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**NATIONAL CO-ORDINATOR, METAL WORKERS ALLIANCE OF THE PHILIPPINES**

**ADDRESS TO 2016 NATIONAL CONFERENCE**

Good morning Brothers and Sisters, Comrades in struggle,

On behalf of MWAP, I wish to thank Comrades Andrew Dettmer, Paul Bastian, Glenn Thompson and the whole AMWU leadership for inviting us to attend this very important National Conference that charts the course of AMWU. It is a great privilege to be present here and be able to not only observe the healthy flow of ideas and debates but to actually feel the enthusiasm and commitment of the representatives in strengthening AMWU given the challenging times ahead.

We also wish to thank AMWU for its unwavering support to the Filipino workers and people in our continuing quest for fundamental changes in the Philippine society. For two decades, AMWU has been sending two workers in the Philippines to join the International Solidarity Affairs being led by Kilusang Mayo Uno. I am very happy to meet here some of these comrades who took time to integrate and learn with the struggling Filipino workers – Brothers Danny, Tony, Chris and Terry and Sister Leanne. I'm also very privileged to meet comrade Frank Cherry who attended the very first International Solidarity Affair in 1984 and who spoke at the May Day rally in Manila. Your great solidarity is very much appreciated.

All of them saw for themselves, the very harsh conditions that the Filipino people are facing. Up to now, we continue to face the same pressing issues of low wages, high unemployment rate, no security of tenure and violations of fundamental labor and political rights including the right to unionise, collectively bargain, to strike and to even have a safe workplace.

There is no national minimum wage in the country. Regional wage boards decide on increases on the basis of so-called differences in the cost of living in respective areas. We have over 1000 wage levels in the country. The highest is in the National Capital Region with PhP481 daily or roughly around AUD14 daily. It is not even half of the estimated PhP1,081 or AUD31 daily cost of living needed by a family of six. Wages are even lower in agricultural areas. And in regions where special economic zones are concentrated, workers only get between PhP330-360 daily or around AUD10 daily. As if it's not enough, the Aquino regime (who governed the Philippines from 2010 to mid 2016) implemented a two tiered wage policy that will create a wage floor level of PhP255 (AUD9), way below the current meager wage and imposes a wage increase that is productivity-based.

Precarious work is very rampant, both in the public and private sector. In many industries, 70-80% of the workforce are contractual workers. This is very prevalent in the manufacturing sector (electronics, garments, automotive, food, mining, steel and metal), in the service sector (BPOs, banks, hotels, wholesale and retail) and in the agriculture sector (pineapple, banana, palm oil plantations). It is also the norm inside special economic zones. Contractual workers are employed on a 5 month basis, with even lower wages and no benefits. The term 555 is very common, which means 5 months to apply, 5 months to work and 5 months to find money for needed requirements and apply again. Most of these contractual workers are young and women workers.

Fundamental labor rights are grossly violated. Unionization rate is less than 10%. In the special economic zones, where multinational corporations abound, there is an unwritten “no union, no strike” policy. Political harassment is still very evident. In the last 5 years under the Aquino government, there were 26 victims of extra-judicial killings in the labor sector, 574 victims of physical assault, 887 victims of threat, harassment and intimidation (which includes surveillance and coercion) and 213 victims of arbitrary arrest and detention. Active union leaders, members and organizers are in the government’s list of insurgents, are tagged as “factory terrorists” and are included in the military’s order of battle. In July 2013, Ben Villeno, former union president of Honda Cars Philippines and who later became a full-time labor organizer, was abducted by suspected military agents. Up to now, we continue to search for him.

OHS conditions are deplorable. Last year, 74 workers in Kentex Manufacturing were burned to death in a fire that broke out inside their workplace. Kentex produces local slippers called Havana, which is a take-off from Havaianas. All of the workers in the company were contractuales with PhP250 (AUD7) daily wage. There are many other cases of OHS violations that led to death or to the crippling of many of our workers, especially in the construction and mining industries.

Government data says more than 26 million people are living below poverty line. This is a very conservative estimate because the Aquino regime considered people living on a PhP51 budget a day (roughly AUD1.50) do not belong to the poor section of society. Urban poor communities are being demolished to give way for construction of condominiums and business ventures. And our indigenous sisters and brothers, especially the Lumads in Mindanao, are being driven out of their lands due to massive militarization to protect the big mining investments. Extreme poverty and lack of jobs are driving 5000 Filipinos to leave the country daily and look for work abroad. That’s 5,000 Filipinos daily! Here in Australia, we have many Filipinos working under the 457 visa.

All of these are happening under the unbridled implementation of neoliberal policies out to squeeze the last drop of sweat and blood from our toiling workers.

But these very oppressive conditions do not stop us in doing our work. Despite the “no union, no strike” policy, we continue to do our organizing work in the special economic zones. The labor conflict in NXP union in 2014, which aimed to decimate the union that has existed for 33 years, victoriously ended. Twelve (12) out of 24 leaders illegally sacked were reinstated, 200 contractual workers were granted regular status and wages and benefits were raised. The NXP union is one of the very few unions that was able to exist in the garrison-like special ecozones.

We now have a new government under President Rodrigo Duterte, who campaigned and won on a campaign platform that “change is coming”. Clearly, his overwhelming victory was a protest vote against the anti-people governance and criminal irresponsibility of the Aquino regime that buried the country to even deeper poverty and subjected the Filipino people to further oppression and exploitation.

The Duterte administration promised change and the people have very high expectations of him. He declared war on drugs and criminality and promised to get rid of graft and corruption in the government. He has promised to end contractualization, a hike in the pension of senior citizens, to ban large-scale and destructive mining, to enter into peace talks and to release political prisoners, among others.

He has appointed Cabinet members from the progressive left movement and some allied individuals. He has opened the way for peace talks with the CPP-NPA-NDF and offered the same to the different Moro groups who are fighting for autonomy. He has show openness in dealing with the People's Agenda that was submitted to him by progressive left.

In the first State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Duterte last 25 July, 30,000 people joined the mobilization in Manila alone to campaign for the People's Agenda and to call on President Duterte to fulfill his promises. This shows the strong and earnest desire of the Filipino people to have genuine change in the country and our commitment to work for it.

There is a sniff of change. Opportunities have opened up and hopefully there will still be more. We will support the Duterte administration in his pro-people programs but at the same time, will not hesitate to strongly criticize him when he implements policies that are inimical to people's interests.

Yes, we smell some change. But we are not letting our guards down. More than ever, we vow to be very vigilant. We will continue to take militant actions to push the Duterte administration to fulfill his promises. We will continue to educate, organize and mobilize our mass membership to fight for their basic economic, social and political rights. We will continue to organize and mobilize to push for genuine agrarian reform and national industrialization that will bring the impetus for genuine economic development in the country.

Indeed, just like our Australian comrades, we are living in a very exciting time. And it is only us, our collective strength, that will turn the tide of this exciting time in our side. Because, as everyone of us in this room will agree, it is only through our collective unity and our global solidarity that we will achieve genuine fundamental social changes. We owe the future generation – our children and our future grandchildren and great grandchildren – a better and humane world.

In ending, we say: Ang tao, ang bayan ngayon ay lumalaban! The people united will never be defeated! El pueblo unido, hamas cera vencido!

Thank you comrades!