

The eight-year struggle of women workers of LCE

A case for celebration on national women's day

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On October 28, we celebrate national women's day and commemorate the Filipino women's struggle for emancipation and empowerment. In a largely patriarchal and feudal society, this day marks a time to remember the advances Filipino women have achieved throughout history. And amidst the pervasiveness and persistence of women exploitation and oppression in Philippine society, this day also reminds us that Filipino women does not waiver in the struggle.

One remarkable case of a group of women enduring an arduous fight for their rights and justice is that of the LCE workers. Last October 17, Leticia Calvelo Enterprises Employees Union (LCE-EU) celebrated their eighth year in the picket line. Emily Supan, vice president of the union shares their difficult yet liberating experience in their long-drawn-out quest for justice.

Union Beginnings

LCE is a garments company in Pasig City that produces for Avon and other foreign brands. The company is owned by Mr. Jojo Montaña. Emily worked for LCE as sewer in 1994. At that time, the union in the factory was management-backed and the workers, most of whom are women, hardly felt the benefits of having the right to bargain with the management. Until in 1997, Emily and other women workers of LCE formed another workers' union independent of the management. The company had then 237 workers, 127 of whom are regular. All of the regular workers joined the LCE-EU. In the union election, the LCE EU gained victory and Emily became vice president.

From 1997–2001, the LCE Workers' Union struggled for higher wages and benefits. In first three years of being union official, Emily recalls that the union was doing well in its collective bargaining but towards the year 2000, crisis struck the company and the management easily sacrificed the interests of the workers.

Emily narrates that it came to a point that although they were regular employees, they were only given three months of work and delayed salaries. The union resisted these cost-cutting schemes of the management and persisted in closing a CBA negoatiation. However, in 2002, the management denied the proposed wage hike among other demands of LCE-EU explaining that the company at a loss. Instead it offered the union a 5-centavo increase in their daily wages.

Following the CBA deadlock, the management told the workers the company was going bankrupt until the factory closed down. LCE-EU was convinced that there the owner just wanted to cut cost after learning that they did not officially declare bankruptcy and after overhearing plans of transferring the machine to Laguna and e. Because of this, the women workers charged the management with illegal lock-out and immediately launched a strike in October 17, 2002. From this day on, the members of

LCE-EU raised the battle to a higher level not only between the union and the management but also within the union and within each union member.

Early days of strike

At the onset, Emily and her comrades learned hard the lessons of sustaining a fight, especially that of a strike. As they prevented the management from moving factory equipment out of the company compound to ensure machines are not transferred to another factory nor sold, three union officials including Emily and nine other members were charged with grave coercion by LCE company drivers. The criminal case prospered up to the municipal trial court and the twelve women strikers were subsequently issued a warrant of arrest.

Emily and the rest of LCE-EU were not at all deterred. They knew the case was plain harassment and intimidation from the management. They evaded prison and remained staunch in protecting the picket line. Emily recalls, “We actually hid. When officers came in the picketline to look for us, we would hide inside a locked room which we managed to build inside [the picket-structure]. Even my husband, he asked me why were there policemen looking for me and I would just instruct him to tell them that what he knows is that I'm in the picket.” A month after the warrant was issued, they were able to muster sufficient funds to post bail. In 2003, the criminal case was eventually dismissed for lack of evidence.

Internal struggle

For years, the women strikers of LCE maintained their picketline by finding various ways to make ends meet. Until early 2008, Emily narrates that the union remained strong even if half of their membership already abandoned the picket line. Those who stayed were committed to the cause. And though some of the unionists were already employed in other factories, the entire membership would regularly meet in the picketline to discuss updates on their labor case.

“Financial problems need to be addressed,” Emily avers, “so it is understandable that some of our members need to find other jobs. Even so, they still take time to stay in the picket in a regular basis. Some of them worked in the morning and stayed in the picketline during the night.”

As for those who are willing to stay in the picket during daytime, they cooked and sold meals to workers in nearby warehouses. Some sold fishball in carts a few blocks away from the picket line. The money they earn the union used as fund for their daily expenses in the picketline and some were spent on the labor case.

Domestic challenges

Aside from the confrontation with the management and state agents, Emily and her co-strikers also dealt with domestic problems because of the strike. She said that his husband for a time complained about her being in the picket the entire day and that she hardly had time for their family. To keep the conflict from aggravating, she needed to explain every now and then to his family the importance of their struggle.

Favorable decision, collateral damages

In 2008, the NLRC ruled in favor of the LCE-EU in the illegal lock-out case and ordered the management to pay workers a total of Php 7 million money claims. But no victory is easily gained especially by the marginalized. The owner still refused to face the workers. After this supposed favorable decision their lawyer and the labor sheriff to changed color and jumped to the side of the management. Emily and the rest of LCE workers suspects they have been paid a considerable amount by management to abandon them.

Despite this discouraging experience, LCE-EU persisted. They replaced their lawyer and moved their case to another sheriff until they finally got an order from the NLRC for Mr. Montaña to release the money claims of the workers. The commission also ruled in favor of the union to transfer the monthly space rental of former LCE factory from Mr. Montaña to the claimants until such time that the strikers are paid the Php 7 million.

But when the workers were already up to collect the rent as payment last September 2, they learned that the entire place was sold to Unilab at a cost of P250 million. Right now, they LCE-EU already filed a motion for garnishment so they can collect the remaining Php 40 million pesos Unilab has yet to pay Mr. Montaña. Emily and the rest of the strikers are hoping Unilab will make a move favorable to them. But in case Unilab refuses to get involve, Emily says they will carry on with the struggle.

State Repression

Like the experience of other strikers, the women of LCE EU also faced various forms of state repression. In the early stages of the strikes, they were harshly dispersed with some of their members put to jail. They also experienced many attempts to demolition Last August, right after they learned about the order of the NLRC to transfer rental from Mr. Montaña to the women strikers, they received a notice of demolition of the picket from the local government. On September 7, they were actually demolished by the Pasig Action Line saying that the picket obstructs the road. ([see related article](#)) Despite this, the LCE-EU workers were not disheartened and rebuilt the picket line.

An inspiring example

The women workers of LCE-EU, is an inspiring example of a relentless struggle amidst many obstacles and continued attack on their rights. For this week's celebration of Filipino women, Emily shares her thoughts for everyone on the need to persist our collective and just aspirations no matter what:

“We should be firm in our principles in order to achieve our aspirations. And not just because we are women, we will easily be disheartened. Like in the picket line, unity is a requirement. We should not be easily affected too when bad things happen... We should really fight for our rights, even if it's difficult. We should take a stand. And when we are oppressed, we must not just let it pass. We should face and resist oppression.”#