

[From *Ang Bayan*, #3, July-Sept. 1998]

## Regarding the national minimum wage

*In its last issue, Ang Bayan tackled the heightened exploitation and oppression of the Filipino masses brought about by the anti-national and anti-people policies of imperialist “globalization.” This article focuses attention on minimum wages. These clarifications are being made to support the Filipino workers’ struggle for a substantial P100 additional wage. In particular, we want to show that the demand for an additional wage is in line with the stand for a national minimum wage standard.*

The Wage Regionalization Act or Republic Act 6727 was enacted in 1990. This law eliminated the old national standards and the practice of setting a national minimum workers’ wage. Instead, a Regional Wage Board (RWB) now determines the minimum wage according to a region’s situation and other considerations.

The workers’ experience has proven that wage regionalization is a divisive instrument which pegs and even further reduces, severely low wages. The Regional Wage Board is composed of capitalists, bureaucrats and yellow “union leaders” who compete to further pauperize workers.

The regionalized wage system takes advantage of the poor and backward conditions of workers and the large unemployed and underemployed force in the countryside by barring any wage increase and pushing wages even lower than the subsistence level. Any demand for additional wages is arbitrarily denied or a very minimal addition is arbitrarily determined. It also exploits and aggravates the disorganized state of workers so as to further localize and diffuse any workers’ action.

Since RA 6727 was implemented, Filipino workers’ wages have been depressed to much lower levels. From 1991 to 1997, the minimum wage in Metro Manila increased by only P79 despite the need for a P471.14 addition to the current minimum to restore it to its 1990 level. The wage condition of workers outside Metro Manila is even worse.

In essence, wage regionalization means not only the localization of wages but the dismantling of the workers’ right to a minimum wage. It eliminates the national standard for the lowest acceptable wage. Thus, the reactionary government also outrightly abandons its responsibility to uphold the people’s right to decent, life-sustaining wages. On the other hand, this bolsters the power of capital to maximize profit from labor power.

The right to a minimum wage, like the right to an eight-hour workday, are labor standards achieved in the course of the life-and-death struggle of workers all over the world. These standards shield workers from inhuman working conditions and further immiseration.

The struggle for a higher minimum wage has always been part of the Filipino workers' movement, since its emergence in the early years of the current century. It has also always been a major issue advanced by the militant unions' movement, the newly established Communist Party as well as the unions under its leadership in the 1930s. After the Second World War, the Congress of Labor Organizations continued to advocate this right.

A legislated minimum wage is a concession to the workers—but one that will not take effect without some payback.

Amid the serious crisis and the rise of the militant workers' and peasant movement of the '30s, Manuel Quezon implemented in 1936 the minimum one-peso daily wage. This was in line with his "Social Justice" program. But this was nonetheless used to deceive and derail workers from being drawn in their numbers to the Communist Party and the revolutionary struggle.

In 1973, the fascist dictator Marcos devised the Labor Code only after having violently suppressed the militant workers' movement since martial law was imposed in 1972. Alongside, Marcos established the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines as the center of yellow unionism and reformism among workers.

The minimum wage law and other reforms in industrial relations are widely violated. Worse, they are used by yellow, reformist and pro-imperialist "union leaders" to draw workers away from the path of militant unionism and political struggles for revolutionary social change.

Since the '60s, experience has proven that only through the militant working class movement's persistent demands can the minimum wage be raised and the rights of workers advanced. In the first half of the '80s, a substantial increase in the real value of wages was legislated despite a severe economic crisis. It was at this time that the strongest and longest-sustained strike movement in the nation's history was attained, along with anti-fascist struggles led by workers.

Nevertheless, imperialists and bourgeois compradors took advantage of the grave disorientation and errors within the revolutionary movement and militant workers' union. Their goal was to divide and dissipate the workers' ranks. They encouraged and aided in various ways the revisionist and yellow splittists, especially the Trotskyite Lagman grouplet, to sabotage and sow confusion and demoralization.

There are several schemes being enforced by the reactionary government to intensify the exploitation of workers. These include the prevalent fascist attacks against union rights, the "flexible labor" policy, the Herrera Law and the Wage Regionalization Act. All working standards are being revoked and reversed; anything that would bar big foreign and local capital from massively expropriating Filipino laborpower and profiting immensely from it are being eliminated.

The demand by militant unions for a P100 addition to the minimum wage is correct and just. It is important to demand a substantive wage increase in the face of ever skyrocketing prices of workers' basic needs. This struggle, moreover, should unify Filipino workers in collective and militant struggles for their fundamental democratic and economic rights.

Indeed, the struggle for additional wages should encompass the struggle to reject wage regionalization and to institutionalize a national standard for a decent and life-sustaining minimum wage. This should also be closely linked to the struggle against the neocolonial policies of deregulation, liberalization and denationalization.

In advancing the interest of the working class, forging the broadest and strongest militant and revolutionary unity of the working masses remains a key task, along with developing their firm solidarity with other democratic and progressive forces, especially the peasantry.

The struggle for reforms in the minimum wage should serve to raise the political consciousness, unity and struggle of the working class. This is the only way to advance workers' struggles to secure tactical gains and advance the strategic interests of their class and the entire nation. **AB**

[From: <http://www.philippinerevolution.net/cgi-bin/ab/text.pl?issue=199807-09;lang=eng;article=07>  
(archived on Feb. 9, 2007)]