

PEOPLE'S HEALTH PAYS THE PRICE FOR THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

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The peoples of the world are now facing the worsening effects of intensifying global crisis. What the imperialists tout as the New World Order can aptly be called the New World Disorder. This has been spurred mainly by the worsening global crisis of capitalism. It is characterised by widespread economic disequilibrium among and within nations, world trade conflicts, rising poverty incidence and increasing concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands, joblessness and social discontent and armed conflicts in various countries.

While using the slogan of 'free competition', 'free market economies' and 'free trade', the evil forces behind the New Economic Order exert every effort to camouflage the reality and workings of monopoly capitalism and to impose on the oppressed peoples and nations worse conditions of neo-colonial dependency and subservience to imperialism.

The New World Disorder and the Semi-Colonial and Semi-Feudal System

The oppressed and the exploited classes in the Philippines, like the majority of the population in Third World countries, are suffering from the vigorous attacks of imperialism. With the removal of protective barriers to trade and investments through liberalisation, the removal of protective economic controls and the guarantee of free market and business operations through deregulation, the reduction in social spending and the transfer of assets and operations of government to profit enterprise through privatisation, the increased power of imperialist-controlled multilateral organisations like the WB, IMF, and WTO, and with the unbridled dominance or monopoly of TNCs in national and global economic activities, the New World Disorder can only mean perpetual underdevelopment for a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society like the Philippines.

Thus, the boastful claim to turn the Philippines into a 'newly-industrialising country' by the year 2000 and for it to become 'a new tiger economy in Asia' is a package of blatant lies. In fact, the Philippine government's continued submissiveness to the policies espoused by the WB, IMF and the WTO prevent industrial development and increase the agrarian character of this society.

There will be no 'brighter days' for the Philippine economy - at least not in the near future. Instead of 'economic recovery' as being repeatedly bragged by the current administration of President Fidel Ramos, the chronic crisis in an export-orientated, import-dependent, foreign-investment-led, debt-riddled and backward agricultural economy continues to deepen and worsen under the New World Disorder.

The immediate backlash of this economic disorder is seen in the workers' plight. The country's so-called 'growing' economy is also seeing a growing army of urban and rural job seekers. The number of unemployed workers increased in 1995 by 16.5%, or an additional 861 000 to the 8.6 million unemployed and underemployed workers in 1996. Even the Department of Labour and Employment admitted that there are job losses due to trade liberalisation under the GATT-WTO. The Philippines became a member of GATT-WTO in January 1995. Since then, there have been 51 cases of GATT-related losses in 1995 and 38 cases in the first quarter of 1996 alone. At least 131 000 workers lost their jobs in these incidents.

'Labour flexibility' measures are being adopted under the guise of promoting 'productivity', 'global competitiveness', 'manpower development' etc. Regular workers are retrenched and replaced with contractual workers. As early as 1992, an ILO study revealed that 73% of factories in the Philippines were already implementing various forms of flexible working arrangements. These include labour-only contracting, contract and casual hiring, piece-rate and part-time systems, rotation, extension of workweeks and other labour cost-cutting schemes.

The use of sub-contracting in the Philippines has resulted in the hiring of more child workers. The ILO estimates that there are 5 to 5.7 million working Filipino children aged between 5 - 17.

There are now about five to seven million Filipino migrant workers with no job security and labour protection whatsoever in their host country. Remittances from these overseas contract workers are being used to prop up the sagging economy.

Land monopoly and food insecurity are aggravated under the trade liberalisation policy. Only 1.2 million hectares of arable lands would be left for rice and corn production while some 3.1 million hectares would be used for export crops. Massive land conversion and displacement of farmers are more rampant than ever. About 1.5 million farmers are losing their only means of livelihood.

There is no genuine industrialisation in the Philippines. The backward industrial production consists mainly of the processing and assembly type. Eighty-eight percent of the manufacturing establishments employ 10 persons or less. This manufacturing industry is import-dependent and foreign-investment-led.

The Philippines is also drowning in debt. Former President Corazon Aquino inherited a US\$26 billion debt from Marcos in 1986. Despite the actual US\$18 billion debt servicing made in the period of 1986 to 1991, Aquino ended her term of office in 1992 with a foreign debt amounting to US\$29 billion. To date President Ramos has not yet finished his term of office but the foreign debt has been pegged at US\$10.6 billion, or an increase of 40% from 1992 to 1996.

The PhP 165 /day minimum wage pegged in Metro Manila today could hardly cope with the PhP 372.21 daily cost of living as at August 1996. At the outset, 75% of Filipinos are still condemned to poverty.

While making sure that the pro-imperialist economic policies are in place, Ramos is unleashing his terror attacks against the people.

Ramos has always shown his commitment to abide by the policies of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation and vowed to implement these policies even earlier than the schedule set by the WTO. On the other hand, he tries to hide the ill-effects of these policies and suppress growing discontent among the masses.

During the APEC Summit held in the Philippines in November 1996, the Ramos administration destroyed urban poor shanties in Metro Manila, installed military restrictions in Central Luzon which prevented farmers and peasants from going in and out of their barrios and prevented them from harvesting their crops in farmlands near the Conference site. Furthermore, the administration placed the activities of people's organisations and their leaders under military surveillance and barricaded the way of a people's caravan in an attempt to suppress the organised people's effort against the APEC Summit and its policies which will surely give the TNCs more license to exploit our workers and to further plunder the rich natural resources of our country.

Ramos, a former military general, implementer of martial law during the Marcos fascist dictatorship and architect of total war policy during the Aquino regime, is systematically asserting his fascist agenda while utilising a deceptive democratic facade in the Government. He is using a so called 'peoples' initiative' in order to perpetuate himself in power through the recent campaign for charter amendment.

A national ID system is taking place in the Philippines while a number of anti-terrorism bills are pending at the Congress. In every given opportunity brought by economic and/or man-made crisis, Ramos is quick enough to seek emergency powers - and his Congress is loyal enough to provide him with what he needs.

The civilian bureaucracy is highly militarised. More than 50 military officers have been appointed to strategic government positions. Certainly, these officials who have easily changed their military uniforms overnight cannot easily forget their old militarist and authoritative way of governance. A martial law or a more discreet constitutional authoritarianism could be installed in the Philippines, without formally declaring it, at any time.

By wholeheartedly serving the interest of his imperialist masters, Ramos is trying to strengthen his political power - even if it could mean further suppression and repression of people's rights.

Side Effects of Economic Disorder to People's Health

The health of the Filipino nation is in a deeper crisis.

The health status of the majority of our population simply speaks for the unwanted side effects of economic policies prescribed by the WB, IMF, and WTO. Under the old and rotten social order, 'health for all' will never be achieved in the Philippines.

Contrary to their commitment to the Alma Ata Conference in 1978, the Government misappropriates the health budget. In 1994 the Department for Health spent PhP 108 per person or 30 centavos per person per day on health.

Poor Filipino families are continuously deprived of their right to health. The WB-IMF's Structural Adjustment Programme and the WTO's policies have severely affected the critical condition of our people's health.

As part of the WB-IMF's prescriptions to enhance the Philippines capability to pay its foreign debt through revenue collection, cutting of government spending and other forms of austerity measures, the Local Government Code was enacted into law in 1994. This has resulted in the decentralisation or devolution of health services to local government units. The responsibility to provide primary and secondary health care was transferred to the hands of corrupt local government executives and unresponsive politicians.

Furthermore, municipalities in the countryside feel the absence of medical and other health services. More people are dying unattended. There are cases of patients dying in a corridor of a hospital unattended. There are more cases of people dying in hospitals, with health professionals in attendance, due to the lack of availability of medical supplies and hospital facilities.

The decentralisation of health services also displaced and threatened the job security of 44 000 public health professionals and workers.

The current privatisation scheme is threatening the weakened and dying public health service. Contractualisation and agency-hiring has become a common practice in government hospitals.

Fee-for-services policies in the guise of cost recovery and user-fee schemes are implemented in all government hospitals. Patients are now being charged laboratory and professional fees as well as for other services which used to be free. These patients are the same people who are carrying the biggest burden in taxes and soaring prices of prime commodities.

Four speciality hospitals - the Lung Centre of the Philippines, Philippine Heart Centre, National Kidney and Transplant Institute and Philippines Children's Medical Centre are targeted for privatisation.

A conversion or re-integration programme is forcing lepers out of the Tala Leprosarium and mental patients out of the National Centre for Mental Health.

The government itself is now spreading scandalous information about inefficiencies and mismanagement in public health institutions targeted for privatisation. They do this to convince the people that health services would be better in the hands of private entities and if rendered in the framework of 'free competition'.

Other faces of privatisation schemes like restructuring, 'semi-privatisation' and co-operativisation are also being considered, especially in devolved public hospitals and health institutions.

Social Service institutions like the Social Security System and Government Services Insurance System are also up for sale.

The privatisation of health services in the Philippines is an outright abandonment of the government's social obligation to people's health.

Under the so called 'new economic order' health becomes a commodity for sale - hospitals and health facilities become investment ventures and services are rendered to make profit.

Challenges to Health for All

There is ample evidence that the health care status is affected by the present globalisation of the economy. In the era of the 'New World Disorder', the Filipino people are forced to pay for every health service they get. This is contrary to the promise of 'Health for All by the Year 2000'.

The Health Alliance For Democracy (HEAD), a political organisation of professionals, workers and students in the health sector in the Philippines, commits itself to rouse, organise and bring the sector closer to the struggle of the country's basic message, in order not to pay the bigger price of being a perpetual victims of imperialist exploitation and domination.

HEAD vehemently opposes privatisation and other economic policies imposed against the Filipino people. Its officers and members are taking the initiative in holding study circles and other education activities, information dissemination in schools and hospitals, public opinion making, participating in sectorial and multisectorial campaigns that expose and oppose policies affecting people's economic and democratic rights and actively participating in people's protest actions.

HEAD links its actions with hospital workers affected by privatisation schemes. While these workers form their own employees' unions, HEAD provides political education activities which enlighten them on the root causes of their problems, on the relationship of their issues and problems on the actual condition of the general masses.

HEAD unites with other nationalist people's movement health organisations and community-based health programmes in their aspirations for 'Health for All'.

We have begun these humble efforts, but much more has to be done.

We firmly believe that health for all will not be served on a silver platter. As long as imperialism through its instruments like the WB, IMF, WTO and its clients 'state' controls every aspect of society 'health for all' remains impossible. Health must be a product of people's concerted efforts in the struggle against imperialist domination. The struggle for health is the Filipino people's struggle for democracy and national sovereignty.

In this context, we challenge all the health activists in this Conference : extend your support for the advancement of people's struggles for genuine democracy and national liberation. The road to democracy and national liberation is the only way for nations dominated by imperialism and their local cohorts to reach 'Health for All'.

Arouse, organise and mobilise the masses in our respective countries to expose and oppose all imperialist attacks that severely affecting their economic plight, their social well being and their right to health

To the IPHC:

“Let us unite and join the people’s struggle against imperialist domination in the world!”

To the people of South Africa....

“Be more vigilant ..your struggle..

Our struggle has not yet completed!”