO DICARO

For information about the Canadian Auto Workers' education programs, visit www.caw.ca/whatwedo/education.

some point in my life, they were there.

We know that Filipinos have been coming to Canada for the last 20 years not only as landed immigrants, but more and more as contract workers under a variety of “temporary foreign workers” programs aimed at attracting a whole range of professional and skilled workers, including computer programmers, nurses and domestic workers, and now also health care, construction, and food and beverage service workers — all low-paid, vulnerable, and expendable. At the same time, we also know that call centres have been sprouting in the Philippines, as well as the rest of Asia.

Right there you have an example of cross-migration of jobs and workers between Canada and the Philippines. We can talk of what that means for Philippine society, including the “brain drain” and the loss of scarce and essential skills for the country.

RECOGNIZING RACIAL DIVISIONS

We are beginning to understand the changing demographics of the workplace and communities in Canada. But we still do not have a full-blown strategy (and some say do not have the political will) to change the face of our union leadership. We also still do not appreciate the racial lines that divide those of us remaining in well-paying jobs and the ever-increasing number of workers in low-waged contingent jobs. On the one side of the divide, people are mostly white and male. On the other side, you’ll find new immigrants, mostly racialized, (those considered to be an “other” race), mostly women, mostly from the Global South. — J.G.

We can talk about what this global migration of jobs and workers means for us here in Canada, especially for “Canadian workers” and Canadian unions. But really, at the end, we have to talk about both: we must connect the dots between the social realities of “those workers there” and “our workers here” if we are to understand corporate globalization.

The first difference in my experience of globalization is in terms of time.

In the Philippines — long before Canadians were experiencing the fallout from free trade agreements affecting Canada, the U.S. and Mexico — there were Parity Rights and U.S. Military Bases Agreements (both established in 1947). These established the control of the U.S. government, corporations, and military institutions over economic, political, and military areas of Philippine society. They guaranteed Americans the “parity right” to develop and exploit the natural resources and operate public utilities in the Philippines. Long before Canadians began to experience massive job

losses in the garment and manufacturing sectors and the creeping privatization of the public sector, export processing zones were created in the Philippines in the early 1970s (similar to maquilas in Mexico). These institutionalized the exploitation of workers and natural resources in the Philippines even as they weakened political sovereignty and undermined the local economy.

Before I had even heard the word “sweatshop” I saw Levi, Motorola, and Nike factories in those export processing zones. Today there are more such zones, only now they are called “industrial parks,” and they are operated by the government for the benefit and under the dictate of foreign investors. And they now go beyond the manufacturing sector: there are call centres and other variations of offshore/contracted out services.

Back in the ‘70s, the export processing zones produced cheap goods enjoyed by consumers in the Global North (the most industrially developed countries) and workers in the Global North had secure jobs, or at least they thought they had. And except for occasional shows of international solidarity (sometimes more in the form of charity), Filipino workers fought back against multinational corporations alone. Worse, in those Cold War years, major U.S. unions sided with corporations in the “fight against communism,” driving Filipino labour activists underground. Still, the Philippine labour movement grew and today — 45 years later — even with all its faults, it has become one of the world’s most militant, progressive, and internationalist labour movements for social justice and against global corporate exploitation.

Before the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, there was GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, 1947), which defined tariff concessions, trade restrictions, and government subsidies in favour of richer economies (like Canada’s) at the expense of poorer countries. Farmers had to produce cash crops for export to rich countries, not for consumption by local people. At the same time, because of massive subsidies by governments of the north for their own agricultural products — which allowed for “dumping” cheap produce to the south — Filipino farmers could not compete, and finally lost their land to corporate farms like Dole Corporation.

At the end of the ‘60s, because of northern countries’ subsidies to their agricultural sector, high tariffs, and the low pricing structure imposed on Philippine export products, there was a massive displacement of farmers, who were forced to become landless peasants. These are the *sacadas* of today: migrant seasonal workers contracted by agricultural estates.

During this same time, the last of the Philippines’ fledgling steel plants — essential to industrialization — were being dismantled or de-nationalized, thereby preparing the ground for the transforma-

COMMUNITY REGI DAVID



REGI DAVID works at the Workers' Action Centre, in Toronto, and her responsibilities include outreach, media, membership and leadership development, education, and casework. WAC largely works with immigrant and low-income (non-union) workers.

"We address globalization struggles through the organizing of those directly affected, including low-income and immigrant workers, workers of colour, and women," she says. "At the Workers' Action Centre we learn from our shared experiences and histories: there are no 'expert' or 'professional' organizers. By having an open space where people can bring their skills and knowledge and share their personal stories, we create a space where real ideas for change can happen."

Regi David participated in the cross-border dialogue as a community-based organizer.

Major improvements to working conditions — for example, the last campaign to raise the minimum wage, or the new attention brought to workers' rights — don't happen because the "decision-makers" want to make changes. In this case, they happened because immigrant workers who faced the impact of poverty came together and fought, without giving up, to push the government to change. And the government had to hear them, whether — as new immigrants — they were allowed to vote or not.

Those workers, members of the Workers' Action Centre, began to talk in 2000 about raising the minimum wage, because it affected them. In the beginning it was only a few workers, but they built up their confidence that they deserved this raise — and workers not just here in Ontario but all workers. Those workers who were there from the beginning are still fighting today, almost a decade later. It's a good sign that our politicians are addressing workers' issues all these years later. These small victories demonstrate our collective power, which we can share with other workers' movements around the globe.

I found the strategy that one of our U.S. sisters shared at the cross-border dialogue to be very interesting. Like us, they also chose to collectively take on employers, march into workplaces, and always with the involvement of workers. For many organizations it is a challenge to have members lead organizing. We try to be true to that, and this group tried hard, too. I also liked the Mexican representative's strategy of using a map of the body to outline their pain caused by work. It was a good exercise for people as it didn't require language to

translate your pain into words.

The conference confirmed for me the importance of the leadership building, through popular education, that we do at the Workers' Action Centre. This model gives people the power to fine-tune and demonstrate their skills. And this way we stay grounded, we stay true to our members. They are not "token" low-income people; they are real people who want to make change, but who don't often get the chance to speak and be heard. So, that's our job: to support people to think through ways to get their voices heard.

Participating in the cross-border dialogue gave me renewed confidence in what I've learned from the workers I've worked with over the years. That's still my best education. The experience-sharing was the most practical part of the dialogue.

This opportunity has to be given to workers. There were too many activists and executive directors there. We are not the experts, so why do we keep acting like we are? Experience has a value and the experience of those directly affected — the workers — is of the highest value, so why are they not part of the discussion? This should be incorporated into the next conference.

For more information about the Workers' Action Centre, visit www.workersactioncentre.org.

PHOTOGRAPH: MILAN NADARAJAWAC

tion of the entire Philippines into an “assembly plant” capable of producing nothing but cheap light industrial goods.

Most devastating of all (and this was before the Harris “Common Sense Revolution” of the ‘90s and the Mulroney era of the ‘80s, in Canada), there was, in the Philippines, the Structural Adjustment Program of the World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF). This meant deep cuts to Philippine social programs, a fire sale of government corporations, deregulated monetary controls and investment, and liberalized trade. All this while imposing onerous debts on the population, and all in the name of a balanced budget and the efficiency and competitiveness agenda of rich countries gathered under the umbrella of the World Bank/IMF.

So, when I arrived in Canada and began to hear about free trade agreements here, I knew I had met this beast before, albeit under a different — and more brutal — guise.

Here lies the second difference among us, as

activists and workers from different countries: there is a difference of degree in how we experience corporate globalization.

For us here in Canada it’s mostly about job security, and, to some extent, the protection of our social programs and natural resources. For those in the Global South, it is about all those, and more: it is about grinding poverty, the suppression of human rights, the loss of lives, and the separation from family or even homeland.

For as long as globalization is seen as simply about jobs, then our movement will be divided. The fight against corporate globalization cannot be reduced to economic nationalism: “We want to keep Canadian jobs here.” It cannot be simply reduced to the slogan, “Buy Canadian.” What happens to union-made goods from other countries? What if other countries/unions adopt the same strategy? And obviously, our fight must also be a fight against xenophobia or any sort of anti-immigrant or racist sentiment, which is simmering, right now, just below the surface.

Globalization is not just about the free flow of goods, capital, services, and people across the globe. It is also the use of political, economic, and military might to destroy our jobs, our communities, and our movement. This experience has been borne out in the Global South, from Argentina to Zimbabwe, Indonesia to Iraq. In the Philippines, global corporate interests, backed up by American political and military forces, propped up an oppressive dictatorship for decades. In all these countries, the fight against global empire is a fight against poverty, social injustice, and war.

Like a tsunami that sends out shock waves long after its initial explosion, corporate globalization hit our communities in the Global North decades after its destructive impact was first felt in the south. If we here in Canada want to truly develop an analysis of corporate globalization, it is important to understand this historical context: globalization is bad, not just because we here in North America are losing our jobs and our social programs. It is bad because workers and communities around the world are being exploited by

DIVIDED IN UNDERSTANDING

During a union meeting in Toronto before Labour Day this year, a union leader who’s an immigrant from the Global South said: “We do not want to hear or see those planes screaming through the skies during our Labour Day march; they mean death and destruction to us” — referring to the Canadian International Air Show that is traditionally held on Labour Day in Toronto. Another labour leader said, with some pride, “Those planes are made by our members.” And that’s where the matter ended, with no hint of recognition of the inherent tension between these two perspectives and interests. Those two sentiments, to me, are a dramatic expression of the division among us. Those two labour leaders are both very committed trade unionists, but they are divided in their understanding and thus in strategy about how to challenge globalization. — **J.G.**

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FARM MIGRANT WORKERS JESSICA FARIAS



JESSICA FARIAS is a co-founder and volunteer member of the group Justicia (Justice) for Migrant Workers, which advocates for farm migrant workers' rights in Canada. It is based in Toronto and Vancouver. "In the last couple of years," she says, "I have concentrated on helping individual workers with their employment insurance applications for parental/maternal benefits. I have also provided outreach and interpretation support to workers in Northumberland County, Ontario, and helped organize various awareness events and information sessions, among other responsibilities." She participated in the cross-border dialogue as someone who works with farm migrant workers.

The body of knowledge and experiences among the conference participants really impressed me. I felt I had much to learn from the work of Lisa VeneKlasen from Just Associates (her publications were remarkable). The work of the women in the Maquila sector in Coahuila, Mexico, was also very moving. It reminded me that all of this work we do starts with a basic recognition of our humanity and our basic needs.

The women spoke about how organizers visit the workers at their homes and how they really get to know them, not only as maquila workers, but as mothers, daughters, neighbours and community members. It reminded me that organizing — or any kind of political education — needs to take into account our multiple human dimensions and to connect to the various aspects of our lives, beyond labour. I see an opportunity for Justicia for Migrant Workers to learn from these experiences.

At times I felt a bit of resentment knowing that there are people who have an opportunity to work on these issues full time and can have an income from being in these spaces, while I am far more limited as a volunteer. (Meanwhile, I recognize that I am only an ally of farm migrant workers and that they should be in those spaces themselves.) Still, having the chance to be part of a three-way talk with expert facilitators and such a wealth of expe-

riences and knowledge really inspired me.

Because of our different experiences, privileges and where we come from, we use different "language" when we talk about our work and the issues, and this is a bit of a challenge. Those who are fluent in political discourses or who have moved in these spaces longer are far more likely to dominate at gatherings like the cross-border dialogue, or have more standing. That's why popular education is a perfect tool to use when talking about cross-border strategies.

Popular education can be a very effective tool in creating collective knowledge, raising awareness and developing mechanisms to organize. Popular education moves away from the academic discourse and tries to build knowledge from peoples' own experiences. It is therefore a very effective resource when working at the grassroots level or trying to build a foundation from the ground up. This kind of education recognizes that we can all contribute and can play a role. It makes us challenge our assumptions and question differences and privileges, and it is endlessly creative. It establishes a more holistic understanding of social change and civic engagement.

For more information about Justicia for Migrant Workers, visit www.justicia4migrantworkers.org.

PHOTOGRAPH: SAHAR VERMEZYARI

Thank you to Nicole Wall, a labour educator at the Labour Education Centre in Toronto, for interviewing Jessica Farias, Regi David and Jenny Ahn as part of this cross-border dialogue special feature in **Our Times**.

THE RIGHT IS ORGANIZING

Right-wing forces are actively mobilizing to shape our workplaces (for example, the Temporary Workers Program in the western provinces). Yet, we have still not developed a common strategy to challenge the anti-worker agenda shaping our political and economic landscape. We also have not yet developed the alternatives that allow us to say, "Yes, another Canada is possible," one that is different from the free-trade neo-liberal vision that our political leaders have crafted in their policy document "Advantage Canada" (February 2006). "Advantage Canada" is the Harper policy document advocating a full embrace of globalization and the neo-liberal agenda: more exports, mostly of our natural resources like water; more privatization, more de-regulation, more free trade, more foreign investment, more outsourcing, and greater integration with the U.S. security and economy (like being part of the war in Afghanistan). But I thought I saw all that some 25 years ago in the Philippines under the Structural Adjustment Program and in those export processing zones. Is this how globalization is coming to Canada, turning it into another "Third World" country?

As we were ending our cross-border dialogue last spring, we were also aware that a few months later the political leaders of our three countries were going to meet in Montebello, Quebec, to push the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP), the most recent reincarnation of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). It's an initiative developed in collaboration with the chief corporate executives of their respective countries, but without the participation of their citizens. – **J. G.**

THISTLE

global corporations.

"What does it matter if I can buy cheaper shoes," one Pilipino worker in a shoe factory said, "if, as a result, I lose my job and have no money to buy food." We can echo this sentiment here in Canada: What good is it to be able to buy cheaper goods at Wal-Mart, if, in the process, our plants and social programs close down — and workers in the south are exploited for their cheap labour.

The loss of jobs cannot be blamed on the low-paid and exploited workers of the south. "They" are not taking "our jobs." Nor can we say to the immigrant and migrant workers coming here that they are "lowering our standards of living," "driving wages down" and "straining our health and social services." Still, I realize it is not easy to explain this to a worker in Canada who just lost her or his job due to a plant closure after their global employer relocated to some low-waged country or contracted the job offshore. Those of us who work at the Labour Education Centre in Toronto know this tension well. We work everyday with laid-off workers whose pain and anger are as legitimate as the fear and desperation experienced by the workers in the export processing zones or maquilas of the Global South. As a union movement, we have yet to develop a common ground of understanding about our stand against corporate globalization.

We know global capital does not easily give up. We also knew that exiles, immigrants, contract workers, and refugees from the Global South are now here in the Global North, seeking to join forces with us in the common fight against corporate globalization. Like us, they understand the fight against globalization is a fight for social and economic justice. And they know from the heart and their own experiences that it is also about building international solidarity between workers everywhere who are fighting for a better world. I guess, at the cross-border dialogue this year, I felt hopeful in their company, sensing that the struggle continues, and that this time it is not only "there," but also "here."


Jojo Geronimo is the executive director of the Labour Education Centre, a project of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council. He emigrated to Canada from the Philippines in 1986. This fall, on a return trip to the Philippines, he visited workers' action centres that are organizing in export processing zones around Manila.

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