



# ULAT SA PAGGAWA AT MAKATAONG KARAPATAN

# CTUHR MONITOR

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**#CTUHR@40**

## Top 10 biggest labor issues in the past 10 years

On October 9, the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR), a non-governmental organization devoted to empowering workers in the formal and informal sectors of the economy to claim their labor and human rights, will celebrate its 40th anniversary.

CTUHR was founded in 1984, when the Filipino workers and people were intensifying their protests in response to the brazen assassination of former Sen. Ninoy Aquino Jr in 1983 and the Ferdinand Marcos Sr dictatorship's numerous crimes. The dictatorship was responding to the widespread and massive protests with massive repression.

## CTUHR @ 40: Top 10 biggest labor issues...



(Pexels)

Labor leaders and allies, especially those from the Catholic Church, banded together to defend workers' labor and human rights and workers' dignity. Inspired by the progressive teachings of the Church, they sought to defend workers' rights to unionize, collectively bargain and strike.

Many changes have occurred in the country's employment and economic situation since 1984: industry and agriculture have further weakened, giving way to a service economy that is dependent on migrant remittances. The number of unionized workers has also dwindled, even as the country shifted from outright dictatorship to a democracy led by a few elites subservient to foreign dictates.

Despite many changes, the cause of fighting for workers' labor and human rights remains necessary, valid and sacred. Filipino workers continue to be brokered by the Philippine government as

cheap labor – characterized by low wages, lack of employer-employee relationship, vulnerability to being removed from work at any time, denied their labor and human rights.

To showcase the continuing necessity, validity and sacredness of the fight for workers' labor and human rights, this anniversary issue of CTUHR Monitor reviews the Top 10 Biggest Labor Issues in the Philippines in the past 10 years (2014-2024) and recounts CTUHR's role in fighting alongside the Filipino workers and people for the advancement of labor and human rights and for a society that will consistently uphold these rights.

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## 2014, NXP24: Union-busting in electronics giant, averted

In May 2014, electronics giant NXP Semiconductors Incorporated (NXPSCI, now Nexperia) retrenched 24 officials of the NXPSCI Workers' Union. The company accused the officials of leading illegal strikes on legal non-working holidays in its Cabuyao, Laguna plant located in a special economic zone (SEZ): April 9 (Day of Valor), April 17-18 (Maundy

Thursday and Good Friday), and May 1 (International Labor Day).

The move was seen as an attempt to bust the NXPSCIWU, a strong union in the electronics industry under the progressive National Federation of Labor Unions – Kilusang Mayo Uno (NAFLU-KMU). It was also seen as an attempt to end ongoing CBA

negotiations and increase the number of contractual workers.

NXPSCIWU used various forms of protests such as holding noise barrages and wearing placards in the company's huge canteen. It held protests outside the plant premises together with supporters, defying SEZ security forces. On social media, NXP workers and supporters voiced their demand with the hashtag #BringBackNXP24. International solidarity from unions and worker formations was also active and strong.

Through their collective action, the NXP workers and their supporters achieved a partial but acceptable victory. In September 2014, the company reinstated 12 of the union officials, gave the other 12 officials a reasonable severance package, and concluded CBA negotiations with a 4.5% wage increase.

(Bring Back NXP 24 Facebook Page)



## 2015, Kentex factory fire: Workers, rights, justice up in flames

On May 13, 2015, a fire broke out in the factory of Kentex Manufacturing Company, a maker of slippers and other rubber footwear located in Valenzuela City, Metro Manila. The factory had a workforce of 200, and 150 workers were present when the fire occurred: 74 of those present died in the fire.

The fire quickly spread when welding works in the factory's roll-up gate created sparks that reached highly inflammable chemicals nearby. The workers got trapped in the factory's second floor, which did not have fire exits and had windows that had thick steel bars that were placed supposedly to prevent products from passing through. Despite working with inflammable materials, the workers did not receive fire training.

The factory fire called attention to the Kentex workers' plight. They

were paid amounts lower than the legally mandated minimum wage and were denied their benefits. Most of them were contractuales, as only 50 were regulars, and the contractor, CJC Manpower Services, is not legitimate. These conditions put into question the Labor Department's factory inspections.

The families of the workers killed in the fire banded together to form the Justice for Kentex Workers Alliance. Despite the alliance's many initial victories in fighting for compensation and legal redress, Valenzuela City fire officers and a company official were finally acquitted by the Sandiganbayan in 2020.

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(Mayday Multimedia)



## 2016-2022, Duterte promise to end contractualization: A populist scam

During the presidency of Noynoy Aquino (2010-2016), contractualization became a prominent labor and national issue. In 2010, thousands of Philippine Airlines or PAL workers were laid off from work and were replaced by contractuales. Various labor issues – from NXP24 to the Kentex factory fire – also brought the issue to national attention.

Running for the 2016 presidential elections, Rodrigo Duterte promised to end contractualization. He reiterated this promise after he was elected president. The promise is one of the boldest pro-people promises made by any president in recent history. It is part of Duterte's efforts to win over workers, the poor and progressives to his side, and part of his projection of himself as an outsider to the country's dominant politics.

As president, Duterte basically pretended to do something about the issue at first without actually doing something to end it. He heightened workplace labor inspections and threatened companies implementing contractualization. His government's department order and his executive order on contractualization were basically warmed-over versions of previous guidelines.

In the end, his government claimed that what he promised to end was not all forms of contractualization but only illegal contractualization – which is already illegal according to previous guidelines. He also said that he is powerless to end contractualization, as only the Senate can pass a law against it. Despite this, his government claimed being able to regularize hundreds of thousands of contractuales.

## 2018: Sumifru workers' strike: Plantation workers fight for dignity

Banana plantation workers in Compostela Valley, who grow bananas with their hands and hearts, live in conditions of extreme exploitation under Sumifru Philippines Corporation (SPC), the commercial arm of a multinational corporation. The fruit produced by their hands and land is being sold all over the world, but they face poverty and indebtedness.

SPC's labor practices starkly contradict its claims of ethical production. Workers earn a mere

P365 a day for labor that is not only grueling but also perilous, often conducted under the threat of exposure to toxic agrochemicals. The company's certifications, such as SA 8000 for labor rights and Global GAP for food safety, serve as deceptive veneers that mask the exploitation that pervades the fields where workers toil.

On October 1, 2018, the workers, led by the Nagkahiusang Mamumuno sa Suyafa Farms (NAMASUFA), started a strike

to demand fair wages and basic dignity. Tragically, the assassination of union member Danny Boy Bautista on October 1, 2018 and subsequent threats against other unionists and strikers illustrate the perilous environment that they face.

The struggle of Sumifru workers in Compostela Valley remains an infuriating testimony of how labor and human rights and workers' dignity are set aside while labor exploitation continues unabated.

(Kilab Multimedia)



## 2018-2019, Contractuals' strike: Demanding the realization of Duterte's promise

Workers did not wait for Duterte to live up to his electoral promise of ending contractualization. Workers and labor groups continuously demanded that Duterte fulfill his promise. In various workplaces, many contractuals got themselves organized with the help of labor groups and started demanding their regularization and the junking of contractualization as a policy. They took advantage of the statements

made by Duterte and his officials on the matter, as well as the workplace inspections that the government carried out.

When their employers refused to regularize them, often despite government rulings ordering employers to do so, and when employers laid off contractuals to bust their unions or destroy their organizations, contractuals held strikes. The number of strikes in the

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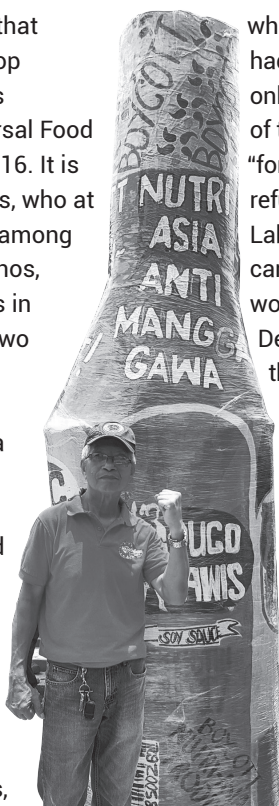
Some of the companies in which the most well-known strikes were launched are NutriAsia (condiments, June 2018), Pepmaco (laundry soap, June 2019), Sumifru (banana plantation, June 2018), Zagu (pearl shake, June 2019), Middleby (kitchen equipment, May 2018), Regent Food Corp. (biscuits, October 2019), Monde Nissin (biscuits, August 2019), Surface Mount Technology or SMT, Inc. (computer components, October 2018), and Coke (softdrinks, March 2017).

Employers, together with the Duterte government, responded to these strikes with repression: picketlines were dispersed, strikers and supporters were mauled and even arrested, and unions and organizations were destroyed.

## 2018-2019, NutriAsia strikes: Resistance hits contractualization hotbed

NutriAsia is a company that produces the Philippines' top condiment brands, and was previously known as Universal Food Corporation or UFC until 2016. It is owned by Jose Yao Campos, who at the time of the strikes was among the Top 30 wealthiest Filipinos, holding important positions in many giant corporations. Two of its factories witnessed strikes in 2018-2019: one located in Cabuyao, Laguna inside the Light Industry and Science Park or LISP, a special economic zone, and another in a factory belt in Marilao, Bulacan.

At the time of the strike, NutriAsia-Cabuyao had more than 1,200 contractual workers and only more than 120 regulars,



(Kilusang Mayo Uno)

while NutriAsia-Marilao had 1,400 contractuales and only 100 regulars. Many of the workers had been “forever contractuales” or refused regularization. Labor inspections were carried out into the two workplaces, and the Labor Department ruled at first that the Cabuyao plant was carrying out illegal contractualization while the Marilao plant was carrying out legal contractualization.

NutriAsia refused to regularize the contractual workers and removed workers it accused of leading the regularization campaign. The

contractuales were left with no choice but to hold strikes. The NutriAsia management, with the help of the provincial and national governments, crushed the workers' picket lines, mauling and arresting strikers and their supporters. Some of the most memorable images of the strikes in 2018-2019 were beaten and bloodied NutriAsia workers and their supporters.



(ACT Teachers Partylist)

## 2019, ILO-HLTM: Solidarity at a time of attacks

In June 2019, the International Labor Organization (ILO) recommended that a mission must be sent to the Philippines to investigate long-standing and grave violations against workers' freedom of association which are direct violations of core labor standards as stated in the ILO Conventions 87 and 98.

This was after the 52nd killing in the labor sector happened while the conference was on going. To no one's surprise, the Duterte government refused to accept the mission, despite the clamor of labor groups and the pressure of the ILO.

In January 2023, as the Marcos Jr. administration intends to position itself as pro-human rights,

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it accepted the High-Level Tripartite Mission (HLTM). Workers, through the All-Philippine Trade Union, prepared seriously and put together a Joint Trade Union Report with comprehensive accounts of violations against freedom of association that occurred from 2019-2023. Among the highlights of the report are the 68 extrajudicial killings among trade unionists and labor organizers, 5 victims of abduction and enforced disappearance and hundreds of

cases of threat, harassment and intimidation.

At least 50 labor leaders met with the mission and shared the rights violations they experience. Among these are Nexperia Philippines Inc. Workers Union (NPIWU) leaders who experienced harassment from NTF-ELCAC elements, multiple times. Also in the meeting were Dyan Gumanao and Armand Dayoha, both labor organizers, who were abducted in broad daylight in Cebu. Lizel Asuncion, wife and primary witness of the killing of long-time labor leader Manny Asuncion was also present in the meeting.

A month after the mission, the ILO released its finding and recommendations, echoing the proposals of the trade unions. These include the following: end to red-tagging, review of the anti-insurgency program and the creation of a Presidential Commission on Freedom of Association.

## 2020-2022, COVID-19 pandemic: A real Philippine horror story



(Atermidya)

It was not the COVID-19 virus that made Filipinos suffer during the pandemic, but the poor pandemic response of the Duterte administration, whose suppression strategy focused on controlling the people rather than the virus. This was evidenced by surveillance, red-tagging, harassment, and intimidation of unionists and labor organizers from different regions.

One of the gruesome murders during pandemic was that of Many Asuncion's death – one of the Bloody Sunday Massacre victims – after being killed by policemen in Dasmariñas, Cavite. Asuncion, a unionist, labor leader, and the coordinator of BAYAN-Cavite, was denied justice when the Department of Justice (DOJ) dismissed the criminal case against the seventeen policemen

involved in his death. Another unionist, Florentino "Pol" Viuya was arrested and charged of fabricated cases of illegal possession of firearms and explosives.

In the early months of 2020, the story of the 72-year-old jeepney driver, Tatay Elmer – one of the PISTON6 victims – represented the plight of many Filipinos who became victims of the "pasaway narrative." As the Duterte administration-imposed lockdowns and quarantine measures, its "ayuda" system remained poor and unresponsive to the needs of the people.

The Duterte administration further instilled fear in Filipinos by signing the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 and passing IATF Resolution 1488, which perpetuated the "No Vaccine, No Work" policy.

## 2022-2024, Marcos Jr regime: Martial law continues in the labor sector

When he became president in 2022, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, the son of the ousted former dictator, tried to distance himself from his predecessor – Duterte, who has been compared to his father in terms of human rights record. Pivoting from Duterte's embrace of China to the US beloved by the country's oligarchs, Marcos Jr also vowed to uphold labor and human rights.

His record, however, speaks for itself: Martial Law in the labor sector continues under his rule. One, workers who try to unionize continue to be laid off from work, either individually or collectively, legitimized through contractualization, or through factory closures.

Two, enforced disappearance, a trademark of the Marcos Sr dictatorship, persists. According

to human rights group Karapatan, 13 desaparecidos were abducted during the Marcos Jr regime, not including the six who have been surfaced. Mindanao labor organizer William Lariosa was abducted in April 2024 while Metro Manila labor organizer Loi Magbanua was abducted in May 2022.

Three, political prisoners from the labor sector are at a record high after 1986. There are currently 755 political prisoners in the Philippines, 27 of whom are labor activists. Most

of the political prisoners from the labor sector were arrested through the Duterte regime's trumped-up charges. The Marcos Jr regime has not taken decisive action to bring about their immediate release.

Four, extrajudicial killings, also a trademark of the Marcos Sr dictatorship, is also continuing under the Marcos Jr regime. Six people have been extrajudicially killed in the labor movement – labor organizer Jude Fernandez (September 29, 2023), BPO sector organizer Alex Dolorosa (April 24, 2023) and farmworker leader Emelda Fausto and her husband and two sons (June 14, 2023) – and no one has been punished for these crimes.



(The Philippine Star)

# CTUHR: The previous 10 years

Over the past decade, the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR) has remained steadfast in its mission to uphold the rights and dignity of workers across the Philippines. In an increasingly challenging environment, CTUHR has played a crucial role in empowering workers, defending labor and human rights, and advocating for social justice. Its commitment to improving the lives of Filipino workers and people is evident in its achievements from 2014 to 2024.

## Strengthening labor rights advocacy

CTUHR has made strides in labor rights advocacy, contributing to policy and legislative reforms aimed at improving working conditions. By working closely with trade unions and labor organizations, CTUHR has forwarded reform proposals on labor policies and supported campaigns for wage increases, job security, unionization, stronger protections for workers in precarious sectors, and decent jobs.

CTUHR has contributed to

workers' campaigns for higher minimum wages and for a national minimum wage. Through collaborative advocacy, CTUHR has pushed for policies to rectify poverty wages, raising awareness about the importance of workers' right to living wages. The organization has also stood up for policies that ensure workers' dignity and safety in the workplace.

CTUHR is also involved in advocacy efforts focused on gender rights in the workplace, climate justice for workers, and prevention of child labor.

## Defending freedom of association and human rights amidst repression

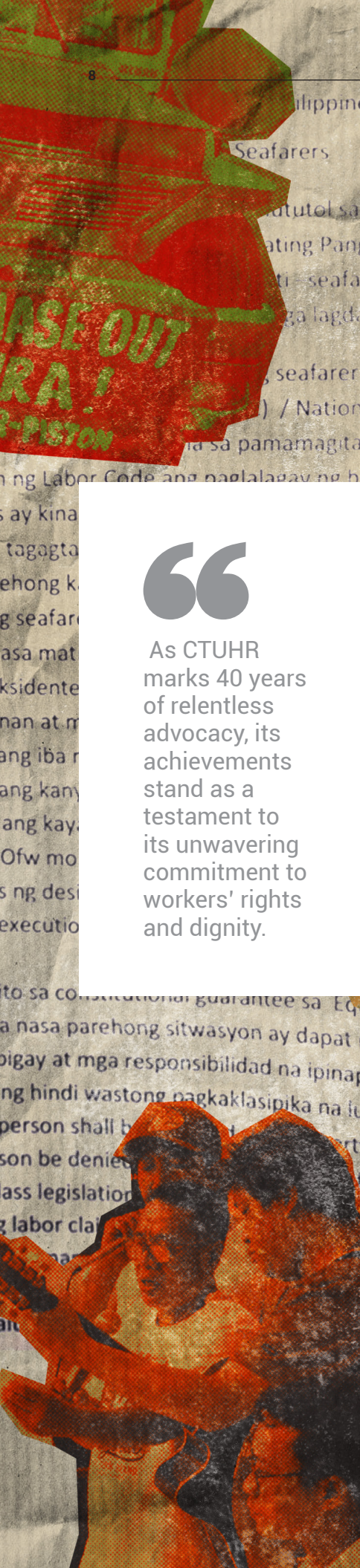
As human rights violations escalated in recent years, particularly during the Rodrigo Duterte regime, CTUHR intensified its efforts in defending labor leaders and activists and the workers that they serve.

The organization tirelessly documented and publicized abuses,

bringing attention to illegal arrests and detentions, abductions and disappearance, extrajudicial killings, and harassment of trade unionists. CTUHR launched countless fact-finding missions and quick reaction teams across the country, particularly in areas where gross rights violations were committed against workers and labor activists. By amplifying these cases, CTUHR has worked to secure justice and accountability for victims.

High-profile cases, such as those involving the illegal arrest and extrajudicial killings of labor organizers, have been at the forefront of CTUHR's campaigns. The Center has worked tirelessly with human rights groups at the international, national and regional levels to demand the release of detained activists and bring attention to the wider pattern of repression against workers fighting for their rights.

CTUHR's reports have been referenced by international



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As CTUHR marks 40 years of relentless advocacy, its achievements stand as a testament to its unwavering commitment to workers' rights and dignity.

institutions, particularly the International Labor Organization (ILO) and United Nations Special Rapporteurs and Committees. The Center's documentation of violations on workers' freedom of association served as the basis for the ILO to send a High-Level Tripartite Mission in 2023.

**Capacity building and empowering workers**

A key part of CTUHR's strategy has been educating and empowering workers to understand and assert their rights. It has repeatedly told workers that without them claiming their rights, rights are just texts written in paper. Over the last decade, the organization has organized countless workshops, Know Your Rights seminars, and Paralegal training programs aimed at educating workers about labor laws, collective bargaining, and unionization.

These capacity-building initiatives have informed and empowered a significant number of workers who are equipped to fight for better working conditions and demand their rights.

CTUHR has continuously pushed for the institutionalization of Workers' Rights Watch, a worker-led mechanism for monitoring rights violations.

**Expanding International Solidarity**

In addition to its local efforts, CTUHR has successfully built bridges with international organizations, linking labor struggles in the Philippines with regional and global movements for human rights and workers' rights. These partnerships have brought critical attention and support to Filipino workers' struggles, gaining solidarity

from global trade unions and human rights groups.

CTUHR's engagement in international forums and campaigns has also raised awareness about the challenges faced by workers in the Philippines, further amplifying the voices of the marginalized on a global scale.

**Responding to the COVID-19 crisis**

The COVID-19 pandemic presented new challenges for Filipino workers, particularly those in essential sectors. CTUHR responded by advocating for workers' health and safety, pushing for the implementation of safety protocols in workplaces, and ensuring that laid-off workers received proper compensation.

During the pandemic, the organization published reports and launched campaigns demanding protection for workers from unjust layoffs, wage cuts, and unsafe working conditions. These efforts helped sustain a critical dialogue around the need for just labor policies during a time of global crisis.

**More years of struggle to come**

As CTUHR marks 40 years of relentless advocacy, its achievements stand as a testament to its unwavering commitment to workers' rights and dignity. While challenges remain, the organization's work has been instrumental in improvements in the lives of many Filipino workers. Moving forward, continued solidarity and support will be essential in advancing the cause of labor and human rights in the Philippines.



**CENTER FOR TRADE UNION AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

702 Culmat Bldg, E. Rodriguez Sr. Ave, Quezon City

CTUHR was formed in the spirit of Filipino workers' struggles, broad public solidarity for these struggles, and opposition to state repression. It stands for workers' inherent right to life and dignity, and supports workers' efforts to claim their rights, fight exploitation and attain social change.